



**AMERICAN CENTURY'S
BROADWAY
HIT PARADE**

Audience Guide
Written by Jack Marshall



*Theater you can afford to see—
plays you can't afford to miss!*

About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, but overlooked American plays of the twentieth century . . . what Henry Luce called “the American Century.”

The company’s mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to surrender our moorings to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all Americans, of all ages, origins and points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These audience guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

The American Century Theater is a 501(c)(3) professional nonprofit theater company dedicated to producing significant 20th Century American plays and musicals at risk of being forgotten.

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FORWARD (AND BACKWARD)

I'm departing from the usual format of our Audience Guides in this penultimate one, making it unusually personal: I hope you'll forgive me.

As Artistic Director for the entire length of this company's journey, I chose all of the musicals we undertook to produce and directed most of them. The current revue brings back a lot of memories, and I feel the need to reveal some details about the various projects as well as the magnificent blends of words, stories and music that inspired them, us, and me.

This compendium does not do justice to the following shows, all but one directed by others. They were no less important and valued than those discussed in the pages ahead; I just ran out of time.

If Only In My Dreams (2004): A wonderful, touching show—a big hit—a TACT original, brilliantly realized by **Jacqueline Manger**, whose three years as Associate Artistic Director were, for me, the most enjoyable of the two decades. And good night, **Kim-Scott Miller**, wherever you are...

One Touch of Venus (2005): Another Jacqueline show, a concert version of a great show that has two ballets in it, pretty much making it impossible and inadvisable to produce. What songs, though!

An American Century Christmas (2009): A personal favorite, this was TACT's original salute to the TV Christmas specials of yesteryear, once an annual treat, now killed dead by political correctness and cynicism. **Kathryn Fuller** was the unsung hero of this one, providing many of the songs and stories that enriched the diverse material. This was also the late **Glenn White's** final show with TACT. Glenn died a year ago, but he had had been with us from the beginning, proudly taking on the role of, as he put it, the company's old geezer. Nearing 80, Glenn played Snoopy in the revue's selection from the Peanuts Christmas special. We also were indebted to our sound designer **Bill Gordon** for this show, as he lovingly assembled the sound clips while also playing "Jingle Bill," the disembodied narrator and voice of Christmas *kitsch* in performances.

Babes in Arms (2010): **Rip Claassen** brought a mob of young talent to TACT for this staged concert version of the Gershwin musical. Not only did *Babes* give audiences a terrific, energetic five performances, it also provided talent that fueled other projects, notably *Marathon '33*.

One Night with Fanny Brice (2010): **Ellen Dempsey** directed Chip Defaa’s original one-woman show about the legendary comic and singer with the tragic romantic life, and Fanny was brought to life by the bottomless pool of talent we like to call Esther Covington.

I would be remiss if I didn’t take this opportunity to thank and salute my collaborator, co-conspirator, ally and trusted friend **Tom Fuller**, who has been doing shows with me since 1970. He has been a performer, music director, arranger, writer and more. Only twice did he not oversee one of these musicals’ singing and accompaniment, and we suffered for it in both instances.

More hidden in these exercises in daring has been another friend from college, **Loren Platzman**, who more than once made productions possible with his musical arrangements. The ultimate compliment came from Bob Bain, the Hollywood legend (as a soundtrack bass and string player) who wrote the melodies for Danny and Sylvia. “That Platzman guy turned my hooks into real songs,” he said. *Hollywood Pinafore*, *Hellzapoppin* and more owe their very existence to Loren’s work.

I want to thank **Mike de Blois**, **Dave Walden**, and **Rebecca Christy**, three remarkable artists who I met in community theater, and whose passion, ingenuity, talent and skill made so many of these projects the success they were, and a joy to work on as well.

Finally, this:

Ten years ago, The American Century Theater was on bankruptcy’s doorstep, and I was being heavily lobbied to give up. Instead I asked lawyer, musician, friend, and all-around competent person **Wendy Kenney** to take over the Board of Directors for one year, and get us back on track. Not only did her leadership do that, eliminating a deficit of over \$40,000, but she didn’t leave after one year, staying until this final curtain.

The company, our audiences, the theater community and especially I owe her a debt of gratitude that will be impossible to repay.

Thank you, Wendy.

—**Jack Marshall**
March 18, 2015

Reflections on *Lady in the Dark*

Book by Moss Hart, lyrics by Ira Gershwin, music by Kurt Weill

The Show

From “*Lady in the Dark: An Appreciation*” by Mark N. Grant,
on the *Lady in the Dark* page of The Kurt Weill Foundation

It was Kurt Weill's first runaway Broadway hit, the show that assured his financial security and made him, in songwriter Ann Ronell's words, a "big shot" on the Great White Way. Cecil Smith, the most astute and highbrow musical theater critic in America during the 1940s, later said that the only other Broadway musical that could touch *Lady in the Dark* as a "wholly satisfactory drama" was *South Pacific*. Though it was one of a trio of artistically adventurous musicals opening in the 1940-1941 season (the others were *Cabin in the Sky* and *Pal Joey*), musically and formally *Lady in the Dark* was the most cutting-edge of the three. It put Gertrude Lawrence on the cover of Time, brought Ira Gershwin triumphantly back to Broadway, made a star of Danny Kaye, and was "the biggest therapeutic factor in [Moss] Hart's own psychoanalysis" according to Hart's friend, New York Times critic Brooks Atkinson.

... Hart had begun psychoanalysis in 1933; in 1937 he tried to interest Kaufman in a musical about analysis, to star Marlene Dietrich, but the idea died aborning... Weill met Hart late in 1939, and they agreed to use the play to create a new kind of musical show...

In his first Broadway venture after his brother George died, Ira Gershwin contributed the lyrics, among his very finest. (In his memoir, Oscar Levant wrote, "Ira's own favorite lyrics are those for *Lady in the Dark*.") ... The gifted but temperamental Gertrude ... played the entire run, which included a remarkable three separate stints on Broadway: January-June 1941 (the show closed for the summer to protect Lawrence's health), the 1941-42 season, and the spring of 1943 following a road tour in the fall of 1942. ... The physical staging of *Lady in the Dark* prefigured by decades the cinematic, high-tech shifting sets that became commonplace in the late 20th century. Designer Harry Horner created four turntables that enabled the psychiatrist's and Allure magazine offices to dissolve into dream scenes and back again.

... Gertrude Lawrence's performance "was one of the supreme virtuoso feats of the modern theatre. From her everyday character she moved, within a split second, and with no possibility of the external aid of changed makeup, into a variety of startlingly different phases."

Gertrude Lawrence is a hard act to follow. The 1944 Paramount film adaptation with Ginger Rogers butchered Weill's score...Christine Ebersole played the lead in the 1994 Encores! concert presentation in New York, and Maria Friedman in the first London production in 1997...Any time is right to revive the show that Cecil Smith called "Weill's best gift to the American stage, beyond all debate."

