

History of theater: 1890 – 1920

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“ Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more; it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. ” - William Shakespeare

The theatre has been a part of entertainment since ancient Greece, around 4th century BC or thereabouts. The theatre grew out of festivals in honor of the god Dionysus. Aeschylus created the first play in her honor. The first Greek plays were all tragedies but eventually comedy made its way and these plays were performed at festivals all over Greece.

Through the centuries theater played the main role of entertainment from noble and royalty to the common person in any city or village, and as we move into the twenties century, theater was still a huge part of the entertainment for the masses. At the start of the 20th Century, America was in full glory of its cultural adolescence, bursting with energy. London was still the theatrical center of the world, but New York was gaining its own form of sophistication and acknowledgement. By 1900 most of the signs on Broadway had gone electric, and New York City's famous theater district soon became known as “ The Great White Way. It was known as the Mecca of the American theatrical world: the rest of the country was referred to by people in show business as “ the road. ” In 1904, the city opened its first underground subway system, and thanks to this system, tens of thousands living far from the theatre district could catch a Broadway show and still be home the same evening. With this increase of commuters and the ever growing number of tourist to New York, Broadway theatres' audiences more than tripled in less than one year. Thus the productions had longer running times than ever before.

At this time the majority of Broadway shows came from London, with English actors, producers, and directors. Then in 1903, Frank L. Baum's children's novel *The Wizard of Oz* was the first-ever all American musical to be performed on Broadway. The story of Dorothy and her pet cow Imogene (the cow was easier to see from the balcony than a small dog named Toto) took audiences to a magical land call Oz. The production included lavish costumes and fantastic fantasy sets and a state-of-the-art cyclone. This production had several hit songs but due to the fantastic MGM's 1939 film, these songs faded from the general public's memory.

After a very long run on Broadway, *The Wizard of Oz* enjoyed a long running national tour, and thanks to the improvements of the railway system, the show was able to take a full scale Broadway production set and costumes on the road. By 1904 it is believed that over 400 different shows were touring the United States with full Broadway production values. The only snag in some of these performances is having theaters in different cities that are able to hold such a production. With this need, the boom of grand theaters around the country began. Many of these theatres are still in operation today.

As the theatre business was booming, the need for new shows was increasing the opportunity for new playwrights were wide open. People like George M. Cohan, Victor Herbert, and Florenz Ziegfeld stepped up to the call. George M. Cohan was a writer, director, choreographer, and producer and starred in several of his own shows. He was famous for his jingoistic musical comedies that celebrated the triumph of the American know-how and New York style street smarts. Though most of his productions had short runs on

Broadway, the musicals that toured the United States were met by packed houses several years.

His most memorable hit was *Little Johnny Jones*, where Cohan played an American jockey who loses the English Derby, clears himself of false charges that he threw the race, and wins the girl he loves. The songs "Yankee Doodle Dandy" and "Give My Regards to Broadway" from this show made Cohan a nationwide household name. Cohan's pro-American shows had little appeal outside the United States and are perhaps too simplistic to be revived in their original version, but his songs are still familiar today, including the wartime hit "Over There." Cohan is most famous for his curtain call speeches where he always ended with the statement "My mother thanks you, my father thanks you, my sister thanks you, and I assure you, I thank you." One of Broadway's most respected composers at the start of the 20th Century was Victor Herbert, a classically trained musician who turned out musicals that were considered much more sophisticated than Cohan's but equally as popular. Though trained in Europe, his scores had a distinctly American sound.

He was the first American songwriter to successfully insist that no changes be made to his scores without his permission. His musicals involved simple American goodness triumphing over Old World ways. He is known for his musical *Babes in Toyland* that is best remembered for its title song "March of the Toys." Trying to copy the success of *The Wizard of Oz*, Herbert's fantasy had a far better score and continued to be revived until the mid 1940s. *Naughty Marietta* was a production about a French noblewoman who leaves her husband for an American Soldier and moves to New Orleans.

The score included the hit song “ Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life” and was designed for operatic voices. It is one of the few Herbert musicals still performed today. When it comes to show stoppers on Broadway, Florenz Ziegfeld was known as the Ultimate Broadway Showman. Boasting his own theatre, Ziegfeld showcased glamorous Parisian reviews that used skits and song to spoof the social and political “ follies” of the day. Thus the Ziegfeld Follies were born. The productions included over the top sets, extravagant costumes and “ The Ziegfeld Girls,” a chorus of attractive females.

Out of consideration for the sensibilities of theatergoers, the tone of his productions was sexy but never trashy. Ziegfeld considered thirteen his lucky number and thus gave his revue the thirteen letter name Follies of the Day taken from the title of a popular newspaper column penned by librettist Harry B. Smith, who Ziegfeld hired to write the libretto. By 1900, there were currently thirty-three legitimate Broadway theatres, and many more would be built over the next couple of decades to meet the demand of the growing audiences.

