

Ak-Sar-Ben Drama and Men Who Make It Success from Year to Year



“Man is born unto trouble as sparks fly upward.”

WHO can tell better of what overtakes an “author” when he gets gay, or gets to thinking that he is getting gay, than the wight himself, who has survived the attempt and knows the result? For this reason I have determined that no other typewriter but the one over which I am chief engineer shall be used in transcribing this share of the current chronicles of Ak-Sar-Ben.

One balmy afternoon last spring, in May, when the cherry blossoms and the snowstorms were playing hide and seek around Omaha, Gus Renze came into my office. I was contemplating a stack of work that would have scared any other man than Gus. By the way, do you know Gus at all well? He is German in everything but his tongue. No Irishman who ever kissed the Blarney stone can come around you with more honeyed blandishments than can Gus when he wants something. Then he is the very quintessence of suavity, and the line of talk he deals out would charm anyone into doing anything. He’s a wonder, is Gus, when it comes to handing out a jolly.

Of course, Gus is always welcome wherever he goes, and it was but a minute after he had entered my place of work until we were both laughing and talking about the old times at the den, and other things, when he opened on me as if a sudden thought had struck him.

“Say, we want you to help us out this year. You are just the boy for the place, and if you’ll only do it, why, you’ll save the show.”

Foxy Gus! I found out later that he and Will Yetter and Charley Black and J. C. Root and “Daddy” Weaver had talked the matter all over and had agreed that I was to be “stung,” and Gus had set out to do the stinging.

“Sure, I’ll do anything once,” I answered, with that fatuous confidence that leads some men to cash checks and others to bet they can open the padlock.

“We want you to write the ritual for this year; that’s all.”

“What do I know about writing rituals?” I asked. “I might write a scare head, or something of that sort, but I’m not a dramatist or a novelist or a poet, and besides I have too much real work to do to take any outside stunts of that nature.”

“Well, you’re going to do it, just the same,” said the smiling Gus, and he hunched his chair over and grew confidential. “You know, I have been telling these fellows that you know all about this sort of thing, and you can put on a better show than any of us. You have experience, and that’s what counts, and that imagination of yours is just the thing we want.”

So we argued it, back and forth, and finally I gave in. “You come out to the den and we’ll talk it over,” said Gus, as he went out of the door, with that cherubic smile of his lighting up his features. “You’d better come out tomorrow, too, so that we can get under way.”

“Tomorrow” I was out at the den and found Gus sitting on a keg that had once held beer, in the middle of the floor, looking wise. Eaton and Larry and one or two others were busy about the place. A big hole had been dug under the floor and some lines had been chalked. We went to talking right away about the show. “It’s to be military,” said Gus, and we talked about military things, and I said I’d think it over. Not much time was allowed me to think, for I had other work of a more exacting nature to occupy my mind, and it was borne in upon me very soon that the show was to start in a couple of weeks. Daddy Weaver got into the game about this time and wanted to know how many actors I was going to have. I sketched a scenario for him, and he said it was good. Then I had another consultation with Gus, and he said it was bully. One night, after matters had quieted down a little, I turned to my trusty typewriter and began to jot out words. It came easier than I thought it would, and visions of success as a dramatist began to distract my thoughts. Before the day set by Gus as the time when the work must be finished I had it written out, and Weaver had looked it over and pronounced it good. Then we went to work to cast the speaking parts.

“Who do you want for this part?” asked Weaver.

“That ought to suit Fred Paffenrath,” I answered. “He will be sure to be there every night, and that is a part that can’t be pushed around from man to man very easily.”

So we agreed on Fred Paffenrath for the Officer of the Guard. Then I put forth the advantages of having Ben Thomas for General Gasooks, and this was acceded to by Weaver. So we went, from man to man, picking each for his fitness. “What sort of a part have you for Doc?” asked Weaver, having in mind Dr. Ramaciotti. “One that will tickle him to death,” I answered. “He’s to wear a cocked hat and sit on a chair and boss the recruiting job.”