The TACT Production: Notes and Memories

- I started thinking about The American Century Theater tackling *Lady in the Dark* when I read an article in now-defunct American Heritage Magazine about “the ten greatest Broadway musicals.” The other nine I knew and had seen on stage at least once, but *Lady in the Dark* was unknown to me, or at least I thought it was. Later, I discovered that the first record album I ever owned as a child, Danny Kaye’s “Pure Delight,” included many songs from the show. I loved them all, and knew them by heart.
- I couldn’t understand why the show was never produced. Since 1943, in fact, there had been no full productions of the show at all. We quickly learned why when we ordered the perusal score and the book. It was a monster: two acts that were really five, a huge cast, and multiple sets. The music was more difficult than most musicals, and this wasn’t even a musical: the experimental form was a serious drama with three elaborate short musicals, the dream sequences, interspersed. In addition, the lead had to be a remarkable dramatic actress who could sing and dance. That wasn’t all. The Kurt Weill Foundation would only allow the whole score to be performed, with the original orchestration, which required 16 instruments.
- I called Tom Fuller and asked him how the company, with a grand total of \$8,000 and change in the bank, could possibly do this show. He replied, “Oh, let’s just do it, and figure out how as we go.” That was, of course, insane. But I agreed.
- Casting was, we knew, going to be difficult, and we had to get lucky. We had to find an outstanding lead able to step into Gertrude Lawrence’s shoes, a strong dramatic actress who could sing and dance, and who was the right age: the plot is the story of why a successful, mature, attractive professional woman rejects love and companionship. Twenty-somethings, even the most talented, need not apply. We also had to find a star actor with the unique talents of a young Danny Kaye. We were very lucky with the Liza role, finding two actresses who had the chops for the part. We settled on one of them, Maureen Kerrigan (the other was tonight’s director, Jacqueline Manger, then Champlain, who took the second female lead),

but finding a Kaye was elusive. We auditioned over a hundred performers for the production, and reached the end of the final audition empty that one, pivotal role. We were packing up when a tall, lanky young redheaded man stopped us as we were locking the Gunston audition room. “Am I too late?” he asked. No, he was just in time. It was Jason Gilbert, and he was perfect: his performance garnered him a Helen Hayes nomination. (He wasn’t our last Danny Kaye, however.)

- Also making the cast was actor-police officer Tom Manger, taking the role of Randy, the movie star, originally played by Victor Mature. Manger and Champlain became the show’s backstage romance, and Jacqueline and Tom were, and are married, now with two young children. Today Tom is better known as the Chief of Police of Montgomery County.
- Arlington County agreed to design and build the set, which involved three segments of sliding platforms. It was manned by three separate set captains back stage, and coordinated by set and prop czar Bill Karukas, on headset with stage manager Rhonda Hill in the booth. He handled this while sitting just a couple of feet away from the orchestra, which was hidden behind the set.



Call Me Mister (2006): TACT Rescues a Classic

For years, TACT board member and Arlington County arts activist Vivian Kallen had been telling me that the company should produce *Call Me Mister*. I had never heard of it, and I was fairly literate in Broadway lore: could it be that this obscure post-war musical revue was worth reviving? As it turned out, it was.

The problem was that a script and score for the show no longer existed. Like many musicals we have investigated for a potential production, since it was not regarded as a likely candidate for licensing, *Call Me Mister* was never preserved properly for future performances. Luckily, a musicologist and researcher named Bruce Winston came to our attention, and contributed his time and expertise helping us develop a working script. He was and is Harold Rome’s biggest fan, and *Rome* (1908-1993) was the underappreciated genius behind the show.

Harold J. Rome is one of the rare musical theater creators who was equally adept at writing lyrics and music. Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Meredith Willson (*The Music Man*), Jerry Herman, Frank Loesser and Stephen Sondheim complete this exclusive and distinguished

group, but Rome, whose career spanned six decades, is the least known. His first show was the unexpected hit revue *Pins and Needles*, which opened a downtown theatre in New York City on Nov. 27, 1937. His final production was the musical version of *Gone With The Wind*, which played in Tokyo, London, Los Angeles, Dallas, Houston, and St. Louis in the years 1970 through 1973, without ever reaching Broadway. In between, Rome wrote the songs or lyrics for 24 produced revues and book musicals.

Call Me Mister may have been his best. At the end of WWII, the military assigned Rome to a Special Services show where he met a sketch writer named Arnold Auerbach. Together they wrote an inspirational musical revue, with comedy skits, about GIs returning to civilian life. It was called *Call Me Mister*, and was used as a promotion for selling war bonds to meet the nation's massive debt. The show was immediately recognized as being of Broadway quality, and soon it was headed there.

The show starred Betty Garrett and featured many war veterans in its large cast, plus such future stars as Jules Munshin, Carl Reiner, Bob Fosse, Buddy Hackett, and Jack Carter. Though the show was competing with Irving Berlin's smash hit, *Annie Get Your Gun*, it was Rome, not Berlin, who won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Lyricist of the 1945-1946.

Call Me Mister toured successfully after the Broadway run, and then, suddenly, it was out of date: the soldiers had returned to civilian life, and the theme was no longer topical. Despite some really funny skits and memorable, tuneful songs, the show was forgotten more quickly than any successful Broadway musical in history. There wasn't even a full recording.

So The American Century Theater decided to produce the first complete version since 1947. Actually, it wasn't quite complete: one skit was unstagable, and the demands of the show meant that TACT could only do it as a "Rescues" entry, the company's periodic staged readings or concert versions of acknowledged Broadway classics that are just too big or difficult to produce today.

An impressive cast, featuring the first TACT appearance of Steve Lebens, who subsequently has become one of the company's most active and popular performers, was assembled, and the final result was a great success. The recording made of one performance is now in the archives of the Yale Drama Library in New Haven, the only performance record of both the songs and the script in existence.

Thanks, Vivian.

Thanks, Bruce.

And you're welcome, Harold.

It was our pleasure.

Hollywood Pinafore: The Iceman Goeth

Musical director Tom Fuller's and my backgrounds include a lot of Gilbert and Sullivan shows—we met in one, in fact. Since my main claim to local theatrical fame has been as founder of a Gilbert and Sullivan society at Georgetown Law Center, as well as the student most responsible for resuscitation of another at Harvard, many have noted the irony of my efforts being restricted to American shows by this theater company's charter and policies.

Thus Tom and I were amazed and thrilled to discover that George S. Kaufman, fresh out of his long-time collaboration with Moss Hart, had written his own musical based on H.M.S. Pinafore: *Hollywood Pinafore*, a tough satire of Hollywood (which Kaufman hated with a passion) with a new book but using the music and basic structure of the Gilbert and Sullivan classic.

The show was brought to our attention by happenstance. I was participating in a theater directors' listserv, and one of the members was Pat Cronin, an actor, theater director and drama professor. (You have seen Pat as "Sid Farkus," the bra company executive in a famous episode of "Seinfeld.") Pat told me that he was the son-in-law of Kaufman's daughter, and through her we could get the rights to perform this "lost" Kaufman musical.

We had to do the show, obviously. But there were problems. There always are.

Hollywood Pinafore, or The Lad Who Loved a Salary, described as a musical comedy in two acts by George S. Kaufman with music by Arthur Sullivan opened on Broadway at the Alvin Theatre on May 31, 1945, and closed on July 14, 1945 after 52 performances... a flop, by any measure. As it happened, the show was a victim of a lot of bad luck, notably a New York ice strike that made air conditioning the theaters in the summer impossible. The reviews weren't bad at all.

Because the show was viewed as a failure, no license-worthy script and score, or arrangements, had ever been produced. There had been a few sketchy productions, but they couldn't have been very accurate.

Tom and I recruited a long-time collaborator from our college days, pianist/arranger and Gilbert and Sullivan scholar Loren Platzman, to clean up the scattered and almost illegible materials we had instead of what we needed. (Loren also did the arrangements for *Danny and Sylvia* and *Hellzapoppin*). At the end, the three of us had produced a clean, full score, an arrangement for a small chamber orchestra, and a workable script.

We had another stroke of luck in this production. Tom managed to track down a former cast member living in Australia, who was extremely friendly and supportive while passing along everything he could remember about the original *Hollywood Pinafore*.

The remaining hurdle was a special George S. Kaufman one. His daughter, Pat Cronin's mother in law, was the formidable Ann Kaufman Schneider, who rules over her father's works with a critical eye and protective stance. She has been known to shut down productions that she feels do not serve the legacy of her father well, and is regarded with some amount of justified terror on Broadway. Ann shut down a William Finn musical version of *The Royal Family* after a backer's workshop performance. He had been working on the show for 5 years.

I coordinated with Mrs. Kaufman throughout rehearsals via phone. She is acerbic, sharp, playful, and fair. Still, when she came to Arlington, with Pat, to see opening night, the company was very anxious.

