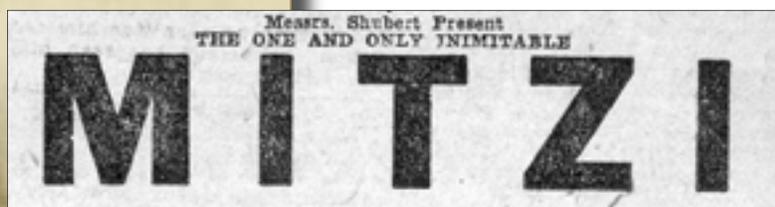




The Show *Passing Show*

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*Searching for Mitzi:
The Life and Career of Mitzi Hajos
from 1910-1970*

by Shay Delcurla

It is difficult for me to believe that it has been over fifteen years since the idea of “finding” Mitzi first entered my consciousness. While browsing in a used book store I came across an interview simply titled *Mitzi*. I became fascinated by the story of a woman who started her career as a leading lady on the stage and ended it working as a “secretary” for J.J. Shubert, a producer who along with his brother Lee had been an employer during several key times during her long career.

I immediately wanted to know more about this woman. I searched for other later articles, but found none, not even an obituary. The trail went completely cold. For a while I had thought that Mitzi was still alive, perhaps in a nursing home for aged actors, but with each passing year this possibility became increasingly remote. If this seems like a far-fetched hope, think of the reaction of Ziegfeld followers who discovered Doris Eaton Travis not only alive, but also dancing, seventy years after her final professional appearance.

Eventually, however, I did find out what happened to Mitzi, and along the way I gained great respect for this woman who had navigated through at least three distinct careers in the American Theatre: First, as a young leading lady of operettas and musicals during the early part of the twentieth century; then, for a period of five years, as a successful character actor; and finally for some twelve years as a staff member in the Shubert offices. My goal, however, was not just to “find” her, but also give her a voice as well. She was after all, not a silent film actress, but a musical comedy star—red-haired, vibrant, dancing and singing; a person whose career should not be relegated to the silent, still, and sometimes grainy photos that happen to have survived.

Most sources record that Mitzi Hajos was born in 1891 in Budapest, although she actually claimed the small town of Szabadka, 100 miles south of Budapest, as her original hometown.¹ In fact, in one of her earliest interviews, Mitzi spoke about the Hungarian town that she hailed from, noting that the locals thought that she would disappear forever if she went to America.² The year of her birth, however, is something of a mystery. Careful examination of documents and interviews reveal that Mitzi was never consistent in giving her age. When she first entered the U.S. in 1910, she reported herself as twenty-years old; fourteen years later on a trip to Europe she cited her age as twenty-nine. It seemed to be the

one outrageous indulgence she allowed herself. But Mitzi's desire to blur her actual age also makes it difficult to determine the longevity and scope of her European career prior to 1910.

She starred in musicals in the U.S. between 1910 and 1930. Photographs of that period reveal that she was very attractive, especially when photographed properly. Well known and popular, for a time she was recognized simply by her first name, something she sought in the courts as was reported in the *New York Times* in 1916:

Here in America I am the only Hajos that has ever been and no one knows how to say my name. Please, honorable Judges, this makes it very hard for me. When I act on the stage my audiences say they like me by clapping their hands, but to their friends they do not say they like me, because they cannot say my name. They think shame to mispronounce it. This is bad for anyone in my business when people are afraid to try to say your name. My first name too is almost as bad, for nobody says it right. In my country they spell it in two ways-MIZZI and MITZI – and they say it always “Mit-see.”³

She goes on to add that it would be much easier if she could have the legal right to be known as “Mitzi.” In fact, as of this date, although she would retain her last name for legal and practical purposes, she would be billed on marquees and ads as Mitzi, often in lettering of equal or greater size than the play's title.

An offer from William Morris to star in *Barnyard Romeo* at The American Roof Garden first brought Mitzi to the United States. She was engaged to recreate the role of a Hen Pheasant, which she had played in Vienna. She arrived in New York on May 21, 1910, aboard the *Campania* which had departed from Liverpool.⁴ She traveled alone, as was her habit, and spent the time crossing to begin learning English, which she had never studied previously.

Barnyard Romeo opened June 6, 1910, less than a month after Mitzi's arrival in New York. She received some good notices in her English-language debut, despite material that was at best uneven. “Chickens Are Tame in this Barnyard,” declared the *New York Times* on June 7, 1910. The reviewer went on to say, “of the principals, Miss Mizzi Hajos, pretty of face and trim of figure, seems a pleasant little person, worthy of better opportunities. She sings nicely enough and cluck-clucks as occasion requires.”⁵ Although Mitzi would never again play a role quite as preposterous as that of the Hen Pheasant, this play did set a precedent of Mitzi appearing in shows with fantastic plots. One of her favorite conceits would be to play in disguise as a young boy or peasant girl, later to emerge as a beautiful young woman, to the delight of her fans.

Mitzi's association with the Shubert brothers began in late 1910 when she signed a contract which no longer survives, but which is referred to in numerous letters sent between Lee Shubert, Mitzi, and her American agent Lea Herrick in the early months of 1911. *The Girl and the Kaiser*, an operetta, was the first Shubert show that she would perform in, but other than the correspondence between Mitzi and Lee Shubert, there is no record of her appearance in the production. Lee speaks flatteringly of her work: “I watched your performance yesterday...in *The Girl and the Kaiser* and I want to tell you how much pleased I was with the charm with which

you invested it. I felt certain that you could play the part and your performance yesterday only verified my conviction”⁶ The show played at the Herald Square Theatre, but closed a couple of days after Mitzi’s appearance. It is uncertain whether the actress appeared in an actual performance, or if this was done by special arrangement for an invited audience. Mitzi received \$43.75 for her work in the play—exactly one-eighth of the \$350.00 per week that her 1910 contract outlined.

That contract called for not less than ten weeks consecutive pay beginning February, 1911. It was under this agreement that Mitzi was engaged to appear with fellow newcomer Al Jolson in the 1911 opening production of the Winter Garden Theatre, *La Belle Paree*. The show was a hodgepodge of vaudeville sketches very loosely pulled together by heavy contrivances. The advertisements for it listed the names of nearly thirty featured performers, a dozen supporting players, and, if we are to believe the ads, 250 “others.” The music included nine songs by Jerome Kern, but Mitzi’s only big moment seems to be the one in the finale when “*cunning* little Mizzi Hajos delighted audiences by jumping from the stage to lead the orchestra.”⁷ Also, Mitzi was a hard worker who prided herself on not missing performances. (Jolson, on the other hand, had a slightly different work ethic and had to be summoned to return to rehearsals.)⁸

Other than a letter that Mitzi sent to Lee Shubert in late January asking when rehearsals were to begin (presumably for *La Belle Paree*, although neither she nor Lee mention the show by name), most of the correspondence from this time period pertains to Mitzi not being paid by the terms outlined in the contract. For example, Mitzi and Lea Herrick each wrote several letters regarding late and missed payments, but Lee Shubert never states in writing why he has not been paying the performer. In the years prior to the formation of Actor’s Equity, actors were often not compensated for rehearsals, and it is quite possible that Shubert did not want to pay Mitzi until opening. But even after the opening, she was still not receiving her salary. Herrick wrote Lee a letter asking for a final settling of Mitzi’s pay. He concluded with: “It is the desire of Miss Hajos’s representatives in this country to do business amiably with any management with whom she may be appearing, but, it is distinctly understood that Miss Hajos is to get first, last and all the time a square deal.”⁹

La Belle Paree did not have a long run, but before it closed Mitzi had already left the show for a starring role in the road company of *The Spring Maid*, not a Shubert show. It is likely that she left the Winter Garden show in part because of the problems she was having getting paid, but more importantly because the lead role in *Spring Maid* offered a better opportunity. For the first time, Mitzi would be the star in an American production. The huge cast and vaudeville format of *La Belle Paree* would have precluded her from having nearly as much onstage time. Although the reviews at the Winter Garden were mostly positive, they describe

a production that seems to be a best chaotic. It is uncertain based on the surviving materials if Mitzi's character Fifi Montmartre even had a solo. *The New York Times* review refers to the show as “dazzling” only to temper this rave by saying somewhat contradictorily that “It will be still better after some eliminations.”¹⁰ Mitzi obliged by leaving the show in March. She would not work for the Shuberts again for fifteen years.

Mitzi toured in *The Spring Maid* for approximately a year. It was reported that she had starred in that show in Europe and would be recreating the role on tour. (The original Broadway production was already playing at the Liberty Theatre when *La Belle Paree* opened.) The show was adapted from the Viennese opera entitled *Die Sprudelfee* by the prolific Harry B. Smith, along with his brother Robert. As Harry would later note in his autobiography, the story of the libretto was practically the same as *She Stoops to Conquer* except that the adventurous young lady, instead of disguising herself as in Goldsmith's comedy, became an attendant at Carlsbad Springs.¹¹ Mitzi's character, Princess Bozena, had six songs to sing, and based on surviving photographs plenty of opportunities to dress as both a peasant and glamour girl.

Having seen Mitzi in *The Spring Maid*, one newspaper article waxed poetic regarding the Magyar presence and historical perspective that she brought to her role. In the same article, Mitzi herself quickly changed the subject to one that was more to her liking, the beautiful music she got to sing. “Heinrich Reinhardt is a great composer, is he not?”¹² The reporter was impressed by Mitzi's overall intelligence, talent, and humility, although he noted that she was at that time still struggling with English. It was during this first American tour that Mitzi began to become a popular star on the road, something that sustained her career for many years, since most of her Broadway runs were relatively short.

