



GRADUATE SCHOOL
EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

East Tennessee State University
Digital Commons @ East
Tennessee State University

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Student Works

5-2007

No Sleep 'til Minsky's: A One-Man Tribute to Burlesque and Vaudeville.

Carl Glenwood Williams
East Tennessee State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Performance Studies Commons](#), and the [Theatre History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Williams, Carl Glenwood, "No Sleep 'til Minsky's: A One-Man Tribute to Burlesque and Vaudeville." (2007). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 2099. <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/2099>

This Thesis - unrestricted is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.

No Sleep 'Til Minsky's:
A One-Man Tribute to Burlesque and Vaudeville

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Communications
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Professional Communications

by
Carl Glenwood Williams
May 2007

Mr. Robert Funk, Chair
Mr. Herbert Parker
Dr. Joseph Sobol

Keywords: theatre, performance, variety, vaudeville, burlesque, comedy, play, one-person,
monologue, solo

ABSTRACT

by

Carl Glenwood Williams

No Sleep 'Til Minsky's is a one-man show paying tribute to early 20th century variety entertainment. The writing process began with research into the forms of vaudeville and burlesque, including films of period acts, autobiographies and biographies of burlesque performers, and study of historical scripts performed in the time period and stored at the Library of Congress.

The format of the show consists of a one-hour core script in which Lou Drake speaks of his life and career in burlesque. In addition to the core script, the structure is designed to allow more actors to participate in staging sketches described by Drake, as well as allowing external acts to splice their material into a performance.

CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	2
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	5
A Word From The Author	5
The Birth of Lou Drake	6
The Shaping and Naming of Lou Drake	7
The Format	8
The Sketches	9
Meet Me ‘Round the Corner	9
The Market Basket.....	9
Strike! Strike!	9
The Plumber Will See You Now	10
The Sale	10
Does Anybody Want a Comic?	11
The Life of Lou Drake	11
Don’t Get Me Started	13
The Celebrity Connection	13
2. THE FIRST DRAFT	15
3. COMMENTS ON THE FIRST DRAFT	72
4. THE FIRST REVISION	73

5. COMMENTS ON THE FIRST READING	128
6. THE THIRD DRAFT	130
7. CONCLUSIONS	182
REFERENCES	183
VITA	185

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The following note is an original Author's Note, and is designed to appear in programs for "No Sleep 'Til Minsky's" under the heading "A Word From the Author."

A Word From the Author

It was October of 2000, and I was taking a class in the performance of comedy. We were studying a variety of forms from Commedia Dell'Arte to the comedy of manners and into the modern day. Following a particularly crazy class day, I shared with one of my classmates that the experience had reminded me of "an old Marx Brothers movie."

My friend replied, "Who?"

Stunned by the question, I quickly rattled off a short list of film names and my friend took notes. I found out later that he went directly from our conversation to the library. The next class day, he said, "Those were the funniest movies I ever saw. Do you have any more?"

It didn't take me long to discover that he was not alone among my friends. I had taken it for granted that the people I had grown up with had watched the same things I did – Warner Brothers cartoons, the American Movie Classics channel, and the programming of Nickelodeon's "Nick At Nite" line-up.

Six years later, I discovered that even I was not nearly as educated as I believed. In the summer of 2006 I was taking a course at ETSU called "The Comedy Continuum," taught by Bobby Funk. It was there that I saw Buster Keaton for the first time and that I ever truly watched Laurel and Hardy.

The characters that I know and cherish have a shared background in burlesque and vaudeville, the variety theatre forms that thrived at the beginning of the twentieth century. These

American pioneers inspired the more modern comics like Lenny Bruce, Andy Kaufman, and Steve Martin. As the next generation of comedians grows to maturity they study these modern comics, but often neglect or are simply unfamiliar with the foundations they built on.

No Sleep 'Til Minsky's is intended to bring those foundations to light. Lou Drake is not a major player, nor was he ever. He is the workaday comic making ends meet wherever he can, and today – March 29, 1937 – he stands on the verge of the death of the form. In April, the Minsky brothers will have their burlesque clubs raided by the police. All fourteen of their clubs – the only burlesque clubs left in New York City – will be closed until further notice. In May, they will be stripped of their business license, closing their theatres permanently. Burlesque in New York will be effectively dead until the late 40s.

But tonight, Mama Draskovich's boy is opening the show in a small southern town. In his pocket is a ticket to New York, and the next week he begins his show at Minsky's.

The Birth of Lou Drake

In discussions with Bobby Funk, my committee chair, I considered many possibilities for what my show should cover. I discussed novelists, playwrights, poets, and songwriters. We discussed different performers that I could represent onstage, including some of the modern comics. In particular, we discussed Brother Dave Gardener – another hero of my youth whom I was finding many people simply did not know. Finally, we discussed the possibility of looking into the days of burlesque for inspiration. I started reading biographies and examining films of the acts.

I quickly reached the decision that I wanted to present a fictionalized comic to the world. My examination of different acts such as Chico Marx's led me to the conclusion that every known comic had signature bits – acts that audiences would expect to see if they saw the

character on stage. I decided then to pursue a new character, one from whom any bit or act could seem natural, and one from whom no specific routines would be expected.

The Shaping and Naming of Lou Drake

Once I had settled on using a fictional character for my tribute to burlesque and vaudeville, it remained to give the character shape and identity. Like many comics of the era, I determined that he would be from a poor background. Many entertainers saw the entertainment business as a way out of poverty. This character would be a first-generation American, the son of a blue collar couple.

His ethnic heritage became a matter of practicality for the performer. As the piece was designed for my own performance, the ethnicity of the character had to look like something I could play. Lou's family background quickly became Polish. His religious background was Catholic, which would set him apart from many of his Jewish counterparts.

As a young man, he had a talent for singing. This would lead people to encourage him in pursuing the stage as a career. Some of the characters in his neighborhood would have served as source material for his comedy. Growing up in a Jewish neighborhood, he would develop a Jewish comic routine. Eventually, a love of comedy would lead him to burlesque, where the comedy could be wilder and more adult.

Finally, on the issue of his name, I decided to avoid the more "bumpkin" names that comedians sometimes adopted, such as the classic burlesque comedian George "Beetlepuss" Lewis (O'Brien, 1951). Instead, I opted for a name that would sound more human. With his Polish background, he would most likely work under an anglicized version of a Polish name. I settled on Draskovich, which would anglicize to Drake. For a given name, I chose to find something that sounded blue collar, and settled on Lou.

While trying out the name on friends and family, my mother made an observation about the name. “Lou and Drake,” she said, “are two names that you have to make certain you separate properly. If you separate them *after* the ‘d,’ you get something interesting.”

In fact, she was right. Running the name “Lou Drake” together produces the words “Lewd Rake.” A perfect name for a burlesque comedian with its hidden double-entendre. With the character at long last named and given a basic form, it was time to set to work on the script.

The Format

The original concept for the show had been to present it as a one-man performance. As I researched further into the show, however, I realized that in order to capture the spirit of variety entertainment you need more than a single person. The question became how to approach the script in such a way that the show could still require only one person, and yet have room to feature more people when they were available.

The solution came in the form of Lou Drake’s memories. The core reality of the script is an interview conducted in Lou Drake’s dressing room. In the course of the interview, Lou describes several sketches that he used to perform with his partners.

The script is constructed, then, with built-in branches. Performed in a straight line exactly as written, *No Sleep ‘Til Minsky’s* is a standard one-man show. The burlesque and vaudeville sketches, however, can be performed in place of Lou’s description when a cast is available to run them. In addition, several branching lines have been put into the script that can be used to segue into other variety acts that might be available to the production but that are simply not said when the piece is performed solo. The result is a show that is flexible enough to move from a single person cast to a production that can showcase seven or more actors and any number of other variety entertainers.

The Sketches

The sketches that Lou Drake performed onstage would be a significant element in his discussion of his career and his life. I wanted to make sure that the sketches included were similar to sketches that Drake himself might have performed. Many of the sketches used in burlesque followed traditional forms with variations added by each comic who performed them.

Meet Me 'Round the Corner.

The first sketch Drake describes is what is commonly known as a “flirtation” scene (Allen, 1995). It consists of a flirtation between the comic and a beautiful woman. This particular sketch exists in so many variations that an original source has never been named. A variation of it appears as the first sketch in Allen’s *The Best Burlesque Sketches as Adapted for Sugar Babies and Other Entertainments* (Allen). The selection of this sketch served to bridge the gap between the time that Lou Drake considered himself to be a singer and the time that he began his work as a comic. It requires the comedians to act as a musical trio (or quartet, depending on the ensemble size) and also works the girls into the scene – always an attractive proposition for a comic.

The Market Basket.

“The Market Basket” is presented as a Jewish comic monologue based on Drake’s own childhood. In fact, it is excerpted from a longer monologue originally written by Hoffman (1914). The piece is a demonstration of ethnic humor, which was a fixture of the burlesque and vaudeville stage for many years. It is a solo routine, which allows it to be a part of the production even at its smallest cast size.

Strike! Strike!

This sketch that opens the second act is an example of one of the ways in which burlesque could be topical and yet still focus on the simple comedy that drove it. In it, the

characters portray a group of union workers who stop using products as the workers who make them go on strike in a show of solidarity. The hat makers go on strike, followed by the coat makers, the shirt makers, the pants and skirt makers, and finally the underwear makers. A variation on this sketch is performed by George “Beetlepuss” Lewis in *Ding Dong Night at the Moulin Rouge* (O’Brien & Connell, 1951).

The Plumber Will See You Now.

This sketch is built on two of the pillars of the burlesque comic stage – mistaken identity and metatheatrics. First, the routine involves the simple confusion of a plumber for a man called Doctor Plummer. As a result, the plumber winds up being asked to examine the beautiful female patient. Second, the routine begins with and hinges on the interference of the sandwich butchers, who sold drinks, tobacco, food, and souvenirs to the audience. The comic portraying the sandwich butcher creates humor by inspiring confusion in the audience as to where the play ends and the reality begins. Is the butcher in on the gag? Or is the show genuinely being interrupted? This sketch is a favorite of Allen’s, and he uses a variation on it – minus the sandwich butcher gag – in *Sugar Babies* (1995).

The Sale.

This sketch could be classified as a “charity work” scene, in which a comic is seen to give money to a comely young woman in distress. In the scene, the comic would be motivated by the removal of the woman’s clothing, and the humor would come as the woman finally outsmarts him, leaving him penniless and unsatisfied. The idea was common enough in burlesque that hundreds of variations can be found. Allen (1995) is fond of the gag, and variations on the theme can be found on film in Abrahams & Tucker (1954), Kent (1958), and even filmed in 3-D by Thompson (1953). These sketches were typically performed as three-person routines – a girl, a

straight man, and a comic – and can be performed that way with the proper cast, but the variation described by Drake is a two-person sketch.

Does Anybody Want a Comic?

The final comic piece of the play is another excerpt from Hoffman (1915). This time, the subject matter of Hoffman’s original monologue matches with Drake’s disappointment over his failed career in film. The piece is a sideways look at working in what was then a relatively new art, and its dark humor belies a disappointment at not achieving the same – not to mention better – success in its new venue. Again, as a comic monologue, we get to finish on a piece that can be performed in its entirety even without a supporting cast.

The Life of Lou Drake

Lou Drake was born March 15, 1900, in New York City. He was the son of Polish immigrants. His father was an occasionally successful tailor and his mother took in washing to help with the bills. Lou had no brothers or sisters.

Lou began his career in show business in 1913 as a back-up singer for a female impersonator. The disastrous results of that first truncated tour did nothing to sway Draskovich from pursuing a life on the stage. He continued to pursue a career as a singer until noticing that the comics appeared to have a lot more fun. He appeared onstage under the anglicized name Lou Drake for the first time in 1916 as a comic singer, and quickly moved on to comic monologues and sketches. He describes his reunion with his first stage partner, Charlie, as having occurred in 1918 when they performed “Meet Me ‘Round the Corner” together. This would also be the first time that Drake played burlesque. Finding that he enjoyed the freedom and the girls more than he did the vaudeville circuit, he decided to concentrate primarily on burlesque. He booked with an agent who put him on a wheel touring the southern states, and he remained there through 1920.

The twenties saw an increase in Lou's popularity, and he started to get booked in bigger markets. In particular, Chicago seemed to love Lou Drake. He still played second-string houses, but he worked with stronger talent. In 1921 while playing a gig with one of his fellow comics, Drake discovered Ellie Harper. Ellie was working with Doug – a fellow comic and one of Drake's closest friends – at the time, but Drake stole her from Doug by promising her a 50-50 split. Such a split was unheard of for a man-woman team at the time, with even the most successful of the teams – Burns and Allen – sharing a 60-40 split (Burns, 1988).

Through the 1920s, Drake and Harper worked steadily in mid-level markets. Drake acknowledges that during this time, Harper largely carried him, and that his own success was more due to his being linked with her than to his own work. They became involved romantically, but even romance can't stand in the way of show business. In 1927, Harper – tired both of Drake's seeming lack of a life outside of the stage and of their mid-level markets – broke up the act to pursue a solo career. She moved on to success in film and on the stage.

Drake also attempted to move forward with his career following his split from Harper, but his attempts at the film industry fell flat. While Harper became more successful, Drake found himself playing parts listed in scripts as "Policeman #1," and never saw a starring role. After six years concentrating on film, he decided to return to the burlesque stage in the year 1933. Once again, he found himself playing on small southern wheels. He booked himself primarily on the strength of the reputation of Drake and Harper and continued to do what he loved.

As we find Drake in 1937, word of his act has reached New York City, where the Minsky brothers have been impressed by it. They have booked him to play in one of their seven Broadway theatres, which had just opened the year before. At the time, New York – one of the largest markets for variety theatre – had only fourteen burlesque stages, all owned by the Minsky

brothers. To Drake, playing Minsky's means a shot at the big time, as he becomes not just Drake of Drake and Harper, but Lou Drake – the Clown Prince of Minsky's.

Don't Get Me Started.

In searching to create a believable and entertaining origin for Drake's career, I examined how many of the comedians began on the stage. Many began in fields other than comedy and moved into comedy when they realized the freedom that it afforded them – as was the case with the Marx Brothers, who famously began as a musical group, but turned to comedy after their insults thrown at a Nacogdoches audience earned them laughter and applause (Tolbert, 1986).

The beginning of Lou Drake's career may sound somewhat familiar to fans of burlesque. Marx describes a similar start to his own career (Marx, 1959). Lou's origin is inspired by this story and presents a heavily modified version of it with a significantly altered ending. The resulting story carries much of the character and believability of the original, but presents a significantly different start for a significantly different comic.

The Celebrity Connection.

A handful of celebrities are mentioned by Lou Drake in talking of his career. From the beginning, it was part of my purpose to avoid making Drake a pivotal point in entertainment history. As I recounted to my board, I specifically set out with the goal of avoiding lines such as, "I told Harpo, 'If you'd just shut the Hell up, you'd be a lot funnier.'"

As a result, Drake's limited interaction with celebrities is generally brief. He briefly mentions having met Groucho – in a later draft of the script, we learned that Ellie Harper introduced the two, suggesting once again that it was more a meeting due to Harper's influence rather than Drake's own. Drake says little about Groucho, except to suggest that he lives up to

his name, suggesting that he is not as frequently rumored named after a “grouch bag.” Groucho himself disputed this rumor (Marx, 1959).