All went well! Mrs. Kaufman liked the show. We got excellent reviews and box office: Washington's Gilbert and Sullivan community came through.

Hollywood Pinafore was also the show in which Brian Childers, playing the Hollywood writer and romantic lead based on Pinafore's "Ralph Rackstraw," did something in one performance that reminded me of Danny Kaye.

But that's another story.



Danny, Brian, Bob, The American Century Theater, and Me

In the 1997-1998 season, The American Century Theater embarked on an ambitious project that would seem daunting now, and was certifiably irresponsible for a small company with no financial reserves and only in its third year of operation. It was all Danny Kaye's fault.

The *sui generis* pattering, clowning, crooning entertainer had been my first show business hero, and his Decca recording "Pure Delight!" was the first album I ever owned. It was a collection of Danny Kaye's standards from his concert performances, as well as his solo efforts from the show that made him a star, the 1941 Moss Hart-Ira Gershwin "musical

play” *Lady in the Dark*. I knew the songs by heart, but I longed to see the show, one that was never produced.

Coincidentally, we had recently launched a new theater company that was dedicated to producing just such neglected shows, so *voila!* I decided that TACT should become the first U.S. professional theater since 1941 to mount a full run of *Lady in the Dark*. The best part of all, in my view, was that I would get to direct someone playing Danny Kaye’s role. We found a good one too: Jason Gilbert.

We were in the middle of rehearsals when I received a phone call from the head of the Washington Writer’s Center, just over D.C.’s Maryland border. He told me that the organization’s Chairman of the Board was a man named Bob McElwaine, and he had not only known Danny Kaye, but had been his publicist in Hollywood for years. Would I like to meet him? Indeed I would, and soon I was having lunch at the Georgetown Four Seasons with a courtly, slim, immaculately dressed man with a twinkle in his eye. That was Bob, and it marked the beginning of a wonderful friendship.

We lunched frequently, and Bob regaled me with stories about Danny, as well as insight on Kaye’s experiences in *Lady in the Dark*. Three years and many social engagements later, Bob handed me a script of a show he had written. It was a two actor musical called *Danny and Sylvia: A Musical Love Story*; there was also a professionally produced CD with a professional singer rendering the songs. (If you had tried to find someone with less resemblance to Danny, you could hardly have done better.) Bob asked me, as a favor, if I would direct a workshop production of the as yet never mounted show. He said he could get the Writer’s Center as a venue.

I liked the score; Bob’s lyrics were set to music by an old friend Bob Bain, who, I was soon to learn, was a legend in Hollywood. A long-time member of The Tonight Show band, he was also regarded by acclamation as the greatest bass player in studio orchestra history. The opening strains of “Bonanza”? That was Bain. The base line in “The Munsters” theme? Bob Bain. The balalaika in “Doctor Zhivago”? Yup, that was him too. The musical’s book was personal for Bob McElwaine, an effort to extol the career of his long-time client and associate, Danny Kaye, but even more important, I think, a gesture of admiration to Kaye’s wife, lyricist and mentor, Sylvia Fine. Bob was a great admirer of Sylvia, and felt that she was unfairly overshadowed by her famous husband. The musical portrayed them as he knew they were—a team—and the players in a very contentious love story.

I loved the idea of doing a show about my old hero, Danny Kaye, but I was dubious about the project. I felt that any chances of the show’s success depended on having a credible Kaye, and as a lifetime admirer of this amazing performer, I couldn’t think of anyone who could play the role and do credit to Danny. I wouldn’t do the show if I couldn’t honor Danny Kaye in the process.

Meanwhile, a musical I directed for the American Century Theater, *Hollywood Pinafore*, was playing at Gunston's Theater Two. Brian Childers was starring as a hapless Hollywood screenwriter; he had been a standout in TACT's production the previous year of *The Boys in the Band*. As I watched him do a comic scene one night, something about his gestures and timing reminded me of Danny Kaye. I had never thought of Brian as being anything like Kaye before, but this one second convinced me. He could play him: right height, vocal range, body type. After the performance, I told Brian about the McElwaine show, and asked if he would be interested in starring in it. "Are you kidding?" he said. "I love Danny Kaye!"

As they say, if a director asks you if you can ride a horse, say yes. It turned out that Brian had very little familiarity with Kaye. *Yet*.

TACT agreed to let me do a limited run workshop production of *Danny and Sylvia*, and Bob rented the The Writer's Center auditorium for a limited two week run in early 2001. During rehearsals, Brian worked like demon on Danny's signature postures and moves: his expressive hands, his dancer's stance, his loose-limbed clowning. They had long been imprinted in my brain from watching every Kaye movie, never missing an episode of his CBS variety show, and seeing him live on stage, so I, along with Bob, who attended many rehearsals, could guide Brian a bit. He did all the hard work, however. Every night, Brian went home and watched videotapes of Danny, over and over. He was especially anxious about doing Kaye's patter songs justice: Danny Kaye was probably the greatest patterer who ever lived. When I first played my old recording of "Pure Delight!" for him in my basement, Brian blanched. He was terrified.

We opened on September 12, 2001. Given the tragic events preceding the opening, the TACT board wanted to postpone it, but I resisted. That evening, Danny and Sylvia's musical director, Thomas D. Fuller, began the performance by telling a surprisingly large house...

The mission of the American Century Theater is to celebrate the American Century. And if there's one thing the American Century has taught us, it's that the American people respond to crisis and tragedy by moving forward in a resolute determination that the American way of life will prevail.

That's why the theater's Board of Directors decided to proceed with this weekend's scheduled performances of *Danny and Sylvia* despite the events of earlier this week. We believe that it is our responsibility to continue to present and honor American traditions and American values in the face of those who want to destroy them. We also think that the best way to respect the dead is to fight for what they embraced in life: freedom, love, joy, laughter -- the human experience in a safe and free society.

Danny Kaye was devoted to international causes of peace, justice, and compassion, as chief spokesman for UNICEF and in many other ways. We believe that if he were still with us, Danny would be among the first to urge that the show must go on. And so it will.

The show went on, all right—on, and on, and on. It was so much of a hit with audience members and critics that TACT remounted the show in its next season. Then we took it on the road...to the Jewish Community Center in Reston; to Germantown’s new BlackRock facility; to a full production at MetroStage. It became, and still is, the most profitable production TACT ever had, and the most performed, with well over a hundred dates. We sent the show to a theater festival in Manhattan, where Brian was directed by Tony winner Thommie Walsh. Everywhere, the show was a smash, which really means that Danny Kaye was a smash....with a big assist from the two Bobs, a variety of terrific Sylvias, and , of course, you-know-who.

Brian just got better and better at channeling Danny. Bob, who initially had told me that he didn’t believe Brian would evoke Danny Kaye on stage, now said that the similarity was eerie. When the 2002 Helen Hayes Awards came around, I predicted that Brian would win the Outstanding Actor in a Musical distinction, and he did. There really was no other choice. Our wonderful Sylvia, the first of many, Janine Gulisano, was nominated in the female category. It was Sylvia’s fate, Bob told me, to always be overshadowed by Danny. He was resigned. (Other TACT Sylvias were Perry Paine in the MetroStage co-production and in New York, and Jacqueline Manger at Blackrock in Germantown.)

In the intervening twelve years, Brian has been a successful working actor in many roles and projects, but Danny Kaye was always lurking. Brian played Danny in another book show, *The Kid From Brooklyn*, and was honored by being chosen to do a Danny Kaye segment when the Los Angeles Dodgers celebrated their Brooklyn origins at the Hollywood Bowl. *Danny and Sylvia* was revived once again, playing several years Off Off Broadway with Brian as Danny. Then in 2013, I asked Brian if he could reprise Danny for a TACT supporters’ event. We had always talked about recreating one of Danny’s famous one-man shows, and Brian took the initiative to use this opportunity to try it. After the positive response from the TACT insiders, he collaborated with accompanist Jeff Biering, who had worked with him on the Off Off Broadway *D&S*, and director Stephen Nachamie, to craft the short version he had prepared into a full-fledged show.

