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The Cohan Narrative

Examining the Reach of George M. Cohan

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Newspaper Research

- Vaudeville News (New York)
- Collyer's Eye (Chicago)
- New York Clipper (New York)



Fig. 1. "George M. Cohan." Collyer's Eye, 9 Jul. 1921.

Vaudeville's "Good Old Days"

By George M. Cohan

(The career of the famous George M. Cohan is part of the history of the American stage for nearly fifty years, during the last twenty of which he has written, signed and produced 31 of his own plays; collaborated with other authors on 14 to which his name as co-author was never attached, and written and composed 500 songs and musical numbers. He also produced, owned, controlled and was both actively and financially interested in presenting 128 theatrical attractions.—Editor.)

Celebrating this centennial anniversary of vaudeville is certainly all right with me, because I started to be a trouser something like fifty years ago and I can go fifty-fifty in recollections of the past 100 years of variety, vaudeville and show business generally. By the time I was three years of age, I had screamed my way through several one-night stand routes which my father had personally booked. At the age of seven I had grown too big to fit in the top tray of my mother's theatre trunk, and yet was too small to be left alone in hotel rooms, so I was shipped back to Providence, R. I., where I had been born, and placed in the E. Street School. It takes the average pupil five or six years to go through this school. I was through in six weeks. The principal of the school told me so.

"You're through." That's all he said. The next day I was shipped back to my parents with a letter which stated that: "A few drops of laudanum in beef broth served to this child morning and evening for several days, would make the world a saner and safer place to live in."

So, after six weeks' absence from the show game, I arrived in Boston thoroughly educated. My father had just disbanded his road show and he and my mother were appearing in a little store on Washington Street, which a man named B. F. Keith had converted into a theatre. Mr. Keith attended our family reunion that night and presented my dear sister Josie with a rag doll and slipped me a toy balloon. My parents had to do six performances a day, Mr. Keith explaining: "You're sure to save money. You can't get out to spend it."

Keith's business grew to such proportions that he decided to look

Tinkling Tunes." When I opened my pay envelope the following Saturday night, I found that it contained exactly six dollars.

"Can you beat that?" I said to a little tenor singer who was dressing with me. "Albee said he would give me what my act was worth and he hands me six dollars."

"What's the extra dollar for?" asked the tenor. I made no further kick.

Only Thirty-four Years Ago

In those days variety actors tried to get seashore jobs during the hot months. The Four Cohans were lucky enough to be booked for the summer of 1893 at Rocky Point, Rhode Island. The pavilion there was the champion honkytonk of all the palaces of amusement we had played. One morning they ran short of a sister team, so I had to put on skirts and a blond wig and do a song and dance with Josie.

It wasn't long after that when Josie was engaged by Koster and Bial at a salary for her single turn that was bigger than the Four Cohans could get at the time. She was a heavenly dancer, and later was transferred to the Imperial Music Hall, which afterwards became Weber and Fields' playhouse. I asked my sister to speak to the manager and try to get him to put me on for my single specialty. In a few days she joyfully told me: "I've arranged for you to show your act."

It was to be at a big benefit Friday afternoon for the yellow fever sufferers in the South. All the big stars were to be in it. Then, as now, the artists of the theatre, big and little, were always ready and willing to give their services free to any good cause. All of the great headliners of the day seemed to be on that stage that afternoon, but nobody knew me. I remember following Ned Harrigan (of Harrington and Hart) from one side of the stage to the other to get a look at him. I kept moving about back-stage, trying to mix in, listen to the shop-talk and all the time wondering when and where I'd be put on the bill. I asked the stage manager, and he didn't know me or anything about me.

That benefit performance was to ring down at 4:30. It was 6:30

Fig. 2. Cohan, George. "Vaudeville's Good Old Days." Vaudeville News, 5 Mar. 1927.

bers of his company. If there is any
one man in show business who is 'en-
titled to take his bows alone that man
is George M. Cohan, yet he was big
enough to acknowledge his dependence
upon the rest of the cast. What the
main is to the flowers, encouragement
is to your professional associates who
play the minor roles. Be considerate

Fig. 3. "Don't Be Selfish." Vaudeville News, 3 Feb. 1922.

THEATER MAGNATE TO BECOME HEAD OF THE BRAVES

BY A STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Fig. 4. "Theatre Magnate to Become Head of the Braves." Collyer's Eye, Jul. 9, 1921.

GEORGE M. COHAN WILL REST.

It is the intention of George M. Cohan to retire from "A Yankee Prince" Co. after the show finishes its Detroit date, Jan. 20-22.

Mr. Cohan will rest, and intends to sail for Europe within a short time. While abroad he will probably complete a new play. In "A Yankee Prince" Charles King will replace Mr. Cohan.