The following year Mitzi toured in the companion play, *The Rose Maid*, which was still running on Broadway when the touring version of the show took to the road. It opened at the Colonial Theatre in Chicago on February 1913, and, along with Mitzi in the title role, featured members of the original New York company. Advertised as being, “prettier than its sister play,”¹³ *The Rose Maid* was actually more like a stepsister to *Spring Maid* as it had different characters, composers, and cast. Aside from the similar titles, only the fact that the books and lyrics of the two musicals were by Harry B. and Robert Smith connected them.¹⁴

From 1914-1925 Mitzi worked exclusively for Henry W. Savage, the man famed for bringing English-language opera to America. Her years with Savage were among her most productive, and she appeared in musicals such as *Sari* (1914), *Pom-Pom* (1916), *Head Over Heels* (1918), *Lady Billy* (1920), and *The Magic Ring* (1923). Typically, a Mitzi musical would play for about one-hundred performances on Broadway, often at the Liberty Theatre (sadly torn down in the year 2000 to be replaced by Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum) and would also enjoy extensive tours during the remaining part of the given season.

Advertising flyer (1921) for the touring production of *Lady Billy*. Produced by Henry W. Savage, the story followed the typical Mitzi formula. The actress played a down-on-her-luck Rumanian countess who travels to America where she earns a living disguised as a boy-soprano until, after many travails, she re-emerges as the princess and reunites with her lover.



The years with Savage were also personally happy as well. Mitzi had said that she thought of Savage as a father figure, particularly after her own father's death. For six years of her tenure as a Savage star Boyd Marshall was her leading man. Handsome and slightly older, the Ohio-born Marshall was known primarily for his work with Mitzi, as well as for numerous early silent films made for the Thanouser Company on the East Coast. Mitzi married Marshall in 1920, and they remained together until his death thirty years later.

In 1925 Henry Savage decided to retire from producing musicals. It was during the road tour of *The Magic Ring* that Mitzi began to correspond with Lee Shubert about the possibility of returning to the Shuberts. Apparently both sides had forgotten about the earlier, less than happy experience. Lee Shubert was highly interested in having Mitzi work for him again. To entice her back he sent her a play that was to be produced especially for her. The title of the play is not mentioned, but in a telegram dated February 11, 1925 that Lee sent prior to sending her the script, he said: "Sending You Play To Denver Which I Saw in Germany - Excellent Music And Wonderful Part for You- Also Good Part For Your Husband -After Reading Kindly Advise- Best Wishes Lee Shubert."¹⁵

Mitzi's reply dated two weeks later was lengthy. She did not veto the project, but had many concerns about the script. She was particularly worried that the German peasants in the original story were to be substituted with Long Island farmers in the American version. "I doubt if there could be enough difference in costume and makeup of the American farm girl to

make it plausible, while the transformation of the peasant would seem quite possible.”¹⁶ Mitzi was expert in playing this type of role, but should have been looking for other types of stories. Clinging to this format would ultimately prove lethal to her career.

Boyd Marshall did not work in either of the two shows that the Shuberts would subsequently produce for Mitzi. This was most likely a decision that the couple made together. The contract that she signed was lucrative and carefully negotiated. The three-year agreement guaranteed Mitzi a minimum of \$2,000 per week with the possibility of collecting much more based on a percentage of the box office.¹⁷ Ultimately, only two shows would be produced under this contract: *Naughty Riquette* and *The Madcap*.

Naughty Riquette represented a change for Mitzi in that the play had not been tailored especially for her talents, but for those of Vivienne Segal. Segal, who would later earn a permanent place in theatre history via the musicals of Rodgers and Hart, left the show after it was in production, and Mitzi agreed to take over the lead.

The first dilemma that Mitzi faced when joining the show was trying to wear Miss Segal’s costumes. J.J. and Mitzi exchanged considerable correspondence regarding the price of Mitzi’s costumes. J.J. wanted her to use any costumes that Segal may have left behind, while, for her part, Mitzi submitted a bill to J.J. to reimburse her for the costumes that she had to have made for the show. J.J. refused to pay. In her correspondence Mitzi shows an emotional intelligence that is enviable. She calmly outlines her reasons for buying the costumes and sounds quite diplomatic and knowledgeable:

My Dear Mr. Shubert,

I am very sorry that you found the dressmaker bills so high, but evidently you have forgotten some of the circumstances, which occurred at the time that I joined this play. You have so many things to think of, that it isn't (sic) surprising. First of all, let me call your attention to the fact, that I was told to wear Miss Segal's cloths (sic) that is what ever she will leave, which wasn't decided, until about 3 days before I had to go in. Also you told me to try to get things ready made, I tried that, but it is impossible for me to get anything with any style to it as I wear children's size.¹⁸

Ultimately J.J. turned to his brother, Lee, for advice. He was practical: “I would give Mitzi \$1,000. as she is making money and there is no use of antagonizing her now and then give in later. She has given you no trouble, whatever, and I would give her this amount and pacify her.”¹⁹

Naughty Riquette would tour extensively and profitably before opening on Broadway at the Cosmopolitan Theatre, located on Columbus Circle, far from Mitzi’s usual 42nd St. playhouses; J.J. Shubert had recently taken over the management of the venue and hoped to create a second theatre hub along Broadway, utilizing Mitzi’s star power to attract fans. *Naughty Riquette* had played in Brooklyn prior to the Broadway opening, and would run just under 100 performances. It would be Mitzi’s last major critical success in a starring role.

In his review of the production, Brooks Atkinson makes a serious attempt to describe



Naughty Riquette (1926):
(top to bottom) advertising
flyer; photograph; newspaper
advertisement.



the unique quality Mitzi possessed that made her unlike any of her contemporaries: “One only has to compare her with others practicing the same trade. Wherein lies the difference? Surely not in skill or versatility: but rather in strength of personality. Without ever cajoling the audience with the familiar tricks of the prima donna, without ever brazenly urging them to admire her genius, she becomes steadily more ingratiating as the evening progresses.”²⁰ Stanley Lupino, Mitzi’s leading man was also praised lavishly for his “Chaplinesque” quality and overall ability, giving Atkinson cause to say that “Charming as she is” (and Mitzi looked beautiful sporting a more modern look, slimmed down, without heavy disguises) “she is not the sole delight of this enjoyable evening”.

Mitzi’s next play for the Shuberts, *The Madcap*, was originally titled *Green Fruit* during its pre-Broadway tour. Unfortunately the star made the decision to return to an old favorite device and would be in disguise during part of the play as a young child. This was something she had first done successfully with *Pom-Pom* in 1916. Years later, when asked why she had never played *The Merry Widow*, she answered, “I told them that I always like to play smart little bums and that I just couldn’t see myself as a tall, sophisticated widow.”²¹ *Madcap* opened at Broadway’s Royale Theatre where it played just over 100 performances. The leading male role this time was assayed by future Hollywood character star Sydney Greenstreet, who in surviving photos appears to tower over Mitzi in her little boy’s costume. Mitzi played the role of a twenty-year old woman pretending to be twelve years old in order to help her mother pretend, in turn, that she was twenty nine. Some reviewers found the story impossible to overlook. *The New York Times* noted, “As Broadway folderol *The Madcap* is just about passable; as a vehicle for its star it fulfills its destiny in a manner that should be pleasing to her followers.”²² Another reviewer somewhat sarcastically noted:



This arduous task has devolved upon Mitzi, idol of the Bible belt, who, it must be related in all fairness, expends incredible ergs of energy playing with her dollies, teasing the grown-ups, lisping naughty little songs, poking portly papa in the tummy, crawling along on all fours and comporting herself generally in a manner usually associated with the enfant terrible of 15-cent fiction.²³

The Madcap company on tour in Denver, December 1927.

Less than a month after the opening, the show transferred to the then less desirable Casino Theatre at 39th Street. In total it played only 103 performances. Evidently, Mitzi's star power was obviously not enough to fill seats for such a troubled and ill conceived production.

In late 1929, no longer under the guidance of entrepreneurs like Savage or the Shuberts, the performer decided to revive her 1914 success, *Sari*, with Boyd Marshall co-starring and she herself directing. After the criticism she had received for playing a twelve-year old in *The Madcap* (when she had, in fact, made her Broadway debut as an adult twenty years earlier), Mitzi was ill advised to bring back *Sari*. Tastes were changing. The kind of operetta that she had been successful with was fast being replaced by the American musical defined by more modern shows like *Roberta*, with songs such as "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," and like *Showboat* with more realistic books and acting styles.

Opening at the Liberty Theatre on January 29, 1930, *Sari* closed after only fifteen performances and was a financial disaster for Mitzi, who had used her own money to produce it. Brooks Atkinson gave a scathing review of the revival, and the fact that he actually liked Mitzi as an actress made his analysis of her gifts even more troubling:

She can cuff a lord; she can mother her aged father. She can also dance the "Ha-Za-Za," sing native tunes with the vehemence of village carnival season and swing round to the measures of "Love's Own Sweet Song." Such things are not in this advanced era to be confused with immortality, or considered as necessary to the perfect state. But Mitzi can perform them suitably.²⁴

But immortality, or at least the appearance of it, was crucial to sustaining a career on the scale of Mitzi's, and *Sari* proved to be a deathblow to the performer's viability as a musical-comedy star. After this production, Boyd Marshall would never act again, while Mitzi would struggle for the next twelve years trying to find a suitable place for herself as an actress in the period between the Great Depression and the Second World War.

Indeed, it would take six years for Mitzi to return to the Broadway stage, when in 1936 she

joined the cast of Kaufman and Hart's *You Can't Take It with You*. The former star created the small but showy role of the drunken actress Gay Wellington. This was her first non-musical part on Broadway, although she had spent the previous six years playing leading roles in summer stock and regional productions of light comedies and dramas such as *Connie Comes Home* and *The More the Merrier*.