Brian presented the full, polished version of *An Evening with Danny Kaye* to TACT audiences last summer. It was sublime—in fact, the show choked me up every time I watched it, especially Brian’s “Ugly Duckling” rendition, which evoked previously forgotten moments listening to Danny sing that song on a recording when I couldn’t have been more than 7 or 8.

In one of those coincidences that make you wonder who is pulling the strings, I accidentally discovered the old album, which I assumed was long gone, on the day of Brian's final performance in Theater II. Naturally, I gave it to him. There may be a happier story of fortunate convergences of multiple passions and fates, but not in my life.

Brian, Bob, the theater and Danny all got a lot from this amazing series of events and surprises, and so did thousands of audience members. And it all began with a couple of recordings from my childhood.

Amazing, don't you think?



Dear World: **Failing Where Everyone Else Had Failed Before**

I always knew that the company would eventually do Jerry Herman's *Dear World*. I loved the music: the cast album was virtually worn out in my home, as it was playing constantly. I loved the play it was based on, Jean Giraudoux's comedy, *The Madwoman of Chaillot*. The famous madwoman confab musical number, in which three batty old ladies simultaneously sing, in counterpoint, about their delusions, was a hit number in my first professional theater venture, a dinner theater revue I directed in my summer between college and law school.

I also just wanted to see the show. My parents and sister had seen *Dear World* in its Boston pre-Broadway run in 1969, and for some reason I had missed it. They raved about the musical for years, and I was envious. *One day*, I plotted....*one day*...

The Show

When he decided to collaborate on a musical version of the Jean Giraudoux comedy, *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, Jerry Herman could do no wrong. He had two musicals running on Broadway, both monster hits: *Mame* and *Hello, Dolly!*. Songs from both shows were being recorded by every artist from Louis Armstrong to Frank Sinatra. This was just the 1960s, and rock and roll had yet to swallow "popular music" whole. It was still not uncommon to hear show tunes on the radio.

Herman writes in his autobiography, "Showtune", that he had a wonderful time writing the score for *Dear World*, and his enjoyment radiates through the songs. Although there is a French flavor to the music, it is hardly oppressive or clichéd, despite what some reviewers wrote (Clive Barnes, in his unusually nasty review for the Times, said that "a concertina

lurks around every corner."). Herman's only nod to the Jacque Brel-Charles Trenet style musical rant is "I Don't Want to Know," a song that has established itself as a cabaret standard.

Dear World was an opportunity for Herman to stretch himself musically, and he took full advantage of it, especially in the operetta-style trio that spectacularly musicalizes the most famous scene from Giraudoux's play, the madwomen's tea party. Each madwoman is given an independently tuneful song about her respective fantasy world, and then the three tunes are sung together in brilliant counterpoint.

It has been called the most impressive musical achievement of Herman's career, a *bona fide* showstopper, and is a number that continues to delight in Broadway revues.

Essentially the same artistic team that had created *Mame* was in charge. Angela Lansbury, who could do no wrong, was the star. Advance sales were huge, and everyone was primed for another massive Herman hit.

Nope. *Dear World* ran six months, less than 200 performances. As usual with such disappointments, there are lots of theories about what went wrong. Were three "strong women overcoming adversity to music" shows by the same composer one too many? Was "One Person Can Beat a Drum" too similar to *Mame*'s "Open a New Window" which was in turn mighty close to "Put on your Sunday Clothes" in *Dolly*? Does the U.S. still have a grudge against France? Was the story too intellectual and sweet for the cynical culture of 1969?

Jerry Herman always said it was misdirected, and made too big for what was a more intimate, thoughtful story. The fact is that nobody knows why the show didn't work on Broadway. But it lost millions, and garnered some nasty reviews. That was enough to bury it.

But the songs of *Dear World* kept alive the hope that the musical would rise again. The cast album developed a devoted following, and at least five songs ("I Don't Want to Know," "The Tea Party," "And I Was Beautiful," "I've Never Said I Love You," and "Kiss Her Now") achieved enduring popularity, an almost unprecedented number for a musical regarded as a failure.

"If the Madwoman teaches us anything," I wrote in the show's Audience Guide in 2003, "it is that you are never beaten until you give up. *Dear World* is indeed worth saving, and perhaps, with some care and some breaks (for a change), this unusual and uplifting show will find its way into the American musical repertoire."

TACT's *Dear World* Adventure

Dear World had never been performed in the D.C. area. I recruited veteran Northern Virginia director John Moran, an old friend, to direct the show, in part because he agreed with me that it was terrific and would attract an audience.

John understood the play and the musical, and had a terrific cast. The production was expensive. We had equity performers in two roles, which was unusual for American Century, and the accompaniment involved two keyboards with adept and union scale keyboard artists.

Things didn't start going wrong until the performances started. Press night had to be rescheduled because of a power outage, and the Washington Post review, which in our history was almost always negative no matter what others thought about productions but always helped publicize them, came out more than a week later than usual, too late to boost ticket sales. Naturally, *this* one was positive, beginning,

Aside from the sparkling Jerry Herman songs performed by a stellar cast, The American Century Theater's production of "Dear World" is also notable for the fact that the message this musical projects to an audience -- that optimism and art can beat back the forces of commerce if one just doesn't give up -- can be applied to the show itself.

Then there was the incident in which our romantic lead was nearly killed mid-performance by having his head split open like a coconut.

Michael Hadary had an entrance in which he was supposed to be carried onstage "unconscious" by a policeman. The actor playing the *gendarme* was about 6'6" tall, and Mike is not much shorter. He was draped over the big policeman's shoulder, and John had staged him to run onstage. One night, the big galoot tripped over his own feet mid-dash and fell face down, holding on to the actor's feet just long enough for him to be flipped completely over his shoulder face up and to get his head slammed on the wood stage with frightening force, making a sound like a thunderclap. Michael was knocked cold, and looked dead. The audience gasped in horror.

The show was suspended as EMTs were called. Backstage, my associate artistic director Jacqueline Manger, playing the role of the madwoman Constance, was furiously juggling parts so the show could go on if Mike had been killed, disabled, or rendered a vegetable—she knew "the show must go on" was an obsession with me and a credo of the company. But our stage manager panicked, and cancelled the performance. (I was not at that performance, just as I managed to miss the performance of *Laughter at Ten O'Clock* in which Bruce Rauscher flooded the theater at Theater on the Run by shattering a giant aquarium mid-show.)

Mike recovered, but the show didn't. *Dear World* lost more money than any TACT production.

I'm still glad I saw it.



***The Cradle Will Rock :* Going Where Only Orson Welles Had Gone Before**

In an unusual example of art imitating life imitating art, the original Federal Theater Project production of Marc Blitzstein's agitprop opera *The Cradle Will Rock* became part of Broadway lore, and The American Century Theater's production emulating it in 1937 became part of local theater lore.

Nobody except the occasional college does *The Cradle Will Rock* anymore, because interesting as it is as a historical reference point, it is so alien to today's society and politics that it might as well take place on Mars. A frankly socialist pro-labor screed that paints U.S. society as a corrupt capitalist hell ripe for revolution, composer/lyricist Blitzstein, a communist, was lighting a match in the tinderbox of the Depression as poverty was spreading and anger at the establishment was high. Young Orson Welles was happy for the controversy and the flamboyant subject matter, but no lefty he: 21-year-old Orson just wanted to make a big splash.