Our acting company was soon formed. Maybe some of you gallant knights would like to know just who formed that band of splendid gentlemen who performed so well their parts at the Den all summer for your edification, and what their entitlements were. Here is the “cast of characters:”

- Officer of the Escort.....Ed Thompson
- Officer of the Guard.....Fred Paffenrath
- Recruiting Officer.....George S. Powell
- Signal Sergeant.....William Kennedy
- Colonel of the Cavalry.....D. L. Ramaciotti
- Adjutant General.....H. L. Battin
- General Gasook.....B. F. Thomas
- Councillor.....E. C. Hodder
- Grand Mufti.....F. W. Fitch
- Orderly to Signal Sergeant.....W. R. Bennett
- Sentinel.....Charles Goodall
- Orderly to Officer of the Guard.....Harry Foster
- Standard Bearer.....Fred Wurn

One evening, just before the show started, we assembled at the Omaha club for dinner, and there, in the sanctity of a private dining room, I read the “play” to the assembled company and the ritual committee of the Board of Governors. Talk about Cornelle reading one of his plays before King Louis and the court! Why, that dead and gone French playwright wasn’t in it. Each of the company vied with the others in paying me compliments, and my aspirations to be a dramatist began to soar again. I saw the finish of Clyde Fitch and W. Shakespeare, and could even dimly, very dimly, picture G. B. Shaw as having a companion in his solitude at the pinnacle of dramatic fame. Oh, it was fine; it was almost intoxicating. Parts were given out that night, and all hands were invited out to the Den for a rehearsal the next evening.

Gus Renze had been working, too, and when we got to the Den the stages were ready, almost finished, and the rehearsal started. It was a bunch of willing workers, and everybody was pleased with his part. At least everybody said he was, and I was given a chance to make a few well chosen remarks, setting forth the general theme of

the drama, the relation each character bore to the whole and the essential spirit that must pervade the performance in order that its best effect might be secured. Then we started. Here’s where I began to wake up.

Each man took his part and read his lines through. It didn’t sound very warlike, nor particularly inspiring. Then some detailed instructions as to personal conduct were given, and it was all gone over again. This time it was better. Fred Paffenrath began to get interested in his share of the work and we began to make diagrams of what the officer of the guard would have to do. Then Bill Kennedy got curious as to the wig-wag business and just what was expected of him. Bill’s imagination was of duty that night and the working aspect of the signal tower didn’t appeal to him. Gus had Eaton duck under the canvass and made a noise like a wireless station. This gave Bill an inkling of what might be looked for, and it was Fitch’s turn. He had found a chance to make the obligation a little stronger. But he was induced to give it a trial as originally set down. George Powell was having all sorts of fun with himself. He seemed to see the laughter concealed in his share of the proceedings from the start. Organizing an army for John Lund was the next big step, and this was finally achieved and the rehearsal was brought to a close about 10 o’clock, with the show fairly under way. That is, we all thought it was. Oscar Lieben was on hand and the matter of uniforms was discussed and practically decided on. Dimmick had his band there and Tom Swift and his quartet, and after a while Gus rolled a keg of beer out into the middle of the arena and the gang sat down to talk things over. Another rehearsal was called for the next night and everybody was urged to be on hand promptly.

At the second rehearsal the relation of one part of the show to another was discovered. Loose ends had to be connected up; short

speeches to fit one character to another were improvised and hastily jotted down or given verbally. Charley Goodall learned to walk his beat and Dr. Foster mastered his entrance and exit before and after the high and mighty officer of the guard. Suggestions came thick and fast from all hands, each more or less pertinent, and everybody seemed bent on making the show a good one, no matter what the author had provided. Two hours spent in going over this and that feature of the work left the matter fairly well understood and the actors agreed to come letter perfect to the next rehearsal. The second part of the show was taken up and the speeches were read in full as written, while a watch was held to determine their length in minutes. It was soon apparent that the well-rounded periods I had so joyously prepared, and which were supposed to be brimming with delight for all who listened to them, were too long by half, and so the blue pencil was applied without qualm of remorse, and literature gave way in chunks before the onslaught of practical work. As a matter of fact, Mufti Bennett fixed his finally to suit himself, but by that time the author had been sufficiently tamed to stand for almost anything.

