

Where to Go to Work in Buffalo
XX11 - In One of the Theaters
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When the day's work is over, and brilliantly lighted streets and festive throngs, motors, packed street cars and closed shops tell of a long evening of rest and pleasure for the city, one class of laborers sally forth to begin the day's labor. Gay throngs file into the theaters and the orchestra strikes up its first strains, then the curtain goes up, and the mind is lifted clear out of the rut of everyday in contemplation of the idealized scene on the stage, as marvelous as modern ingenuity can make it. Then it is that back there, in the dim light, a corps of men toil for their living – men whose lives are spent in the theater, but who never see a play.

The glamour of the theater draws little Johnny around to the dingy, bare brick wall wherein is situated the great, mysterious stage door. He watches the loads of stuff coming in from the station, watches busy men unloading it and depositing it within the cavernous gloomy door. Johnny is of working age and he wants a job. He hates school. So he slides up to the stage manager and asks to be allowed to go to work on the stage. He is taken on, and told to come around that evening at 7:30 o'clock. So Johnny fairly treads upon air as he sets forth – to be forever within the theater, to need no costly tickets of admission – to be one of the chosen few, so Johnny feels. It is a specially big production, and many extras are needed. The week ends, Johnny is taken on permanently as a clearer at 50 cents a performance. The theater has claimed him, and thenceforth his lot is cast behind the scenes, in that bare and draughty outer circle from which is shut off the little space of the stage room wherein night after night is concentrated the whole essence of the theater. Night after night for five or six years Johnny lounges in the wings with half a dozen other dingy figures, telling scraps of stage gossip in whispers, speculating as to the success or failure of the piece, whispering of omens noted (for these stage folk are unconquerably superstitious), stealing as close as possible to the edge of the scenery, peeping eagerly from behind a stage rock or hillock or tree trunk, or finding a thin place in the canvas, an eyehole, and appropriating it. There are many thin spots in the canvas after it has been rolled and unrolled and handled half a season, and the stagehand that finds a place of vantage glues his eye to it and drinks in the play – wrong side about. There is Maxine Elliott, standing with a huge apple bucket in either hand, her red hood slipping from her black hair – the buxom Devonshire maiden. Down there within the dark semicircle where hundreds of people sit watching, a roar of applause rings to the great arched ceiling. The actor stands in the orchard gate with the beautiful scene behind her of heavily laden trees, very realistic, yet very idealized. Johnny, with his eye to a hole sees her standing there surrounded by crazy, irregular framework, filled with dingy grey canvas.

Except for the light that filters through between canvases, the stage is as dark as possible, lest a stray reflection should mar the carefully studied lighting effect within the picture. And, except for the queer, long-distance stage voices in the play, the stage is utterly silent. Should anybody cough audibly or sneeze or speak, the stage manager is after him, on tiptoe, but bristling.

Just within the screen of the canvases, and waiting with ear and eye strained, stands the queer figure of the rosy farmer's wife, with a tea making outfit in her hands. She jostles past Johnny, who immediately shrinks up out of the way, and as the actors come near a certain point in the dialogue she waits her cue – the word or action that is the sign for her to come in. In she goes, but there are other actors waiting yet. And now they are all on stage, and beginning to come off again and away they fly to the dressing-rooms, and the stagehands are left in possession of the eyeholes once more. And now down comes the curtain and the call to “strike.”