Mitzi remained with *You Can't Take It with You* for its entire two-year run; it would be the performer's last major stage success. Throughout the run her name and picture appeared frequently in the press, and she seemed to be enjoying the renaissance of her career. Because her name was synonymous with musicals, the press concentrated on the fact that she was not singing and dancing. "Mitzi Drops Spins Will Go Straight" was one typical headline. Coincidentally, her namesake child actress Mitzi Green was appearing in *Babes in Arms* at the same time and also had a dressing room on Shubert Alley. Green who had been known as "Little Mitzi" during her earliest years in show business was the daughter of Joe Keno, an actor who first appeared with Hajos in *Barnyard Romeo*.

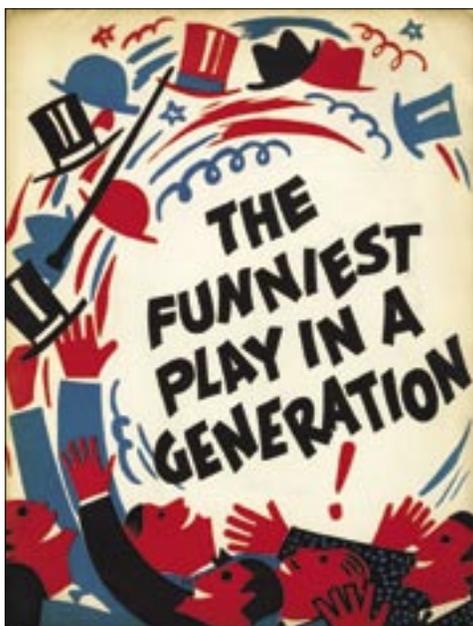
Interestingly enough, it was at this time that Mitzi would subtract an additional five years from her actual age and begin to state her birth date as 1896. She was occasionally called on this in the press. Claiming to be younger, in fact, seemed counterproductive when her best chance of sustaining her acting career was by moving into character roles.

After successfully transitioning to character parts with her turn in *You Can't Take It with You*, Mitzi was unable to find another suitable role and was forced to accept the role of Broadway Sarah in *Mr. Big*, a play that starred Hume Cronyn and Fay Wray.²⁵ The character is not listed in early workshop productions of this play, so it is likely that this bit part was written especially for Mitzi. *Mr. Big* was notable for two reasons: it had a plot that allowed for

interaction with the audience, and also it caused a dispute between the Shuberts and George S. Kaufman, two parties that had been significant to Mitzi's career. Brooks Atkinson had commented in his review of *Mr. Big* that Lee Shubert and Kaufman had collided violently over the play. It would seem that the fuss was of little concern for the play opened to mixed reviews and closed soon after.²⁶ Luckily, Mitzi was able to win one more role on Broadway before giving up acting.

Café Crown offered Mitzi the opportunity to portray one of the denizens of a Second Avenue café and the chance to work with the young Elia Kazan, who directed the show. Kazan speaks of *Café Crown* in his

You Can't Take It with You, publicity flyer, 1936.



autobiography, *A Life*, and it is easy to see that he did not have a great deal of respect for it: “This play was slight stuff, so every successful director in town must have turned it down.” He adds this, but not much more: “I would cast it colorfully, with vivid ethnic types, move them around in a way that would seem spontaneous and unstudied....This was a small folk piece and it would be a bad mistake to make it into anything better.”²⁷

Kazan’s notes from *Café Crown* are slim compared to those of his other productions. There is faint analysis regarding Mitzi’s character, but no mention of the former star herself. In reference to the play he also mentions that he felt as though being overly friendly with cast members had been a problem, and he was determined to keep from getting personally involved with the cast. Al Hirschfeld, who would have well remembered Mitzi’s years as a star, sketched her in the ensemble of *Café Crown* for the *New York Times* as a much older woman. One look at the drawing would support the theory that Mitzi was indeed old enough for character parts.

Brooks Atkinson mentioned Mitzi favorably as an ensemble member but nothing specific of her performance. The play ran a respectable, if not sensational, 141 performances. In fairness to the show, it was a difficult time in America; during the early stages of rehearsals the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Just as the stock market crash had coincided with the revival of *Sari*, the start of World War II would mark the end of Mitzi’s fifty-year acting career. When Mitzi walked out of the stage door of the Cort Theatre at the end of *Café Crown*’s run, she would be saying goodbye to her life as a professional actress.

Mitzi never expected that *Café Crown* would mark the end of her acting career, and she continued to speak of returning to the stage until the end of her life. But not that long after *Café Crown*, she went to work in J.J. Shubert’s office in the Sardi building. We can only speculate that the Great Depression, World War II and the illness that had befallen Boyd Marshall, all played a part in this move. During her years as a star Mitzi enjoyed the privileges of her wealth which included trips to Europe, owning a touring car of her own, and a much publicized collection of jewelry. There are references made in early articles to large homes as well as apartment buildings that Mitzi had purchased in Hungary.²⁸ These properties are never mentioned after the War.

A press release announced that the former star would be playing the role of “Girl Friday” or “secretary” to her former employer. Early on it was agreed that Mitzi would be involved in virtually every aspect of J.J.’s work with the exception of real estate. At the start, Mitzi spoke openly that she had hoped J.J. might put her in a road company production so she could return to acting. “I love the road. When I hear the train wheels, I feel like an old fire house horse listening to the fire engines.” When asked why she had decided to work behind the scenes she told Paul Denis of the *New York Post* in 1943, “I’m 48—not young enough to do the roles that made me a star, and not old enough to do the roles I would like to try.” The performer did not always photograph well and some of these stories were accompanied by pictures of a decidedly dowdy-looking Mitzi.

Regardless of her initial motivations for moving from acting to the Shubert offices, Mitzi never did return to performing. Exact dates of her tenure in the Sardi Building are unknown, but she started working for J.J. in 1943 and stayed until sometime in 1954.

Initially, Mr. J.J. (Lee and J.J. Shubert are almost always called Mr. Lee and Mr. J.J. in internal documents. Mitzi was also given the same courtesy and is almost always referred to as Miss Mitzi.) was trying to groom her as an administrator. According to interviews, her primary job was that of casting director, specifically for the touring companies of the operettas such as *The Student Prince* and *The Merry Widow* that were sent out perennially.

Correspondence indicates that Mitzi did many different things at Shubert. She was involved in issues that concerned casting, costuming and script analysis. It is unlikely that she ever functioned as a secretary or “Girl Friday” at least during the early years. The one emerging trend during her employment is that each year she seemed to have fewer and fewer responsibilities.

An early letter from the period finds Mitzi investigating allegations of incompetence in the touring company of one of the Shubert operettas. Mitzi’s serious tone in her correspondence suggests someone who is knowledgeable about touring a musical and also someone quite serious about making good as an administrator. Her letter has a slightly imperious quality that was never present in her correspondence from her days as a leading lady. Pencil on this document are the words “alleged by Mitzi.”²⁹

A lengthy letter written by J.J. in 1946 carefully details his plans to make Mitzi an administrator and his disappointment that it was not working out to his satisfaction:

Dear Miss Mitzi:

I know you mean things for the best, but your impertunity is getting rather in my hair. I know your best interest is for ourselves, but I think down deep in your heart you are still the actress—and a very good one at that; I have been trying to make an executive of you but I am afraid acting is more to your liking.³⁰

In the same letter J.J. goes on to explain his frustrations with the professional unions and the impact that they are having on the sending out of new road productions. He concludes with, “Inasmuch as you have always been an actress and there is little to do now in the office, if you get an opportunity to get a part in a play, I will not stand in your way.”

Although Mitzi did not leave to return to acting, after the date of this letter, she seems to take on fewer office responsibilities than before. Some articles written about the Shubert brothers lump Mitzi in with a number of other people thought to be destitute whom Lee and J.J. may have considered to be charity cases. A 1947 project had Mitzi reviewing some sketches or properties that were owned by the Shuberts in order to see if any of them had possibilities for updating. Some of her commentaries during this period show that Mitzi still struggled a little when writing in English: “These sketches might have been funny a few



(left) Mitzi as she appeared while working in the Shubert offices in 1946; (right) as she appeared while starring in *The Magic Ring* (1923). These images accompanied a profile of the actress, "Her Job Most Satisfying" by H.C. Norris, that was published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* on August 18, 1946.

years ago, but at the present time sound out moded, they could be brought up to date, but it would involve (sic) quite a little work."³¹ It would be safe to assume that her typed correspondence of the late 1920s was written with some assistance from a secretary or perhaps Boyd Marshall.

Mitzi's finances may have been an important factor that led her to take a job in the Shubert offices, but it would seem unlikely the working relationship between the former star and her producer would have lasted as long as it did if there were not other reasons as well. After all, Mitzi and J.J. were quite different temperamentally. Mitzi had been described as "a friendly person, generous, impulsive and magnetic."³² J.J., on the other hand, was not outgoing, didn't like to give interviews, and was known to shout at rehearsals.³³ Both people, however, were devoted not only to the theatre in general, but more importantly to the operettas with which both had had great success.

Much changed in the Shubert offices when Mr. Lee died in 1953. Most important, John Shubert, J.J.'s son, became more involved in the operation of the business. Although Mitzi worked in J.J.'s office, it was Lee's death that ultimately brought about the changes that ended her employment. J.J. himself had advised John in matters of office efficiency in the 1950s, and he urged his son to make radical changes in personnel. Two memos, one from 1943 addressed to Lee, and the other, dated 1954, addressed to John, are clipped together in the Shubert Archive. In each of these, J.J. outlines the problems with present staff and urges the recipient to think carefully about every employee's viability and to make changes accordingly. It would appear that Mitzi had entered the Shubert offices during one of these "housecleaning" periods and left during a second one.