One celebrity of the time who is less known in the modern era was Hinda Wassau. Many variations exist regarding Hinda’s claim to fame as the first woman arrested for stripping in burlesque. Baldwin (2004) tells the story of Wassau’s outer costume becoming stuck and her being forced onto the stage without being able to change into her dance costume, only to have her outer costume shake off. Futterman (1992) suggests that it was simply as Wassau claimed in court – her shimmying loosened her clothes, resulting in the accidental strip. Drake, however, has his own backstage account of what happened, as he was standing behind the scenes at the time.

Drake also mentions having seen Harry Langdon’s vaudeville act and gives the impression that he was less than impressed. His opinion of Langdon is very low as he insists that if Langdon can have a film career, so can he.

Finally, Drake mentions having encountered Gypsy Rose Lee. He speaks highly of her intelligence, having noted the business savvy that would become a trademark of the famous stripper (Preminger, 2004). He advises her on the film industry, but history shows us that as a film actress Gypsy was less than successful. Even so, Drake has a fond memory of the smart stripper who recognized him from the movies – but couldn’t place where she had seen him.

CHAPTER 2
THE FIRST DRAFT

Act I

At rise: Backstage of a small burlesque theatre somewhere in the southern states. Monday March 29, 1937. The furnishings are spare. There is a make up table, a stool, and a trunk. Lou Drake enters in his street clothes.

For the purposes of the show, a live drummer can be used. If this is the case, then the drummer provides the voice of the stage manager. The show can also be provided with any Rimshots and stage manager lines as pre-recorded sound cues.

“Rimshots” consist of two drum beats and a cymbal strike, the type heard to follow many a joke.

Lines in bold are optional and are intended to segue into optional acts featuring local talent.

Knocking.

STAGE MANAGER

Mr. Drake, the girls ask that you not come into their dressing room while they're changing.

LOU

Ah, what do they care? I'm as good as a paying customer.

Stay out of the dressing room, stay out of the dressing room. I'm in the basement and they got the whole backstage. They got windows. I got hot water pipes. Not as bad as last week, though. I don't want to say the theatre was small, but the roaches walked stoop-shouldered.

Rimshot.

You hear that? Huh? Hear that? I've heard that damn drum so many times onstage I think it's starting to follow me. Watch this.

The other night I took my girl to the park for a late night picnic. I worked hard on that picnic basket. The moon was full. Not a cloud in the sky. She was beautiful. It was magic. Suddenly, some guy throws an axe. Hits my girl right here.

Pats thigh.

Can you believe that? Hits her right here. She's all right, though. She's fine. I almost lost three of my fingers, but *she's* fine.

Rimshot.

You hear that? Huh? I swear it was right there. Eh, it's probably nothing. Just in my head.

Pause.

Two drums and a cymbal fall down a hill.

Rimshot.

If you could hear it, too, you'd be busting a gut right now.

So you're here about the book, right? You want to talk to me about a book.

No?

You sure? We could move a lot of paper. I'm thinking *The Lou Drake Story*. Yocking it up with the clown prince of Minsky's. You hear I'm playing Minsky's? I finish this week up, hop on a train, and it's "Hello, New York." I got my ticket already. April 3, 8 AM.

The Minsky's own that town. You want to play burlesque in New York? You got to talk to the Minsky's. Fourteen theatres. Seven on Broadway. They love my act. They haven't seen it yet, but they've heard all about it. By this time next year people are going to know my name all up and down the coast and a book would fly out of the stores. I figure it's *The Lou Drake Story*, by Lou Drake and – what's your name? I can share the credit. I tell you the stories, you write it. Make us a fortune.

No? You sure?

Fine. I can write it myself. What's it take to write a book? Hands? I got hands. I'm all hands. Least that's what they say in the girls' dressing room.

Rimshot

So if you're not here to write a book, why are you here? Young guy like you wants to hang out downstairs with the comic when the girls are right up there? Just two flights up? That ain't natural.

The newspaper?

You're kidding, right?

Hey, what's black and white and red all—

Rimshot

I ain't even said the punch line yet! Eh, who cares. Everyone knows that one. Sometimes you got to go for the easy laugh, you know? That's the way I look at it. The easy joke — the one everybody knows coming, but they're going to laugh anyway. They're in on it with you.

It's not about me these days, anyway. It's about them. It was always about them. That's why they've got the upstairs dressing room and I'm down here next to the furnace. I like to think some of those folks wouldn't like the show as much without me, though. We wouldn't have the show without pasties, right? And what holds a pastie on? Glue. And

the comics hold the girls together. Without us it'd just be dirty. With us, it's entertainment. We're the glue that holds the pastie to the breast of burlesque.

Don't you quote that. Don't you dare quote that. I want to work again. I got Minsky's in a week. Besides – I might want to use that in my book. Excuse me if I change while we talk.

Lou removes his jacket and shirt and sits down in his shirt sleeves. He begins to powder his face.

(singing) Down by the old, mill stream...

You like that? I been singing all my life. Mama Draskovich wanted a singer. She loved music. She always told me, she would say, "Louis, Boy, you have such a nice voice. That voice is going to be your fortune some day." I used to make candy money singing. I'd go down some street, stand there with my hat in my hand and I'd sing. People would give me pennies. I'd buy a little something for me, take the rest of it home to mama. Usually. I was a kid – what are you going to do? I made a fortune for a kid back then.

Turns out that shtick only works as long as you're nine. I hit thirteen and people stopped throwing pennies. I got chased with a lot of brooms. I was getting my baritone then, and mama said I needed to stop singing on corners and get myself on a stage.

What stage? I didn't know from stage. Mama didn't do anything but cook and take in cleaning. Papa was a tailor. Papa was a tailor and a practical joker. He had a sign out front, "Ask about our half off deal." Folks would come in and try to give him half the money for a suit – he'd hand them a sleeve.

Ask any tailor – that's no way to build a business. Papa was in and out of business all the time. He moved shop more than his customers changed pants. All right – that wasn't difficult in our neighborhood.

Rimshot

Mama took in cleaning, papa sold individual sleeves – what did we know from stage? It's not like you walk up and say "Hey, mister, I'm a thirteen year old kid who wants to be in your show. Let me up on stage." So I stood on street corners. I got chased with brooms.

One day I'm standing on the street corner singing and this kid, Charlie, who lived down the block comes up and asks me if I want to make some money with my singing. Says he ran into a guy who's got a stage act – got dates booked and everything. Not that I knew what that meant. All he needs is two kids who can sing – a tenor and a baritone. He sings tenor, I sing baritone, between the two of us we can make some money. Just one week of rehearsal and then a three month tour on the road.

I go running home and mama is so proud. Papa is too, but he can't show that, you know. He's got to be worried for his poor boy. So I tell him all about the guy whose act we're

doing. A former preacher who's got an entire gospel act lined up. Spreading the word of the Lord in song. A charitable man who gives to little starving orphan kids.

What?

Of course it wasn't true. I hadn't met the man yet – I didn't know who he was. I didn't know him from Adam. I was looking at money in my pocket. But more important, I was looking at three months on the road. Three months of steady work on the stage as a singer.

The next morning Charlie and I go meet this Mr. Harris. Charlie warns me on the way there that this guy's a little cracked, but I figure I can deal with cracked for three months on stage. It's the launch of a career. I figured Hell, three months on the road and then straight to a life in the opera singing *Rigoletto*.

Mr. Harris opens the door – I swear as my name is Louis Draskovich – in a floor-length purple dressing gown. He's got red fingernails. I've got to say, up until that point I'd only heard of folks like him.

Mr. Harris was casting two young men – a baritone and a tenor – to sing backup for him in his act. His act was “Mrs. Harris and the Shoeshine Boys.”

Make sure you get that right. *Mister* Harris was casting backup singers for *his* act – as in, the act that *he* did – *Mrs.* Harris and the Shoeshine Boys.

I know, I know – female impersonators on the stage ain't nothing new. Not on the vaudeville stage, not on the burlesque stage, not on any stage. But I was thirteen years old drinking tea from a flowery teacup in the middle of a middle-aged bachelor's apartment and talking about how we're going to be following up "Pretty Blue Bonnet" with "The Prettiest Girl Around" and going into our grand finale – a song *Mr.* Harris had written for *herself*, "My Dear Fanny."

Charlie and I were expected to provide our own clothes for the act, but *Mr. Mrs.* – as we started calling him – was going to provide our props for us. We each got a hat and a purple shoeshine box.

Yes, purple.

Shoeshine box.

And on the end of each one in cut glass was "Shoeshines, 5¢."

I could hear every kid on the street laughing at me already. But three months on stage was three months on stage, and *Rigoletto* was within my grasp.

Mr. Mrs., it turned out, was an old hand at all of this. He had done the act once before – did pretty good with it, too. So when he decided to do it again, a couple of the theatres he called even remembered his act. Only problem was his shoeshine boys weren't boys any more, so he needed us.

We sang through the songs a couple of times and Mr. Harris told us to be back at nine the next day and we'd begin our rehearsals "in earnest." I didn't know where Earnest was, but I hoped it didn't have as many doilies.

Rimshot

We spent a week rehearsing that show into the ground. Eight hours a day we'd go up on the roof of Mr. Mrs.' building and dance around like idiots learning the choreography while he'd croon and pout, and I thought to myself, "This is showbiz!" I bought my first cigar the last day of rehearsals because I knew I was a bigshot vaudeville singer now.

The next day I said good-bye to my mama and papa and started down the road with Charlie, puffing on my cigar. You mind?

Lou snips and lights a cigar

We got on our train with Mr. Mrs. who had decided for the occasion of traveling to our grand debut to remove his fingernail polish and put on a suit. Charlie and I lugged the cases with our shoeshine boxes and Mr. Mrs.' costumes up the steps to the train and settled in, and Mr. Mrs. told us that we were on our way to our first engagement in Poughkeepsie.

So it wasn't quite as far out on the open road as I hoped. Still – the stage. Charlie showed me he'd gotten himself his first grouch bag. You know that? Little bag you wear right around your neck. Keep your wallet and everything in it when you go onstage, that way nobody can go into the dressing room and clean you out. Somebody tried to tell me Groucho named himself after the grouch bag he wore. I've met Groucho. Trust me. He didn't name himself after the grouch bag.

So there we are – two kids traveling with Mr. Mrs. We got to Poughkeepsie and stashed our stuff at the YMCA. Charlie and I stashed our stuff at the Y. Mr. Mrs. had a room at the Windsor Hotel. You ever stay in the Windsor? I make it a point to stay in the Windsor every time I find myself in Poughkeepsie. The Y won't have me any more – says it right there in the name, “*Young Men's*.”

Rimshot

The next night we made our big debut. We went on right after Simon Smith and his Dancing Spaniels. Ever follow a dog act on stage? Worst spot on the bill. You spend a fortune on shoes.

Rimshot

Charlie and I get out there and we start the whole thing out. We got this whole bit about walking around the street looking to sell shoeshines. Then out comes Mr. Mrs., and our jaws about fell through the floor.

See, Mr. Mrs. always wore his purple dressing gown and red wig when we rehearsed on his roof. We'd never actually seen him all dolled up. He comes out on the stage in a

floor-length, bright red evening gown with elbow-length gloves, eyes painted purple, lips painted red, and false eyelashes so big I almost backed into the orchestra pit getting away from ‘em.

Rimshot

The only thing bigger than his eyelashes was his blisters. I lived in New York. I’ve seen padded bras before. But this was ridiculous. He’s wearing these heels and he wobbles while he walks. Now, I’ve seen good female impersonators since. They all know enough to wear heels they can walk in. They’ve all got good since. And they don’t have shoeshine boys backing them up, either. Some use bellboys.

Rimshot

One more thing. Charlie and I had noticed something in our grueling week of rehearsal. It was not what you would call subtle. Actually, it was pretty much the first thing we ever noticed.

Mr. Mrs. couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket.

So he’d croon and pout and bat his eyelashes. And Charlie and I are dancing around with our purple shoeshine boxes trying our damndest not to laugh because while we’d gotten used to Mr. Mrs.’ singing, we were seeing him do it in full costume *for the first time*. All along we thought we could carry the act. We figured it was a dance number mostly, and with two good singers in the act we could kind of make Mr. Mrs. sound better. But with the dress and the boobs and the heels and the eyelashes – suddenly we weren’t in a vaudeville act any more. We were in a freakshow.

And the audience. They're sitting there all the way through "Pretty Blue Bonnet" with their mouths open. Just hanging open. They don't know what to make of this any more than we do. But Mr. Mrs. just keeps on going. Just keeps on acting like there's nothing at all wrong.

Then about halfway through "The Prettiest Girl," it happened.

The audience cracked.

Somebody got the joke. Which was funny in itself, because there was no joke to be gotten. But now somebody had decided that this was, in fact, a comedy act we were seeing. And there was a chuckle. Then another chuckle. Then somebody laughed. And somebody guffawed. And the next thing we know, you can't hear "My Dear Fanny" over the laughs.

Now that made sense to me. I always thought it was a funny song. But it turns out that Mr. Mrs. was very proud of it. He – She – Whatever he was, had written this tender, touching song about her poor departed terrier, and the entire audience was laughing at it. When Mr. Mrs. sang, "I hope some poor boy finds my Fanny and loves her for his own," he meant it to be serious. And the audience was tearing him – her – to shreds with their laughter.

Okay. So Charlie breaking down and laughing probably didn't help matters.

I would have stopped him, but I was laughing so hard I dropped my shoeshine box.

I know that this sounds strange, but you should have seen the act that followed us.

Mr. Mrs. was horrified. Crushed. Completely broken. Backstage he – she – pushes past me and Charlie and screams something about the tour being cancelled before barreling out onto Main Street, wig, evening gown, and all.

Charlie and I tried not to laugh too loud. There was another act on the stage, after all.

We showed up at the Y, and that's where the trouble began. Remember Charlie's grouch bag? He was so proud of having a grouch bag like a real performer. But he didn't know how he was supposed to use it. He put all his valuables into it and then – instead of wearing it like any sane person – put it in the bottom of his trunk.

When we got to the Y, we found out Mr. Mrs. had gotten there first and had presented himself as our guardian. He had picked up our trunks for us and left instructions for us to meet him.

But he didn't say where.

Or when.

You ever try to walk from Poughkeepsie to New York City?

Me neither. Because I'm smart.

Between the two of us – meaning between me, because all of Charlie's money had been in his bag – we had maybe enough money for a ticket home. The only thing we had to work with was our shoeshine boxes. So Charlie suggested we start shining shoes. Which would have been a great idea. If either one of us had actually known how to shine shoes. It would have been an even better idea if either one of us had actually *had* anything in our shoe shine boxes except for the rags we each used as dance props. So we split up and agreed to meet back at the Y once we had each sold our shoeshine boxes.

I got lucky. About two blocks down the road, I came across a shoeshine boy who had a box that was almost beat to pieces. I showed him my shoeshine box and told him he could have it for five dollars.

After he stopped laughing at me, he agreed it was pretty solidly made and it looked like it'd hold everything he was doing. But he said I'd better make it three dollars, because he'd have to strip the paint off it or folks would laugh at him.

I was young. I wasn't going without a fight. I told him that the paint wouldn't take long to strip off, and the wood itself was worth four.

He told me that was true, and we should make it two dollars because he'd also have to take the cut glass off the end, too. Especially since he charged a dime.

What could I do? I bowed to the superior businessman and I took the two bucks. He was a real shoeshine boy. I just played one on stage.

I got back to the Y and I waited with my two dollars burning a hole in my pocket. I couldn't imagine what we were going to do. If Charlie didn't pull at least five for his shoeshine box we could kiss home good-bye forever. I'm sitting there trying my best to put a smile on my face, but mostly just looking like a stupid, miserable kid when up rolls Charlie with a big bag of dimes in his fist. So I ask him how much he got for his box, and he says, "Enough."

