

Theatricals Music Features

BROADWAY TRY-OUTS DOOR TO FAME OR FAILURE

'Survival of Fittest' Rule in Theatrical Elimination—Writer Describes Typical Broadway Audition and Lists 10 Commandments

New York, Jan. 12 (By Eva Jessy for ANP)—If there is truly a broken heart for every light on Broadway, according to the old sob ballad, nine tenths of them must be shattered at the starting post, which in the theatrical profession is the audition stage. The try-out is the route to fame and year after year thousands of Negro hopefuls apply only to be found wanting of the sparkling talent Broadway demands. The disappointment and discouragement suffered by aspirants during one season would fill volumes. The singing field garners the largest crop. Human emotions involved in an audition are varied and interesting. Fear, envy, suspicion, desperation—often the event is the final straw to a drowning man. Would-be stars, lacking carefare, walk the seventy blocks from Harlem's edge to Broadway's centre. Applicants seem to be drawn from every conceivable place. Many wear borrowed finery, sing from borrowed music.

There is a type, a story in every individual. Veterans at the game, unconcerned, assured; the first timer, edging nervously up to a fellow asking to be shown the "main" man, whether the spot has been filled, etc.—A smalltown lad trying to look as if he knew all the answers—middle aged putting on a juvenile front—a stout contralto, tightly corseted, tries desperately to keep stomach and bosom in shadow. Thin-legged women surreptitiously strike the most flattering pose. A former prima-donna enters swathed in furs—seeking to impress by studied entrance—stands apart till approached, then insists on being heard immediately.

When a producer or agent sends out a call for singers there is no telling what the harvest will be, but it is certain to be full of surprises. Like casting a net in the deep sea, one may draw anything from a minnow to a whale. Anything from a hog called to a Florence Mills. No producer passes up the chance for a "discovery" and will listen down the line of singers to the very end.

IS GIVE AND TAKE GAME: It is serious business, the making and holding of auditions. The aspirant gives all he has, freely, desperately, the producer takes it all in, coolly, unresponsively. Producers are a poker face lot, with a few exceptions. In vain may the singer search the face before him for a hint of his fate. Good or bad the judge's face tells nothing. In fact, the more pleased the producer, the more inexpressive his face is likely to become. To show enthusiasm would puff up the performer, run up his price, discourage the others, but this philosophy sometimes works a loss at both ends. Often the auditor sits far back in the theatre in darkness, the glow of a cigar the only sign of his presence. The darkness permits a keener focus, absolute relaxation and puts the singer more at ease.

In many instances there is an elimination board, thus only the most promising voices reach the decisive ear. Mostly dreaded by singers is the auditor who strolls or rushes back and forth like a caged beast while the vocalist shows his wares. Likewise disgusting in the producer whom after instructing the singer to proceed, begins an animated conversation with a third party, never giving the performer a glance until the end, when he says vacantly "Thank you very much." And it is time wasted.

PORGY AUDITIONS MEMORABLE EVENTS: Of all the auditions witnessed by the writer in 12 years the one held in search for

talent for the opera "Porgy and Bess," were most exhaustive, discriminating and revealing. Auditions were held secretly over a period of no less than six months. Requirement was both type and ability. Training and lack of training were desired in the same voice, in a number of cases, meaning that only a trained voice could accomplish certain things required in the score, yet that voice must not sound trained.

Open auditions revealed that, despite the Negro's insistence that he is ready for opera and such, most singers, if we are to judge from "Porgy" applicants are on half-way ground, above the mediocre, below the exceptional. This classification includes both private pupils and graduates of music schools. Many should never have selected singing as a career, and those gifted with good voices are lacking the many fine points.

There is a mighty broad line between operatic and other kinds of training and this applicants learned with a big shock. In one instance a well known society soloist sweated thru his audition and remarked he never before realized how far he was from being a good singer until that moment. Theatrical performers hesitated to fall back on trick vocalization, "top sopranos" found altitude alone insufficiently. In short, those auditions did much to reveal the lack of musicianship in the vocal field. There was a flood of baritones, a scarcity of tenors; a few altos, plenty so-so sopranos all aspiring to "first", almost complete absence of basses. Auditions were performances in themselves, as dramatic, as comical, as any productions to reach the paying public.