As late as 1954, Mitzi was trying to convince John to produce a West Coast production of *Blossom Time* with John Charles Thomas, which she claimed Lee had been interested in producing before his death. Mitzi's project came to an abrupt end when J.J. became involved: "I would not

do anything about John Charles Thomas....One experience with him was enough.”³⁴ Mitzi’s “retirement” that same year was not voluntary. Nearly fifteen years later she would tell Richard Lamparski, “They made me quit. I just loved my work.”³⁵

Jackson Heights, Queens, had been home to Mitzi and her husband since the 1940s. She and Marshall had purchased a co-op there in 1948 at Hawthorne Court, in what is now known as the Historic District.³⁶ From the time that they moved there until the late 1960s, Mitzi kept her name and address listed in the Queens telephone directory. She recognized that she was no longer sought after, let alone recognized, in public.

Boyd Marshall died in November 1950. Marshall’s “voice” is even more elusive than his wife’s, but according to Mitzi their marriage was very happy even after they had both stopped performing. In 1943 Mitzi said, “I live in Jackson Heights (I prefer to say Long Island because Jackson Heights reminds people of a breeding ground it’s got so many babies) with my husband who was my leading man for six years and our Belgian griffon, Peter. We’re married twenty-three years and he’s still the most interesting man in the world. We never have an argument. If he won’t give in, I do, and that settles it quickly.”³⁷

In 1957, Mitzi appeared on stage one final time for an Actor’s Fund benefit. The evening’s program was made up of star performers from the first three decades of the twentieth century. While some former stars actually performed or sang, Mitzi, along with Blanche Yurka, Florence Reed and many others, was listed among those who reminisced about their golden days in the theatre.³⁸ The fact that Mitzi chose not to sing is not surprising. Although she had emphasized the fact that she wanted to expand her career after the *Sari* revival by appearing in non-musicals, it was also implicit that she no longer wanted to sing.³⁹

Mitzi would live in her Jackson Heights home until a year and a half before her death in 1970. With the exception of the benefit performance for the Actors’ Fund she remained out of the press and the spotlight until 1968, when after more than a ten-year absence from the media, her name was referenced three times. In addition to the interview with Richard Lamparski, she was mentioned in the obituary of Mitzi Green, the former child star who had been named after Hajos. And if further proof was needed that Mitzi was once a star, Ogden Nash wrote a poem about his youth called “A Dream of Innocent Orgies.” In the poem, which was published in *The New Yorker*, Nash tries to rhyme “Hajos” with “outrageous”:

*When I heard the chimes at midnight with a Mitzi Hajos,
My conduct would have been I hope outrajos*⁴⁰

A sentimental piece, it is not one of the poet’s best works.

Lamparski’s interview mentions Mitzi’s move to a “home” in Connecticut—that is, a nursing home—specifically the Eagle Crest Convalescent Center in Washington Depot, Connecticut. According to the interview she still came into Manhattan once a week to have

her hair done and go to the theatre. The photo accompanying the article shows Mitzi well dressed and groomed wearing a hat with a small veil. It would appear that she is trying to show off her hands and rings clutching a glass, while sipping a soda in a Times Square shop. "I'd return to the stage tomorrow if I thought a part was right for me but listen I'm no kid and I know it."⁴¹ After so many years away from acting Mitzi still craved performing, but not any of the offstage attention associated with being a star, which made her uncomfortable.

Admitting that she was no longer a kid was not just a casual comment for Mitzi but an admission of failing health. She had become a Christian Scientist after moving to the United States, and she valued the edicts of her faith, which included positive thinking and healing without traditional medicine. However, she had been suffering for years from advanced cerebral arteriosclerosis and would finally succumb to the disease in June, 1970 when she suffered a major stroke. The Lillis Funeral Home in Connecticut was in charge of arrangements. She was cremated, and there is no record of any funeral, wake or memorial service—a sad, but perhaps, not unexpected end for an actress who had entertained thousands of theatregoers over a span of more than fifty years on two continents.

The death certificate of Mitzie (sic) Hajos Marshall, retired actress, that was issued by the town of Washington Depot lists no next of kin. Only Mitzi's attorney, Mrs. Ebben Schramm, is given as the informant at the time of death. Her Jackson Height's home was listed as her legal residence. Her date of birth is cited as 1889, making her 81 at the time of her death.

Finding additional information on Mitzi is difficult. Aside from having had no children, neither Mitzi nor Boyd Marshall have wills on file in Jamaica, Queens's probate court, so it is impossible to determine what, if anything, was done with Mitzi's estate, and the inevitable personal memorabilia that would lend itself to a fuller work on her life. She mentioned her parents occasionally in her youth, but not after marrying Marshall. Ellis Island manifests have no record of her parents ever having visited the U.S. Her father, Leopold Hajos, had died sometime during Mitzi's employment with Henry W. Savage. It is not known whether her mother, Rose Weinberg Hajos, or any of her other family were living in Budapest during the Second World War.

Questions remain as to why Mitzi has been marginalized, if not forgotten. There are three chief factors. First, in the years between her retirement from acting and her death, the changes that took place in the U.S. culturally and politically were tremendous. At the time of Mitzi's final interview, one of the shows setting records on Broadway was the musical *Hair* which featured a pop/rock score, a nude dance scene and an anti-war theme. (It would be interesting to know if Mitzi saw it, and what she thought of it.) It was, needless to say, light years away in every aspect from *Barnyard Romeo*.

Second, Mitzi's contracts had restricted recordings of most types. She made only one record—in 1916 on the RCA Victor label. On it she sings two songs from *Pom-Pom*: "In the Dark,"

a yodeling number, and “Evelyn,” a “pants song” which Mitzi considered her greatest hit. Although the quality of the two recordings is poor by today’s standards, the star’s voice is, as many reviewers remarked, quite pleasant and remarkably unaccented considering she had only begun to learn English six years earlier. Both the Shuberts and Henry Savage imposed this contractual obligation, the prevailing logic being that theatregoers would not pay large sums to see someone on stage who could be watched or listened to for little or no charge in other media. Likewise, there is no record of Mitzi ever having appeared in film or on television. The Thanhouser film company has a web site set up to preserve and promote their silent films, and in their biography of Boyd Marshall, they claim that Mitzi occasionally performed under the name Dixie Crane.⁴² Although this seems to be unsubstantiated, it would be nice to think that Mitzi may have made a few silent films under this pseudonym. In any case, despite the fact that by the late 1930s she had thought that she would ultimately end her career by becoming a character actress in Hollywood, this never did happen. In addition, although she enjoyed listening to radio drama and made at least a few broadcasts during her star years, it is difficult to determine how often she participated in radio programs.

Third, of all of the plays in which Mitzi appeared, none of her starring vehicles have been revived, and of her later work, only *Café Crown* and *You Can’t Take It with You* have earned a permanent place in the American Theatre.

Although Mitzi had worked with the likes of Jerome Kern, George S. Kaufman Moss Hart, Elia Kazan and countless others who have a secured place in theatre history, her major contribution was to create entertainment that was particular to the tastes of audiences prior to the American musical’s developing its own truly distinct characteristics. Mitzi concentrated almost exclusively on submerging herself in work that made for escapist popular entertainment rather than on the great roles that would guarantee her lasting reputation. Once American musical theatre carved out its own unique identity that was separate from the operettas that Mitzi loved, she was not well positioned to make the transition. Not only was she clearly associated with being a part of the earlier hybrid European shows that became vintage almost overnight, but also, and more importantly, she was herself European. And as a performer, she was more interested in working in the theatre each day, than she was in preserving the legend of her glory days.

Mitzi’s halcyon days were the years that she spent working with Henry W. Savage; her years with the Shuberts were those of transition. In many ways, however, these transitional years are the most interesting out of a theatrical career that ultimately spanned well over sixty years. Mitzi outlived or outlasted by many years all of her greatest advocates, including Lee and J.J. Shubert. The documentation surviving at the Shubert Archive is the most comprehensive known extant material from the performer’s life. This, along with published materials, shows

a career of dazzling highs punctuated by constant reversals of fortune, situation, and status. Mitzi navigated these changes with a pluckiness, determination and grace that is enviable. It was the authenticity of these qualities that are at the very core of what endeared her both to audiences and to the Shubert brothers for so many years.