He got his chance. While the play was being rehearsed, violent labor action spread throughout parts of United States. Conservative members of Congress attacked WPA director Henry Hopkins for the liberal and even revolutionary output of the WPA's Federal Theater Project, which was funding the show. Fearing *The Cradle Will Rock's* pro-labor message would cause further damage to the WPA's fight for survival, Welles was ordered to shut the production down.

Welles went to Washington to plead for a reversal. Rejected, he rushed back to New York as an audience of 600 waited outside the theater to see if *Cradle* would ever rock. Welles and producer John Houseman rented an abandoned theater at the last minute, and along with Blitzstein led the cast and audience 20 blocks across town to let the show be performed there, without sets, lighting design, or most of the costumes.

Blitzstein sat at a piano alone on stage: since union rules prohibited Equity performers playing in what was a non-union theater, and because a musical lionizing unions and organized labor couldn't be hypocritical, the actors had to perform the show extemporaneously, using the audience instead of the stage. It was perhaps the most unusual and famous opening in theatrical history, and also one of the most successful.

It has been said that Welles realized that the show itself would not be successful, and maneuvered the WPA into closing it so that he could force this theatrical stunt.

I decided that if it worked for Orson, it could work for us.

The audience that arrived to see our production of *The Cradle Will Rock* discovered the cast and staff, including the director (me) milling around outside of a locked and chained Theater II, with a notice from the State of Virginia closing the venue. Nobody knew what was going on, or why this had occurred. The TACT staff kept urging audience members to stay: we were making calls, getting lawyers. The show would go on, I promised; just be patient. Cast members improvised songs and comedy acts in the lobby to keep the restless group entertained. Some cast members and orchestra members left for home, as did some of the audience.

Then a cast member announced that she had found one of the windows to an adjoining office slightly open and unlocked. We boosted a child (sometimes a young woman) from the audience through the window and into the office, with instructions to open the fire door. The cast and audience entered through the back of the dark theater. Someone turned on the house lights.

The set had been destroyed! The lighting design was disrupted! The costume rack had been removed! Our stage manager, Rhonda Hill, burst into tears. Audience members started to leave. *No*, I declared. We wouldn't be beaten this way by state bureaucrats! The show would go on! We'd set up chairs around the empty space, and play the show in and around them. The actors would borrow clothes and jewelry from the audience. We could make theater happen: we didn't need all the trappings!

Incredibly, most of our audience members fell for the trick, at least until the show started. And every audience did *for the rest of the run*. The energy of the show was amazing, and the content didn't matter: it was the revolutionary feel of how the show was being performed under adversity that the audiences responded to. *The Cradle Will Rock* was nominated as the Outstanding Musical of the Year by Helen Hayes judges.

After our triumphant opening night (filmed by PBS and included as part of its documentary on the Federal Theater Project), several TACT staff members who had been furiously opposed to my concept as suicidal and doomed to fail cornered me and asked, "How did you know? How did you know it wouldn't be a total disaster?"

My honest answer was that I *didn't* know it would work, and was as surprised as they were at way the audience seemed to fall for the deception. But, I told them, I thought that it would sure be cool if it *did* work, and was worth the risk.

And it was.



***archy & mehitabel*: A Risky Project That Didn't Pay Off**

The only American Century Theater musical to make critic Bob Mondello's "Ten Worst" list was *archy and mehitabel*, TACT's second musical gamble.

Musical director Tom Fuller and I were both admirers of the 1954 Columbia Records album, based on a live TV performance, with songs adapted from Don Marquis' newspaper columns about a literary cockroach and his street pals, especially a hedonistic alley cat named Mehitabel. The album featured Eddie Bracken as archy (he didn't use upper case because archy typed by jumping on the keys, and shifting was impossible), Carol Channing as Mehitabel, and David Wayne as Marquis, who also played other roles.

A special favorite of mine was Wayne's rendition of "The Theater Cat's Lament," a bombastic musical reminiscence by an old actor cat named Tyrone. With words by Joe Darion (who later supplied the lyrics to *Man of La Mancha*) and music by "symphonic jazz" composer George Kleinsinger, the song is a performer's delight. I used it as an audition piece in college.

Marquis is a New York City legend and everyone loved the recording, so it seemed like a good idea at the time to expand the book, add some songs, and make a Broadway musical out of the record. With an expanded plot, the addition of several lengthy ballet sequences, and a larger cast of animals and bugs, *archy & mehitabel* was renamed *Shinbone Alley*. (There is a shortened, animated version of the show that's not bad at all.)

It opened on Broadway, with neither an out-of-town tryout nor previews, on April 13, 1957 and closed after 49 performances and awful reviews. The cast featured Bracken, reprising his role as archy, and Eartha Kitt, using her tiresome cat routine that later served her well as the TV *Batman's* Catwoman. One of the show's writers was Mel Brooks. But *Shinbone Alley* was terrible. There was no cast recording, but I heard a tape of a live performance. Desperately bad. Embarrassing even.

Tom and I didn't understand how a project based on such strong material could go so wrong. Assuming, correctly, that nobody would be protective of such a bomb's integrity or copyrights, we set out to fix the material. We returned to the format of the album, with a narrator (Marquis) played by then TACT chair Shelly Wallerstein. An old Royal typewriter magically typed away the nightly columns left for the newspaperman to discover every morning (a small actor, and one night, yours truly, pulled wires while stuffed under an old desk).

Tony Gudell, a terrific musical comedy actor whom we met in *Lady in the Dark*, was archy; the multiple Helen Hayes award-winning musical theater actress, Signature's Donna Migliaccio, was Mehitabel. We cut several of the songs added for the Broadway version, and used more of Marquis's original material.

It was a big improvement over the Broadway disaster, and we had restored much of the album's charm and whimsy. It still didn't quite work, though it was nowhere near as bad as Bob said it was.

Everyone, however, loved the theater cat song, rendered by a singing D.C. lawyer named John May.



The Robber Bridegroom: **A Hit and a Classic Going Out of Style**

In the Seventies and well into the 1980s, it looked like *The Robber Bridegroom* would become a musical standard. Quirky, funny, dark and unusual, it boasts a bluegrass-tinged score and is based on a novella by Eudora Welty. There are fights, a chatty, disembodied head that's kept in a box, murder plots, a kidnapping, a character named Goat with a "brain the size of a scuppernong seed," an evil stepmother, and a talking raven.

That's my kind of entertainment!

By 2003, it was clear that *The Robber Bridegroom* was fading into regional theater obscurity except in certain regions, mostly in the South. One reason was the dreaded virus that The American Century Theatre disdains and has fought valiantly for two decades: political correctness. The show's "hero" is a rapist, among other things, and even rapes the object of his romantic affections while she's sleeping, and sings a haunting song about it. This aspect of his character is mostly soft-pedaled, but it has been sufficient to put the

show on the feminist “DO NOT STAGE” list, especially in high schools and colleges, grass roots of musical theater survival.

We decided to produce the show to remind audiences how much fun it was. For good measure, I assigned a woman to the task, Deanna Duncan, who agreed that the character of Jamie Lockhart/the Bandit was a redeemable one. Brian Childers, fresh off his multiple triumphs as Danny Kaye in TACT’s *Danny and Sylvia*, took on the role and was, as usual, sublime. The accompaniment featured two demon fiddlers, which supplied great energy to the Alfred Uhry (words) and Robert Waldman (music) score.

All the songs are a joy; “Steal With Style,” the Bandit’s anthem, is an all-time Broadway great, especially the way Brian did it.

Bad weather and electrical outages cost the show reviews, performances, and enough performances for audiences to discover our production.



***I Do! I Do!* for a New Culture**

2013’s *I Do! I Do!* was an unusual production for a company that specializes in older works and that on only rare occasions has found it necessary to re-envision the original material. But our mission is to show audiences and other companies why 20th Century stage works remain vital and relevant, and we decided that there was only one way to do that in this case.

It wasn’t a Rescues project, but it was a rescue.

