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BEHIND THE TICKET WINDOW WITH EDDIE CORBETT

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AT Wallack's Theatre during the run of "Disraeli" a good-looking and well-dressed young woman placed a pretty, yellow-haired baby on the glass slab of the box office window and said to the astonished treasurer, Billings Burch:

"Do not be alarmed—hold Millicent for me a moment, please; I wish to bring in her baby carriage."

The woman never came back, and the ticket seller, alone in the sales booth, had to sell tickets for the show with little Millie cooing from a waste basket at his feet, into which he was forced for the time to deposit her.

The baby was subsequently turned over to a foundling asylum.

AT Weber's Theatre during the run of the Scotch players in "A Scrape o' the Pen," a man came to the box office at the close of the second act and said to the box office man: "Much obliged for selling me those two seats with the post in between. That's the first show I've enjoyed in the seven years I've been married."

AT the New Amsterdam Theatre during the run of "The Count of Luxembourg," a man showed up at the window, looking for all the world in the cut of his beard and foreign clothes like an alien just arrived from some un-English-speaking country. With long lines of ticket buyers impatiently pushing forward, box office ticket sellers necessarily have to think fast and often. The man in front of the window studied the ticket chart a moment in obvious confusion. The box office man hastened to his rescue:

"Spraechen sie Deutsch?" the treasurer asked.

The man in front of the window looked blankly at the box office man.

Sam Harrison, manager of the attraction, who has been around the world several times, was in the box office and stepped confidently into the breach:

"Parla Italiano?" he asked, smiling the while encouragingly upon the man with the beard.

But the Italian of the manager didn't penetrate, apparently, any further than the German of the ticket seller.

"A qui si habla Espanol," ventured Harrison in the lingo of the Hidalgos.

Still the prospective ticket buyer held his tongue and stared his confusion.

"Comprenez-vous Francais?" supplemented Harrison.

Still the silence and the stare.

"I know," said the manager finally to the box office man, "he's a mute."

And then Harrison sent his fingers into kinetic syllables designed to assure the visitor that he was confronting a fellow digit linguist.

The finger interrogation brought results.

"Say," blurted the man in front of the window in first class Broadway English, "who do you fellows think you're kiddin'?"

THE present box office of theatres is of comparatively recent evolution. In the good old days of New York there was no such thing as printed tickets calling for seats days and even weeks ahead. Manhattan was then in the "tank" class.

In the early days of the theatre of New York, for instance, when Burton was the leading comedian of the town's best theatre on Chambers street, nearly opposite the site of to-day's City Hall, days when Edgar Allan Poe lived on East Broadway near Clinton street, you paid your money to a man at the door. The programmes of the theatres carried the information that if you desired admission without delay you must have the exact amount of money ready to hand over so the line wouldn't be halted while change was made.

The primitive practice in the theatres of the old town of taking admission money "at the gate" obtained as recently as half a century ago, up to the time when Wallack's Theatre held the southwest corner of Broadway and Broome street. In this later period of box office evolution it was possible to reserve seats at Pond's music store. Also, if you went to Wallack's in those days and left your name and address, accompanied by legal tender, you would receive a slip of paper entitling you to a wooden seat that was reserved for you, and you only.

It wasn't until a much later era that anything like a real box office window system developed. Just as mankind always fumbles for long periods with conditions that are new to it, just so the early New Yorker of the theatre, as well as the public in general, moved awkwardly and slowly in getting into and for that matter out of the playhouse of his time.

WHEN tickets were first sold at a box office as cards of admission to take the place of the oral sayso of a moneytaker at the door, the ticket seller operated through a small hole cut in a wooden and absolutely opaque door. The aperture was designedly no larger than the compass of a medium-size grape fruit—a hole just big enough for the free and comfortable entrance of a hand holding money for tickets or taking the tickets sold and the change due.

The box office man's face in those days was never seen. The lower button of his waistcoat was about as far as inquisitive ones on the public side of the ticket window could get to definite acquaintance with him. In those days of theatre ticket buying you got in line, went along with the tide, put your money down on the stingy little wooden ledge or shelf, took your tickets and change and moved on. If you were fussy and insisted upon asking what was to become of you after you got into the theatre or where you were to sit a policeman in the lobby, costumed after the present helmeted and long-frocked London bobby, prodded you playfully forward unceremoniously. Men in box offices in those days got rich, and men still living who are familiar with the period say some of the policemen got rich with them—rich for that time—those days.