Endnotes

1. "Minute Visits in the Wings," *New York Times*, 5 Mar. 1916.
2. Mitzi Hajos, "Almost Confessions," n.s., 9 Apr. 1914, *Robinson Locke Collection*, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.
3. "Minute Visits in the Wings."
4. The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc., <http://www.ellisland.org/search> (accessed 2006). The Hungarian spelling is mistaken as "Miggi."
5. Review of *A Barnyard Romeo*, *New York Times*, 7 June 1910.
6. Lee Shubert to Mitzi Hajos, 20 Jan. 1911, *General Correspondence, 1910-1926*, File #2432, The Shubert Archive.
7. Gerald Boardman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 265.
8. Winter Garden Management to Al Jolson, 22 Feb. 1911, *General Correspondence, 1910-1926*, File #3109, The Shubert Archive.
9. Mitzi Hajos to Lee Shubert, 9 Mar. 1911, *General Correspondence, 1910-1926*, File #2432, The Shubert Archive.
10. "Winter Garden Open with Dazzling Show; New York's Latest Plaything a Flashy Toy in Brightest Colors, with Lots of Jingle to It," *New York Times*, 21 Mar. 1911.
11. Harry B. Smith, *First Nights and First Editions* (Boston: Little Brown, 1931).
12. "Mizz Hajos," *San Antonio Daily Light*, 21 Jan. 1912.
13. *The Rose Maid*, souvenir program, 1912.
14. For some reason, it would appear that Mitzi removed *Rose Maid* from her resume almost immediately after touring with it.
15. Lee Shubert to Mitzi Hajos, *General Correspondence, 1910-1926*, File #2432, The Shubert Archive.
16. Mitzi Hajos to Lee Shubert, 24 Feb. 1925, *General Correspondence, 1910-1926*, File #2432, The Shubert Archive.
17. Sam S. and Lee Shubert, Inc., Contract with Mitzi Hajos, 2 Apr. 1925, *Actors' Contracts, 1921-30*, The Shubert Archive.
18. Mitzi Hajos to J.J. Shubert, Nov. 1925, *General Correspondence, 1910-1926*, File #2432, The Shubert Archive.
19. Lee Shubert to J.J. Shubert, 13 Nov. 1925, *General Correspondence, 1910-1926*, File #2432, The Shubert Archive.
20. Brooks J. Atkinson, "Mitzi the Capricious One," *New York Times*, 14 September 1926.
21. Paul Denis, "J.J. Has a New Secretary, It's Mitzi, of Musical Comedy Fame," *New York Post*, 1 Aug. 1943.
22. "Madcap' Shows Mitzi to Fair Advantage," *New York Times*, 1 Feb. 1928.
23. Katharine Zimmerman, "The Madcap' with Mitzi Opens at Royale," n.s., n.d.
24. "The Play; Mitzi and 'Sari'," *New York Times*, 29 Jan. 1930.
25. The author of *Mr. Big*, Arthur Sheekman, originally wrote the lead with his wife Gloria Stuart in mind. Stuart was dropped from consideration when Fay Wray became interested in the role. Stuart would wait a phenomenal amount of time before gaining another important role—in the film *Titanic* (1997). Gloria Stuart, *I Just Kept Hoping* (New York: Little Brown, 1999), 130-31, 135-36.
26. An earlier report in the *New York Times* asserted that the Shuberts had decided not to exercise their option after the experimental production of *Mr. Big*, and that the rights had reverted to authors Sheekman and Wise. The Shuberts were monitoring the show's progress throughout the New England previews.
27. Elia Kazan, *A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1988): 191-92.
28. As late as the mid 1930s, Mitzi mentioned her property in Hungary somewhat wistfully saying she could live much better in Budapest, but didn't care to live outside the U.S.
29. Mitzi Hajos to Ada Nelligan, 29 Nov. 1944, *Mitzi Hajos Papers*, The Shubert Archive.
30. J.J. Shubert to Mitzi Hajos, 19 Nov. 1946, *Mitzi Hajos Papers*, The Shubert Archive.
31. Mitzi Hajos to J.J. Shubert, 30 Jan. 1947, *Mitzi Hajos Papers*, The Shubert Archive.
32. L.C. Brenner, "Memory Lane," McNaught Syndicate (New York, N.Y.), 6 May 1936.

- ³³. "J. J. Shubert Dies," *New York Times*, 27 Dec. 1963.
- ³⁴. J.J. Shubert to John Shubert, 25 Feb. 1954, *Mitzi Hajos Papers*, The Shubert Archive.
- ³⁵. Richard Lamparski, *Whatever Became Of... ?* [Second Series] (New York: Crown Publishers Inc., 1968), 204-5.
- ³⁶. "Factory Building in Queens Trading; Expanded Metal Engineering Co. Buys in Long Island City—Houses in Other Deals," *New York Times*, 12 Mar. 1948.
- ³⁷. Denis.
- ³⁸. "Nostalgia Marks Actors Fund Fete," *New York Times*, 21 Dec. 1957.
- ³⁹. Mitzi made her final musical comedy appearance in a supporting role in the "New Deal" musical *How's Your Code?* in the summer of 1933 at the Westport Country Playhouse, Westport, Conn. She sang only two songs, but was praised for her performance in the local paper. ("New Deal Musical Scores at Playhouse 13," *Bridgeport Post*, August 1933.)
- ⁴⁰. Ogden Nash, "A Dream of Innocent Orgies or, the Most Unforgettable Characters I Never Met," *New-Yorker*, 6 July 1968.
- ⁴¹. Lamparski.
- ⁴². Thanhauser Company-Film Preservation, Inc., <http://www.thanhouer.org> (accessed 2006).

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From A Long Line of Theatre People

Theodore V. Jacobi, Jr., better known on Broadway as Vince Jacobi, recently sat down with the staff of the Shubert Archive to talk about his career as an electrician, and sometime lighting designer, on Broadway. Vince is the father of Theodore [Ted] Jacobi, III, who is



Theodore V. "Vince" Jacobi, Jr. (center) with his sons Robert J. (left) and Theodore "Ted" III.

Engineering Project Manager in The Shubert Organization's Facilities Department. Vince and Ted come from a long line of electricians associated with Broadway productions.

Vince began by recounting how he followed his family into the theatre business:

My great-grandfather was Wilbert Gifford, my grandmother's father. When the union, the forerunner of I.A.T.S.E. (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Motion Picture Operators), was formed in 1886, he was a charter member. He worked in the Metropolitan Opera

Company when it was located down on 14th Street until he died around the year 1900. Because he died so early, his prominence as a founding member was never properly recorded because the minutes of union meetings did not begin until 1893 when I.A.T.S.E. officially came into the business.

My father was a native New Yorker, and his name was also Theodore Jacobi, but he was never known as anything but Vince. He served in the first World War. His brother Eddie joined I.A.T.S.E. in 1916. When the war ended, Eddie, who was a production electrician at the Cort Theatre, was able to get my father in as an apprentice in 1919. My father told a story about how he and Eddie shared an apartment on 58th Street that had no electricity, so they ran a cable over from a theatre on 58th Street to their apartment in order to get power. That was before electricity became commonplace.

The first Broadway show that I saw was *Anything Goes* (1934) at the Alvin Theatre. My father was a production electrician there. When I was 9 years old, I used to go into work with my father on Saturdays. There was this bridge where the switchboard was, and I would stand there at the edge watching the show. Many famous performers played the Alvin. Fred and Adele Astaire danced in shows. I would talk with the Astaires, and one Christmas they gave me a great big airplane. My father was scared I'd get killed so I couldn't fly it outside. I'd do it in the attic. My father was very friendly with Cole Porter and George Gershwin who did shows in that theatre. In fact, before I joined the union, I was an usher in the Alvin Theatre. I was out in the front of the house for the original production of *Porgy and Bess* (1935).

In April 1936, I turned 18, and in August I started my apprenticeship as an electrician. Back in the 1940s, you couldn't get into Local One unless you were a son of a union member. The owner of the shop was another big source of members. The union only took in a few new members at a time because there were only a couple of shops around at the time to accept apprentices. Now, with television we have a lot of shops where we have apprentices. I was in the shop for three years, and then after I got out, I worked around for a while because there wasn't very much work. The shop that I was in was more like a manufacturing shop. They built board lights and strip lights, and I did the wiring on all those. We did small switchboards, and then we also used to do the great big piano boards which are now all gone.

Vince's first job on Broadway found him on 45th Street moving back and forth between three different theatres there. At that time, the end of the 1940s, the theatres were used to broadcast radio programs with live audiences. One of the more noteworthy programs that he worked on was *This is Your Life*, the Ralph Edwards radio show on NBC that later went on to a successful television run.

Vince's next position was uptown at a burlesque theatre located at 125th Street and Third Avenue, where for his first six months he was a spotlight operator. Things, however, became a little dicey:

One of the girls, Margie Hart, was "teasing" at the curtain and the police raided the theatre. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia didn't like burlesque. He wanted it out of New York; so he sent the cops, in and they closed us down. The Minsky Brothers took over the theatre, but there was too much [work] for the carpenter, property man and the flyman, because the Minskys used platforms and more involved sets. We only had curtains before that. So, I took over as the carpenter. It was a hemp house, and

I had a flyman. We did that for about another six months, then LaGuardia closed us down again. That was the end of burlesque in New York.

During World War II, Vince served as the production electrician on *Winged Victory*.

He recalls:

*We took it on the road to Boston. In New York, it played at the 44th Street Theatre, across from Shubert Alley. The Shuberts at that time had three shops: an electric shop, a carpenters' shop and a property shop. We had men working in each shop. When I did **Winged Victory**, it was all very old equipment which had been stored in the Shubert warehouse. I had nineteen men working with me in the electric department, and I had to take them over to the warehouse and dig out all this equipment—the old switchboards and so forth—clean it up and get it ready to go on the road. Abe Feder, the lighting director, wanted me to rehearse using the switchboard but without turning any lights on. He drove me crazy. That was the old type of equipment. We had single cables. Each light or two lights had a cable running to it that went to the switchboards on the gridiron. Today, you have multi-cables, that is, 12 or 14 cables in one round rubber cable which make the work easier.*

Vince also worked at *The Stage Door Canteen* which was downstairs in the 44th Street Theatre. He used to supply them with lamps for the little tables, and when they needed bulbs, he sent them down.

One day, Vince was walking up Broadway with a stagehand/electrician named Bob Harris when they passed the Hollywood Theatre which would, in 1949, be rechristened as the Mark Hellinger Theatre. (It is now the Times Square Church). It was then a moving picture house that had been built by Warner Brothers as a vaudeville theatre. Bob was filling in there for another electrician who was sick and unable to work, but he had no desire to stay there because it was too much work for him.