I Do! I Do!, the once popular 1966 Broadway musical by *The Fantasticks* team of Harvey Schmidt and Tom Jones, is a paradox. Like its source, a 1951 drama by Jan de Hartog called *The Fourposter*, it was intended to be a probing, sometimes sentimental, but at heart realistic examination of the institution of marriage, using one long and remarkably typical marriage as the “star” of the show. Drama usually arises from the remarkable, not the ordinary, but both the play and its musical adaptation, on the page at least, aimed at entertaining by placing a mirror in front of married couples, and handing a guidebook to those who hadn’t taken the leap yet. This was key to both shows’ success, because the only suspense in such a story would be which familiar event that had already been dramatized in hundreds of other plays, movies and “I Love Lucy” episodes the authors would choose to omit.

The show was only a modest hit, running less than two years. Where *I Do! I Do!* really took off was in dinner theaters and community theaters, where it was not a star vehicle (no stars!), and thus the real strength and genius of Schmidt and Jones' show could shine through. It was about marriage, and although the marriage on stage began in the 19th Century, *I Do! I Do!* would never be anachronistic, because marriage in America hadn't changed for centuries, and wasn't about to change. After all, this was 1966! What could change marriage?

Oh, only the pill, the sexual revolution, the divorce rate, women's liberation, gay rights, changing gender roles...and, in dizzying fashion (for some, far too dizzying), the redefinition of marriage itself.

Having decided to do the show, a viewing of a local professional production—a decent one—had a TACT delegation in despair. The show seemed dated beyond redemption. But as I watched, I had a revelation.

The power and sentiment that were always the sturdy spine of the play and the musical remained. My idea was to play the single couple in the musical from the perspective of three realities, with four actors showing the progress of a single marriage alternately portrayed as a traditional heterosexual marriage and two same sex marriages. The story, the songs, and virtually all the dialogue and music were unchanged, but Agnes and Michael kept changing. (One review said that the couple became like a Rubik's Cube. Good analogy.) The female Agnes went into the bathroom to change into a nighty on the couple's wedding night, and her male equivalent came out in briefs. We had a wonderful, brave cast: Steve Lebens, Mary Beth Luckenbaugh, Chad Fornwalt, and Esther Covington. (The all-female Michael and Agnes were my favorites, I think.) Though Schmidt and Jones expressed last-minute doubts, they let our experiment go ahead.

Marriage, every marriage and especially long-lasting ones, is a great adventure, and like so many American Century Theater shows, what has changed in the U.S. since the original production makes older works more intriguing, not less so. Though some violently disagreed, this production was designed to herald the real message of *I Do! I Do!* in the most unequivocal way. Marriage is marriage, and love is love.

The production was one of our very best, and among my personal favorites.



***Hellzapoppin'*: The Thrill of a Lifetime**

(Adapted from the *Hellzapoppin'* Audience Guide's "The Secrets of *Hellzapoppin'*, or How To Recreate a Broadway Legend without a Usable Script, or What Jerry Lewis Wishes He Knew")

I am, at heart, a silly person, and I was determined to do this show, one of Broadway's most successful, and beyond question its silliest. But there was no script. Here is what we did...

Hellzapoppin' ended its Broadway run in 1941 as the longest-running musical in Broadway history, a distinction that it held for just a few years. *Oklahoma* soon shattered its record by more than 50%, but that doesn't take away from Olsen and Johnson's achievement. After all, *Hellzapoppin'* wasn't a book musical or even a conventional revue. It was a mess, a rule-breaking exercise in hysteria that the press quickly dubbed a "circus musical" because it seemed that multiple acts were always occurring at the same time. Olsen and Johnson may have been flops on the silver screen, and they may not have been gifted writers, but they knew how to make complicated stunts and routines appear spontaneous without letting a show tumble out of control.

The script for *Hellzapoppin'* was merely their starting point, and even it was just a cut-and-paste job from old routines and classic material from other comics. Only one complete script exists, though many scraps and sections are well-buried in Ole Olsen's personal papers in Indiana. The surviving script is the first one, from 1938, and checking out the programs from the show it is clear that it underwent many alterations. In fact, Olsen and Johnson boasted that you could keep coming to *Hellzapoppin'* indefinitely and never see the same show twice.

This was undoubtedly true. Ole and Chic didn't even stick to the script they were officially using at any given time, which was a good thing. The 1938 script, as typed, is fairly bland, with more detail in the stage directions than in the dialogue. As they had throughout their career, Olsen and Johnson punched up their lines considerably once they got in front of an audience.

It is this unique aspect of *Hellzapoppin'* that accounts for the fact that it is by far the least produced of the 100 longest-running Broadway musicals. *Hellzapoppin'* was Olsen and Johnson, and vice versa, and without them, the show couldn't exist – or so the conventional wisdom went.

Legendary Broadway producer Alexander Cohen set out to disprove the conventional wisdom in 1975. Reasoning that *Hellzapoppin'* was still famous even if nobody under the

age of 40 (then . . . 80 now) could have seen it, he lined up comedian Jerry Lewis to be his star. Lewis was then about the same age (and about as washed-up in movies) as Olsen and Johnson were in 1938, but he was certainly at home with outrageous material, physical comedy, and ad-libs. British actress Lynn Redgrave joined Lewis as co-star. Cohen, every bit David Merrick's equal as a hitmaker, spared no expense: he hired the biggest names in the business to write new material and songs, and took the show on the road to Broadway in 1977. Pulitzer Prize winner Abe Burroughs was originally the director. After he was fired, Broadway veteran Jerry Adler took over

The show wasn't just a flop. It was a catastrophe of historic proportions. Lewis, who insisted on directing all his own sequences, feuded with Redgrave over comic styles and stage time. Though Adler always claimed that Lewis behaved like a consummate professional, Producer Cohen and Lewis also fought – in fact, there was a point at which they reportedly exchanged death threats. Tommy Tune, among others, tried to re-work the show, but nothing could save it. The project exploded in Boston in a welter of accusations and rumors and red ink; the entire \$1.3 million investment was lost. To this day, mentioning *Hellzapoppin'* is a sure way for any interviewer to get thrown out of Jerry Lewis' home. *Hellzapoppin'* without Olsen and Johnson had only been Hell.

But, of course, it was *Hellzapoppin'* in name only. The original had been hosted by two gentle comics who let the supporting cast get most of the laughs, a formula wisely followed by TV's *Hellzapoppin'* clone, "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In." (Producer George Schlatter originally was going to call the show "Hellzapoppin'.") Lewis, a famous egomaniac even by Hollywood standards, saw the show as his showcase and was loath to surrender center stage to anyone. A few years later, Mickey Rooney and Ann Miller essentially made a Broadway hit out of the same show concept that Lewis was rehearsing. Their show was called *Sugar Babies*. And it wasn't *Hellzapoppin'* either.

In preparation for the project of mounting an authentic-feeling version of *Hellzapoppin'*, The American Century Theater interviewed many people who had seen the original show and recalled details about it. Few mentioned the stars. Everyone mentioned *Hellzapoppin'*'s signature gag, the tree that grew throughout the second act, the "Oscar Lady," Olsen and Johnson's raffle, and the fact that an audience member "won" a lap full of ice. Many recalled the various assaults on the audience with practical jokes involving fake insects, rubber snakes, and weasels. The chaos in the lobby stuck in people's minds, as did the intrusions of various audience "plants." A few mentioned a man "thrown from the balcony"; he was, of course, a dummy, but this was a memorable gag in the show. Universally, the interviewees said that show was extraordinarily loud.

They also opined that it couldn't be done. One expert who thought it could was frequent TACT costume designer Rip Claassen, whose grandfather worked on the original production. Rip provided invaluable background, and agreed to both design costumes and serve as Assistant Director.