"How did you get all that money?" I said.

"Sold it to a shoeshine boy," he says.

"And you got that much?"

“How often do you get a chance to buy a diamond-studded shoeshine box? Think of the benefit to your business.”

“How did you get him to take it?”

And he smiles real big, and he says, “I just left it there for him.”

And I say, “But he paid you for it?”

“Well, kind of. It was more like he wasn’t paying attention to his money at the time. Don’t worry, though. I left him a note. Right in the box. ‘For a full refund, contact Mrs. Harris, c/o the Windsor Hotel.’”

Rimshot

That. That was my introduction to show business. You get on stage once, and you can never get away from it. It didn’t matter that we barely made it home. It didn’t matter that our grand three month tour had fallen flat after only one performance. It didn’t matter that we’d lost all the money we’d been paid by Mr. Harris. Charlie and me both knew that we had to get back on the stage.

It wasn’t the last time we worked together, either. It was about five years after that we set ourselves up with another guy – Mitch – in a musical act. We were the Brick Shedhouse Trio. And we sang gospel. And pretty girls would walk by, and—

Okay. Here's the set-up. The three of us were the Brick Shedhouse Trio, right? Three no-account bums on the streets convinced that they're going to be national singing stars.

Especially once we get nailed down our rendition of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot."

[At this point, if two additional males and at least one female are available, the actual sketch can replace the following monologue].

So we sing "Swing Low" complete with appropriate hand gestures. In some states they were appropriate. In other states they could get us arrested. Anyway, we're going straight through the song when this gorgeous dame walks by and drops her handkerchief right in front of Mitch. Mitch goes up and says, "Excuse me, ma'am, but I think you dropped this."

And she looks at him and flutters her pretty little eyes and says, " Why thank you, kind sir. You deserve a reward for your honesty and generosity. I live right around the corner on the third floor. Why don't you come up in half an hour and let yourself in?" And takes off on those gorgeous stems of hers.

Mitch, needless to say, being of sound mind and body, takes off after her to go claim his reward, turning the Brick Shedhouse Trio into a duo.

So now we're singing "Swing Low" with our handgestures again. And now right by us walks this gorgeous dame. A different dame than before. And she drops her handkerchief

right in front of Charlie. Now, Charlie, he's not the smooth character Mitch is. Plus, he stammers, so he goes up to her and returns her handkerchief to her, saying, "Ex-c-c-use me, m-miss. I th-think you dropped thisss."

And she, wiping herself off with her handkerchief, says, "Why, thank you, kind sir. You deserve a reward for your honesty and generosity. I live right around the corner on the fourth floor. Why don't you come up in half an hour and let yourself in?"

And Charlie, being of not so sound body but definitely sound mind, takes off right after her.

So now I step forward, all by my lonesome, and I say, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, presenting Mr. Brick Shedhouse, himself." And back into "Swing Low." Complete with hand gestures. And wouldn't you know it, right in the middle of the first verse, on comes another gorgeous dame who drops a handkerchief right in front of me.

Now I'm no fool. I know the game by now.

So I pick up the handkerchief and I walk over to the girl, and I says to her, "Excuse me, ma'am, but I think you dropped this."

And she says, "Why, thank you, sir."

And I say, “Now, wasn’t that honorable?”

And she says, “It sure was.”

And I say, “And wasn’t it generous?”

And she says, “It sure was.”

And I say, “And don’t you want me to meet you around the corner on the fifth floor in half an hour?”

And she moves in close and says, “Well, why don’t you come up now?”

Completely floors me. And I’m stammering like Charlie now, “Well, uh, you see, uh, I got a show. I’m Mr. Brick Shedhouse and I’m doing a show and uh—“

And she reaches out and strokes my chest, and says, “Oh, come on, it’ll only take a few minutes.”

“Well, uh, I do this, uh, show, and I – could you do that a little bit higher?”

“Of course, is this better?”

“Ooh, yes. Yes, yes, yes.”

“Now don’t you wanna come on around the corner?”

“Well, I—show, and I, uh, swing low, y’know, coming – could you do that a little bit lower?”

“Is that better?”

“Ooooh, yeah. Little bit faster now. Just a bit. Please?”

“Like this?”

“Ooooh, yeah. I just – the show and the song and I had a trio and—“

“Now don’t you wanna come around the corner with me?”

“Well, I, uh – ooo. I think it’s a little late for that.”

Rimshot.

I loved that bit. That was some of the most fun I ever had on stage. And the girls didn’t hurt.

We hooked up with another act for a while. It would always follow right on us...

Lou opens his trunk and withdraws a black hat with attached curls.

Alas, poor Yonik. I knew him. And that's as close to Shakespeare as you'll ever hear a bum like me get. Yonik Persky. He ran the candy shop right down the road from my house. Remember I told you about getting pennies for my singing? Whenever I bought candy, I'd buy it from old man Yonik. Truth is, he was a little blind – so sometimes I could get extra candies out of him.

I used to spend all my free time there when I was a kid. Mama used to ask me where I learned those words I was using at the dinner table, and I'd tell her that old man Yonik used them all the time. And she'd say, "Well, I'll just have to ask him what they mean then, won't I?"

Nice thing about working a Jewish act is that the theatres don't care what you say in Yiddish, as long as it's not a Yiddish theatre. I got kicked out of a show once when I was sixteen for my language. We were doing a "pay me now" bit, and without thinking I said, "Now wait just a damn minute." I walked off stage and the manager handed me my picture and told me to get out. Just like a lot of vaudeville theatres, they had a language policy. Hold on. Somewhere in here...

Lou pulls a metal sign out of his trunk and reads it.

"Don't say Hell. Don't say Damn. Don't say Ass. You're never too good to be shipped back to the bush leagues." They kept my paycheck as a fine.

But me? I still got their damn sign.

You can say things in Yiddish you can barely get away with in English. For that matter, you can get away with them in practically any language except English. *Tuckus. Derriere* – French, see? Sounds romantic now. I knew a girl from England – a creature something rare. Everywhere she went, she went with a London *Derriere*.

Rimshot.

Where was I?

Looks at hat.

Oh. Yes. Yonik. I loved old man Yonik. I loved him so much I put him on stage. With this. He didn't wear these, actually, but every comic who works Jewish wears it – why should I be any different?

I'd walk out on stage with a bag – just like I'd come from market. And this is what I'd say...

Note: The following monologue is excerpted from a longer piece entitled "The Market Basket," originally written and performed by Aaron Hoffman in 1914.

I tell you, I don't know whether I'm dead or alive; but I think I am.

Rimshot

You can believe me, if I was only a young man again, I wouldn't be what I am today.

Rimshot

I tell you, it's impossible for a poor man what lives by working, to support a big family no-goods what lives by eating.

Rimshot

If the prices of things keep up so high, a poor man has got only two ways to get along.
Either he must live without eating, or else he will starve to death.

Rimshot

Lou looks into the basket.

I am walking from one store, full with robbers, to the next store, full with thieves: I am walking till both my feet on the bottom is wearing out – and so far, only one time I find one butcher what give me the right weight and the right price. And that one early this morning. But I couldn't buy nothing from that fellow. I was asleep yet.

Rimshot

I tell you, when you go out to do the marketing, money goes like water. Worse than water.

Every Saturday night when I take a bath – I am wishing that money was like water. When I want more water, I turn on the hydrant.

Rimshot

And the only way I can satisfy a family of money eaters like I got it; I got to be a hydrant.

This afternoon I start out with a two dollar bill to buy things for supper. And all I got is meat, fish, eggs, coffee, sugar, butter, and a couple vegetables, and would you believe it, I ain't got left more as a dollar and a half.

Rimshot

I don't know what is going to be the end from this country, unless it is the finish.

Rimshot.

It was bad enough for a poor man when we had sitting fat in Washington, President Taffy. But when the Democrackers came out and put up Wouldn't Wolfson for President of Washington, he said it was going to be different.

He say, if I vote for him, the market basket will be full.

So that November, I go to the pulls, and I make him elected. And maybe you think he's appreciating this? No sir!

When I wake up the next morning, the market basket is empty like always. And you can believe me, if the poor people is waiting till the politicians shall fill up the market basket, pretty soon we will have to eat the basket.

Rimshot

When I was a single man, I had no worry from nothing. The price of food could go up, I wouldn't care how high, and it wouldn't bother me. I was boarding.

I lived by Mrs. Mendelssohn – she keeps a fine boarding house – everything first class.

Of course it was expensive – three dollars a week. But it was worth it.

Believe me, what I ate in a week you couldn't buy for five dollars.

Neither could Mrs. Mendelssohn.

Rimshot

I don't know what was the matter with that woman. When I started in to board by her, she said she is only happy if the boarders like her cooking, and eat up everything on the table.

And you can believe me, she never had a boarder that tried more as me to make that woman happy.

Rimshot

I treated her like a son.

Rimshot

I made her feel like it was my own home.

Rimshot

All the time I was boarding with her, she can't say I even missed one meal. But it was terrible the way she treated me.

Everytime I got up from a meal, she looked at me like a knife she could stick in.

The only time she treated me nice was when I was sick for a week, and the doctor forbid I should eat anything.

Rimshot

In the two years I boarded with that woman, I paid her as regular like the clock in the parlor. Half the time it was stopped.

Rimshot

And how you think Mrs. Mendelssohn appreciated a good boarder? She tried to raise the price on me. She wanted me I should pay four dollars a week. I wouldn't do it. I didn't mind the money, but why should she try to rob me? Three dollars was enough.

No matter how much I tried, I couldn't eat any more. So why should I pay an extra dollar?

Rimshot

I told Mrs. Mendelssohn I'd sooner go to housekeeping myself.

So I got married. Not that I wanted to get married, but I didn't want to get done out of a dollar.

Rimshot

And now I got a wife. I tell you, she is never satisfied. The more I satisfy her, the more she is kicking. I don't know what's the matter with that woman. I give her everything I want.

Rimshot

Always she complains with me – she says she ain't got nothing to wear. And the clothes I give her. Only the best. Just to show you how good is them clothes – they're just like new, and she's wearing them already fifteen years.

Rimshot

I don't like to say it, but if she was laying dying and I gave her in her hand Heaven, she wouldn't be satisfied – I would have to give her Hell.

Rimshot

And it wouldn't be so bad, if my wife knew how to manage. For twenty years, every Saturday night, I am laying in her lap my wages, good wages too. Already in one week, I made as high as twelve dollars – and still she can't make the two ends they shall come together.

But when you see the way a woman goes out to do the marketing, you can see how the money goes.

She goes to the grocery or butcher and all the nice young clerks is smiling at her. They can smile. They get paid for that – with money they smile at my wife.

And with every smile the price goes up.

You can bet when I go in a store to buy something, nobody smiles. No mater what store I go to, as soon as I come in, everybody stops smiling.

Not that I'm a stingy fellow. I don't expect anybody to sell me anything for less than it cost.

If I get it for the same, I'm satisfied.

Rimshot

I don't care if a man makes a little profit on me. I don't care how little.

Rimshot

When a man makes a nickel on me, he deserves it.

Rimshot

But when my wife does the marketing, she's so extravagant. She's such a spendswift.

To show you. There is only nine people in the family. And for one meal, she goes out and buys a whole pound and half steak. And steak is so expensive. Thirty-five cents a pound. And when you buy a pound steak, half is fat and half is bone. First they weigh it. Then they cut off the fat and throw away the bone and give you what is left.

And I begged my wife she should be more a-comical.

But every week she wants more money for the table. She says the children don't get half enough to eat. And that makes me feel bad. I'm a good father. I can't stand it to see my children don't get half enough to eat. So I say to her:

“From now on, I'm going to do the marketing myself, so I can make sure they will get half enough.

Rimshot

And I tell you, till a man does the marketing himself, he don't know what a hard time a woman's got to get enough to eat for a family on the same wages like when things was cheap. I tell you, you got to feel sorry for them. They can't hold out half of what they used to.

To show you what my wife knows from marketing:

She says it is better to pay cash and trade in one place.

But believe me, it is better to buy on credit and the next time go to a different place.

Rimshot

So I went to Eppstein, the grocer. I thought I'd patronize him first. He's a good friend of mine. He's got such a fine grocery store, you wouldn't believe it. He even keeps cream.

And he keeps real milk, too. Pure – guaranteed.

And let me tell you, with milk people can't be too particular. He told me himself that some cows ain't healthy, but when you drink his milk, you have nothing to fear from any cow.

Eppstein, the grocer, is a nice feller; only his hand is so heavy. It must weight at least two pounds.

One thing Eppstein keeps that you can depend on and that's butter. Other places before you buy butter, you got to ask to smell it. But at Eppstein's you don't have to ask. You can smell it so soon as you come in the store.

Rimshot

And the prices he charges for his butter. Forty-five cents a pound. And he don't sell butter what comes in a tub. Everything must be now style, fancy – only print butter he sells.

It's wrapped up in one piece thick paper to keep it dry and another piece paper to keep it clean, and yet another piece paper to keep it fresh and another piece paper to tell the name and address where the butter belongs from, and yet another piece paper from the health department what says butter is butter, then before they weight it comes yet more paper, wrapping paper.

You pay forty-five cents and you get half pound butter and half pound paper.

But anyhow, Eppstein is a pretty nice fellow. His place is packed with customers. I am glad to see that. The cashier, she's got a little office in the front. When I was going out with the check in my hand, she was talking to a customer. That cashier is a nice lady.

I didn't want to interrupt her.

Rimshot

Why should I bother people that are busy? It pays to be a gentleman.

See here, I got it, two pounds coffee. Always my wife must have the best coffee – she never pays less than nineteen cents a pound. And here I got it, two pounds coffee for nineteen cents.

Of course the lady standing next to me, didn't notice she made a mistake when I picked up her coffee, but it shows you that a man knows better to do the marketing.

Rimshot

I was going to run after her and tell her of the mistake she made – but say, I'm a stranger – what right I got to go up and speak to a respectable lady. Right away everybody would say she ain't a lady.

I did her a great favor. It only cost her nineteen cents and she's a lady.

You see what I got here? Apples. I got them for nothing – the best in the barrel – and here is a bone for the dog, also for nothing, and here is a pair pants for my youngest boy – all from the same barrel.

Rimshot

Here I got onions. Good strong ones. And something I got here in this package – bag that no woman got from any grocer. A pound sugar that weighs thirty-two ounces.

I bet you want to know how I got thirty two ounces in one pound.

I ordered onions and a pound sugar at the same time. The clerk gave me onions and when he started to weigh the sugar, I asked him to cut up an onion to see if it was strong, and it was so strong his eyes started to cry and while he was crying, I weighed the sugar myself.

A woman don't know how to handle those thieves. But when I go out to do the marketing, no matter how big crooks they are, I show them they got nothing on me.

Rimshot

You see what I got here? Potatoes. There's one lucky thing, potatoes I don't have to buy. At the corner from my house is a Greek, he's got it a vegetable stand. He's a nice feller, only when anybody calls him guinea, he gets terrible mad.

One day my youngest boy called him guinea, and right away, he threw at my boy a big potato. A good one.

It's a lucky thing I got eight boys, I never have to worry about potatoes.

Drums. At this point, an optional act may perform.

Lou returns to the table, taking off the hat.

Yonik sold well for a good time. I played some class gigs with that act. I could always get a gig playing Jewish. And the topical bits – the Presidents, the politics. People always say that stuff gets old too quick. You ever known a President who didn't promise things would get better? Change the names around and the whole act is new. And it's even funnier when things *do* get better.