Vince's father was a business manager at that time, and Bob suggested that Vince approach his dad about placing him at the Hollywood. Vince did just that, and the senior Jacobi contacted Barney Klawins, who had previously worked with him at the Cort and who now ran the Hellinger for Warner Brothers. Barney appointed Vince as the Hollywood's house electrician, and he remained in that position for 30 years. He remembers his years there fondly:

*The Hollywood played moving pictures at a time when pictures used to play six months at one theatre on Broadway before being released nationally. We had reserved-seat showings of films like **Yankee Doodle Dandy** and **Sergeant York**. In between exhibiting motion pictures, we presented legitimate shows at the house. The theatre had a big lobby that was all marble and mirrors and extended through a four-story building in the front. That was the entrance for the motion-picture audiences. When there were legitimate shows, they would close off that lobby, and refer to the playhouse as the 51st Street Theatre because there was another big lobby on 51st Street that was used for legitimate bookings.*

The Hollywood's policy was to switch back and forth between movies and legitimate shows. We'd have a movie; then we'd close; we'd advertise on our

marquee the movie attraction at the Strand or we'd book a legitimate show. There were two different parts of Warner Brothers' organization. There was the motion picture theatre group that ran the Strand Theatre, and then there was Barney Klawins, who ran the Warner Bros. legitimate theatre. I used to go out on the road with Barney with shows to places like Boston, New Haven, and Baltimore before bringing them into the city. When we showed motion pictures at the Hollywood, we had a five man crew: a carpenter, a property man, an electrician, my assistant, and a maintenance man. When we had a live show, it was always the three heads of the departments and whatever extra men we needed to make the show work. The first legitimate shows that I worked on there were Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh in *Romeo and Juliet* (1940) and Eddie Cantor in *Banjo Eyes* (1941).

In 1941, Sol Hurok, the Russian entrepreneur, brought in the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo to The Hollywood (a.k.a. 51st St./Hellinger Theatre), the most beautiful theatre in New York. It had such a stunning lobby that Hurok, came to me one day and said, "Vince, could we light up the balcony?" The theatre had a big main chandelier that hung in the middle of the lobby, so I put little dinkies on the bottom of the lights all around because the women used to come to the theatre in mink and ermine and would stand around the balcony and gaze at everything. It was spectacular. The lobby was almost as entertaining as the ballet itself; people loved it so much.

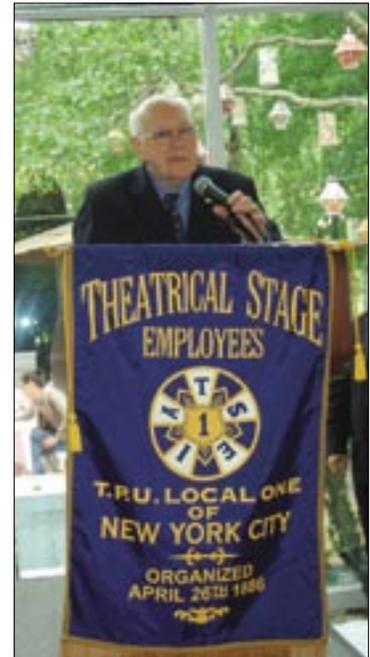
We did a lot of other shows until the multi-millionaire Anthony Brady Farrell bought the theatre from Warner Brothers. Farrell put on many shows at the playhouse until he booked *My Fair Lady* which ran so long that he lost interest and sold the theatre to Stanley Stahl who owned the building in the front. *My Fair Lady* ran there for five years before moving to the Broadway Theatre and where it played another year.

At the same time that Vince served as head electrician on *My Fair Lady*, he was working in television:

I did three different shows for Jan Murray on NBC all through the '50s and early '60s. Jan's shows taped at the Adelphi Theatre, and I was with him for eight years as a property man. I did all his television game shows—*Dollar a Second*; *Treasure Hunt*; and, *Charge Account*. I could combine this with my work at the Hellinger, because the game show was day work while the legit shows were night work.

After thirty years at the Mark Hellinger, Vince became an officer of I.A.T.S.E. He explains:

First, I was a trustee. When the union's secretary passed away in 1969, I.A.T.S.E. President, John Nolan appointed me secretary. Then at election in October, I won and was secretary until 1978. Then I ran for business manager, and served in that position until 1986. When I left the union office, my friends at Shubert, Bernie Jacobs and Peter Entin, put me in the Longacre Theatre as the electrician. But because the Longacre is not open very much, they would move me around from one theatre to another as other electricians would go on vacation. I was at the Majestic with *Phantom of the Opera* for three weeks, at the Broadway for a stint with *Les Miserables*, and again with *Les Mis* for three weeks when the show transferred to the Imperial. Then I worked at the Cort, returned to the Longacre, and then on to the Ambassador when *Bring In 'Da Noise* opened there. When the Longacre reopened, Peter Entin wanted to know if I'd go back. I said no because we were doing pretty well with *Noise Funk*. So... I stayed at the Ambassador.



Vince Jacobi at the I.A.T.S.E. luncheon in June, 2006 where he was presented with a ring commemorating his remarkable seventy years as an active union member.

When I left the union office in 1978 and came back to working as an electrician, a lot had changed in terms of technology. When I was at the Longacre Theatre, it was referred to as an “endangered” theatre, which meant that there was no road crew there. The house crew had to work both sides. I had to learn how to run the memory board. I figured, well, I’m going to be a head house electrician, I don’t need to bother with that. But it turns out that I did have to learn how to do the board after all. The Longacre had a show, and two electricians who were with the show brought a board in from one of their shops and taught me how to do the programming. So on any given day, I had to do the board which I needed to memorize; I had to do the show; I had to do the house lights. I had to maintain the whole thing. Nowadays, when an electrician gets sick, I replace him. Once the board is programmed, you just have to push the button. The main job is setting up the show. Today everything is automated. The scenery and everything else moves by automation. That has cut way down on the number of crew members. For example, when the revival of *Chicago* opened at the Richard Rodgers Theatre in 1996, they had sixteen men working on the crew; ten years later, for the same show at the Ambassador, we have only myself, two front light men, a sound girl who takes care of the microphones, a carpenter, a flyman and a property man. And that’s a big difference.

The times may change; the shows may change; the technology to mount those shows may change; and even the very playhouses themselves may change. One thing, however, remains constant, without men like Vince Jacobi, theatre on Broadway would be in the dark.



A Dancing Bunny

On August 4 and 7, 2006, Barry Shulman conducted an interview with his former dance teacher, Broadway performer Bernice Lee, now known as Bunny Grant. One of Bernice’s first roles on Broadway was in the Shubert-produced show, *Everybody’s Welcome* (1931). Shulman, a distant relation of the Shubert brothers, (his grandfather, Jack Isaacs, was the first cousin of Lee and J.J.’s nephews Milton Isaacs Shubert and Lawrence Shubert Lawrence Sr.), felt that the resulting oral history would be a welcome addition to the Shubert Archive, and Archive staff agreed.

The now 91-year-old Ms. Grant first became interested in performing through her father who was a cellist and trumpet-player in theatre pit orchestras. As a young girl she would visit him backstage, watch the acts, and copy the dances that the performers did. She says, “I learned a lot from those steps, even before I took dance lessons.” Soon she began to perform. She remembers that at the age of twelve she danced, accompanied by her brother on the violin, in a traveling show that was part of the Chautauqua circuit. When the show’s ingénue suddenly left, Bernice was tapped to fill in. She had to learn five roles in one week, but did not mind: “I had a ball! Oh, it was so much fun, just being an actress!” But despite the fact that the head man wanted her to stay on, her mother, not at all a typical “show-business

mom,” wanted her to return to school in Atlanta.

Back home in Atlanta, she played various club dates, while continuing at school, until she got a job in the chorus of Atlanta’s Fox Theatre, which produced live shows to accompany motion pictures. After a few months the chorus was sent on the road. For example, they played Houston, Texas, for six months. There were different acts each week, so Bernice and the other girls had to learn new routines constantly. She was often singled out to be “the straight man” for the star comedians on the bill. It was a lot of work. As she explains, in these vaudeville shows there would be about eight different acts, depending on the condition of the theatres, the audiences, etc.—sometimes there would be five acts, sometimes ten. After every show, a movie would play. When it ended, the acts came on again, then another movie showing, etc. There were usually four shows a day, sometimes five, due to the matinees, and this went on seven days a week.

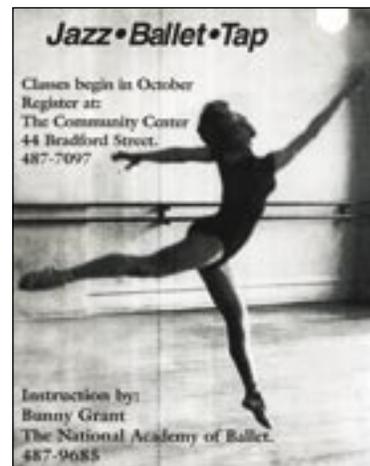
It was not long before Bernice’s thoughts turned to Broadway. Two friends of her dance teacher, Ally La Fontaine, sponsored her and took her to New York. One of them, who once had been a show girl for Ziegfeld, took her to an audition at the Ziegfeld Theatre:

I didn’t have a costume, so she dressed me in one of her bathing suits and pulled it to the back and pinned it with a great, big, enormous safety pin! Well, entering the theatre, she took me down to where Ziggy was sitting in the audience, and he looked me up and down and said, “Turn around!” I said, “Do I have to?” He said, “Turn around!” I did and he let out a big laugh and said, “Get up there,” meaning I was in. I rehearsed two and a half weeks during which time I was often called forward by the dance instructor to show the rest of the girls how to do the steps. My mother, in Atlanta, was worried about me, so she called my aunt, who was living in New York. My aunt came and took me out of the show, saying, “No niece of mine is going to appear in those scanty costumes!” I went to live with my aunt, and got a job with the New England Vaudeville Circuit for two months.