VARIOUS FACTORS INFLUENCE JUDGES: The writer, included in the audition board of three action for the Theatre Guild, listened to and watch each applicant. Factors of which the singer had no suspicion entered into the appraisal. One soprano, sweet-voiced and charming, was selected on personality and amiability chiefly, another on her buxom figure, one man-voiced contralto offered "Walter Boy" with assurance, while the audition board was aware of nothing save her flat white shoes which gave her a most ludicrous appearance.

A baritone of other days famous on two continents 20 years ago, essayed a ballad that at one time would have brought cheers. All that remained was a continental style and he failed to place. A reputation as a trouble maker barred a woman who by virtue of voice and type would have rated a quick okay. An inexperienced chap with more conceit than ability strutted to the piano, gave the pianist a copy of "Chloe", struck an impressive pose and proceeded to bellow forth on the second line of that well known song. Catastrophe was immediate and when he glared in offended dignity at the accompanist the judges could control their laughter no longer. He barged from the stage feeling much mistreated.

A cute little thing whose charm had bowled them over in night clubs blushed and almost fainted from nervousness. It took repeated encouragement from her escort to bolster her up for the ordeal. The judges were bored past sympathy. One old man returned again and again for another try, insisting that he could do better. The judges were startled when a short fat woman sang one stanza of her song in high soprano and the second in deep contralto, both good quality. She landed as much for comedy as vocal ability. Some well-known singers were accepted with out a hearing, some very light complexions were rejected on that score. For once "creoles" were not preferred. The word quickly gets around and most applicants were

not too far removed from the "Catfish Row" requirements.

JUDGES MAKE STUPID BLUNDERS: But producers and those who should know do not always know, nor recognize talent when they see it. It is difficult to believe but sure that many drawing huge salaries in motion pictures, vaudeville, opera, radio were not so long since pushed aside with a glance or overlooked entirely. True artistic talent may develop miraculously, yet surely there must be some sign of it even in the sprouting stage. And the producer should have an eye trained for such perception. Usually the talent must be as pronounced as a Chesterfield signboard before it is recognized by the powers that be.

Ten years ago the celebrated George Cukor turned thumbs down on Bette Davis at a Rochester theatre. In his opinion she was hopeless. A year later Bette Davis crashed Broadway another year, she made Hollywood and six years later won the Best Performance Award.

The late and immortal Schumann Heink had as many careers as a cat has lives. Her first try-out with a Vienna opera was a miserable failure. They laughed at her homely face, her clothes, her figure. Somebody was mighty stupid.

Errol Flynn was in pictures four years before he forced the audition that landed him in the top crust. The role was "Captain Blood". He returned to the casting office time and time again telling them: "I've had adventures that make Captain Blood look like a fairy tale. I can shoot, ride, swim handle any kind of a boat. It won't hurt to try me will it?" Persistence and self-assurance won a test and the part.

Duke Ellington tops the list now but there was well remembered time when auditions seemed but a farce designed for the producer's idle moments. And the shaping and re-shaping of a band to another's idea is something else again. For a band or vaudeville until auditions are frequently strung out over months and months. Every audition finds new faces in the judges' stand and the unit must go thru its paces repeatedly while the contemplated producers picks imaginary flaws and suggests absurd or impossible changes. Such is the experience of every band, however famous.

Minta Cat, Gergette Harvey, the Southernaires, all have tales to tell of auditions at sometime or other that would ended their careers, had not their own stubbornness prevailed.

HOW MATTHEW BROKE IN: The writer literally forced the hearing of Erward Matthew for the much struggled after Capitol Family Hour. Fred Raphael was holding auditions in the broadcasting room. We took Matthews in, unannounced and without appointment and asked for an immediate hearing. We were too late, said Raphael and besides, their new policy was to have aspirants try out over WHN, the Lowe radio station. "Let him come in and sing a song over the air and if we like him Okeh," he said.

I refused point blank. "He's not that kind of a singer, he is far above that, and you'll be making a mistake to let him go out the door unheard." Nonplussed, Raphael called a pianist and walked resignedly to the control room. The air became tense with excitement at the first note. Orchestra men on the point of leaving crowded back into the room, the pianist was smiling ecstatically and Raphael was busy on Mayor's private phone and thus was Matthews "discovered."

Walter Brennan gave an audition for "Barbary Coast" unsolicited. He applied all made for the part minus an eye, old hat, ect.