Everybody awakes from the trance of silence and hither and thither they rush. Everybody has his appointed task. There is the property-man of the company directing the clearers – the little chaps who hustle about dragging off the furniture, the stage carpenters and his boys pulling the great canvasses out of the way and the electrician and his assistants switching off certain lights, switching on others, regulating everything in accordance with the plots of act II. And, not to be forgot, away up above and out of sight, the busy flymen, in their pitchy black gallery, above the stage seize the ropes from the belaying pins and haul for dear life. Like the sail of a great ocean ship up, up goes the back drop, up one after another go the wood borders – those cutout affairs, that give the effect of overhanging branches, ivy or roses. They are just like sails, a foundation of almost invisible net for the flimsy painted foliage. Up they all go. Those flymen are wonders in their way, and it takes a pretty competent stagehand to manage the flies. Imagine a gallery, high up in the loft above the stage, with a gridiron of rafters far above it again. And over these close-woven rafters are swung the lines. Short, center and long lines they are called, for they go in sets of three. The short one is attached to the top of the scene nearest the stay pins, the center to the middle top, and the long line to the far edge. And it takes some muscle, and a certain knack, too, for a man to haul in those three lines at one operation, and lift the sometimes heavy weight of painted canvas until it swings high above the stage in the darkness of the outer void. And to know just what pin governs each set – to pick it out from the 150 set, at a minute's notice and without hesitation or the loss of a moment, to get it out of the way and just the right canvas for the next act lowered to the stage – well, you and I couldn't do it. It takes a full-fledged member of the Stage Mechanics' Union on anything from \$18 a week and up. So from the flies are manipulated the drop scenes and hanging pieces, while down on the stage other chaps bring on the frame scenery and set it up.

A little interior effect is being rapidly shaped down there on the stage. The men shoulder and bring in huge pieces of framework, lifting and balancing it with the knack of long experience and setting it down to the exact line marked on the ground cloth for that scene. The back and sides have been placed, and the backings set in place, (the pieces that give the illusion of something beyond a door that has to be opened during the act) so that no matter where your seat may be in the whole house, you cannot see around them. And with a quickness that is startling these men begin to “snap” the back and sides together – snapping a thin, strong lash, to catch the series of metal hooks alternately on one piece and then the other. Seldom do they miss their mark, and in a twinkling the house is laced together. From above comes down the little ceiling aimed so precisely that

it falls exactly upon the top space and is snapped securely there. These pieces of canvas, made as they are to give the idea of perspective, present some odd shapes.

“You may notice,” said one of Buffalo’s theater managers, ‘that everything almost is solid nowadays. That’s what we call a practical door – a real, wooden door that can be opened and shut.”

And a stagehand at that moment came behind, carrying a doorknob. It didn’t fit. He hastened off to change it. Every door, every knob is accounted for and made to fill a certain need. The property-man has them all in his head and his assistants must get them in their right places.

“That,” said the manager again, pointing to a heavy battered old bed back on the stage that had been dragged outside the enclosed scene, “was used in the boarding-house scene. And see that old stand and wash basin – everything is real, you see. We do very little faking now.”

It was a in a play that depicts New York. There were windows in the little house set up, and these looked out on the wall of an apartment-house. Between the two shone the outer daylight and the electrician was now busy getting his strip lights into place to shed morning light within that space, and indoor light within the house. One thousand white electric lights there are above the stage in a big theater and various colors and gelatin sheets and what not, to tint the light to soft grey dawn, rosy sunset, glaring midday or twilight as the case may be. Perhaps there is no other craft so comprehensive as stagecraft. The designing artist who plans the whole effect for a play, of scenery, lighting and postures for the actors, must be sure of close sympathy in the man who paints the scenes, the man who understands electricity and carries out his ideas, and the stage carpenter who makes and places the scenes. And all must be in sympathy with the actor folk.

It was in the biggest theater in Buffalo, that great structure built originally to accommodate masses of German singers on its stage. The old red brick walls, lost in shadows, and high above, the gridiron with its maze of ropes, some holding scenery, some hanging idle, tied in sets and hooked to sandbags to bring them down – it is a vast stage, capable of staging almost any production. Along the side wall you ascend by steep and narrow wooden stair to that dizzy height, and tread in the cobwebby twilight past an old painted mantelpiece, some queer bits of furniture and other odds and end that accumulate about a theater, and are raised and lowered when needed.

“We have a full equipment of stuff to use for stock company staging,” the theater manager explained, ‘stored away wherever we can make room for it.” Across the swaying, dizzy bridge and into the fly gallery we went.