All right: any *Hellzapoppin'* had to have the tree (indeed, even Jerry Lewis' version included the tree), the "Oscar Lady," spiders, weasels, and a raffle with a grand prize consisting of ice. What else? Here a script sent to us by a wounded veteran of the 1977 *Hellzapoppin'* proved invaluable. Also invaluable were various accounts of the show, which mentioned routines that somehow had slipped the minds of our interviewees after only six decades.

The Opening

Among the most audacious *Hellzapoppin'* bits was the "Yiddish Hitler," which appeared shortly after the show opened. It was right at the top of the show, taking the place of the newsreels mentioned in the script: the curtain opened to reveal the Nazi dictator making a speech in Yiddish with gestures typical of the Jewish comics of the period. Olsen and Johnson were not generally interested in political commentary, but Hitler was a terrific comic prop, and, as Mel Brooks has proved more than once, he still is. Thus, we knew what the first "number" would be. Another irresistible *Hellzapoppin'* gag involved an audience member eagerly buying a ticket to a more "respectable" show (in the original run, Rodgers and Hart's musical *I Married an Angel*) from a scalper.

Constructing the rest of the show's opening involved adapting the original script to the confines of a black box theater. *Hellzapoppin'* began with confusion among supposed audience members arguing over seats, followed by a vast scene called "Bedlam" that involved over 40 bizarre characters wandering around the theater. The new version of *Hellzapoppin'* had to have a different kind of Bedlam to evoke the same effect, and made use of two standard Olsen and Johnson devices that they included both in the show and their films: gorillas, and disgruntled chorus members. Traditionally Olsen and Johnson made their entrance well after the show had gotten under way. Sometimes they came in driving an old jalopy, sometimes they were carried in by Harem girls, sometimes they just stumbled into the proceedings as if by accident. We opted for the latter, and, of course, Olsen and Johnson had to begin by throwing various kinds of food at the audience.

The Sketches

The "Hotel Sketch" in Act I was an Olsen and Johnson staple that was presented essentially as it was in the original *Hellzapoppin'*. The sketch certainly didn't originate with them. It is one of many standard vaudeville routines that allowed comics to customize a generic situation with their choice among dozens of tried-and-true sight gags and one-liners. The Olsen and Johnson version included several gags that, if not original with them, certainly became identified with them through repeated use: the spoon exchange, "sorting strawberries," and the discussion of Johnson's driving skills. The one feature that seems 100% Olsen and Johnson is the stampede; when they weren't stealing from other comics,

Ole and Chic's humor tended to the surreal. The original sketch's ending involved a joke that doesn't "play" now (after the lights go out, Johnson has a dream and awakes to find himself in a romantic embrace with Ole). The revised ending involves typical Olsen and Johnson devices, and if they didn't use it, they certainly wouldn't have objected to it.

Other sketches in the original script had dated beyond fixing. One was the "Vegetable Sketch," in which Olsen and Johnson (the former in drag) play a supposedly "racy" romantic scene and then are forced by a censor to perform it again with vegetable names substituted for the objectionable words. This was a satire on the infamous Hays Code then being followed in Hollywood, and most of the humor involved Johnson's cracking up at the silliness of the sketch, à la Harvey Korman in "The Carol Burnett Show." But today the sketch seems tame and tedious rather than naughty and silly.

To replace this and an even more dated sketch involving World War I, we added two genuine vaudeville classics that Olson and Johnson definitely performed and probably included in *Hellzapoppin'* during its run. One of them is the most enduring and famous of all Vaudeville routines, variously called "Niagara Falls," "Poko-Moko," and "Slowly I Turned." The other, less well known but also a comic staple, is the "Straight Man Sketch," in which a volunteer from the audience repeatedly foils the comic's attempt to tell a joke. We added a technological element, but the sketch is otherwise just as Ole and Chic performed it.

Other sketches that are adapted from *the Hellzapoppin'* originals include "Lonely Heart," to which we appended a final punch line most famously used by Spike Jones, and "The Maternity Ward," which in 1938 ended with a gag that would be regarded as racist today. Courtroom and doctor "blackout sketches" (so named because the lights would go off immediately after the punch line) were standard equipment in burlesque and vaudeville; they were essentially dramatized jokes. All of such sketches presented here were in Olsen and Johnson's repertoire, and surely some, if not all, of them appeared in *Hellzapoppin'* at one time or another.

The Audience Bits

In addition to the "Hellzapoppin' Raffle," (which in the 1938 script included five prizes; it must have taken twenty minutes!), most of the audience bits in TACT's recreation are from the original, with some adaptations. For example, the multiple incarnations of "Spartacus" who invade the show were originally "Napoleons." The crying baby was actually "shot" (!); as violent as this *Hellzapoppin'* is, the first was more violent still. The lottery winner, the knight, the balloon seller, the various odd scenes discovered in the dark, the multiple idiots and madmen – these were all features of the original.

Hellzapoppin' was famous for its practical jokes on the audience. Olsen and Johnson required patrons to enter through the stage, where they would be the object of various gags

and tricks; for example, the women would have their dresses and skirts blown up by blasts of air (a joke that originated in Coney Island Fun Houses). The “Spiders in the Ceiling” and the “Escaped Weasel” routines, with their respective assaults on random audience members, were among the features that made *Hellzapoppin’* what it was. At the risk of lawsuits by phobics, both were faithfully recreated in TACT’s production.

Olsen and Johnson were famous for their use of audience stooges for everything from heckling from the audience to taking a 50 pound block of ice on the lap. Yes, some of the interjections and wisecracks you heard from the audience were scripted. But maybe not all of them.

A personal note: my Harvard educated father, a Silver Star recipient in World War II and one of my resources for *Hellzapoppin’* lore, made his second stage appearance (his first was in a school pageant as a snowman) in an audience bit that garnered specific praise in some reviews—including the Washington Post’s, by a humorless reviewer who didn’t get the show at all. When Ole complained that a Johnson crack was so bad only an idiot would think it was funny, my 87-year-old father, previously seated quietly in the house, suddenly started clapping his hands like seal and bellowing “FUNNY! That was FUNNY!!!” “Thank you, Senator,” replied an embarrassed Ole. “I think there’s a vote you have to make.” And my Dad exited, looking like an idiot.

Acts and Routines

The “Magic Door” running gag was a standard device in vaudeville and burlesque; on television it was used most prominently by comic Soupy Sales and on the “Dean Martin Show.” The bit was also the inspiration for Laugh-In’s “Joke Wall” that always closed the show. Olsen and Johnson used the gag occasionally on their “Fireball Fun-For-All” TV show, and it is thoroughly in the spirit of *Hellzapoppin’*. One of the door routines was taken more or less directly from the Olsen and Johnson film “Crazy House”: the Saleslady, who in the original was a salesman played by Shemp Howard, of Three Stooges fame.

The “Escape Artist” routine and the “World’s Greatest Second Tenor” (he was a first tenor originally, and Chinese rather than a Pacific Islander) stand out in the original script (and in some newspaper reviews) as among the very best *Hellzapoppin’* comic elements, and apparently were included in the show throughout its run. “Eleanor Rigby” is a variation of the mangled lyrics routines pioneered by the great Winstead “Doodles” Weaver (Sigourney’s uncle), who appears briefly in the 1941 *Hellzapoppin’* movie but who was best known for his work with Spike Jones’ comedy band. The rest of the truncated or botched songs as well as the parodies were adapted from older bits and various sources. Similar routines constantly cycled though Olsen and Johnson’s original.

The Running Gags

Hellzapoppin' accumulated multiple running gags as the show progressed. Among the authentic running gags from the original that were faithfully reproduced in TACT's production: the growing tree, the "Oscar Lady," the balloon seller, the drunk who is searching for a bathroom, the hapless escape artist, and the off-stage suicide. And, yes, we couldn't resist adding one or two of our own.

