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A Plea For Comedy

A strenuous effort to make vaudeville refined, even at the risk of making it utterly unendurable, seems to be in progress. One by one, the good, old Brutal Brothers acts are being exiled to the medicine shows and one ring circuses, and in their place all sorts of excessively “polite” turns are offered. Eminent musicians thump the piano or fiddle away for 11, 12 or 13 minutes; decayed stars of the legitimate appear in one act plays with a sob in every line; and in general there is an accentuation of the pathetic, the ladylike, the respectable and the downright maudlin to the lasting detriment of the amusing.

Let me cast one loud melancholy vote against that madness! Let me warn the vaudeville magnates that if they would get my trade they must go back to first principles. I have no desire to weep, to think or even to sleep when I go to a vaudeville show, but only a strong, animal yearning to guffaw. I want to lean back in my narrow, uncomfortable chair and bawl. I crave low comedy, of the lowest and most humorous sort laid on with a shovel, rammed in with a slapstick, soaked with a seltzer siphon. It is only thus that my midriff can get its violent but salubrious massage.

There are bilious and inhuman folk who maintain that low comedy is not amusing; that it is not pleasant to see the first comedian wallop the second comedian over the head with a rubber ax; that there is no honest fun in the cracking of skulls. Let us pity all who think so! They miss a lot in life. They never know what it means to lay back and laugh like a hyena—to laugh so heartily that the ribs squeak and crackle beneath the strain and the jawbone aches for hours afterward. Such cacchination is the safest and most delightful of all tonics. It is ten times as powerful as a mint julep and not one tenth as damaging. No matter how much the ribs are strained, they never actually break; no matter how abominably the jawbone aches it is never actually dislocated.

If you want to see genuine, old-fashioned vaudeville today you must go to the burlesque houses. Down at the Gayety and Monumental they still use up a wagon load of barrels every week making slapsticks, and still buy loaded seltzer siphons by the case. It must cost a lot to provide the artillery for some of those shows. I have seen 10 slapsticks broken in half an hour and 100 gallons of seltzer water projected into the eyes and down the backs of low comedians in one night. I have seen scaramouches belabor one another with fence rails, dishpans, cowbells, chairs, sofas, rolling pins, swords, curtain poles and monkey wrenches: with—

Ladders
Plug hats
Little dogs
Beefsteaks
Cuspiors

Frying Pans
Canvas trees.
Artificial rocks.
Dear mats
Soaked newspapers,

Piano legs	Papier mache poultry
Telephone receivers	Bicycle tires
Boards	Pistol butts.
Boots	Spears
Walking sticks	Bladders
Rolls of oil cloth	Mixed drinks
Lariats	Bungstarters
Crockery	Tie picks
Hatchers	Kettle drums
Beer steins	Hammers
Stethoscopes	Buckets
Lead pipe	Bags of flour
Garden hose	Confetti
Iron cigara	Crutches
Celluloid bricks	Coffee pots
Clarinets in B	Trombones
Clarients in A flat	Helmets
Chains	Repeating rifles
Ropes	Mayonnaise
Tables	Violins

And believe me, every last weapon had its own individual humor. No matter what the technique there was always an invigorating guffaw in the wallop.

According to Col. Sam Dawson, that astute student of horseplay, the happy thought of substituting a cheap violin for the customary slapstick was invented by Weber and Fields. That was years ago and they were appearing at the time, as a pair of German musicians. Fields carried a violin, which Weber borrowed from him. They then got into an altercation and of a sudden Weber came down upon Fields' head with the fiddle, which was splintered into a thousand pieces. Set down in cold blood, of course, the incident seems tame enough, but it was sufficiently comic as enacted to make the reputation of the two comedians. People fell screaming into the aisles; the roars of mirth stopped the show; on more than one occasion the police came galloping, thinking there was a panic.

Since then that fiddle trick has been done by hundreds of second rate Merry Andrews, but while it was yet new the fiddles they used cost them \$1. So a piece by the gross, and giving two performances a day, they destroyed 12 fiddles a week. Thus, their weekly fiddle bill was \$21.60—but their audiences were so delighted that their salary rose from \$60 a week to \$500, and so they made a not a profit of \$418.40

Epoch-making Inventions

It is impossible of course, to happen upon so brilliant an idea every day, but all the same it is not the only one to the credit of Weber and Fields. The device of fighting a duel with billiard cues, now so common on the burlesque stage, is another of their delightful inventions. They also devised the slapstick made of three barrel staves instead of the usual two. Its virtue lies in the fact that its sudden impact, upon the pantaloons or elsewhere, produces a loud and complex noise like that made by what is called triple tonguing on the cornet.

Incidentally, it may be mentioned that Weber and Fields discovered the humorous possibilities of the cornet itself. Twenty years ago that horrible horn was received quite gravely as a true musical instrument by the plain people of America. But now its employment at sober music-making is confined to circus concerts and park bands. Whenever a performer produces a cornet in vaudeville the crowd begins to laugh, because it knows by experience that he will soon be making funny sounds with it, on bringing rabbits and beef stews out of it, or beating some other performer over the head with it.

Why is low comedy so all-fired funny? Why do we all laugh so heartily when the slapstick comes down upon the assistant comedian's skull? There are acidulous psychologists, so called, who tell us that the taste for such rough humor is an atavistic proof of our barbarous ancestry; that those of us who love low comedy are brutes. But in this case as in many other it is easy to refute the psychologists by appealing from their theories to the facts. Men of the first consideration are eager patrons of the circus, and yet all circus humor, it must be plain, is based upon assault. Unless the clowns clubbed one another, played painful practical jokes upon one another and met with grotesque accidents every other minute, they would be sorry clowns, indeed, and no one would pay money to see them.

In the burlesque houses, where genuine vaudeville is still nourished and acclaimed, the average audience is certainly not made up of newsboys and criminals. There may be plenty of both classes, true enough, upstairs, but on the first floor fully half of the men are of the eminently respectable type. So far I have yet to see a bishop at a burlesque show, but I have seen plenty of doctors, lawyers and business men, including not a few members of the Merchants and Manufacturers' Association. This reminds me by the way that I once attended a prize fight—and a hot and gory one it was!—which was honored by the presence of five millionaires, two Congressmen, an eminent physician and no less than eight lawyers of distinction. All sat upon the stage in the full view of the house!

No; it is impossible to dismiss the comedy of mayhem as an amusement of the canaille only. No doubt the true reason for the favor it enjoys among all classes lies in the fact that it is always simple and understandable. An epigram often eludes even the most alert of us, but the long note of the slapstick reaches the perceptions of all. Say what you will against it, you will have to admit that it is uproariously funny. Fight against it as you will. It will infallibly make you laugh.

And in the criticism that it is inhuman there is very little validity. It is plain enough of course, that an unprovoked assault upon a human being must always be inhuman—but how about a justifiable assault upon a vaudevillian? Isn't it a fact, after all, that the average vaudevillian richly deserves all of the clubbing he gets! And besides, isn't it a fact that we are all well aware, the while we laugh at that clubbing with vociferous roars, that it really doesn't hurt him?

(Source: Parks Media Center, Iowa State University, microfilm collection)