“Isn’t it dangerous for the men up here?” was asked, as men were seen leaning over the balustrade that alone shielded them from a fall to the stage so far below.

“No. They get used to it. We have had a couple of men fall, but never a serious accident. One fellow fell through several pieces of canvas and was caught by another stagehand at the bottom, not even shaken up.”

To one side of the stage is the house electrician’s room, up many a narrow and dark stairway and through hidden doors. In this locality, too, is found the carpenter’s shop, where he works away in perfect seclusion. To the other side are the dressing-rooms, vast numbers of them, where the actors establish themselves on arrival and hold sway until the final strike.

“You employ the stagehands yourself?” was asked.

“We have our own crew; every theater has. Then, when we have a big production coming in, we engage extras for the performance. But every theater manager has his electrician, his carpenter and his property-man, as well as his assistants.”

“What does a stage electrician make?”

“Anywhere from \$18 to \$ 25 a week.”

“And the others?”

“Well, a property-man receives about the same, and a carpenter \$25 to \$35 a week.”

“And the ordinary stagehand?”

“They average about \$16 a week – anywhere from \$12 to \$18 they range. Then, of course, you know each company brings its own corps of men with it – its crew.”

“So there’s always a chance for a stagehand to go on the road?”

But it was a company manager himself who talked of this phase of the business, and a more interesting man one could not find to talk to. A pleasant, childlike manner, a keen appreciation of the human side of the work, as well as a sense of humor – and that charm that comes of contact with the artistic in life and is fostered by much traveling. Yes, he was a delightful talker, that veteran show manager.

“It all depends on the show,” he started. “Now, the one I’m managing just now, for example, has its stage manager, its treasurer – the man who stands just inside the curtain and keeps his eye on the house and afterward settles up at the box office – its electrician, property-man, carpenter and stagehands of the ordinary kind. Then we have a regular specialist who takes care of our animals. You know, this show has cattle and sheep and horses in it. Well, those animals are great pets, and the man who takes care of them looks after them like babies. We call them his family. But, wait, here he is.” And he turned to introduce the animal expert, who approached. A kindly, gentle-mannered man he was,

just the sort to make pets of dumb creatures. He lost no time, either, in getting into his hobby.

“The leading horse,” said he, “is called Dandy. He’s been playing that role for fourteen years; knows his cues better than some of the men and women. As soon as the girl puts down her face to cry, Dandy gets ready. He pricks his ears and gets all tense with excitement. Then he’s in it. Away he goes on stage, does his stunt, and – you know there’s a pie sitting on the table in that act – well, Dandy never makes a mistake, and the others follow his lead. And then down goes the curtain, and Dandy bolts for that pie. It’s the booty of the animals by long tradition, and they look for it every time. And it doesn’t take ‘em many minutes to have their noses in it, and lick up the last crumbs. Our sheep, even, seem to have sense, and do just what’s wanted of them. And cattle! Some folks say cattle are stupid. Well, we’ve played in many a place where we had to take our animals in and out by a fire-escape – they don’t think anything of climbing fire-escapes, and coming down them, too. But his weather’s what plays the dickens with the pets. The cars are not heated, and I just have to stay with them every minute and watch them and keep them covered up. We lost one through a bad cold he caught traveling once. Dandy! Oh, you have to meet Dandy. He’s been on the stage seventeen years – played in Humanity, before he came with this show.”

And so that special show had its trained crew of animal experts as well as the usual men. Another expert was employed too – the snowstorm man, for it was in that play where the poor outcast Anna Moore is lost in the snowstorm.

“We calculate,” said the aforesaid show manager, “that Anna’s been buried under about twenty tons of paper snow since this play went on the boards. See that thing that looks like a long cage? That’s the snowstorm apparatus.”

This sieve-like cage is filled with chopped up paper and a powerful electric fan blows through it, sending the storm right in at the door. It falls upon a cloth and is rapidly gathered up and put away after the act.