LEONARD GROVER, still to be found along Broadway on bright days, can entertain by hour any one disposed to listen to his memories of the past in the box offices of New York, as well as of Washington, his reminiscences embracing intimate impressions of Lincoln, Stanton, Sumner, McClellan, Dana Sheridan and others of the antebellum days, all of whom were his patrons when Grover ran the important theatre of the Capital City.

PASS FIENDS—folk who get orders for tickets for the theatre without pay, on this or that pretext—were as common then as now, according to Grover. One afternoon, while Lincoln was sitting in the small office of Grover's playhouse in Washington—he was only a Congressman then—chatting, as was his wont occasionally, during lull periods at the Capitol, a pass fiend called Grover to the little hole in the door that served for the box office window. Grover didn't wish to give the man the seats, yet hesitated to say so bluntly. Without being overheard by the pass applicant, Grover, from his position at the box office window, conveyed his predicament to Lincoln, sitting further back in the little compartment.

"Say you propose to give him the seats if he agrees to take you to dinner," suggested Lincoln, with a mischevious twinkle.

Grover did as he was told.

The Washington man on the lookout for free seats was equal to the occasion.

"I can't hear what you're saying?" he retorted, with his hand horned over his ear.

Grover looked at Lincoln, who had overheard.

"Repeat the proposal," suggested Lincoln.

Grover reiterated his reciprocal overture.

"I've suddenly lost my hearing," came back the pass person.

Once more Grover looked to Lincoln for his cue.

"Take a pencil and write as I dictate," suggested Lincoln, his amusement increasing.

Grover seized a pencil and Lincoln dictated:

"Sorry you've lost your hearing. What was it you wanted?"

The man desiring the free tickets wrote his request for seats for the night's performance. Grover read the communication aloud for Lincoln's benefit.

"Take the pencil again," the statesman from Springfield, Ill., suggested.

And Grover wrote while Lincoln again dictated:

"Your writing is so illegible I can't make out a word of what you've written and to cap the climax, I've suddenly gone deaf, too!"

ABRAHAM ERLANGER, of the theatrical firm of Klaw & Erlanger, was originally a box office treasurer. Under the ownership regime of Mark Hanna, the Euclid Avenue playhouse, of Cleveland, Ohio, harbored Erlanger in its box office when he was in his teens and so small of stature that he used to have to stand on a soapbox to bring his juvenile face to the level of the window at which he sold.

Charles Burnham, the present president of the Theatrical Managers' Association of New York and lessee of Wallack's Theatre, is another graduate from the box office. Burnham, when 15 years old, sold tickets in the original Wallack's Theatre, at Broadway and Broome street, and got as his weekly wage six dollars.

AUGUSTUS THOMAS, the playwright, received his first insight into the psychology of playgoers while treasurer of a theatre in St. Louis, Mo. George Broadhurst is another playwright who graduated from the box office. According to the old time treasurer in the box office, the same components of human nature were manifest in the old days that harass, fret and amuse the box office men of to-day.

FROM the present theatre's beginning, when auditoriums were all sectioned off, seats and partitions indicated, tickets for same printed and placed on sale, and seat charts placed in box offices for the observation of the public, the troubles and diversions of the box office men began. In the old days of the hole-in-the-door period of window sale, if a buyer stopped to be particular, either about his seat location or his change, and the lobby policeman didn't happen to be on the job, he was abused by the ticket man whose voice he could hear but whose face he couldn't see.

An oath called for an oath in those days, but the man from within always had the last word, for his citadel was impregnable.

A desire to know where you were to sit, a request for chairs on the aisle, a suggestion for locations free from the proximity of posts or pillars or stoves, or drums or drafts was regarded as impertinent—offenses fit for any retaliation.

The manager of the theatre invariably took this point of view, also, when approached by malcontents or complainants against the tirades of ticket sellers. Ned Gilmore, who graduated from a place behind the bar of the old Metropolitan Hotel on Broadway to the management of Niblo's Garden, next door, was one of the managers of the period who had small patience with ticket buyers who insisted upon knowing precisely what they were buying.

GILMORE had the voice of a deep sea pirate, and often when his treasurers weren't raspy enough in choking off questions about locations and prices, Gilmore would lend his voice to the abuse and thus speed the passing throng in front of the box office window.

One of the tricks of this manager to secure an armistice from some particularly stubborn and aggressive seat buyer at the window would be to open a window at the back of the Niblo box office, which acted as a suction draft to the hole or flue at the box office window, with the result that the ticket buyer's shin plasters or other paper currency of the time would be whipped by the wind into the box office like leaves in a gust, with the consequence that the man would have to get out of the box office line until his bills could be collected and handed back to him, by which time a seat at the back of the house would be about all this theatregoer could buy.