See, this kind of philosophy is the sort of thing I think would make a great book. *The Lou Drake Story*. Topical humor is fantastic. Especially when it's universal.

Rimshot

What? What was so funny about that?

Look. I do this act. Maybe you've heard of it. A couple of friends and me. I'm not doing it tonight, but we do it in all the big towns. I stay at Minsky's more than a week, you can bet we'll be doing it there. Topical humor the whole bit. And the best part is, even the hoochie koochie girls can get in on it. It don't take much – they just need to know a couple of lines.

Knocking.

STAGE MANAGER

You're needed upstairs, Mr. Drake.

LOU

Duty calls. It's probably nothing – remind me where we were when I get back.

Exit Lou

Brief Intermission

Act II

Knocking.

STAGE MANAGER

Thirty minutes, Mr. Drake.

Note: With one or two additional men and three additional women, the actual sketch can substitute for the following monologue.

LOU

Look at me, all dressed up. I been down to the Union Hall. I been down the Union Hall with my brothers – all of ‘em. You know what the boss man is trying to do to us? The boss man wants to cut our wages. He can’t cut my wages. He already cut my wages, from soup to nuts. He already cut the soup. The next cut’s the nuts, I ain’t doing that.

Rimshot

I got my brothers with me and if they try anything like that, we’ll hold together and we’ll *strike!*

(To reporter)

That’s how the act begins. Now in walks the first girl, right? And her line is, “Did somebody say ‘Strike’?” And I say, “Yes, I said it. What can I do for you?”

And she says, “Well, I’m a member of the hat maker’s union, and we stand with you guys.” You gotta keep the lines simple, not every stripper can be Gypsy Rose Lee.

“All right,” says I, “we’ll bring you into the union. We’ll stick together and if the bosses try anything, we’ll *strike!*”

And in walks a second dame, who says, “Did somebody say ‘Strike’?” You see how these lines are repeating? Makes it funnier. And easier on the strippers.

“Yes,” I say, “we said it. We’re in the union and we’ll stick together.”

“Well, I’m in the coat maker’s union,” she says, “and we’ll stand with you guys.”

“Great,” I say. “Welcome to the union. Here’s what we do. The bosses wanna cut our wages. They try anything, we’ll *strike!*”

And in walks a third dame. “Did somebody say ‘Strike’?”

“Yes, I said it. Who would you be?”

“I’m in the skirt maker’s union, and we stand with you guys!”

“Welcome aboard, welcome aboard. Now let’s get one thing clear. Nobody puts anything over on the union. Just let them try anything. We’ll *strike!*”

Now we got three girls on stage and finally on rushes my buddy. “Lou,” he’s saying,
“Lou, Lou! I just came from the Union Hall! The hat makers just went on strike!”

“Strike,” I say, “then let’s get started! Run back and bring back some more news.” Then I
turn to the girls. “Hear that girls? The hat makers are on strike!”

“Well, what do we do?” they say. Now this is pretty much their line for the rest of the act.
Makes it easier on them, see?

“Let’s take off our hats,” I say. “Hat makers are on strike, we won’t wear hats!” And off
come the hats. “They’ve gone too far,” I say, “and now we’ll *strike!*”

On comes my buddy. “Lou, Lou! The coat makers just went on strike!”

“Run back, boy,” I say. “Run back and bring back any more news you get. Hear that
girls?”

“Well, what do we do?”

“What else? Take off our coats.” And we all take off our coats. “They’ve gone too far,
and now we’ll *strike!*”

And on comes my buddy – figured out what his cue is by now? “Lou, Lou! The shirt makers just went on strike!”

“Back! More news, I say!” Then I turn back to the girls. “Did you hear that? The shirt makers are on strike now!”

“Well, what do we do?”

“What else? Take off our shirts.” And off come the shirts. Now the girls are all in their bras, doing what they do best. And I say, “They’ve gone too far, and now we’ll *strike!*”

“Lou! Lou! The pants and skirt makers just went on strike!”

“Of course they did, you beautiful boy, you. Run on back and bring back all the good news you can. Did you hear that girls?”

“Well, what do we do?”

“What else? Take off the skirts. I’ve already got my pants off.” Now they’re in their skivvies, I’m in my boxers – always good for a laugh if I do say so myself – and we say, “They’ve gone too far, and now we’ll *strike!*”

“Lou! Lou! The underwear makers just went on strike!”

“Of course they did. Stick around this time, junior, you might learn something. Did you hear that girls? The underwear makers are on strike.”

“Well, what do we do?”

“Off with the underwear! Now!”

Rimshot

If the sketch is performed in place of the monologue, here is where the play resumes.

You got the joke, right? I love that joke. Now – how do we end the bit? That’s the question. It depended on the town. Most places, we just had the girls start to reach for their underwear, then suddenly realize what they’re doing. They run off stage, big laughs and applause from the audience. Some theatres just brought the lights down on that last line – let the audience fill in the blanks.

One time in Chicago, we decided it would be fun if we got our friend Barney to end the sketch. Barney was doing a doctor sketch that day, but he also did a good Irish policeman. So we had him dress up as in his officer’s costume and run onstage to arrest these union kids for performing burlesque without a license.

Great joke. Kind of sad the audience wasn't in on it. They thought it was an honest-to-God raid, and they ran screaming out of the theatre trying to get away from the cops. Of course, it was just Barney.

I miss Chicago. Chicago is a hip town. You can get away with a lot in Chicago. Or you could. Ten years ago I was in the State Congress Theatre. You know that story? Hinda. She did this act – sexy little number. She'd run her hands up her sides and moan and groan while she shook and shimmied her hips. She's got two costumes on while she's doing this dance. She was supposed to only have the one on – the one under her chorus outfit. But the zipper got caught backstage.

So with the stage manager telling her to get out there now or she's fired, Hinda turns around and – like a trooper – hops out on stage and starts to shimmy for everything she's worth. And while she's shimmying, pieces of her top costume start to come off. And they're dropping all over the floor and she's kicking them away and still shimmying and the audience is *roaring* now. She gets down to the end and she has almost nothing on – just her heels and that damn smile of hers, cutest smile you've ever seen. And she picks up all of her clothes she can reach, winks, and skips off the stage.

Now. That night when the police came to the theatre, it wasn't just Barney in his costume.

I never understood that. Burlesque has always been an adult thing. I've worked vaudeville. I've worked burlesque. There's not much difference between them except that in burlesque you always know your audience is more adult.

We were doing an act there that night. Beautiful sketch. It was a doctor sketch. We all loved the sandwich butchers, but we'd played in a few theatres where the sandwich butchers just didn't understand that they were supposed to stay out of the theatre while we were performing. Oh, they stayed out while the girls were on stage. But let even one comic set his poor foot out of the wings and they'd be out selling sandwiches and tobacco and toys to take home to the kids. So we decided we'd have a little fun with the audience

—

With two more men and one woman, the actual sketch begins here in place of the following monologue.

We get out there and out through the theatre walks the sandwich butcher. "Sandwiches. Cigarettes. Rubber balloons. Sandwiches, cigarettes, rubber balloons."

"Look," says my pal Doug, who's playing the doctor. "Can't you see we're working here? When we're on stage you stay out in the lobby. Now, you promised."

And the sandwich butcher says, "Sorry, I'm just trying to make a living," and walks out the back of the theatre.

So in walks the dame – Ellie was onstage with us then. Great talking girl. Give her straight bits, give her comic, she can work with it all. And pretty, to boot – the audiences loved her.

“Doctor,” she says, “I have the worst pain in my side.” And off we run. Standard little doctor bit. A couple of sawbones jokes and the doctor tells her, “Don’t worry, miss. We’ve sent for a specialist. Doctor Plummer should be here any minute.”

“Did someone call for a plumber?” I say, walking in with a big red wrench in my hands.

“Oh, thank goodness you’re here, Doctor Plummer,” says the doctor.

“Hear you had a problem with the old pipes,” says I.

“Oh, do you really think that’s the problem?” says the girl.

Rimshot

“Now, hush,” says the doctor. “Doctor Plummer knows best. Well, Doctor Plummer? Are you going to examine the patient?”

Pause

“What. Right here?”

“Yes.”

“In front of all these people?”

“Of course.”

“I had no idea this was such a hip town.”

Rimshot

So I start poking and prodding and the doctor’s poking and prodding. I’d take the wrench and act like I was turning her toe with it, and then when the laughs would start to die, Ellie – she had great timing, Ellie – she’d say, “Doctor, it’s my side that hurts.”

“Oh, your side,” says I. “Sounds like stiffness of the alcagojerial-something to me.”

“Well,” says the doctor. “Don’t just stand there – rub her side.”

So I start rubbing her side, saying, “Rub ‘er side, rub ‘er side, rub ‘er side...”

“Oh, Doctor Plummer,” she’d say. “Now it’s my neck that hurts.”

“Quick, Doctor Plummer, rub her neck!”

“Rub ‘er neck, rub ‘er neck, rub ‘er neck....”

“Oh, Doctor Plummer, now my feet hurt.”

“Quick, Doctor Plummer, rub her feet!”

“Rub ‘er feet, rub ‘er feet, rub ‘er feet...”

And in through the audience walks the sandwich butcher, shouting, “Rubber balloons! Rubber balloons!”

Rimshot

Blackout.

Here the script resumes if the optional scene has been used.

Thunderous. Every time. The audience couldn’t get enough of it. I loved that act. Barney was always the sandwich butcher. As for me and Doug, we were good. We were real good. Best on the circuit. But Ellie *made* that act. You should have seen the look on her face – just an instant right before blackout, but the audience caught it every time.

Let me explain something to you about Ellie. You run into someone like Ellie maybe once in a lifetime. If you’re lucky.

Knocking

STAGE MANAGER

Twenty minutes, Mr. Drake.

LOU

Thanks! You mind?

Lou relights his cigar.

Like I was saying – you run into a girl like Ellie once in a lifetime. My once in a lifetime came in 1921. She was working with Doug when I first ran into her. Doug and I had done a few shows together, but she was new. I didn't know who she was, but I knew I was gonna steal her. The audience loved her.

So I taught her one of my favorite bits and we gave it a tryout. Little thing I liked to call "The Sale." I play a guy who's just managed to land the princely sum of \$100.

With one additional woman, this sketch can be performed in place of the monologue.

"One-hundred dollars," I say. "I got one-hundred dollars. Oo, I'm lucky today. The things I could do with one-hundred dollars. I could buy myself fifty two-dollar steaks. Yes, sir, my luck is looking up."

On walks Ellie in her mink coat and she is bawling her eyes out.

"Oh, now," says I, "what seems to be the problem here?"

"Oh, you wouldn't understand," she says, sobbing. "My husband and I are about to lose our apartment."

“Oh, terrible,” I say. “Terrible thing to happen.”

“My husband gave me the money to pay the rent,” she says, “but a man grabbed my purse and I lost every penny of it. Now I don’t have the rent and if I can’t come up with it before my husband comes home from work we’ll both be in big trouble.”

“Wish I could help, really. Wish I could help. What are you going to do about it?”

“Well, I was heading down to the pawn shop to see how much I could get for my mink.”

“Let me see,” I say, and she hands me the coat. “Oh, that’s fine, fine. Only wish it were real mink. You should be able to get ten dollars for it.”

“Only ten? But I thought it was worth at least twenty-five.”

“Oh, no, not at a pawn shop. You won’t get a price that good at a pawn shop.”

And now she breaks down crying again.

“Oh, come on,” says I. “Don’t cry. I’ll tell you what. Maybe I’ll meet a nice girl today. I’m feeling lucky. And when I do I can have a nice mink coat to give her. Tell you what. I’ll give you the twenty-five dollars.” And I give her the twenty-five dollars and I turn to walk away.

But Ellie starts crying again. So I turn back. “Oh, come on,” I say. “What’s wrong now?”

“Twenty-five dollars just isn’t enough.”

“Not enough?” I say. “Where are you living, the Taj Mahal? Well, what else have you got? You want to do business with the pawn shop you need something to pawn.”

“I was thinking I could sell my skirt,” she says. “I figure it’s worth twenty-five dollars.”

“Oh, I hate to break it to you, kid. But not to a pawn broker it ain’t. Maybe five bucks.”

And down she goes crying again.

“Aw, look here,” I say. “You don’t got to cry over this. Look. I’ll give you twenty-five for the skirt. You get twenty-five, I get the skirt, maybe I’ll meet a nice girl for the mink and a nice girl for the skirt. I feel lucky.” So I give her the twenty-five and she takes off her skirt and hands it to me. Always got a few catcalls from the audience. I turn to go, but wouldn’t you know it – she stops me again, crying.

“What now?” I say. “You’ve got fifty dollars already.”

“But it’s not enough,” she says. “We’ll lose the apartment and my husband will be angry with me.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“I figured I could sell my shirt.”

All right. Now I know what the game is. “Twenty-five, right?” I say.

“Fifty,” she says.

“What is that, inflation?”

“Twenty-five for the left and twenty-five for the right.”

“Right,” I say. And I give her the fifty and out comes the shirt. Now the audience is really loud. And they get even louder when they realize I’m not walking away this time.

“Oh, boy,” I say. “I knew I’d meet a nice girl today. Man, am I feeling lucky. Okay.

What next and for how much?”

“What?” she says, standing there in her skivvies.

“What next? And how much? Oh, boy oh boy I’m feeling lucky today.”

“Oh, no,” she says. “This hundred will do just fine for me until my husband gets home from work.”

Rimshot

Here the script resumes.

And off she goes, leaving me with no money, hands full of women’s clothing, and the audience laughing hysterically.

We killed with that act. Killed. In Chicago – that can be a tough town. I made a deal with her – come with me and get a fifty-fifty split. That’s how much I wanted her on stage with me. There wasn’t a couple act onstage that did that kind of split. Not that I knew of, anyway. So she packed up her stuff, said good-bye to Doug and took off with me.

Chicago, 1927, we were all on stage together again. I apologized to Doug. He just looks at me, smiles, and says, “Nah, don’t worry about it. You should have seen the guy *I* stole her from.”

I had six years with Ellie. Six years when I practically didn’t have to work at all. I could throw anything at her and she’d make it funny. In return, I got half of the cash for doing an eighth of the work. Tell me that’s not every man’s dream. We split hotel rooms, we wrote new material. We were what you call joined at the hip. 1921 to 1927. Then she left me.

No, not for another man. That I could have understood.

No. She left me for a solo career.

Rimshot

Now that's just hurtful. I try to pour my heart out with every ounce of sincerity I've got and that's a punchline? Ain't I got any feelings?

Rimshot

You *do* hear that, right? You have *got* to hear that. Some day I'm going to find that drummer and kill him.

Yeah. So 1927 was just a bad year all around. Hinda got arrested, Ellie decided I was holding her back. I thought I'd try a little bit of film work. It seemed to be working all right for Chaplin and Keaton. I saw Harry Langdon back in his vaudeville days. I figured that if Langdon could make movies, I sure as hell could.

Film was about as close as I ever got to real work. And that bothered me. Up early in the mornings, help put together the set. Then off to figure out the stunts. Shoot it. Get up the next morning – repeat.

It's great if you're a star. It's great if you're Chaplin or Keaton. Or even Langdon. But if you're Lou Drake? My sense of humor just didn't appeal to them. They said that I was—
Well, I was just—

Okay. You want the truth? The truth is that I couldn't stand working in film. Watch Keaton. Keaton plays Keaton. Chaplin's got his bits. But me? I'm Lou Drake. I've never been Lou Drake the little tramp or Lou Drake the stone face. I do everything. I'm a plumber, a doctor, a grifter. I do all different sorts of characters. Yeah, I'm always Lou Drake. But Lou Drake's everybody.