The productions included those of drama, comedy and musicals, but legitimate theatre was not the only theatrical entertainment of this time. During this time a large group of entertainers travels from one small theater to the next, entertaining thousands with their simple song and dance, mini-comical skits, and different acts of entertainment. These people were known as Vaudevillians and their theatre circuit was known as Vaudeville. Vaudeville was a theatrical paradigm in the United States and Canada from the early 1880s until the early 1930s.

Each performance consisted of separate, unrelated acts grouped together on a common bill. Types of acts included popular and classical musicians, dancers, comedians, trained animals, magicians, female and male impersonators, acrobats, illustrated songs, jugglers, one-act plays or scenes from plays, athletes, lecturing celebrities, minstrels, and movies. Vaudeville developed from many sources, including the concert saloon, minstrelsy, freak shows, dime museums, and literary burlesque. Called "the heart of American show business," vaudeville was one of the most popular types of entertainment in North America for several decades until the start of the movie age. Vaudeville originally started in the mid 1850s but thanks to the increase of number of theaters and improvement of transportation via railway, the popularity grew in the late 19th century into the early 20th century. Vaudeville opened the door of entertainment to thousands who had some form of special act. It was also one of the few avenues that opened for African-American mobility in a white world. African-American musicians achieved financial success while carving their niche for future artists.

One of the most famous African-American acts was that of Bert Williams and George Walker, a ragtime song and dance team that toured the Vaudeville theaters with Williams playing a well-dressed conniver and Walker as a limbering stooge. Harry Houdini, the famous escape artist was a very popular entertainer in the early 1900s. After a tour in Europe he came back to America with thunderous applause and recognition. Houdini was able to perform his difficult feats by remaining in excellent physical and mental condition. He pushed himself relentlessly.

To develop his capacity for holding his breath, Houdini installed an oversize bathtub in his house so that he could practice regularly. Through extensive training, he was able use his left hand nearly as well as his right. While casually chatting with friends, he would perform card and coin tricks without looking at his hands, or tie and untie knots in pieces of rope with his feet. Determined to stay on top of the entertainment field, Houdini refined techniques he had already mastered and continually developed new and more daring escapes.

Though known to be friendly and warm, Houdini had a large ego, could be touchy and petty at times, and frequently displayed a volatile temper to his assistants. One of the most fascinating acts that I found in my research was that of Evelyn Nesbit. In 1893 Nesbit started her career as an artist model in Pittsburg, PA. In 1901 Nesbit, age 16, with her mother moved to New York City where Nesbit modeling career grew to such a point that she was one of the highest paid artist and photography models in New York.

At the time she was being paid \$5 for half a day and \$10 for a full day of work. During this time Nesbit was also performing as a chorus girl on Broadway. Nesbit's real story stated when her husband, Harry Thaw shot her lover, Stanley White on the night of June 26, 1906. Thaw knew that Nesbit has been seeing White for years even before their marriage. On the night of the 25th, at the production of "Mam'zelle Champagne" at the dining theater on the roof of Madison Square Gardens, Thaw saw White sitting several seats away from him and Nesbit.

He calmly got out of his seat, walked over to White, pulled out a revolver and shot White three times in the face. The incident became known and "The

Crime of The Century. " Thaw was tried and committed to life on an insanity plea. Thaw's mother offered Nesbit a huge sum of money if she would divorce her son before the conclusion of the trial. Nesbit did but never received any of the money; but Nesbit's popularity soared, and from this she created an act known as " The Girl on the Velvet Swing" where all she did was sit on a swing in the middle of the stage and tell her tragic story.

Nesbit's act lasted for a few years, but as most stories, once you've heard it once or twice, interests started going astray. She eventually tried her hand at movies with little success. In 1926 she gave an interview to the New York Times about her dramatic life story which she eventually published as a memoir. The list of famous Vaudeville acts is endless, and many of these actors and entertainers took their talents west to Hollywood to become movie stars. One of these most successful stories of this is that act of Abbott and Costello.

Starting in the early 1920s, the act of Lou Abbott and Bud Costello was known for the quick one liners and fast repartee. Most famous for their " Who's on First" routine, Abbott and Costello's acts moved from stage to radio to movies, becoming one of the most famous duos in American entertainment. As we look back at theatre in the early 1900s we see the birth of a new age, one of theatre productions written, produced and directed by Americans, with American themes. Theatre changed as the times changed.

It gave to the people what the people wanted and what they needed. From the large Broadway productions to the simple song and dance routines of Vaudeville, theatre was one of the main source of entertainment; allowing

people to escape from their everyday world into a world of song, laughter and enjoyment. From the hearts of the actors and entertainers to the hearts of the theatergoer, life on a stage is one of true imagination and continues to allow us to go to that place where our true selves can wander, wonder and enjoy.