THEY tell a story on the gallery or Crosby street box office of Niblo's of this period that illustrates one of the sources of income of those days, and in a small measure, for that matter, of to-day, of the man in the box office who believes when making change that "A quarter short now and then, is a warning lesson to careless men."

An uncouth man with a fist of the type described as horny, during the run of "The Black Crook" stuck a two dollar bill through the small orifice of the Crosby street box office and said, in a threatening voice:

"And for once, gimme me right change!"

The box office man of the time, whose name isn't necessarily pertinent to the relation of the incident, flung the buyer out a quarter ticket and deftly counted out seven quarters, a process the man on the other side of the little cubby hole followed alertly, the while counting audibly, as the pieces of silver fell on the slab, "one, two, three, four, five, six, seven." But as the ticket seller shoved the quarters and the ticket toward the buyer, he slyly thumbed back into his money box one of the silver coins.

The man on the other side of the window, who obviously had a memory for former experiences of short-changing at the same window, picked up his ticket and his silver with a satisfied grunt and started to climb the heights of stairs that led to Niblo's family circle.

The first act of the spectacle was not quite over when the man in the box office, about to close the gallery booth and return to headquarters in front of the theatre on Broadway was arrested by the din and clatter of some one tramping pell mell down the many flights of stairs with the cumbrous noise of rough shod cavalry. Presently the man who had previously tendered the two dollar bill with the odd request reappeared in front of the window.

He thrust his hand in through the little hole in the booth, and dropping the six quarters given him in change on the slab, he closed his fist, and, so far as he was able, shook the closed hand at the figure of the treasurer sheltered within the inclosure. The man, after kicking futilely at the booth exclaimed:

"Damn you, you pirate, take it all!"

TALK to the bulk of box office men of the theatres of New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia or any of the big sophisticated centers and they'll give you facts that prove that in all big cities women theatregoers have one common desire when selecting a seat location and men another. Women wish, as a rule, to sit "in the center of the house"; men almost anywhere so long as the seats are "on an aisle."

AT the Globe Theatre during the present run of Charles Dillingham's "Lady of the Slipper," a man ticket buyer addressed Sidney Harris, the treasurer:

"Two seats on the aisle."

Harris handed out two seats.

"On the aisle?" the man asked.

"On the aisle," the treasurer answered.

"Both on the aisle?" the man asked.

"Both on the aisle," the box office man answered, as he made a quick exchange of one of the pasteboards for another plucked from the rack.

The ado the man made at the box office window on the evening he used the tickets, when he found himself on an aisle and his wife, also on an aisle, a row behind him, goes to prove to the satisfaction of some box office treasurers that ticket sellers never can satisfy the ticket buying public.

SATURDAY evenings in all the small and near-large towns of the theatre belts are the dullest nights of the week for the box office men. All stores are kept open late on the last night of the week, and the bulk of regular patrons of the small-town theatre are either buying or selling. The accounted better class of playgoers of the old South, especially in New Orleans, Memphis and Atlanta, shun the playhouse almost entirely on Saturday night. The last night of the week is tacitly the special theatre night for the colored folk of the cotton country, and white folk, as a rule, by common custom keep away from the playhouse on that evening.

Friday night is society night for white folk in New Orleans; also, to a less extent, Tuesday evening. The same calendar obtains also in most of the populous far Southern cities. Down there evening means afternoon, a designation that often confuses the ticket seller from the North.

REFUNDS of money to play patrons are one of the bugaboos of treasurers. When some accident precipitates a rush from the auditorium to the box office for a return of money paid for seats, the box office man generally flirts with an inferno. Nothing but a squad of reserves from the nearest police station can save the ticket man or even the box office itself from destruction in such crises unless the finest diplomacy is exercised. Sam T. Jack took one of his troupe of colored players to the old St. Charles Theatre, New Orleans, once—only once—under the label of "Sam T. Jack's Creoles." The troupe left town on a fast train within an hour after the curtain went up on the first performance, driven by a threat of shotguns in the hands of an organized and infuriated posse of real Creoles who resented what they deemed an outrageous insult to their first families.

A VERY young girl, accredited in the reports to be an attractive model, faced Fred Moore at the Apollo Theatre, Atlantic City, during the recent engagement there of "The Million," her expression abashed, her mien hesitant. She was a native of Atlantic City, she said, and had called to see if she could exchange two tickets for the night preceding for seats for a later performance. All tickets are accounted for night by night with traveling shows. The tickets offered for exchange by the girl had already been charged as sold and occupied and the accounting therefor closed.