Bruce Cabot's first movie audition was a failure. Isabel Jewell was at rock bottom when she took the test for "Tale of Two Cities." Her whole future depended on it. Cary Grant's audition was an accident. Joan Crawford's life was just one audition after another, producers thought her impossible, but the divine spark was there all along.

A singer, a performer, is like a diamond on which the cutter of

CAB INTRODUCES HIS FIRST SOLOIST



Photo shows the famous Cabell Calloway III, introducing his first soloist, the noted June Richmond, who formerly warbled for a white band before signing up with Cab's hot Cotton Club Orchestra, now in its third winter on the "Great

White Way," Broadway and 48th Street, New York. Cab is also busy rounding out courses for his new "Jive University," which will be broadcast over CBS from the Cotton Club. (Calvin Service.)

experience must labor for years to bring out every fact by careful work, and it must be a good stone to begin with, but if anyone can discern its brilliance in rough, producers should. Yet numberless times they fail and you read time after time of this or that actor being "discovered" when the fact of the matter is that the artist carried that same talent quantity and quality, to audition after audition, and the producers failed to see it. Auditions are not infallible tests, but they are the best method the business has of finding who's got the button.

THE ASPIRANT HAS MUCH TO LEARN: While the possession of talent and ability is the main selling point in an audition, other factors weigh heavily for or against the artist. There are many rules to follow and many "don't's" to observe. There are tricks in every trade and not necessarily illegitimate.

The first caution is regarding appearance. Clothes may not make the man, but they make an impression, which is one-third the battle. The producer reasons thus: "If he is so good as that, he should be looking better," and it's straight reasoning. And you cannot stand before a man in shabby clothing and demand a big salary.

There are the Ten Commandments for those making auditions:

- (1) Don't rush and attempt to overwhelm the producer. Astonish him if you can, but don't rob him of the chance to appraise you calmly. He resents your putting your finger in his eye.
- (2) Don't brag (you'll only appear ridiculous at the show-down). Neither try to worm yourself in with cheap flattery. Yours has no value to a superior, and the presumption is sickening.
- (3) Don't cringe. A respectful attitude is all that is required. A conductor or director is not a tyrant or Lord God Almighty, just another human being.
- (4) Don't of all things, speak ill of another director, or accuse him of unfairness. It disgusts and embarrasses your listener.
- (5) Don't insist on singing more when he says "sufficient." If you have a better song sing it first. It may help to ask how many numbers he will consent to hear, and what type he prefers.
- (6) Don't ask the pianist to transpose the number on sight. It shows lack of consideration and is proof of

carelessness.

(7) Don't wear "That'swhat-they-all-say" expression when told you will be called in case of vacancy. It is insulting to the conductor, and remembering that, look, he won't call you, sure enough.

'CHARLIE' SPEARS 'EM UP FOR ANP

WAY DOWN SOUTH COULD YOU DO THIS FOR ME PAL? Take my money and do what you think is best. In 1922, "Uncle" Jim McAllister had been a dryman for many years, died in Fayetteville, N. C. He left all of his modest estate to his boyhood playmates, Williamson W. Fuller, white of New York, a native of Fayetteville who left many years ago and became a multi-millionaire and became a multi-millionaire and became a multi-millionaire as general counsel for the American Tobacco company.

When Jim and Fuller were small boys they hunted and fished together in the long ago and remained life-long friends. So just before "Uncle" Jim died he signed a remarkable will in which he declared he was leaving everything he possessed to his best pal, Mr. Fuller, and asked his white friend to do what he thought was best with it.

The multi-millionaire after a few years sold the estate and converted the proceeds into the "James McAllister Christmas Fund" which was established 12 years ago. The beneficiaries are residents of Cross Creek township who were contemporaries of his old time pal.

Only the income from the fund is distributed each Christmas and the amount distributed among the aged Negroes at the holiday season every year amounts to \$800.

Mr. Fuller erected a special building on his estate at Pinehurst, a Carolina winter resort, and in it you will find just one thing, his old pal's antique low wheeled one "hoss" dray.

CATFISH ROW

Mr. Barnum, who was the biggest faker in American history and loved to fool the public would only magnify his remarks as to the gullibility of the American people were he living today.

Barnum's thesis: Was that a "sucker" is born every minute, and by golly, the old gentleman was right. Even today he could find no end of concrete evidence as to the correctness of his thesis.