Yeah. I had no character to sell. At least nothing they were buying.

Ellie used to say that I'd be the world's greatest man if I could only figure out who the Hell I was. But that's the way the game goes sometimes, isn't it? You get so swept up in everything that goes on up there – up on the stage – you forget that you're supposed to be somebody off stage, too. All my life can be summed up in comedy sketches and gigs I played in this town or that town. I got a handful of movies, and the closest any of my characters ever got to having a name was "Policeman #1." Number *one*. As in different from the other policemen. See? That's a name.

The best thing about the movies was missing out on some of the rougher patches of the business. The circuits tried to clean up the acts – tried to clean up *burlesque* while I was shooting my movies. Holy Joe closed down the theaters in New York for a while. Those were things I was probably better doing without.

Of course, the fact is that you can only run your head into a brick wall for so long. I spent six years out there trying to make movies. Finally, I figured that the movies just weren't for me. Leave it to the Marxes. They do well enough. No reason for me to stay where I'm not wanted.

Where I'm wanted is here. Right here in this theatre, right now. They want me on that stage, they want me in front of that audience. The girls need me to hold the act together. We're not all stars, see, but we all have something to do.

Pause

What. Don't I get a rimshot for that?

Knocking. Lou jumps.

STAGE MANAGER

Ten minutes, Mr. Drake.

LOU

Thanks!

Lou begins to finalize his preparations on costume and make-up.

You see *A Night at the Opera*? Great picture. Great picture. Best those guys have ever done. Long way from a theatre in Nacagdoches, don't you think? The folks who are out there now – they got it sewn up. I got no regrets. This is where I'm meant to be. Gypsy Rose Lee – smart cookie. Smartest hootchie kootchie I ever met. Well, bumped into. She

recognized me. Thought she did, anyway, couldn't place me, but said she knew me from the movies. Asked me all about it. I told her – you've got to find a character if you're going to work in movies. Even the girls. You can't just look pretty – you've got to have a personality. As in singular.

Rimshot

Thank you. I thought it was funny, too.

Let 'em have the movies. I got burlesque right here. I got Minsky's next week. No April Fool's. It's gonna be big. They've got fourteen houses in New York – seven just in Broadway. Seven. Just opened these past couple of years. This is the big time now. And guess who's opening tonight's show? That's right, me. I'm opening it tonight. I got myself a new act and everything. Hey – I may not be in the movies, but I *was*. Wanna hear?

The following monologue is excerpted from "Does Anybody Want a Comedian?" originally written and performed by Aaron Hoffman and Bobby North in 1914.

I had a good job – in the movies. You know, nowadays, "Everybody's moving it – moving it – moving it."

I'd have enjoyed the work, too. Nothing to do all day but have my face photographed – but it was too hard on the cameras.

Rimshot

The first picture I posed for was a real long one – four reels. Really. It had a great title: “Why He Kissed Her” – in four parts. A beautiful thing!

Rimshot

And there was another photo play I worked in. “The Girl With the Heavenly Eyes” – one reel.

Rimshot

You know when you work in moving pictures, they don’t pay you by the week. They pay you by the foot. The first picture I posed for – just as an experiment – they broke me in. And I broke three cameras. And they paid me off by the foot. I don’t know whose foot it was – but I think it was the director’s.

Rimshot

I wasn’t getting much salary but he raised me without my asking.

Rimshot

He had agreed to pay me ten cents a foot and if my face took well I’d get something to boot. My face *didn’t* take well and he turned me around so *he* could get something to boot.

Rimshot

I don’t remember just what the size of the boot was, but I know it left a lasting impression on me. Naturally I was sore at this affront from the back and I told him I had a kick coming. That was true although I didn’t know it at the time.

Rimshot

He said, “The shoe is on the other foot.” And it was. I know. Because a moment later I turned my back and I was *convinced* of it.

Rimshot

I didn't see it, but I felt sure of it.

I told him he was a mighty poor director. Then he directed me to a place that I refused to go to.

He said, "When it comes to directing, I am there with both feet and I don't take a back seat for anybody." He was right.

He was there with both feet – and for two weeks I wouldn't take a back seat for anybody – or a front seat – or any kind of a seat.

Rimshot

I asked him when my picture would be released. He said, "We can't release it." I said, "Why not?" He said, "Because moving pictures are shown in the dark and we don't want to frighten the children."

Rimshot

I suppose everybody has had a yearning to pose for moving pictures. And let me tell you it's a great life – if you *live*.

I'll never forget the first picture I posed for. They gave me the manuscript to look over. It was a great part I had to play. Easy. The first thing I had to do was to leap from the Brooklyn Bridge into the river. I told the director I couldn't swim.

He said, “That makes no difference. In this picture you drown, anyway.”

Rimshot

I refused to do it.

I didn't want to drown in the very first picture.

Rimshot

I wanted to live through one picture anyhow – to see how I looked. I expected them to take me out and drown me *afterwards*.

Knocking

STAGE MANAGER

Five minutes.

LOU

Thanks!

That's just the beginning. That goes on a long time. Can you believe this? I got Minsky's next week and everything's picking up for me now. I'm opening tonight. And I tell you it's all because I'm right where I belong. It's all about being in the place I belong in right now with no illusions.

Who needs the movies? I've got Minsky's next week. I'm going to be on Broadway – legit. The Marxes played Broadway, and they were burlesque, too. But me? I'm playing burlesque *on* Broadway. It's a whole new game. Who knows where we go from here.

Well, I know where *I* go from here. I got a ticket to New York City. If April goes well I'm set. Everything's going to work out just fine for Lou Drake.

Let me tell you something. It was just twenty-four years ago that I started this business, and it has been a whirlwind since day one with Mr. Mrs. and my fellow shoeshine boy. There are folks have been in this business for thirty, forty, fifty years. I got decades left in this body, and I'm taking it for all it's worth.

You know, you should reconsider that book. You really should. I can send you letters from New York. It doesn't even have to be *The Lou Drake Story*. What's my life? Comedy sketches on the stage? A few lousy movies? Nah. I'm telling you – *The Lou Drake Philosophy*. Be in your place at your time and it all works out. What was I thinking about not having a life? I got one. Those people up there, they give it to me. And I got Minsky's next week. That's all that matters. Because it's only up from there.

Knocking

STAGE MANAGER

Mr. Drake. Places!

LOU

Thanks.

One week and I'm in Minsky's. I don't think I'm gonna be able to sleep until then.

Exit Lou

CURTAIN

CHAPTER 3

COMMENTS ON THE FIRST DRAFT

Comments on the first draft were very brief. All members of the committee felt that “The Market Basket” could be shortened for greater effectiveness. Doctor Joseph Sobol suggested that I review my language to make certain that it was more in line with true oral style. Robert Funk suggested that I also consider ending on a joke, noting that a character such as Drake would want to leave the audience laughing.

With these few comments in hand, I made a handful of revisions to the script and prepared for a reading.

CHAPTER 4

THE FIRST REVISION

Act I

At rise: Backstage of a small burlesque theatre somewhere in the southern states. Monday March 29, 1937. The furnishings are spare. There is a make up table, a stool, and a trunk. Lou Drake enters in his street clothes.

For the purposes of the show, a live drummer can be used. If this is the case, then the drummer provides the voice of the stage manager. The show can also be provided with any Rimshots and stage manager lines as pre-recorded sound cues.

“Rimshots” consist of two drum beats and a cymbal strike, the type heard to follow many a joke.

Lines in bold are optional and are intended to segue into optional acts featuring local talent.

Knocking.

STAGE MANAGER

Mr. Drake, the girls ask that stay out of their dressing room while they're changing.

LOU

Ah, what do they care? I'm as good as a paying customer.

Stay out of the dressing room, stay out of the dressing room. I'm in the basement and they got the whole backstage. They got windows. I got hot water pipes. Not as bad as last week, though. I don't want to say the theatre was small, but the roaches walked stoop-shouldered.

Rimshot.

You hear that? Huh? Hear that? I've heard that damn drum so many times onstage I think it's starting to follow me. Watch this.

The other night I took my girl to the park for a late night picnic. I worked hard on that picnic basket. The moon was full. Not a cloud in the sky. She was beautiful. It was magic. Suddenly, some guy throws an axe. Hits my girl right here.

Pats thigh.

Can you believe that? Hits her right here. She's all right, though. She's fine. I almost lost three of my fingers, but *she's* fine.

Rimshot.

You hear that? Huh? I swear it was right there. Eh, it's probably nothing. Just in my head.

Pause.

Two drums and a cymbal fall down a hill.

Rimshot.

If you could hear it, too, you'd be busting a gut right now.

So you're here about the book, right? You want to talk to me about a book.

No?

You sure? We could move a lot of paper. I'm thinking *The Lou Drake Story*. Yocking it up with the clown prince of Minsky's. You hear I'm playing Minsky's? I finish this week up, hop on a train, and it's "Hello, New York." I got my ticket already. April 3, 8 AM.

The Minsky's own that town. You want to play burlesque in New York? You got to talk to the Minsky's. Fourteen theatres. Seven on Broadway. They love my act. They haven't seen it yet, but they've heard all about it. By this time next year people are going to know my name all up and down the coast and a book would fly out of the stores. I figure it's *The Lou Drake Story*, by Lou Drake and – what's your name? I can share the credit. I tell you the stories, you write it. Make us a fortune.

No? You sure?

Fine. I can write it myself. What's it take to write a book? Hands? I got hands. I'm all hands. Least that's what they say in the girls' dressing room.

Rimshot

So if you're not here to write a book, why are you here? Young guy like you wants to hang out downstairs with the comic when the girls are right up there? Just two flights up? That ain't natural.

The newspaper?

You're kidding, right?

Hey, what's black and white and red all—

Rimshot

I ain't even said the punch line yet! Eh, who cares. Everyone knows that one. Sometimes you got to go for the easy laugh, you know? That's the way I look at it. The easy joke – the one everybody knows coming, but they're going to laugh anyway. They're in on it with you.

It's not about me these days, anyway. It's about them. It was always about them. That's why they've got the upstairs dressing room and I'm down here next to the furnace. I like to think some of those folks wouldn't like the show as much without me, though. We wouldn't have the show without pasties, right? And what holds a pastie on? Glue. And the comics hold the girls together. Without us it'd just be dirty. With us, it's entertainment. We're the glue that holds the pastie to the breast of burlesque.

Don't you quote that. Don't you dare quote that. I want to work again. I got Minsky's in a week. Besides – I might want to use that in my book. Excuse me if I change while we talk.

Lou removes his jacket and shirt and sits down in his shirt sleeves. He begins to powder his face.

(singing) Down by the old, mill stream...

You like that? I been singing all my life. Mama Draskovich wanted a singer. She loved music. She always told me, she would say, "Louis, Boy, you have such a nice voice. That voice is going to be your fortune some day." I used to make candy money singing. I'd go down some street, stand there with my hat in my hand and I'd sing. People would give me pennies. I'd buy a little something for me, take the rest of it home to mama. Usually. I was a kid – what are you going to do? I made a fortune for a kid back then.

Turns out that shtick only works as long as you're nine. I hit thirteen and people stopped throwing pennies. I got chased with a lot of brooms. I was getting my baritone then, and mama said I needed to stop singing on corners and get myself on a stage.

What stage? I didn't know from stage. Mama didn't do anything but cook and take in cleaning. Papa was a tailor. Papa was a tailor and a practical joker. He had a sign out front, "Ask about our half off deal." Folks would come in and try to give him half the money for a suit – he'd hand them a sleeve.

Ask any tailor – that’s no way to build a business. Papa was in and out of business all the time. He moved shop more than his customers changed pants. All right – that wasn’t difficult in our neighborhood.

Rimshot

Mama took in cleaning, papa sold individual sleeves – what did we know from stage? It’s not like you walk up and say “Hey, mister, I’m a thirteen year old kid who wants to be in your show. Let me up on stage.” So I stood on street corners. I got chased with brooms.

One day I’m standing on the street corner singing and this kid, Charlie, who lived down the block comes up and asks me if I want to make some money with my singing. Says he ran into a guy who’s got a stage act – got dates booked and everything. Not that I knew what that meant. All he needs is two kids who can sing – a tenor and a baritone. He sings tenor, I sing baritone, between the two of us we can make some money. Just one week of rehearsal and then a three month tour on the road.

I go running home and mama is so proud. Papa is too, but he can’t show that, you know. He’s got to be worried for his poor boy. So I tell him all about the guy whose act we’re doing. A former preacher who’s got an entire gospel act lined up. Spreading the word of the Lord in song. A charitable man who gives to little starving orphan kids.

What?

Of course it wasn't true. I hadn't met the man yet – I didn't know who he was. I didn't know him from Adam. I was looking at money in my pocket. But more important, I was looking at three months on the road. Three months of steady work on the stage as a singer.

The next morning Charlie and I go meet this Mr. Harris. Charlie warns me on the way there that this guy's a little cracked, but I figure I can deal with cracked for three months on stage. It's the launch of a career. I figured Hell, three months on the road and then straight to a life in the opera singing *Rigoletto*.

Mr. Harris opens the door – I swear as my name is Louis Draskovich – in a floor-length purple dressing gown. He's got red fingernails. I've got to say, up until that point I'd only heard of folks like him.

Mr. Harris was casting two young men – a baritone and a tenor – to sing backup for him in his act. His act was “Mrs. Harris and the Shoeshine Boys.”

Make sure you get that right. *Mister* Harris was casting backup singers for *his* act – as in, the act that *he* did – *Mrs.* Harris and the Shoeshine Boys.

I know, I know – female impersonators on the stage ain't nothing new. Not on the vaudeville stage, not on the burlesque stage, not on any stage. But I was thirteen years old drinking tea from a flowery teacup in the middle of a middle-aged bachelor's apartment

and talking about how we're going to be following up "Pretty Blue Bonnet" with "The Prettiest Girl Around" and going into our grand finale – a song *Mr. Harris* had written for *herself*, "My Dear Fanny."

Charlie and I were expected to provide our own clothes for the act, but Mr. Mrs. – as we started calling him – was going to provide our props for us. We each got a hat and a purple shoeshine box.

Yes, purple.

Shoeshine box.

And on the end of each one in cut glass was "Shoeshines, 5¢."

I could hear every kid on the street laughing at me already. But three months on stage was three months on stage, and *Rigoletto* was within my grasp.

Mr. Mrs., it turned out, was an old hand at all of this. He had done the act once before – did pretty good with it, too. So when he decided to do it again, a couple of the theatres he called even remembered his act. Only problem was his shoeshine boys weren't boys any more, so he needed us.

We sang through the songs a couple of times and Mr. Harris told us to be back at nine the next day and we'd begin our rehearsals "in earnest." I didn't know where Earnest was, but I hoped it didn't have as many doilies.

Rimshot

We spent a week rehearsing that show into the ground. Eight hours a day we'd go up on the roof of Mr. Mrs.' building and dance around like idiots learning the choreography while he'd croon and pout, and I thought to myself, "This is showbiz!" I bought my first cigar the last day of rehearsals because I knew I was a bigshot vaudeville singer now.

The next day I said good-bye to my mama and papa and started down the road with Charlie, puffing on my cigar. You mind?

Lou snips and lights a cigar

We got on our train with Mr. Mrs. who had decided for the occasion of traveling to our grand debut to remove his fingernail polish and put on a suit. Charlie and I lugged the cases with our shoeshine boxes and Mr. Mrs.' costumes up the steps to the train and settled in, and Mr. Mrs. told us that we were on our way to our first engagement in Poughkeepsie.