The manager explained all this to the timorous suppliant, who listened the while and seemed on the verge of tears. Moore finally decided to escape the tears by writing out a pass for the seats desired. The girl took the piece of paper calling for the seats and read it with embarrassed interest. The customary line at the bottom of all passes, "Good for two seats any night but Saturday and holidays," seemed to fall in with something passing in her mind, and she read the restriction over several times to herself aloud. Moore, thinking he would have to explain the manner of getting coupons on the slip, waited for the questions he was sure were forthcoming. But, instead of the expected puzzled queries, the girl of the Boardwalk came out with this, voiced falteringly:

"I appreciate your courtesy extremely. It's been a lot of bother and it's helped me out of an awkward situation. I've been trying to think of something I could do for you in return for your great kindness. I've thought of a way—maybe not quite an even return, but anyway something that'll show I'm grateful. I'm one of the girls working for the fair in the —— church on Atlantic avenue next week, and"—here the girl drew from her handbag a personal card—"and if you'll come over and present this"—here the girl paused again to write something on the card—"I'll honor it."

When the echoes of the rustle of the departing girl's frills and furbelows had hushed in the lobby, Moore scanned the penciling on the pasteboard.

"Kissing Booth. Good for two any night but Saturday and holidays," it read.

AT the Columbia Theatre, Manhattan, the Broadway one-week stand of traveling burlesque, during the recent engagement of Al Reeves' Beauties, a playhouse where the give-and-take of good-natured raillery between patrons and box office men is considered matters of course, a man ticket buyer asked:

"Are these seats behind a post, old man?"

"Yep, Cap, but it's a glass post," the treasurer answered.

AT the Eltinge Theatre, where "Within the Law" is the bill, the box office telephone rang the other day just before a matinee. A strange girl at the other end of the wire, without any preliminaries or supplement, shot this query at the treasurer:

"Will you please see if my sister is waiting in the lobby?"

Telephone queries equally cryptic are reported to be common. Familiar bromides to box offices over the wire are: "Will you please tell my husband to hurry right home?" "Tell Doctor So-and-so to come to the telephone at once, please." The box office men are ungallant enough to aver that all puzzle messages over the telephone come from the fair sex.

AT the Cohan Theatre during the present engagement of the only George M. in "Broadway Jones" a man approached the box office and asked:

"How much are seats downstairs?"

The box office man told him.

"How much are seats upstairs?" the man questioned.

The box office man quoted the tariffs aloft.

"What's playing up there?" the man asked.

"A MAN of the obviously married type approached the box office of the Knickerbocker during the current performances of "Oh, Oh, Delphine."

"Will you please give me a programme of the show?" he requested. A programme was handed to him.

"What is it, a comic piece or a drama?" the visitor queried.

The man was told.

"Is the principal girl a blonde or a brunette?" the man interrogated.

The correct information was given him.

"What's the principal big scene?" the man asked.

The information was supplied him.

"Sure the piece ain't a drama and somebody ain't shot in it?" the man questioned further.

The box office man assured him negatively and the man finally went away.

Box office men describe men and women of this class as alibi programme hunters, who use the programmes and information thus obtained as alibis to prove to some one their presence at certain performances when palpably they have been somewhere else.

DURING the present performances of Mrs. Fiske in the new Sheldon play, "The High Road," at the Hudson Theatre, a man approached the box office just before a Saturday matinee.

"Change these two orchestra seats for two upstairs, will you?" he requested. The box office man made the exchange desired and then asked why two of the best seats downstairs were being relinquished for two in a part of the auditorium generally considered less desirable.

With something of the air of a small boy caught scaling the wall of a forbidden orchard the man replied:

"During the night when she thought I was asleep I caught my wife going through my pockets. I saw her writing down the number of the seats I've just exchanged. I wasn't going to take my wife to the matinee. I've planned to take my—sister. I'm changing the seats to get out of the storm zone."

The man had barely left the lobby before a middle-aged, worried-looking little woman showed up and asked if she could possibly buy a single seat, or even two seats of such a number in such a row, designating in her inquiry a location directly behind the seats turned in a short while before by the man who wanted to take his—sister. To help an interesting situation along the box office men got busy and through the aid of the hotel agencies sold the worried-looking little woman a seat behind the seats turned back by the man. Then the box office men sold the original two seats to two girls whose loveliness and smart toilettes, they thought, might interest the lone, worried-looking little feminine.

Ushers who were told to keep tabs on the several principals of the comedy reported later that the man upstairs with his—sister seemed to enjoy the show immensely, but that the little woman downstairs didn't seem to pay any attention to the stage, finding her interest instead in everything the two girls in front said and did, even to following them out of the theatre and down Broadway after the matinee, while the man and his—sister, after some reconnoitering, went the other way.

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