DUBOSE HEYWARD: Deserves a friendly and resounding pat on the back for giving to the world "Porgy", the story of the crippled

beggar who lives amongst his fellow Negroes with his woman "Bess" in Catfish Row down in old Charleston.

Every since the book was published, and the play produced, millions of people have really believed that Negroes live in Catfish Row down in his historic old city. Even veteran newspaper men walk the plank and go off the wrong end every time they hit Charleston to cover a case. Every time. They always snap a picture of the worst slacks they can find, up some alley down in the dumps and shoot it in to be published under the title "Catfish Row."

Usually we pay no attention to anything like that, because we know the boys but when one of our favorite weekly papers published a photograph of a shack shortly after the storm, which was supposed to be Catfish Row, hat was the limit, because we want our news straight. So we said Cholly 'ol boy its time to STRAIGHTEN 'EM OUT: And stop all that "fool stuff" right now. So get this straight: There is only one Catfish Row in Charleston. And never has been but one. And it is on an alley. And it is not a street. And it is not a row of buildings. And it is not in a colored neighborhood. It is in a white neighborhood down near the world famed old bettery where you will find single colonial homes worth in the hundreds of thousands of dollars (and you know what that means down South.) That is where Catfish Row is located.

Catfish Row is a single building, a very very old apartment house with two wings extending back from the street. In other words the building is shaped somewhat like a horse shoe, with the open part in the rear. Between the two wings (in the rear) is an open court beautifully landscaped with southern flowers, and fountains. The two wings are Catfish Row and White people live in Catfish Row and not Negroes. The building is owned by a millionaire landscape artist who has an apartment in the building and lives there also. The other apartments are all occupied by artists (writers) painters musicians, etc.) all white.

The History of Catfish Row

We talked with the owner and he gave us permission to take as many photographs as we wished, also sketches. He also gave up the history. Here it is.

Long before the Civil War, Catfish Row was occupied by white people and was known as "The Hat and Gown," and for a short period after the Civil War it was occupied by Negroes as a tenement house. Except for this short period of time, white people have lived there, always. Near the building you will find many little shops, "Porgy's Hat Shoppe," etc. But there was never a "Porgy" and there never was a "Bess" except in the imagination of Dubose Heyward and George Gershwin but there is a Catfish Row. Well, So long old timers, do be good.

MUSICAL DON'TS

Don't attempt numbers beyond your powers. A simple song well sung is art. Omit songs that Marian Anderson, Tibbett, Hayes, Robeson and other superlative artists have made familiar unless you can top their performances.

Don't use ragged music that falls all over the place, embarrassing all present.

Don't use hackneyed numbers—and this is an important point—Ninety percent of tryouts selects, "Rose in the Bud", "Because", "I Love You Truly", "Chloe", "Water Boy", "Water Boy", "Without A Song", "Road to Mandalay", "Morning", "Homing", "Passing By", "A Brown Bird Singing", etc., when there are hundreds of other songs just as fine and certainly more welcome for their freshness.

And finally, don't forget that charm in singing and manner eclipses all other qualities. Sensationalism may dazzle for a time, but charm casts a spell the years cannot break.

WHENCE AND WHY DO THEY COME

Where do they come from? Like the nursery rhyme—"Out of every-where, into here"—small towns, where they were the best in the county—church choirs, college theatricals, glee clubs, quartets. They may entertain bright hopes of landing on Broadway at the first hearing, but even after disillusionment they hang on and make the rounds on every call. As long as there is an example of success within their view, they will vision the same glory coming eventually to themselves.

Perhaps they know the stories of Katherine Cornell, Claudette Colbert, Frank Wilson, Little Billy Adams, stepping out in a current White Way attraction—Why do they cling to this mirage, this source of disappointment, unless as Walter Huston declares, "We love best the thing for which we suffer and starve—cuss out and worship."

FORT WORTH GETS SECOND NEW THEATRE

Forth Worth, Texas, Jan. 13—(By R. L. "Pie" Melton for ANP)—Theatrically speaking, the city of Fort Worth is forging ahead. The opening of the \$38,000 Ritz theatre Wednesday marked the second all sepia show to open in Cowtown in less than a year, the other being the Grand which opened several months ago. Both theaters are modernistic in structure, somewhat streamlined, having neon lighting fixtures that are similar to the brights lights of Harlem.

The opening of these movies has caused colored theater-goers to become more show conscious and at the same time, caused other surrounding Negro business to soar.

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