One famous *Hellzapoppin'* running gag that has attained pop culture immortality is the joke public address announcement. We have many of them, most based on Olsen and Johnson equivalents; the original had even more, and they were constantly being changed. Robert Altman used the device prominently in his film *M*A*S*H*; "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-in" made gag announcements one of the show's trademarks, both with text crawls across the screen and using the late Gary Owen's radio announcer character to intone absurdities and non sequiturs .

How authentic was TACT's *Hellzapoppin'*? It didn't have the real Olsen and Johnson, obviously (though the late, great Bill Karukas was actually better than Ole) nor are the songs the same – though many of them date from the same period or before. There was no elaborate Lindy Hop production number as in the original, because that was an act meant to capitalize on a new dance craze, and the Lindy Hop was no longer new or even popular by 2007.

The specialty acts – the jugglers, acrobats, ventriloquists, and unicyclists – were missing, but they were fungible, generic circus and variety show acts that could have been in any show of the period, and were. Today you can see such performers live at the D.C. Fringe Festival or on TV in such shows as "America's Got Talent." In *Hellzapoppin'*, they were filler. The cast was less than half the size of the original, and there was no orchestra and very little dancing.

But *Hellzapoppin'*, our research tells us, was an accurate evocation of the pace, spirit, and style of the original Olsen and Johnson creation, and it contained much of the material that made the show memorable and influenced so many writers and comics to come. If 2007's *Hellzapoppin'* evoked laughter, it was laughter that came to us through the decades from Olsen and Johnson and their contemporaries. Thus issues of authenticity fade into irrelevance. All Olsen and Johnson cared about was that their audiences, beset by the long Depression and dreading a war that was already visible on the horizon, left the theater happier and sillier than when they entered it. Our updated packaging of their show's jokes, routines, and sketches accomplished this for our audiences, and we left the experience confident that Chic and Ole would be satisfied.



The Golden Apple (1954)

In our final overview of twenty years of American Century Theater musicals, there is one notable addition to the program that involves music never before heard on this stage, or any other in Northern Virginia.

That is the section featuring selections from *The Golden Apple*, which opened Off-Broadway at the Phoenix Theatre almost exactly 61 years ago, then moved to Broadway's Alvin Theatre and closed sixteen weeks later, never to be produced there or in any other major professional venue again.

This is the one musical orphan with a reputation among musical theater buffs approaching (but not quite reaching) that of *Lady in the Dark*, so naturally, I wanted to see it produced by TACT. Doing such a show, however, would be a huge responsibility, even more, perhaps, than the theater usually undertakes when it has the audacity to present a playwright's neglected masterpiece to the world for a second opinion. A poor production is worse than none, undermining the work's reputation, and being unfair and disrespectful to its creator. This has always been a guiding caveat behind TACT shows.

Furthermore, *The Golden Apple* is not only as difficult and expensive to produce as *Lady*, it is even a greater risk. *Lady in the Dark* is a legendary musical; *The Golden Apple* is better described as a cult musical. Most people, even Broadway buffs, have never heard of it.

In the alternate universe where The American Century Theater isn't ignored as retrograde by the Washington Post and has been the beneficiary of millions from from one or more wealthy patrons who understand and appreciate our unique mission, TACT would have produced this show. Unfortunately, in this reality, we were never in a position to take that leap.

Here's what you missed:

The Show

The musical is based on the Iliad and the Odyssey. What made it special from the beginning was that the book and lyrics were written by the radical, brilliant American poet and lyricist **John Latouche** (1914-1956).

Broadway first heard of him in 1937, when he contributed two songs to the pro-union revue *Pins and Needles*. In 1939, he wrote the lyrics for Ballad for Uncle Sam, later retitled Ballad for Americans, to music by Earl Robinson, for the show *Sing For Your Supper*. The extended song was the "Born in the USA" of its time, featured at both the 1940 Republican Convention and the convention of the American Communist Party. The 13-minute cantata to American democracy was written for a soloist and a full orchestra.

Paul Robeson performed it on the CBS Radio network, and the song became national sensation.

Latouche wrote the book and lyrics for *The Golden Apple* with music by Jerome Moross. It was honored with the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Musical. In 1955, he provided additional lyrics for Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*. Latouche also wrote the libretto to Douglas Moore's opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, one of the few American operas to be included in the standard grand opera repertoire. He was with Broadway producer David Merrick on musicalizing the Eugene O'Neill play *Ah, Wilderness!* when he died of a sudden heart attack at 41.

The story of *The Golden Apple* was transplanted from Ancient Greece to the town of Angel's Roost, Washington, at the foot of Mt. Olympus, just after the Spanish-American war. Adventure-loving Ulysses and his men return triumphant from the war to their various women, including Ulysses's wife Penelope, and also Helen, a young woman married to the old Sheriff Menelaus. To honor the returning soldiers, the townsfolk organize a fair, and one of the events is a baking competition. Old Mother Hare, who supplies the women with herbs and prophecies, is left out of the festivities, but she shows up anyway to cause trouble. She has an apple made of gold wire that she will award to the best baker. Three important townswomen—Miss Minerva, Mrs. Juniper, and Lovey Mars—select Paris, a balloon-riding traveling salesman, to judge the contest, then promptly try to influence his vote.

Lovey Mars wins because she promises him Helen. Soon Paris and Helen are off to Rhododendron, the Big City, as Mother Hare enjoys her disruption of the community. Although Ulysses had promised Penelope that he'd eschew any more long adventures that would keep him far from home, he immediately gathers his men and goes off to retrieve Helen.

Helen becomes the toast of Rhododendron until the Angel's Roost men show up and grab her. Ulysses is about to take her back to her old hubby Menelaus, but he and his men want to enjoy the big city first. Rhododendron's Mayor Hector sees this as his chance for revenge against the hick interlopers. Their "late-night bender" lasts 10 years, and his men vanish one by one into the temptations of the city and the machinations of its sinful inhabitants. The men are serially ruined by social climber Calypso, the corrupt stockbrokers Scylla and Charybdis, the Sirens (you guessed it: prostitutes), a crazy female scientist who shoots men into space but can't retrieve them, and Circe, a seductive magician's assistant.

Ulysses is down to one last hero, Achilles, who gives up his life for Ulysses by intercepting a knife aimed at Ulysses' heart by Paris. Now the sole survivor of the catastrophic boondoggle, Ulysses returns to Penelope, promising her—again—that he is staying home for good.

The cast for this whimsical and erudite show included such future stars as Kaye Ballard, Bibi Osterwald, Charlotte Raye, and even Jerry Stiller, of “Seinfeld” fame.

The Golden Apple is best remembered for its songs, but the musical was ground-breaking in other ways. Here is one modern critic’s assessment, a typical one for those who have seen or studied the show:

The music really is terrific, sort of an encyclopedia of popular American musical forms: ballads, cakewalks, vaudeville turns, music hall spoofs, soft-shoes, marches, even a Rodgers and Hammerstein pastiche. The lyrics are equally striking. Ethan Mordden considers this perhaps the greatest set of lyrics for any musical, and while I don't entirely agree, they are indeed impressive. Somehow they wed the whole Trojan War/Odyssey concept to middle American values and speech patterns without sounding in the least pretentious, stupid, or patronizing. They're also quite funny! They're full of sly jokes and double-take moments that require the listener pay close attention to catch. Like Merrily We Roll Along, this score rewards careful listening.

The show is endlessly inventive. The long "Odyssey" sequence is done as a series of vaudeville turns, thus predating the similar concept used in *Follies* by some 17 years. The defeat of Paris takes place in a boxing ring. The competition for the golden apple is a baking contest. Helen is neither pretty nor smart, but the men love her because "she's always willin'."

The Golden Apple, obviously, needs and deserves a production, even a black box production, so its joys can be experienced by today’s audiences.

On behalf of the American Century Theater, I apologize for not being able to accomplish that within the time allotted to us.

I hope another local company will eventually find the courage and dedication to do what we could not.