“The man that invented that storm,” said the manager, “made something like \$1,000,000 out of it.”

They were just bringing in the stuff through the stage door, and the manager of the theater, that indispensable person, had come down bright and early to oversee it.

“Where’s Hi Holler’s wagon?” shouted somebody in dismay. Should a piece of equipment be lost it might be a serious matter. For where could they be sure of picking up just the right kind of battered old gig for the raw countryman to sit in? It was found, however, and brought in safely.

“And what other people does the company bring with it?”

“There is the stagedoor keeper – he knows everybody who’s supposed to come on the stage, and keeps others off. Then there’s the stage manager and the usual crew of hands.”

“How do you arrange with the men – how about their traveling expenses and all that?”

“We pay their fares and sleeping cars when there’s a night trip. Sometimes, you know, we have to jump out of a place at night right after a performance and catch a train for the next stop – and set up again ready for the next night. Sometimes we leave in the morning in the middle of the week, and there’s another company coming in at the same time. Our men are hard at it taking down scenery, getting the properties out of the way and sent off on the train, and at the same time there’s the other show bringing its stuff in and putting up scenery. Then, the hands have to use their wits to see that they don’t take out something that’s just been brought in, or bring in something that’s been taken to the wagons.”

“And what are the duties of the show manager?”

“Well, there are two kinds of show managers – the old fashioned kind, the all-round theater-man who has been manager, advance agent and everything in turn. And then there’s the newfangled kind – the newspaperman who goes ahead and writes stuff and gets it into the papers, about his show. I belong to the old school. I’ve been in the business 30 odd years, and I’m something of a stage manager, something of a railroad man, something of a newspaper man and businessman, as well as a lot of other things. I go on ahead and make arrangements for the company – for the keep of the horses and cattle and sheep, find out about hotels, railroad rates and as much as possible about the likes and dislikes of the place – you know there are no two cities alike, no two have the same tastes or the same prejudices. You never can tell whether a city will stand for a thing or whether they’ll go wild over it – you’ve got to learn as much as possible beforehand. And then I wait to see the things started, is possible, then – on to the next stop.”

“Does a show manager have a good salary?”

“Anything from \$65 to \$125 a week and expenses – according to what he does and what he’s worth.”

At the stage door there lounged a man with hands in pockets, who seemed to be looking on a great deal and doing very little.

“Who is that man?” was asked of the theater manager.

“That’s the walking delegate of the Stage Mechanics’ Union. He stays right there and sees that everything’s done according to rule. He’s the man we apply to for extras, and he comes around when the stuff’s coming in this way to see what we need and that the men are being treated according to agreement and so on.”

There was a great hustle among the men who were putting up the drop scenery, and it seemed there were not enough hands for the task at the moment. Right near stood a couple of chaps with hands behind them, leaning on a haircloth sofa back.

“Why don’t they help?” was asked.

“They don’t dare. The different crews aren’t allowed to do each other’s work – against union rules. So the men who handle the drop scenery can’t expect help from the crew supposed to handle properties or frame scenery or the men who bring in the stuff from the transfer wagons.”

“And how many men do you employ in a theater?” was asked of the manager.

“From twelve to 80, according to the play.”

“And then there are other people employed about the place – ushers and doorkeepers and so on?”

“Yes, the ushers are young high school boys who like the job.”

“And what other people are there?”

“The treasurer and his assistants are most important members of the staff; also the theater stenographers, advertising man, porters, janitors, engineers, firemen and the crews of the cleaning women.”

“How many altogether?”

“Well, we have about an average of 45 people on our payroll – steady employees they are.”

And there are five important theaters in Buffalo. If the average is even 40 people to a theater, that would make 200 theater attaches in regular employment besides the extras. The union boasts 150 members in Buffalo. For, indeed, this trade of manipulating the paraphernalia of a theatrical show is a very businesslike one – one that requires quick activity, ready wit and long apprenticeship. But it seems to pay as well as most trades, much better than some.