So it wasn't quite as far out on the open road as I hoped. Still – the stage. Charlie showed me he'd gotten himself his first grouch bag. You know that? Little bag you wear right around your neck. Keep your wallet and everything in it when you go onstage, that way nobody can go into the dressing room and clean you out. Somebody tried to tell me

Groucho named himself after the grouch bag he wore. I've met Groucho. Trust me. He didn't name himself after the grouch bag.

So there we are – two kids traveling with Mr. Mrs. We got to Poughkeepsie and stashed our stuff at the YMCA. Charlie and I stashed our stuff at the Y. Mr. Mrs. had a room at the Windsor Hotel. You ever stay in the Windsor? I make it a point to stay in the Windsor every time I find myself in Poughkeepsie. The Y won't have me any more – says it right there in the name, “*Young Men's*.”

Rimshot

The next night we made our big debut. We went on right after Simon Smith and his Dancing Spaniels. Ever follow a dog act on stage? Worst spot on the bill. You spend a fortune on shoes.

Rimshot

Charlie and I get out there and we start the whole thing out. We got this whole bit about walking around the street looking to sell shoeshines. Then out comes Mr. Mrs., and our jaws about fell through the floor.

See, Mr. Mrs. always wore his purple dressing gown and red wig when we rehearsed on his roof. We'd never actually seen him all dolled up. He comes out on the stage in a floor-length, bright red evening gown with elbow-length gloves, eyes painted purple, lips painted red, and false eyelashes so big I almost backed into the orchestra pit getting away from 'em.

Rimshot

The only thing bigger than his eyelashes was his blisters. I lived in New York. I've seen padded bras before. But this was ridiculous. He's wearing these heels and he wobbles while he walks. Now, I've seen good female impersonators since. They all know enough to wear heels they can walk in. They've all got good sense. And they don't have shoeshine boys backing them up, either. Some use bellboys.

Rimshot

One more thing. Charlie and I had noticed something in our grueling week of rehearsal. It was not what you would call subtle. Actually, it was pretty much the first thing we ever noticed.

Mr. Mrs. couldn't carry a tune in a bucket.

So he'd croon and pout and bat his eyelashes. And Charlie and I are dancing around with our purple shoeshine boxes trying our damndest not to laugh because while we'd gotten used to Mr. Mrs.' singing, we were seeing him do it in full costume *for the first time*. All along we thought we could carry the act. We figured it was a dance number mostly, and with two good singers in the act we could kind of make Mr. Mrs. sound better. But with the dress and the boobs and the heels and the eyelashes – suddenly we weren't in a vaudeville act any more. We were in a freakshow.

And the audience. They're sitting there all the way through "Pretty Blue Bonnet" with their mouths open. Just hanging open. They don't know what to make of this any more

than we do. But Mr. Mrs. just keeps on going. Just keeps on acting like there's nothing at all wrong.

Then about halfway through "The Prettiest Girl," it happened.

The audience cracked.

Somebody got the joke. Which was funny in itself, because there was no joke to be gotten. But now somebody had decided that this was, in fact, a comedy act we were seeing. And there was a chuckle. Then another chuckle. Then somebody laughed. And somebody guffawed. And the next thing we know, you can't hear "My Dear Fanny" over the laughs.

Now that made sense to me. I always thought it was a funny song. But it turns out that Mr. Mrs. was very proud of it. He – She – Whatever he was, had written this tender, touching song about her poor departed terrier, and the entire audience was laughing at it. When Mr. Mrs. sang, "I hope some poor boy finds my Fanny and loves her for his own," he meant it to be serious. And the audience was tearing him – her – to shreds with their laughter.

Okay. So Charlie breaking down and laughing probably didn't help matters.

I would have stopped him, but I was laughing so hard I dropped my shoeshine box.

I know that this sounds strange, but you should have seen the act that followed us.

Mr. Mrs. was horrified. Crushed. Completely broken. Backstage he – she – pushes past me and Charlie and screams something about the tour being cancelled before barreling out onto Main Street, wig, evening gown, and all.

Charlie and I tried not to laugh too loud. There was another act on the stage, after all.

We showed up at the Y, and that's where the trouble began. Remember Charlie's grouch bag? He was so proud of having a grouch bag like a real performer. But he didn't know how he was supposed to use it. He put all his valuables into it and then – instead of wearing it like any sane person – put it in the bottom of his trunk.

When we got to the Y, we found out Mr. Mrs. had gotten there first and had presented himself as our guardian. He had picked up our trunks for us and left instructions for us to meet him.

But he didn't say where.

Or when.

You ever try to walk from Poughkeepsie to New York City?

Me neither. Because I'm smart.

Between the two of us – meaning between me, because all of Charlie's money had been in his bag – we had maybe enough money for a ticket home. The only thing we had to work with was our shoeshine boxes. So Charlie suggested we start shining shoes. Which would have been a great idea. If either one of us had actually known how to shine shoes. It would have been an even better idea if either one of us had actually *had* anything in our shoe shine boxes except for the rags we each used as dance props. So we split up and agreed to meet back at the Y once we had each sold our shoeshine boxes.

I got lucky. About two blocks down the road, I came across a shoeshine boy who had a box that was almost beat to pieces. I showed him my shoeshine box and told him he could have it for five dollars.

After he stopped laughing at me, he agreed it was pretty solidly made and it looked like it'd hold everything he was doing. But he said I'd better make it three dollars, because he'd have to strip the paint off it or folks would laugh at him.

I was young. I wasn't going without a fight. I told him that the paint wouldn't take long to strip off, and the wood itself was worth four.

He told me that was true, and we should make it two dollars because he'd also have to take the cut glass off the end, too. Especially since he charged a dime.

What could I do? I bowed to the superior businessman and I took the two bucks. He was a real shoeshine boy. I just played one on stage.

I got back to the Y and I waited with my two dollars burning a hole in my pocket. I couldn't imagine what we were going to do. If Charlie didn't pull at least five for his shoeshine box we could kiss home good-bye forever. I'm sitting there trying my best to put a smile on my face, but mostly just looking like a stupid, miserable kid when up rolls Charlie with a big bag of dimes in his fist. So I ask him how much he got for his box, and he says, "Enough."

"How did you get all that money?" I said.

"Sold it to a shoeshine boy," he says.

"And you got that much?"

"How often do you get a chance to buy a diamond-studded shoeshine box? Think of the benefit to your business."

"How did you get him to take it?"

And he smiles real big, and he says, “I just left it there for him.”

And I say, “But he paid you for it?”

“Well, kind of. It was more like he wasn’t paying attention to his money at the time. Don’t worry, though. I left him a note. Right in the box. ‘For a full refund, contact Mrs. Harris, c/o the Windsor Hotel.’”

Rimshot

That. That was my introduction to show business. You get on stage once, and you can never get away from it. It didn’t matter that we barely made it home. It didn’t matter that our grand three month tour had fallen flat after only one performance. It didn’t matter that we’d lost all the money we’d been paid by Mr. Harris. Charlie and me both knew that we had to get back on the stage.

It wasn’t the last time we worked together, either. It was about five years after that we set ourselves up with another guy – Mitch – in a musical act. We were the Brick Shedhouse Trio. And we sang gospel. And pretty girls would walk by, and—

Okay. Here’s the set-up. The three of us were the Brick Shedhouse Trio, right? Three no-account bums on the streets convinced that they’re going to be national singing stars. Especially once we get nailed down our rendition of “Swing Low Sweet Chariot.”

[At this point, if two additional males and at least one female are available, the actual sketch can replace the following monologue].

So we sing “Swing Low” complete with appropriate hand gestures. In some states they were appropriate. In other states they could get us arrested. Anyway, we’re going straight through the song when this gorgeous dame walks by and drops her handkerchief right in front of Mitch. Mitch goes up and says, “Excuse me, ma’am, but I think you dropped this.”

And she looks at him and flutters her pretty little eyes and says, “ Why thank you, kind sir. You deserve a reward for your honesty and generosity. I live right around the corner on the third floor. Why don’t you come up in half an hour and let yourself in?” And takes off on those gorgeous stems of hers.

Mitch, needless to say, being of sound mind and body, takes off after her to go claim his reward, turning the Brick Shedhouse Trio into a duo.

So now we’re singing “Swing Low” with our handgestures again. And now right by us walks this gorgeous dame. A different dame than before. And she drops her handkerchief right in front of Charlie. Now, Charlie, he’s not the smooth character Mitch is. Plus, he stammers, so he goes up to her and returns her handkerchief to her, saying, “Ex-c-c-use me, m-miss. I th-think you dropped thisss.”

And she, wiping herself off with her handkerchief, says, “Why, thank you, kind sir. You deserve a reward for your honesty and generosity. I live right around the corner on the fourth floor. Why don’t you come up in half an hour and let yourself in?”

And Charlie, being of not so sound body but definitely sound mind, takes off right after her.

So now I step forward, all by my lonesome, and I say, “And now, ladies and gentlemen, presenting Mr. Brick Shedhouse, himself.” And back into “Swing Low.” Complete with hand gestures. And wouldn’t you know it, right in the middle of the first verse, on comes another gorgeous dame who drops a handkerchief right in front of me.

Now I’m no fool. I know the game by now.

So I pick up the handkerchief and I walk over to the girl, and I says to her, “Excuse me, ma’am, but I think you dropped this.”

And she says, “Why, thank you, sir.”

And I say, “Now, wasn’t that honorable?”

And she says, “It sure was.”

And I say, “And wasn’t it generous?”

And she says, “It sure was.”

And I say, “And don’t you want me to meet you around the corner on the fifth floor in half an hour?”

And she moves in close and says, “Well, why don’t you come up now?”

Completely floors me. And I’m stammering like Charlie now, “Well, uh, you see, uh, I got a show. I’m Mr. Brick Shedhouse and I’m doing a show and uh—“

And she reaches out and strokes my chest, and says, “Oh, come on, it’ll only take a few minutes.”

“Well, uh, I do this, uh, show, and I – could you do that a little bit higher?”

“Of course, is this better?”

“Ooh, yes. Yes, yes, yes.”

“Now don’t you wanna come on around the corner?”

“Well, I—show, and I, uh, swing low, y’know, coming – could you do that a little bit lower?”

“Is that better?”

“Ooooh, yeah. Little bit faster now. Just a bit. Please?”

“Like this?”

“Ooooh, yeah. I just – the show and the song and I had a trio and—“

“Now don’t you wanna come around the corner with me?”

“Well, I, uh – ooo. I think it’s a little late for that.”

Rimshot.

I loved that bit. That was some of the most fun I ever had on stage. And the girls didn’t hurt.

We hooked up with another act for a while. It would always follow right on us...

Lou opens his trunk and withdraws a black hat with attached curls.

Alas, poor Yonik. I knew him. And that’s as close to Shakespeare as you’ll ever hear a bum like me get. Yonik Persky. He ran the candy shop right down the road from my house. Remember I told you about getting pennies for my singing? Whenever I bought

candy, I'd buy it from old man Yonik. Truth is, he was a little blind – so sometimes I could get extra candies out of him.

I used to spend all my free time there when I was a kid. Mama used to ask me where I learned those words I was using at the dinner table, and I'd tell her that old man Yonik used them all the time. And she'd say, "Well, I'll just have to ask him what they mean then, won't I?"

Nice thing about working a Jewish act is that the theatres don't care what you say in Yiddish, as long as it's not a Yiddish theatre. I got kicked out of a show once when I was sixteen for my language. We were doing a "pay me now" bit, and without thinking I said, "Now wait just a damn minute." I walked off stage and the manager handed me my picture and told me to get out. Just like a lot of vaudeville theatres, they had a language policy. Hold on. Somewhere in here...

Lou pulls a metal sign out of his trunk and reads it.

"Don't say Hell. Don't say Damn. Don't say Ass. You're never too good to be shipped back to the bush leagues." They kept my paycheck as a fine.

But me? I still got their damn sign.

You can say things in Yiddish you can barely get away with in English. For that matter, you can get away with them in practically any language except English. *Tuckus. Derriere*

– French, see? Sounds romantic now. I knew a girl from England – a creature something rare. Everywhere she went, she went with a London Derriere.

Rimshot.

Where was I?

Looks at hat.

Oh. Yes. Yonik. I loved old man Yonik. I loved him so much I put him on stage. With this. He didn't wear these, actually, but every comic who works Jewish wears it – why should I be any different?

I'd walk out on stage with a bag – just like I'd come from market. And this is what I'd say...

Note: The following monologue is excerpted from a longer piece entitled "The Market Basket," originally written and performed by Aaron Hoffman in 1914.

I tell you, I don't know whether I'm dead or alive; but I think I am.

Rimshot

You can believe me, if I was only a young man again, I wouldn't be what I am today.

Rimshot

If the prices of things keep up so high, a poor man has got only two ways to get along. Either he must live without eating, or else he will starve to death.

Rimshot

Lou looks into the basket.

I am walking from one store, full with robbers, to the next store, full with thieves: I am walking till both my feet on the bottom is wearing out – and so far, only one time I find

one butcher what give me the right weight and the right price. And that one early this morning. But I couldn't buy nothing from that fellow. I was asleep yet.

Rimshot

I tell you, when you go out to do the marketing, money goes like water. Worse than water.

Every Saturday night when I take a bath – I am wishing that money was like water. When I want more water, I turn on the hydrant.

Rimshot

And the only way I can satisfy a family of money eaters like I got it; I got to be a hydrant.

This afternoon I start out with a two dollar bill to buy things for supper. And all I got is meat, fish, eggs, coffee, sugar, butter, and a couple vegetables, and would you believe it, I ain't got left more as a dollar and a half.

Rimshot

I don't know what is going to be the end from this country, unless it is the finish.

Rimshot.

It was bad enough for a poor man when we had sitting fat in Washington, President Taffy. But when the Democrackers came out and put up Wouldn't Wolfson for President of Washington, he said it was going to be different.

He say, if I vote for him, the market basket will be full.

So that November, I go to the pulls, and I make him elected. And maybe you think he's appreciating this? No sir!

When I wake up the next morning, the market basket is empty like always. And you can believe me, if the poor people is waiting till the politicians shall fill up the market basket, pretty soon we will have to eat the basket.

Rimshot

When I was a single man, I had no worry from nothing. The price of food could go up, I wouldn't care how high, and it wouldn't bother me. I was boarding.

I lived by Mrs. Mendelssohn – she keeps a fine boarding house – everything first class. Of course it was expensive – three dollars a week. But it was worth it.

Believe me, what I ate in a week you couldn't buy for five dollars.

Neither could Mrs. Mendelssohn.

Rimshot

I don't know what was the matter with that woman. When I started in to board by her, she said she is only happy if the boarders like her cooking, and eat up everything on the table.

And you can believe me, she never had a boarder that tried more as me to make that woman happy.

Rimshot

I treated her like a son.

Rimshot

I made her feel like it was my own home.

Rimshot

All the time I was boarding with her, she can't say I even missed one meal. But it was terrible the way she treated me.

The only time she treated me nice was when I was sick for a week, and the doctor forbid I should eat anything.

Rimshot

In the two years I boarded with that woman, I paid her as regular like the clock in the parlor. Half the time it was stopped.

Rimshot

And how you think Mrs. Mendelssohn appreciated a good boarder? She tried to raise the price on me. She wanted me I should pay four dollars a week. I wouldn't do it. I didn't mind the money, but why should she try to rob me? Three dollars was enough.

No matter how much I tried, I couldn't eat any more. So why should I pay an extra dollar?