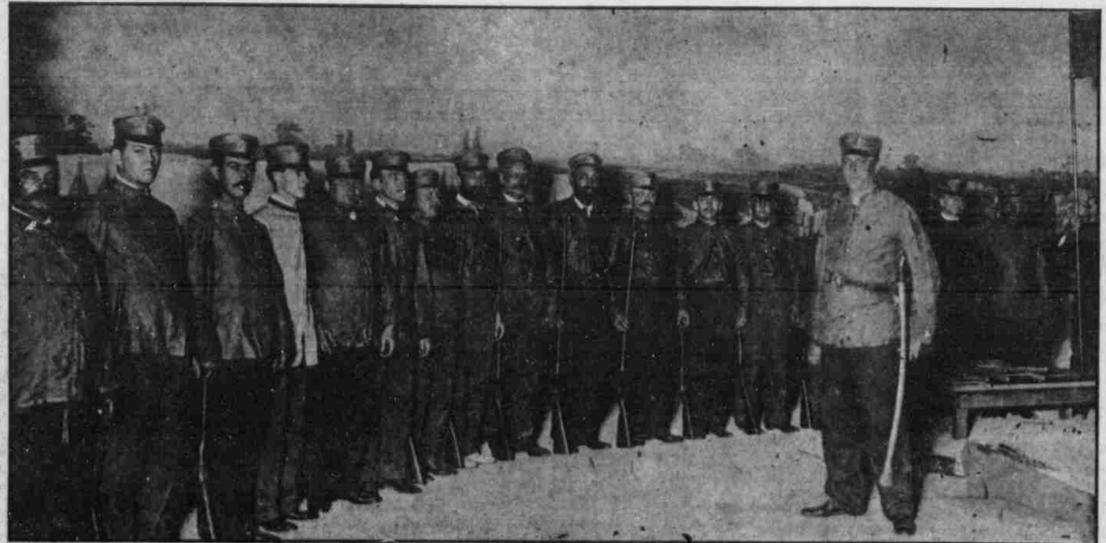
In the meantime all were getting closer and closer together. It is team work that counts at Ak-Sar-Ben, just the same as elsewhere, and if ever a bunch of good fellows played “the inside game” it was this same royal lot who made up the working crew for the last year. Almost every man of them is a veteran in the service, and each has his whole thought bent on making the show go. Stunt after stunt was suggested and tried, and when one was adopted it was accepted by all and never once was there noted any tendency to slight the details or kick on the work. For example:

“What have you got for Henry?” asked Dad Weaver on the night of the first rehearsal, meaning what role had been assigned to Ehrenpfort.

Roster of Ak-Sar-Ben Working Crew for the Year 1907

- Benedict, E. W.
- Bennett, W. R.
- Bourke, W. T.
- Boyles, C. E.
- Brucker, G. F.
- Case, W. A.
- Crane, E. E.
- Dimmick, J. F.
- Ehrenpfort, Henry.
- Fitch, F. W.
- Foster, Charles E.
- Foster, Dr. H. A.
- Goodall, Charles W.
- Hodder, E. C.
- Jacobson, Jacob.
- Karbach, Charles J.
- Kennedy, William.
- Kuense, G. C.
- Lieben, Oscar G.
- Lund, John G.
- McCullough, T. W.
- McCune, O. E.
- McGrath, Charles J.
- McKay, F. M.
- Mots, Herman.
- Miller, A. V.
- Miller, Clinton E.
- Molony, Charles E.
- Negale, W. F.
- Paffenrath, Fred F.
- Palmer, Edward.
- Petrie, E. F.
- Penfold, J. L.
- Petersen, Peter.
- Potter, E. L.
- Powell, George S.
- Reiter, Carl.
- Renze, Gus A.
- Shimpton, Frank C.
- Shankley, E. J.
- Storr, Adolph.
- Swift, T. F.
- Swigart, George M.
- Thind, L. P.
- Thomas, B. F.
- Thompson, Ed. E.
- Turney, F. E.
- Wappich, William F.
- Weaver, J. D.
- Wern, George.
- Wurn, E. F.
- Wilcox, Frank.

Veteran Troopers of Ak-Sar-Ben’s Fighting Forces



GENERAL JOHN LUND AND HIS ARMY READY TO GO TO WAR—DR. WURN WAS SO EAGER TO GET THE FLAG IN THE PICTURE THAT HE MISSED OUT HIMSELF.

“We’ll give Henry a thinking part,” was the answer, and it was explained that he would be placed in charge of the “field” station of the signal corps. Henry accepted the billet and went off with his musket in hand as enthusiastic as if he had been named as General Gasooks. Then, when rehearsal had shown the impracticability of the proposed arrangement of field station and guard house, and the “coop” was moved and the field station stunt was abandoned, Henry went along with the coop, and all summer stood guard over the guard house. Petrie and Petersen took their places as guards, and Dr. Wurn fell in as color bearer, while the army waxed more zealous as each night went along, till it was finally commended as the most efficient body of troops ever put into the field by Samson.