Fig. 5. "George M. Cohan Will Rest." New York Clipper, Jan. 22, 1910.

EDITORIAL

BY THEIR DEEDS

Many years hence, when the youngsters of today have become old men and women, they will look back with grateful eyes upon the theatrical era through which we are at this moment passing.

For instance, George M. Cohan is a tremendously big man today. But the time will come when he will be a bigger man. George M. Cohan

Fig. 6. "By Their Deeds." Vaudeville News, Sept. 2, 1921.

George M. Cohan to Retire for a Short Time.

George M. Cohan will retire from the stellar role in "Fifty Miles From Boston," after Saturday, Nov. 23. Laurence Wheat, who played the title role in "Artie," which has ended its career, will succeed him. Mr. Cohan is to leave the stage for a few months in order to complete two new plays, which he will produce before the close of the present season.

Fig. 7. "George M. Cohan to Retire for a Short Time." New York Clipper, Nov. 23, 1907.

GEORGE COHAN RETIRES FROM THE STAGE

GEORGE M. COHAN has withdrawn from "A Prince There Was." It is understood that Mr. Cohan will not again appear on the stage. He has been succeeded in the "Prince" role by Grant Mitchell, who has starred for the last two seasons in "A Tailor Made Man."

Mr. Cohan's unexpected return to the stage early in January was one of the most interesting features of the New York season. When "A Prince There Was" opened on Christmas Eve with Robert Hilliard, it was quickly set down as a failure. Mr. Cohan bought out Mr. Hilliard's interest and upon a few hours' notice, went into the "Prince" role, immediately the play became a success.

In converting the piece from a failure to a success, there were many changes made by Mr. Cohan so that even with another player in the leading role, the play is looked on as a success.

Fig. 8. "George Cohan Retires From the Stage." The Courier-Journal, May 4, 1919.

"THE YANKEE PRINCE."

All Cohan shows that have visited Salt Lake have been highly successful. So much so, that "The Yankee Prince," with George Cohan himself and the Cohan royal family was given a royal greeting at the Salt Lake theatre last night. When it is realized that the stupendous production is practically the work of one man, who is author, composer and star, the wonder grows that even the talent of a George Cohan could accomplish so much.

The play is staged by George Cohan, the music, orchestral and lyric, is his composition, the lines are his own and he and Tom Lewis divide the honors for mirth-creating roles. Brilliant and swift in action, admirably staged and a finished production from every point of view, it is easy to understand that this play has been a great New York success, and that the original company is presenting it here.

"The Yankee Prince" is said to be a satire on titled fortune hunters, Englishmen preferred. The opening scene is a tea room in the Savoy hotel, London. It is the usual case of rich Ameri-

Fig. 9. "The Yankee Prince." Salt Lake Herald, Nov. 19, 1909.

George M. Cohan Lampoons President

New Stage Play Pokes Fun at Administration

Forsaking his usual American flag, George M. Cohan waves a microphone as he portrays a typical fireside address while burlesquing President Roosevelt in what is called one of the most daring satirical performances ever presented on the stage—"I'd Rather Be Right." The play opened in Boston recently. Cohan returns to his tap dancing days, as he sings jingles making good natured fun of the President, his family, members of the cabinet and members of the Supreme court. George Kaufman, who was one of the authors of "Of Thee I Sing," is one of the collaborators on the new play.



Fig. 10. "George M. Cohan Lampoons President." Roosevelt Standard, Oct. 28, 1937.

DIVORCES **GEORGE** **COHAN**,

Actor and Playwright Went Too Fast
for Wife in Chicago.

New York, Feb. 19.—Wearing as much gold brahl, gold tinsel and cloth of gold purses, gold ornaments and gold toilet articles as was possible, Mrs. **George M. Cohan**, known on the stage as **Ethel Levy**, appeared today before Justice **Trux** and a jury and obtained an absolute divorce from her husband, **George M. Cohan**, playwright and actor.

Her counsel read to the jury the depositions of several Chicago men, who told of visits that they said **Cohan** made in their company to notorious houses in Chi-

Fig. 11. "Divorces George Cohan." Inter-Mountain Republican, Feb. 20, 1907.

GEORGE COHAN OUT OF PRODUCING FIRM

NEW YORK, Oct. 7.—George M. Cohan, playwright and producer, announced today he would retire from the producing firm of Cohan & Harris, as far as participating in its business affairs is concerned, following the end of a play now running at the Cohan & Harris theater.

He stated, however, he would continue to write plays and that his interest in the George M. Cohan theater here and the Cohan Grand Opera house in Chicago would be retained.

Fig. 12. "George Cohan out of Producing Firm." Salt Lake Tribune, Oct. 8, 1919.

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