Rimshot

I told Mrs. Mendelssohn I'd sooner go to housekeeping myself.

So I got married. Not that I wanted to get married, but I didn't want to get done out of a dollar.

Rimshot

And now I got a wife. I tell you, she is never satisfied. The more I satisfy her, the more she is kicking. I don't know what's the matter with that woman. I give her everything I want.

Rimshot

Always she complains with me – she says she ain't got nothing to wear. And the clothes I give her. Only the best. Just to show you how good is them clothes – they're just like new, and she's wearing them already fifteen years.

Rimshot

I don't like to say it, but if she was laying dying and I gave her in her hand Heaven, she wouldn't be satisfied – I would have to give her Hell.

Rimshot

But when you see the way a woman goes out to do the marketing, you can see how the money goes.

Not that I'm a stingy fellow. I don't expect anybody to sell me anything for less than it cost.

If I get it for the same, I'm satisfied.

Rimshot

I don't care if a man makes a little profit on me. I don't care how little.

Rimshot

When a man makes a nickel on me, he deserves it.

Rimshot

But every week she wants more money for the table. She says the children don't get half enough to eat. And that makes me feel bad. I'm a good father. I can't stand it to see my children don't get half enough to eat. So I say to her:

"From now on, I'm going to do the marketing myself, so I can make sure they will get half enough.

Rimshot

To show you what my wife knows from marketing:

She says it is better to pay cash and trade in one place.

But believe me, it is better to buy on credit and the next time go to a different place.

Rimshot

So I went to Eppstein, the grocer. I thought I'd patronize him first. He's a good friend of mine. He's got such a fine grocery store, you wouldn't believe it. He even keeps cream.

And he keeps real milk, too. Pure – guaranteed.

And let me tell you, with milk people can't be too particular. He told me himself that some cows ain't healthy, but when you drink his milk, you have nothing to fear from any cow.

Rimshot

Eppstein, the grocer, is a nice feller; only his hand is so heavy. It must weight at least two pounds.

One thing Eppstein keeps that you can depend on and that's butter. Other places before you buy butter, you got to ask to smell it. But at Eppstein's you don't have to ask. You can smell it so soon as you come in the store.

Rimshot

And the prices he charges for his butter. Forty-five cents a pound. And he don't sell butter what comes in a tub. Everything must be now style, fancy – only print butter he sells.

It's wrapped up in one piece thick paper to keep it dry and another piece paper to keep it clean, and yet another piece paper to keep it fresh and another piece paper to tell the name and address where the butter belongs from, and yet another piece paper from the health department what says butter is butter, then before they weight it comes yet more paper, wrapping paper.

You pay forty-five cents and you get half pound butter and half pound paper.

But anyhow, Eppstein is a pretty nice fellow. His place is packed with customers. I am glad to see that. The cashier, she's got a little office in the front. When I was going out with the check in my hand, she was talking to a customer. That cashier is a nice lady.

I didn't want to interrupt her.

Rimshot

Why should I bother people that are busy? It pays to be a gentleman.

See here, I got it, two pounds coffee. Always my wife must have the best coffee – she never pays less than nineteen cents a pound. And here I got it, two pounds coffee for nineteen cents.

Of course the lady standing next to me, didn't notice she made a mistake when I picked up her coffee, but it shows you that a man knows better to do the marketing.

Rimshot

I was going to run after her and tell her of the mistake she made – but say, I'm a stranger – what right I got to go up and speak to a respectable lady. Right away everybody would say she ain't a lady.

I did her a great favor. It only cost her nineteen cents and she's a lady.

You see what I got here? Apples. I got them for nothing – the best in the barrel – and here is a bone for the dog, also for nothing, and here is a pair pants for my youngest boy – all from the same barrel.

Rimshot

You see what I got here? Potatoes. There's one lucky thing, potatoes I don't have to buy. At the corner from my house is a Greek, he's got it a vegetable stand. He's a nice feller, only when anybody calls him guinea, he gets terrible mad.

One day my youngest boy called him guinea, and right away, he threw at my boy a big potato. A good one.

It's a lucky thing I got eight boys, I never have to worry about potatoes.

Drums. At this point, an optional act may perform.

Lou returns to the table, taking off the hat.

Yonik sold well for a good time. I played some class gigs with that act. I could always get a gig playing Jewish. And the topical bits – the Presidents, the politics. People always say that stuff gets old too quick. You ever known a President who didn't promise things would get better? Change the names around and the whole act is new. And it's even funnier when things *do* get better.

See, this kind of philosophy is the sort of thing I think would make a great book. *The Lou Drake Story*. Topical humor is fantastic. Especially when it's timeless.

Rimshot

What? What was so funny about that?

Look. I do this act. Maybe you've heard of it. A couple of friends and me. I'm not doing it tonight, but we do it in all the big towns. I stay at Minsky's more than a week, you can bet we'll be doing it there. Topical humor the whole bit. And the best part is, even the hoochie koochie girls can get in on it. It don't take much – they just need to know a couple of lines.

Knocking.

STAGE MANAGER

You're needed upstairs, Mr. Drake.

LOU

Duty calls. It's probably nothing – remind me where we were when I get back.

Exit Lou

Brief Intermission

Act II

Knocking.

STAGE MANAGER

Thirty minutes, Mr. Drake.

Note: With one or two additional men and three additional women, the actual sketch can substitute for the following monologue.

LOU

Look at me, all dressed up. I been down to the Union Hall. I been down the Union Hall with my brothers – all of ‘em. You know what the boss man is trying to do to us? The boss man wants to cut our wages. He can’t cut my wages. He already cut my wages, from soup to nuts. He already cut the soup. The next cut’s the nuts, I ain’t doing that.

Rimshot

I got my brothers with me and if they try anything like that, we’ll hold together and we’ll *strike!*

(To reporter)

That’s how the act begins. Now in walks the first girl, right? And her line is, “Did somebody say ‘Strike’?” And I say, “Yes, I said it. What can I do for you?”

And she says, “Well, I’m a member of the hat maker’s union, and we stand with you guys.” You gotta keep the lines simple, not every stripper can be Gypsy Rose Lee.

“All right,” says I, “we’ll bring you into the union. We’ll stick together and if the bosses try anything, we’ll *strike!*”

And in walks a second dame, who says, “Did somebody say ‘Strike’?” You see how these lines are repeating? Makes it funnier. And easier on the strippers.

“Yes,” I say, “we said it. We’re in the union and we’ll stick together.”

“Well, I’m in the coat maker’s union,” she says, “and we’ll stand with you guys.”

“Great,” I say. “Welcome to the union. Here’s what we do. The bosses wanna cut our wages. They try anything, we’ll *strike!*”

And in walks a third dame. “Did somebody say ‘Strike’?”

“Yes, I said it. Who would you be?”

“I’m in the skirt maker’s union, and we stand with you guys!”

“Welcome aboard, welcome aboard. Now let’s get one thing clear. Nobody puts anything over on the union. Just let them try anything. We’ll *strike!*”

Now we got three girls on stage and finally on rushes my buddy. “Lou,” he’s saying,
“Lou, Lou! I just came from the Union Hall! The hat makers just went on strike!”

“Strike,” I say, “then let’s get started! Run back and bring back some more news.” Then I
turn to the girls. “Hear that girls? The hat makers are on strike!”

“Well, what do we do?” they say. Now this is pretty much their line for the rest of the act.
Makes it easier on them, see?

“Let’s take off our hats,” I say. “Hat makers are on strike, we won’t wear hats!” And off
come the hats. “They’ve gone too far,” I say, “and now we’ll *strike!*”

On comes my buddy. “Lou, Lou! The coat makers just went on strike!”

“Run back, boy,” I say. “Run back and bring back any more news you get. Hear that
girls?”

“Well, what do we do?”

“What else? Take off our coats.” And we all take off our coats. “They’ve gone too far,
and now we’ll *strike!*”

And on comes my buddy – figured out what his cue is by now? “Lou, Lou! The shirt makers just went on strike!”

“Back! More news, I say!” Then I turn back to the girls. “Did you hear that? The shirt makers are on strike now!”

“Well, what do we do?”

“What else? Take off our shirts.” And off come the shirts. Now the girls are all in their bras, doing what they do best. And I say, “They’ve gone too far, and now we’ll *strike!*”

“Lou! Lou! The pants and skirt makers just went on strike!”

“Of course they did, you beautiful boy, you. Run on back and bring back all the good news you can. Did you hear that girls?”

“Well, what do we do?”

“What else? Take off the skirts. I’ve already got my pants off.” Now they’re in their skivvies, I’m in my boxers – always good for a laugh if I do say so myself – and we say, “They’ve gone too far, and now we’ll *strike!*”

“Lou! Lou! The underwear makers just went on strike!”

“Of course they did. Stick around this time, junior, you might learn something. Did you hear that girls? The underwear makers are on strike.”

“Well, what do we do?”

“Off with the underwear! Now!”

Rimshot

If the sketch is performed in place of the monologue, here is where the play resumes.

You got the joke, right? I love that joke. Now – how do we end the bit? That’s the question. It depended on the town. Most places, we just had the girls start to reach for their underwear, then suddenly realize what they’re doing. They run off stage, big laughs and applause from the audience. Some theatres just brought the lights down on that last line – let the audience fill in the blanks.

One time in Chicago, we decided it would be fun if we got our friend Barney to end the sketch. Barney was doing a doctor sketch that day, but he also did a good Irish policeman. So we had him dress up as in his officer’s costume and run onstage to arrest these union kids for performing burlesque without a license.

Great joke. Kind of sad the audience wasn't in on it. They thought it was an honest-to-God raid, and they ran screaming out of the theatre trying to get away from the cops. Of course, it was just Barney.

I miss Chicago. Chicago is a hip town. You can get away with a lot in Chicago. Or you could. Ten years ago I was in the State Congress Theatre. You know that story? Hinda. She did this act – sexy little number. She'd run her hands up her sides and moan and groan while she shook and shimmied her hips. She's got two costumes on while she's doing this dance. She was supposed to only have the one on – the one under her chorus outfit. But the zipper got caught backstage.

So with the stage manager telling her to get out there now or she's fired, Hinda turns around and – like a trooper – hops out on stage and starts to shimmy for everything she's worth. And while she's shimmying, pieces of her top costume start to come off. And they're dropping all over the floor and she's kicking them away and still shimmying and the audience is *roaring* now. She gets down to the end and she has almost nothing on – just her heels and that damn smile of hers, cutest smile you've ever seen. And she picks up all of her clothes she can reach, winks, and skips off the stage.

Now. That night when the police came to the theatre, it wasn't just Barney in his costume.

I never understood that. Burlesque has always been an adult thing. I've worked vaudeville. I've worked burlesque. There's not much difference between them except that in burlesque you always know your audience is more adult.

We were doing an act there that night. Beautiful sketch. It was a doctor sketch. We all loved the sandwich butchers, but we'd played in a few theatres where the sandwich butchers just didn't understand that they were supposed to stay out of the theatre while we were performing. Oh, they stayed out while the girls were on stage. But let even one comic set his poor foot out of the wings and they'd be out selling sandwiches and tobacco and toys to take home to the kids. So we decided we'd have a little fun with the audience

—

With two more men and one woman, the actual sketch begins here in place of the following monologue.

We get out there and out through the theatre walks the sandwich butcher. "Sandwiches. Cigarettes. Rubber balloons. Sandwiches, cigarettes, rubber balloons."

"Look," says my pal Doug, who's playing the doctor. "Can't you see we're working here? When we're on stage you stay out in the lobby. Now, you promised."

And the sandwich butcher says, "Sorry, I'm just trying to make a living," and walks out the back of the theatre.

So in walks the dame – Ellie was onstage with us then. Great talking girl. Give her straight bits, give her comic, she can work with it all. And pretty, to boot – the audiences loved her.

“Doctor,” she says, “I have the worst pain in my side.” And off we run. Standard little doctor bit. A couple of sawbones jokes and the doctor tells her, “Don’t worry, miss. We’ve sent for a specialist. Doctor Plummer should be here any minute.”

“Did someone call for a plumber?” I say, walking in with a big red wrench in my hands.

“Oh, thank goodness you’re here, Doctor Plummer,” says the doctor.

“Hear you had a problem with the old pipes,” says I.

“Oh, do you really think that’s the problem?” says the girl.

Rimshot

“Now, hush,” says the doctor. “Doctor Plummer knows best. Well, Doctor Plummer? Are you going to examine the patient?”

Pause

“What. Right here?”

“Yes.”

“In front of all these people?”

“Of course.”

“I had no idea this was such a hip town.”

Rimshot

So I start poking and prodding and the doctor’s poking and prodding. I’d take the wrench and act like I was turning her toe with it, and then when the laughs would start to die, Ellie – she had great timing, Ellie – she’d say, “Doctor, it’s my side that hurts.”

“Oh, your side,” says I. “Sounds like stiffness of the alcagojerial-something to me.”

“Well,” says the doctor. “Don’t just stand there – rub her side.”

So I start rubbing her side, saying, “Rub ‘er side, rub ‘er side, rub ‘er side...”

“Oh, Doctor Plummer,” she’d say. “Now it’s my neck that hurts.”

“Quick, Doctor Plummer, rub her neck!”

“Rub ‘er neck, rub ‘er neck, rub ‘er neck....”

“Oh, Doctor Plummer, now my feet hurt.”

“Quick, Doctor Plummer, rub her feet!”

“Rub ‘er feet, rub ‘er feet, rub ‘er feet...”

And in through the audience walks the sandwich butcher, shouting, “Rubber balloons! Rubber balloons!”

Rimshot

Blackout.

Here the script resumes if the optional scene has been used.

Thunderous. Every time. The audience couldn’t get enough of it. I loved that act. Barney was always the sandwich butcher. As for me and Doug, we were good. We were real good. Best on the circuit. But Ellie *made* that act. You should have seen the look on her face – just an instant right before blackout, but the audience caught it every time.

Let me explain something to you about Ellie. You run into someone like Ellie maybe once in a lifetime. If you’re lucky.

Knocking

STAGE MANAGER

Twenty minutes, Mr. Drake.

LOU

Thanks! You mind?

Lou relights his cigar.

Like I was saying – you run into a girl like Ellie once in a lifetime. My once in a lifetime came in 1921. She was working with Doug when I first ran into her. Doug and I had done a few shows together, but she was new. I didn't know who she was, but I knew I was gonna steal her. The audience loved her.

So I taught her one of my favorite bits and we gave it a tryout. Little thing I liked to call "The Sale." I play a guy who's just managed to land the princely sum of \$100.

With one additional woman, this sketch can be performed in place of the monologue.

"One-hundred dollars," I say. "I got one-hundred dollars. Oo, I'm lucky today. The things I could do with one-hundred dollars. I could buy myself fifty two-dollar steaks. Yes, sir, my luck is looking up."

On walks Ellie in her mink coat and she is bawling her eyes out.

"Oh, now," says I, "what seems to be the problem here?"

"Oh, you wouldn't understand," she says, sobbing. "My husband and I are about to lose our apartment."

“Oh, terrible,” I say. “Terrible thing to happen.”

“My husband gave me the money to pay the rent,” she says, “but a man grabbed my purse and I lost every penny of it. Now I don’t have the rent and if I can’t come up with it before my husband comes home from work we’ll both be in big trouble.”

“Wish I could help, really. Wish I could help. What are you going to do about it?”

“Well, I was heading down to the pawn shop to see how much I could get for my mink.”

“Let me see,” I say, and she hands me the coat. “Oh, that’s fine, fine. Only wish it were real mink. You should be able to get ten dollars for it.”