All this busy bustle had to come to an end some time and the first performance was given on a lovely Monday night, with a crowd of “rookies” that would have puzzled the bunch at the close of the season, let alone at the beginning. But eventually the last man had been taken into the army and the show was pronounced good. Cues had been missed, lines had been omitted and words changed, but the outlines of the ritual were there. Gus had performed wonders, but he couldn’t get the scenery to work right that first night, and so said things that must have made the recording angel turn his head away. But it was all in the night’s work, and the first show set forth what was necessary to change for the second. Back of the scenes these matters were talked over and the actors aided in working out the new details, until eventually the initiation ceremony went along as smoothly as a babbling brook. Some of those who took the medical examination may have thought the going was a bit lumpy, but the fellows down in front, rather liked it, and said so. But it wasn’t all achieved without effort.

“You won’t know your dingbusted ritual when we get through with it,” said Dad Weaver to me one night just as the show was starting.

“You can take the ritual and go where Methusalem went last year,” I told him. And then Doc Ramaciotti told Fred Paffenrath that Weaver and the author had had a fight, and Paffenrath said it must have been over something he said and wanted to apologize. But he found out that the little passage was but a pleasant way the two had of telling each other that things were going bully. And thus it went. Just to show how readily the working crew enters into the spirit of the whole work, and how zealous they are so good results: On “Boosters” night it was determined to put on a variation of the regular ceremony. Gus came down town and talked it over with me, and we began to work out the theme. Before we finally decided we had outlined three separate ceremonials, working them out in detail, and finally on the afternoon of the day we discarded all of them and took the one that was really put on. It was after 4 o’clock in the afternoon, and while Gus went away to prepare the properties I started the typewriter to get out the new speeches. We had no time to notify the actors until they came to the Den. It was late, of course, when they got there, but we corralled them, and in a minute had them up on the north stage, rehearsing new work. New speeches were handed to Bennett, Thomas, Battin and Hodder, and the show was started. Not a man who saw the performance that night—and it was one of the most laughable ever put on at the Den—but would have said the affair had been worked out for days instead of a few minutes by the actors. It is such zeal that makes Ak-Sar-Ben the great success it is.

Long before the summer was over I had given up any notion of becoming a playwright; my half-formed aspirations in this direction all fell down before the actuality, and I was mighty glad that I had fallen into the hands of such a loyal and good-natured crowd. I would like to pay a deserved tribute to each of these men—to Swift and his quartet, to Dimmick and his band, to Lund and his army, to each of the actors, to Oscar Lieben, who presided over the “green room;” to Gus and his force of mechanics, and finally to Daddy Weaver, who did everybody’s work all summer long, and did it well. These fellows all did a lot of things for which the author was given credit, and he now takes this opportunity of expressing his appreciation of the co-operation of all, and especially Fitch, who succeeded at last in making the obligation what he thought it ought to be. We had a number of debates over this, and Fitch always yielded to my entreaties, until I went away, and we could no longer consult over the matter, so he just changed it. When I came back it had been amended to his taste, and none of the subsequent postulators ever knew the difference.

One shade of gloom cast its pall over the ceremonies at the close of the season. Death suddenly called Dr. Ramaciotti, and the sorrow of the working crew was genuine. He had not felt able to take his part for two or three meetings, and W. F. Wappich had assumed the role. But no one thought “Doc,” as he was most affectionately called, was not coming back. He was at the Den the night before he died and enjoyed seeing Wappich preside over the medical and physical examination of a big class of “rookies,” and in less than twenty-four hours after he was dead. His loss was felt as personal by each of the crew. He was genial and affable in all his ways, took his part with interest and tried at all times to get the best out of it. The tribute paid him by his fellow workers was sincere and deserved. He will be missed more when next season’s show is put on than ever.

From first to last, the “show” is put on with studied care. It is rehearsed and worked out in all its details, and the various stunts are developed thoroughly before being tried on postulators for knightly honors. While the members of the working crew are all volunteers, each works as energetically as though he were drawing a high salary, and each tries as hard as the other to make the affair a success. This is really what does make it win. It is the spirit that has marked Ak-Sar-Ben from the very beginning of its wonderful career.

Year after year these men have worked to make the initiation ceremony a success. They give of their time and their means to the support of Ak-Sar-Ben, and the success of the organization is due in no small measure to their intelligent zeal in carrying on the “show.” I feel that it has been a privilege to work with them, and I value the friendships I have made during the summer at the Den a great deal more than I do the little fleeting fame that has come to me as

THE AUTHOR.