Soon Bernice landed the role of Grace in *Everybody’s Welcome*. She also understudied the stars, Ann Pennington, whom she had coached in speaking with a Southern drawl, and Harriette Lake, who would later change her name to Ann Sothern. Grace only had a couple of lines, but she appeared with the characters played by Frances Williams and Belle Baker in a song and dance number. There were about five weeks of long and intensive rehearsals before the show embarked on its pre-Broadway tour which began on the New England circuit—New Haven, Boston, etc. During that entire time, the show was constantly being reworked. Acts were hired and fired.

Everybody’s Welcome had a decent run of about four months on Broadway—after all this was the midst of the Depression. The show also toured post-Broadway. Bernice recalls an incident that happened to her while on tour in Chicago that seems like it could have come out of a 1930s screwball comedy:

*I was sixteen years old and on my own in Chicago. The musical director of **Everybody’s Welcome**, a fairly young man, asked me if I wanted to go to a party. I said, “Oh! I love parties!” So we cabbied to a building on Lake Shore and Oak Street, and took the elevator to the seventeenth floor. On entering the room, the musical director turned around and locked the door and said, “Excuse me a moment,” and went into what I supposed was the bathroom. I looked around. No*



Bernice "Bunny" Grant at various stages in her career.

one was there. No party. I went to the window and looked out and saw a ledge about 10 inches wide. I opened the window, put my high heels under my armpit, and climbed out, and began inching, with my back to the wall, toward the next room. Halfway there, I saw him at the window. He looked down, and then up, and went back in. I continued on and found the window to the next room open. I climbed in, heard snoring, and crept through the room and out the door. The stair exit faced me and I walked down to the next floor where I took the elevator down the rest of the way and taxied home. You should have seen the musical director's face the next night when the curtain opened and there I was on stage!

Bernice also got to know both Shubert brothers:

My preference of the two of them was J.J. He was like a granddaddy or an uncle to me. Lee was more of the debonair man-about-town who wasn't very friendly to us girls—the people in the show. He was just a person that showed up every once in a while and didn't interact with us. J.J. did. He was very loving and "huggy" and glad to see us whenever he came there. He was very friendly with us and treated us like we were family. It was very enjoyable to have him around.

After *Everybody's Welcome*, Bernice was cast in Courtney Burr's production of *Walk a Little Faster*, directed by Monte Woolley and starring Bea Lillie, Evelyn Hoey, Bobby Clark, and Paul McCullough. Choreographer Albertina Rasch staged the dances. Bernice recalls that Rasch always called her "I-am" because of the accented way she sang those words in the musical number, "Unaccustomed as I Am," as she danced with Donald Burr. Her other big number in the show was Ravel's "Bolero." While the ensemble danced, she was seated on top of a huge drum as the drummer drummed for what seemed like forever—"You know how long Ravel's 'Bolero' is!" she exclaims. Bernice thought that Bea Lillie was remarkable: "She was excellent! She would get out on the stage and do a funny skit and then pull up her evening dress and skate off of the stage! She was a howl!"

When *Walk a Little Faster* closed, Bernice opened her own act at the Paradise Restaurant, a dinner club at Broadway and 49th Street. Billed as Bunny Lee, she worked there for three years, and was featured in all dance numbers. She not only did her own choreography, but staged some for the club. During this time, her name appeared in Ed Sullivan's, Walter Winchell's, and Louis Sobel's newspaper columns. Her legs appeared in the *Police Gazette* with the caption, "Are these the most beautiful legs in the world?" She also danced at the Loews State Theatre on Broadway where she performed some numbers from her Paradise Show. And as if she wasn't busy enough, she also did five motion-picture shorts for Warner Brothers (although she never saw even one of them).

It was at this time that Bernice met pianist/accompanist, Jack Goodman, whom she would go on to marry. Within six months of marriage she became pregnant. She continued to work, however, as long as she could—all the way up to her seventh month of pregnancy. In fact, the wardrobe lady had to keep letting out the seams of

her costumes. She remembers audience members, “regulars,” saying things like, “When are you gonna drop that?”

Wanting to stay at home for a while with her son, Bernice quit performing after his birth. Soon, she and Jack relocated to Ithaca, N.Y., where she opened a very successful dance studio called Dance Workshop. One summer, she took a group of talented students to New York City to study with noted ballerina/dance educator Thalia Mara. Bernice decided to study with her as well and took Mara’s teachers-graded syllabus from grade one and up.

Bernice feels that having been a performer on stage helped her become a better teacher because, being a dancer, one learns all the nuances of movement—the head, the arms, the smile, and the way one uses the body. As a result, she turned out quite a few professional teachers and dancers.

The former Broadway hooper also put on shows for charity, served as artistic director of the Ithaca Civic Ballet for three years, and produced the *Nutcracker* for the Civic Ballet’s Children’s Matinee Series. Eventually, wear and tear, along with arthritis, necessitated hip replacements, and so finished her dance career.

Though really “happy” that she was a dancer, it was, in fact, the teaching that Bernice found most rewarding. She says, “Knowing all of my students and trying to help them to develop into something—giving what I had to them, and seeing them use it and go on—that was the most thankful, wonderful part of my life.”



News From the Archive

Productions that the Archive staff has recently received queries about include *Alive and Kicking*, *At Home Abroad*, *Awake and Sing*, *Blossom Time*, *Bonita*, *Chess*, *A Chorus Line*, *The Circus Princess*, *The Cocktail Party*, *Diamond Lil*, *Dreamgirls*, *The Fall Guy*, *Funny Girl*, *The Guest of Honor*, *The Great John Ganton*, *The Heidi Chronicles*, *Hooray for What!*, *J.B.*, *Jerome Robbins’ Broadway*, *The Last Mile*, *Life Begins at 8:40*, *The Little Show*, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, *Man of LaMancha*, *A Man’s World*, *Manhattan Madness*, *A Matter of Gravity*, *Maytime*, *The Office Boy*, *Over the Top*, *Pajama Lady*, *The Passing Shows*, *Ruggles of Red Gap*, *The Riviera Girl*, *Snow White*, *The Show Is On*, *The Straw Hat Revue*, *Tarzan (1921)*, *Ten Little Indians*, *Those Who Walk In Darkness*, *Three After Three*, *Top O’ the World*, *Walk with Music*, and *The Ziegfeld Follies of 1936*.

Researchers have also sought out information on performers Adelaide and Hughes, Fred and Adele Astaire, Balliol and Merton, the Barr Sisters, Barry and Holland, Richard Bennett, Bernard and Rich, Sarah Bernhardt, the Box Sisters, Billie Burke, Carlos and Norma, Vernon and Irene Castle, Christiane and Duroy, Jack Clifford, Les Copeland, Cortez and Peggy, Dario and Irene,

Antonio De Marco (aka Tony De Marco), Divina and Charles, the Dodge Twins, Dora Duby, Basil Durant, Jimmy Durante, Percy Elkeles, the 4 Dancing Fords, Fowler and Tamara, Gaston and Andree, Frank and Marguerite Gill, Bonnie Glass, Gilda Gray, Texas Guinan, Edmonde Guy and Van Duren, the Guy Sisters, Jack Haskell, Helen Hayes, Josephine Head and Albert Zapp, George Houston, Willie and Eugene Howard, Carl Hyson and Dorothy Dickson, Juan and Juanita, Al Jolson, Mei Lanfang, William and Clara Lavelle, Ruth Lockwood, the Lorraine Sisters, Vera Maxwell, Wallace McCutcheon, Medrano and Donna, Miller and Farrell, Carmen Miranda, Mitty and Tillio, Marjorie Moss and George Fontana, Maurice Mouvet, Oscar Mouvet, Mae Murray, Jack Norworth, Bee Palmer, Sarah Jessica Parker, Peggy and Cortez, Cynthia and Taylor Perot, Harry Richman, Marion and Martinez Randall, Rosita and Ramon, Charles Sabin and Edwina St. Clair, Joan Sawyer, Carlos Sebastian and Dorothy Bentley, Hal Sherman, Andre Sherri, Mia Slavenska, Peggy Steffans, Spencer Tracy, Tracy and Hay, Florence Walton, Clifton Webb, Gilbert Wells and Florence Brady, Bert Williams, and Theo and Hanlon Zambuni; artist J. Mortimer Lichtenaur; designer Lincoln J. Carter; producers Martin Beck and Arthur Hopkins; road manager Louis Epstein; and writers F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Golden, David Leavitt, and Wendy Wasserstein.

Among the theatres researched were the Bastable (Syracuse, NY), Belasco, Biltmore, Booth, Broad Street (Newark), Broadhurst, Cort, Forrest, Hammerstein, Helen Hayes, Hippodrome, Hudson, Jacobs, Jolson, Longacre, Lyceum, Lunt-Fontanne, Morosco, New Century, New Victory, Palace, Richard Rodgers, Ritz (Walter Kerr), Schoenfeld, Selwyn, Shubert, Shubert (Newark), Studio 54, Winter Garden, and the Ziegfeld.

Other topics of study included the 1929-31 theatre seasons; the history of theatre production in Kansas City, MO; revues; press representatives; a lawsuit involving the Shubert Brothers and *Variety*; the Stage Door Canteen; and telegraph code books.

Notable guests and visitors to the Archive included classes from Columbia University and Texas Woman's University; designer William Ivey Long; staff members of the London Theatre Museum; and the cast of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* which played at the Lyceum Theatre from May through September, 2006.

Images from the Archive's collections could be seen in a variety of places including on the Internet Broadway Database website (www.ibdb.com); in an episode of the Sci-Fi channel's program, *Sci-Fi Investigates*, that dealt with ghosts in the Belasco Theatre; in a Dreamworks-produced documentary about the history of the musical *Dreamgirls*; in an NHK TV (Japan) documentary on the Shubert Theatre in New York; and on the website of the new Broadway production of *A Chorus Line*.

Also the authors of three recently published and noteworthy books used the Archive's collections in the course of their research. Gary Chapman's *The Delectable Dollies: The Dolly*

Sisters, Icons of the Jazz Age (London: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2006) is a delightfully designed history and homage to the sensational twins who appeared in many Broadway shows including several produced by the Shubert brothers (*The Merry Countess*, 1912; *The Honeymoon Express*, 1913; *The Beggar Student*, 1913; *The Whirl of the World*, 1914; *Maid in America*, 1915; *The Midnight Revue*, 1915; and *The Greenwich Village Follies*, 1924). Felicia Harrison Londre's *The Enchanted Years of the Stage: Kansas City at the Crossroads of American Theatre, 1870-1930* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2007) is a richly illustrated history of that city and includes discussion of the Shuberts' theatres there (The Sam S. Shubert Theatre and The Shubert Missouri Theatre). Weldon B. Durham's *Liberty Theatres of the United States Army, 1917-1919* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Co., 2006) takes a scholarly look at a subject that is largely unexamined in histories of American involvement in World War I.

Also worth mentioning is the fact that on August 11, 2006, a section of Broadway and 51st St. in Manhattan was officially designated by the City of New York as "Al Jolson Way." Arguably the Shubert brothers' biggest star ever, Jolson first came to the attention of Broadway audiences when Lee and J.J. hired him to be one of the performers in *La Belle Patee*, the musical revue that opened the Winter Garden Theatre in 1911. In all, Jolson played in ten shows at the Winter Garden, a venue that became synonymous with his name. The new street designation, which lies one block north of the Winter Garden, was nine years in the works. It took a lot of effort on the part of members of the International Al Jolson Society to make it a reality. The letter that New York City Mayor Bloomberg issued in honor of the occasion read, in part: "As theatre and film audiences, performers, and hopefuls pass under this sign in the years to come, they will be well-served to remember not only the way Al Jolson performed, but also the way he lived his life—with a talent and charm that were only exceeded by his boundless generosity."

And speaking of events outside of the Archive, November marked the completion of a large-scale project to renovate the exterior of the Lyceum Theatre, home of the Shubert Archive. As Broadway's oldest continually operating playhouse, the Lyceum, built in 1903, has definitely experienced a great deal of wear and tear. More than a century of New York City weather had caused deterioration of the terra cotta façade, the mansard roof drainage system, and the flat-roof membrane. But more importantly, once work began, engineers discovered that some of the building's structural-steel underpinnings had badly corroded. The costly and time-consuming repairs also included restoration of several key design elements like the oval windows in the mansard roof, and the two copper lions' heads at the roof's pinnacle. Finally, the entire façade was power-washed. As a result, the Lyceum Theatre proudly marches into its second century looking like new.

Finally, the Archive is proud of the fact that its Director, Maryann Chach, received the Theatre Library Association's Award for Distinguished Achievement in Service and Support

of Performing Arts Libraries for “her extraordinary leadership of the Shubert Archive and her continuing service to the archive profession.” Gerald Schoenfeld, Chairman of the Shubert Organization and of the Shubert Foundation, presented the award in a ceremony held at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center on June 6, 2006. TLA Vice President, Kenneth Schlesinger, summed up Maryann’s contributions well: “In many respects during TLA’s lean years when many volunteers were not coming forward, Maryann essentially kept the organization going on a day-to-day basis. In instances too numerous to name, she would be the one to come to bat, take on that additional assignment, and yet again, work her unglamorous, behind-the-scenes magic, that would sustain TLA and move it forward...Moreover, as Director of the Shubert Archive, Maryann Chach is an exemplary professional and inspiration to performing-arts archivists. Her dedication to building an outstanding collection, recruiting and training exceptional archivists...and her ongoing commitment to the individual researcher serve as touchstones of the professional standards to which we all aspire.” Bravo, Maryann!



Gerald Schoenfeld and Maryann Chach
backstage at the Theatre Library Association
Awards Ceremony, June, 2006.



*Hold On To Your Hats--
Al Jolson Returns*

After a nearly ten-year absence from the Broadway stage during which he starred in six Hollywood films, Al Jolson made a triumphant return to New York with the musical, *Hold On To Your Hats* which opened at the Shubert Theatre on September 11, 1940. In the show, which co-starred Martha Raye, Jack Whiting, and Bert Gordon (*aka* the Mad Russian), Jolson played a character named the Lone Rider. A hero on radio, but a gun-shy “average Joe” who has never been on a horse in his life, he is somehow persuaded to “go West” to hunt down a notorious “real life” Mexican bandit referred to as the “Red Terror of the Plains.” After a series of fortuitous mistakes, the Lone Rider conquers all and everything ends well.

Critics were lukewarm about the show’s plot, but they could not praise Jolson highly enough, referring to him as “a master showman,” “a brilliant performer,” and an “extraordinary entertainer.” Nor was Jolson satisfied with merely giving the audience what the show’s lyricist, Yip Harburg, and composer, Burton Lane, wrote for him. At the end of the show, at least on opening night, he appeared front and center to perform some of his greatest hits including “April Showers,” “Swanee,” “You Made Me Love You,” and “Sonny Boy.”

The photographs on these two pages (including a rare color portrait of Jolson) give but a small taste of the show’s shenanigans and the wonderful costumes and sets designed by Raoul Pene Du Bois. The images were recently donated to the Shubert Archive by Paul A. Bowers, a Professor of Graphic Design at the State University of New York at Fredonia. Professor Bowers is researching Jolson’s career and has utilized the Archive’s collection.





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The Passing Show

The Passing Show was the original title for a number of lavish revues presented by J.J. Shubert at the Winter Garden Theatre. A rival to *The Ziegfeld Follies*, *The Passing Show* became a prototype of Shubert glamour, talent and panache.

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*Illustration to the left and on front:
Lyceum Theatre façade as depicted on a souvenir card
issued by Between the Acts Cigars, c. 1910s.*

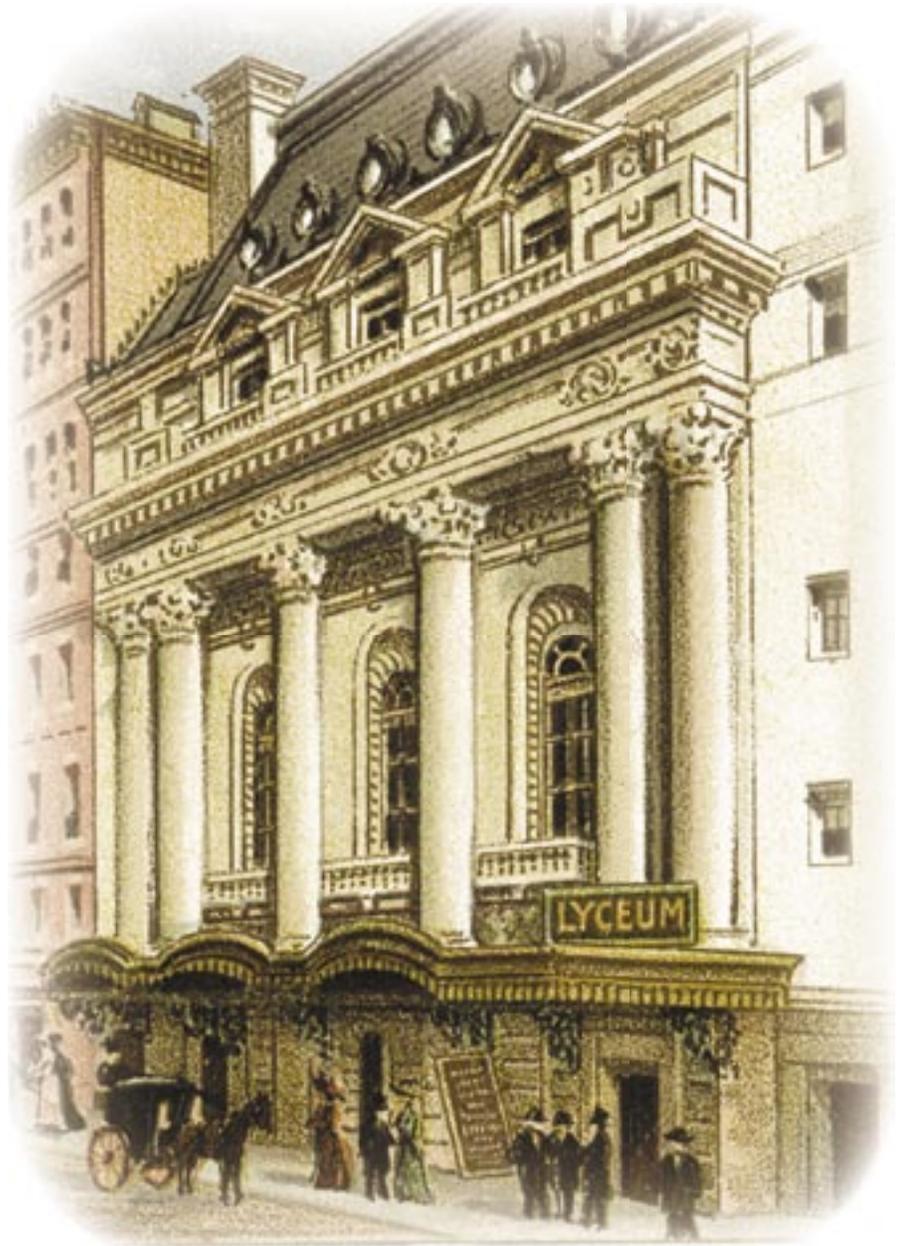
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