“Only ten? But I thought it was worth at least twenty-five.”

“Oh, no, not at a pawn shop. You won’t get a price that good at a pawn shop.”

And now she breaks down crying again.

“Oh, come on,” says I. “Don’t cry. I’ll tell you what. Maybe I’ll meet a nice girl today. I’m feeling lucky. And when I do I can have a nice mink coat to give her. Tell you what. I’ll give you the twenty-five dollars.” And I give her the twenty-five dollars and I turn to walk away.

But Ellie starts crying again. So I turn back. “Oh, come on,” I say. “What’s wrong now?”

“Twenty-five dollars just isn’t enough.”

“Not enough?” I say. “Where are you living, the Taj Mahal? Well, what else have you got? You want to do business with the pawn shop you need something to pawn.”

“I was thinking I could sell my skirt,” she says. “I figure it’s worth twenty-five dollars.”

“Oh, I hate to break it to you, kid. But not to a pawn broker it ain’t. Maybe five bucks.”

And down she goes crying again.

“Aw, look here,” I say. “You don’t got to cry over this. Look. I’ll give you twenty-five for the skirt. You get twenty-five, I get the skirt, maybe I’ll meet a nice girl for the mink and a nice girl for the skirt. I feel lucky.” So I give her the twenty-five and she takes off her skirt and hands it to me. Always got a few catcalls from the audience. I turn to go, but wouldn’t you know it – she stops me again, crying.

“What now?” I say. “You’ve got fifty dollars already.”

“But it’s not enough,” she says. “We’ll lose the apartment and my husband will be angry with me.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“I figured I could sell my shirt.”

All right. Now I know what the game is. “Twenty-five, right?” I say.

“Fifty,” she says.

“What is that, inflation?”

“Twenty-five for the left and twenty-five for the right.”

“Right,” I say. And I give her the fifty and out comes the shirt. Now the audience is really loud. And they get even louder when they realize I’m not walking away this time.

“Oh, boy,” I say. “I knew I’d meet a nice girl today. Man, am I feeling lucky. Okay.

What next and for how much?”

“What?” she says, standing there in her skivvies.

“What next? And how much? Oh, boy oh boy I’m feeling lucky today.”

“Oh, no,” she says. “This hundred will do just fine for me until my husband gets home from work.”

Rimshot

Here the script resumes.

And off she goes, leaving me with no money, hands full of women’s clothing, and the audience laughing hysterically.

We killed with that act. Killed. In Chicago – that can be a tough town. I made a deal with her – come with me and get a fifty-fifty split. That’s how much I wanted her on stage with me. There wasn’t a couple act onstage that did that kind of split. Not that I knew of, anyway. So she packed up her stuff, said good-bye to Doug and took off with me.

Chicago, 1927, we were all on stage together again. I apologized to Doug. He just looks at me, smiles, and says, “Nah, don’t worry about it. You should have seen the guy *I* stole her from.”

I had six years with Ellie. Six years when I practically didn’t have to work at all. I could throw anything at her and she’d make it funny. In return, I got half of the cash for doing an eighth of the work. Tell me that’s not every man’s dream. We split hotel rooms, we wrote new material. We were what you call joined at the hip. 1921 to 1927. Then she left me.

No, not for another man. That I could have understood.

No. She left me for a solo career.

Rimshot

Now that's just hurtful. I try to pour my heart out with every ounce of sincerity I've got and that's a punchline? Ain't I got any feelings?

Rimshot

You *do* hear that, right? You have *got* to hear that. Some day I'm going to find that drummer and kill him.

Yeah. So 1927 was just a bad year all around. Hinda got arrested, Ellie decided I was holding her back. I thought I'd try a little bit of film work. It seemed to be working all right for Chaplin and Keaton. I saw Harry Langdon back in his vaudeville days. I figured that if Langdon could make movies, I sure as hell could.

Film was about as close as I ever got to real work. And that bothered me. Up early in the mornings, help put together the set. Then off to figure out the stunts. Shoot it. Get up the next morning – repeat.

It's great if you're a star. It's great if you're Chaplin or Keaton. Or even Langdon. But if you're Lou Drake? My sense of humor just didn't appeal to them. They said that I was—
Well, I was just—

Okay. You want the truth? The truth is that I couldn't stand working in film. Watch Keaton. Keaton plays Keaton. Chaplin's got his bits. But me? I'm Lou Drake. I've never been Lou Drake the little tramp or Lou Drake the stone face. I do everything. I'm a plumber, a doctor, a grifter. I do all different sorts of characters. Yeah, I'm always Lou Drake. But Lou Drake's everybody.

Yeah. I had no character to sell. At least nothing they were buying.

Ellie used to say that I'd be the world's greatest man if I could only figure out who the Hell I was. But that's the way the game goes sometimes, isn't it? You get so swept up in everything that goes on up there – up on the stage – you forget that you're supposed to be somebody off stage, too. All my life can be summed up in comedy sketches and gigs I played in this town or that town. I got a handful of movies, and the closest any of my characters ever got to having a name was "Policeman #1." Number *one*. As in different from the other policemen. See? That's a name.

The best thing about the movies was missing out on some of the rougher patches of the business. The circuits tried to clean up the acts – tried to clean up *burlesque* while I was shooting my movies. Holy Joe closed down the theaters in New York for a while. Those were things I was probably better doing without.

Of course, the fact is that you can only run your head into a brick wall for so long. I spent six years out there trying to make movies. Finally, I figured that the movies just weren't for me. Leave it to the Marxes. They do well enough. No reason for me to stay where I'm not wanted.

Where I'm wanted is here. Right here in this theatre, right now. They want me on that stage, they want me in front of that audience. The girls need me to hold the act together. We're not all stars, see, but we all have something to do.

Pause

What. Don't I get a rimshot for that?

Knocking. Lou jumps.

STAGE MANAGER

Ten minutes, Mr. Drake.

LOU

Thanks!

Lou begins to finalize his preparations on costume and make-up.

You see *A Night at the Opera*? Great picture. Great picture. Best those guys have ever done. Long way from a theatre in Nacagdoches, don't you think? The folks who are out there now – they got it sewn up. I got no regrets. This is where I'm meant to be. Gypsy Rose Lee – smart cookie. Smartest hootchie kootchie I ever met. Well, bumped into. She

recognized me. Thought she did, anyway, couldn't place me, but said she knew me from the movies. Asked me all about it. I told her – you've got to find a character if you're going to work in movies. Even the girls. You can't just look pretty – you've got to have a personality. As in singular.

Rimshot

Thank you. I thought it was funny, too.

Let 'em have the movies. I got burlesque right here. I got Minsky's next week. No April Fool's. It's gonna be big. They've got fourteen houses in New York – seven just in Broadway. Seven. Just opened these past couple of years. This is the big time now. And guess who's opening tonight's show? That's right, me. I'm opening it tonight. I got myself a new act and everything. Hey – I may not be in the movies, but I *was*. Wanna hear?

The following monologue is excerpted from "Does Anybody Want a Comedian?" originally written and performed by Aaron Hoffman and Bobby North in 1914.

I had a good job – in the movies. You know, nowadays, "Everybody's moving it – moving it – moving it."

I'd have enjoyed the work, too. Nothing to do all day but have my face photographed – but it was too hard on the cameras.

Rimshot

The first picture I posed for was a real long one – four reels. Really. It had a great title: “Why He Kissed Her” – in four parts. A beautiful thing!

Rimshot

And there was another photo play I worked in. “The Girl With the Heavenly Eyes” – one reel.

Rimshot

You know when you work in moving pictures, they don’t pay you by the week. They pay you by the foot. The first picture I posed for – just as an experiment – they broke me in. And I broke three cameras. And they paid me off by the foot. I don’t know whose foot it was – but I think it was the director’s.

Rimshot

I wasn’t getting much salary but he raised me without my asking.

Rimshot

He had agreed to pay me ten cents a foot and if my face took well I’d get something to boot. My face *didn’t* take well and he turned me around so *he* could get something to boot.

Rimshot

I don’t remember just what the size of the boot was, but I know it left a lasting impression on me. Naturally I was sore at this affront from the back and I told him I had a kick coming. That was true although I didn’t know it at the time.

Rimshot

He said, “The shoe is on the other foot.” And it was. I know. Because a moment later I turned my back and I was *convinced* of it.

Rimshot

I didn't see it, but I felt sure of it.

I told him he was a mighty poor director. Then he directed me to a place that I refused to go to.

He said, "When it comes to directing, I am there with both feet and I don't take a back seat for anybody." He was right.

He was there with both feet – and for two weeks I wouldn't take a back seat for anybody – or a front seat – or any kind of a seat.

Rimshot

I asked him when my picture would be released. He said, "We can't release it." I said, "Why not?" He said, "Because moving pictures are shown in the dark and we don't want to frighten the children."

Rimshot

I suppose everybody has had a yearning to pose for moving pictures. And let me tell you it's a great life – if you *live*.

I'll never forget the first picture I posed for. They gave me the manuscript to look over. It was a great part I had to play. Easy. The first thing I had to do was to leap from the Brooklyn Bridge into the river. I told the director I couldn't swim.

He said, “That makes no difference. In this picture you drown, anyway.”

Rimshot

I refused to do it.

I didn't want to drown in the very first picture.

Rimshot

I wanted to live through one picture anyhow – to see how I looked. I expected them to take me out and drown me *afterwards*.

Knocking

STAGE MANAGER

Five minutes.

LOU

Thanks!

That's just the beginning. That goes on a long time. Can you believe this? I got Minsky's next week and everything's picking up for me now. I'm opening tonight. And I tell you it's all because I'm right where I belong. It's all about being in the place I belong in right now with no illusions.

Who needs the movies? I've got Minsky's next week. I'm going to be on Broadway – legit. The Marxes played Broadway, and they were burlesque, too. But me? I'm playing burlesque *on* Broadway. It's a whole new game. Who knows where we go from here.

Well, I know where *I* go from here. I got a ticket to New York City. If April goes well I'm set. Everything's going to work out just fine for Lou Drake.

Let me tell you something. It was just twenty-four years ago that I started this business, and it has been a whirlwind since day one with Mr. Mrs. and my fellow shoeshine boy. There are folks have been in this business for thirty, forty, fifty years. I got decades left in this body, and I'm taking it for all it's worth.

You know, you should reconsider that book. You really should. I can send you letters from New York. It doesn't even have to be *The Lou Drake Story*. What's my life? Comedy sketches on the stage? A few lousy movies? Nah. I'm telling you – *The Lou Drake Philosophy*. Be in your place at your time and it all works out. What was I thinking about not having a life? I got one. Those people up there, they give it to me. And I got Minsky's next week. That's all that matters. Because it's only up from there.

You know I had a dressing room next to Mary Pickford's? There was a hole in the wall, too. I let her look.

Rimshot

Oh, come on!

Knocking

STAGE MANAGER

Mr. Drake. Places!

LOU

Thanks.

One week and I'm in Minsky's. I don't think I'm gonna be able to sleep until then.

Exit Lou

CURTAIN

CHAPTER 5

COMMENTS ON THE FIRST READING

After hearing and reading my revised script, my committee offered more suggestions for further revision. The overall note regarding the script was that the dialogue was strongly written and flowed naturally, and that the piece as it stood was a wonderful script. Even so, there is always room for improvement.

First and foremost, all committee members agreed that the character of Ellie showed great potential, and that her limited role in the play was not nearly as powerful as it could be. It was suggested that I re-approach the play with an eye toward making Ellie more of a presence throughout the script.

Once again, the subject of “The Market Basket” was broached. It was expressed that while the shorter monologue was, in fact, stronger than it had been, that still more editing was possible.

The final joke was noted, and it was felt by all that it added to the piece. The final laugh gives lightness to what could easily be too heavy of a scene. Also noted was my anachronistic use of the word “hip,” which it was suggested that I correct.

Finally, with regards to the script, I was told to examine my character’s relationship to the newspaper reporter. In particular, to play with the idea that subjects such as Drake’s idea for a book had been discussed before. Robert Funk suggested that I should find a way to write the relationship so that Drake does not have to wait for a response when he asks a question, thereby eliminating the “silent partner” aspect of the reporter.

Additionally, Herbert Parker suggested that I also create a script including all of the sketches written out for multiple performers. In this way, I could produce not only a one-man show but a marketable straight play.

It was also suggested by Parker that I examine the religion of Drake and see what it means to his interactions with his career and the people around him.

The remainder of notes concerned the performance of the piece – the importance of studying the burlesque comics to learn their vocal and physical styles. Performers such as Jackie Mason were suggested to learn the rhythms of the form, and I was advised not to rehearse in blue jeans and t-shirt, but rather to begin constructing the costume.

With the notes in hand, I returned once more to my script to revise again.

CHAPTER 6
THE THIRD DRAFT

Act I

At rise: Backstage of a small burlesque theatre somewhere in the southern states. Monday March 29, 1937. The furnishings are spare. There is a make up table, a stool, and a trunk. Lou Drake enters in his street clothes.

For the purposes of the show, a live drummer can be used. If this is the case, then the drummer provides the voice of the stage manager. The show can also be provided with any Rimshots and stage manager lines as pre-recorded sound cues.

“Rimshots” consist of two drum beats and a cymbal strike, the type heard to follow many a joke.

Lines in bold are optional and are intended to segue into optional acts featuring local talent.

Knocking.

STAGE MANAGER

Mr. Drake, the girls ask that stay out of their dressing room while they're changing.

LOU

Ah, what do they care? I'm as good as a paying customer.

"Stay out of the dressing room." I'm in the basement and they got the whole backstage. They got windows. I got hot water pipes. Not as bad as last week, though. I don't want to say the theatre was small, but the roaches walked stoop-shouldered.

Rimshot.

You hear that? I've heard that damn drum so many times onstage I think it's starting to follow me. Watch this.

The other night I took my girl to the park for a late night picnic. The moon was full. Not a cloud in the sky. It was magic. Suddenly, some guy throws an axe. Hits my girl right here.

Pats thigh.

Can you believe that? Hits her right here. She's all right, though. I almost lost three of my fingers, but *she's* fine.

Rimshot.

I swear it was right there. Eh, it's probably nothing. Just in my head.

Pause.

Two drums and a cymbal fall down a hill.

Rimshot.

If you could hear it, too, you'd be busting a gut right now.

Now are you sure there's no way I can interest you in a book? We could move a lot of paper. I'm thinking *The Lou Drake Story*. Yocking it up with the clown prince of Minsky's. You hear I'm playing Minsky's? I finish this week up, hop on a train, and it's "Hello, New York." I got my ticket already. April 3, 8 AM.

The Minsky's own that town. You want to play burlesque in New York? You got to talk to the Minsky's. Fourteen theatres. Seven on Broadway. They love my act. They haven't seen it yet, but they've heard all about it. By this time next year people are going to know my name all up and down the coast and a book would fly out of the stores. I figure it's *The Lou Drake Story*, by Lou Drake and – what's your name? I can share the credit. I tell you the stories, you write it. Make us a fortune.

Or I could just write it myself. What's it take to write a book? Hands? I got hands. I'm all hands. Least that's what they say in the girls' dressing room.

Rimshot

The newspaper sent you to do a story on me. No big deal. Happens everywhere. They all want to do a story on Lou Drake and the film biz, or life after Drake and Harper.

Newspapers...

Hey, what's black and white and red all—

Rimshot

I ain't even said the punch line yet! Eh, who cares. Everyone knows that one. Sometimes you got to go for the easy laugh, you know? That's the way I look at it. The easy joke –

the one everybody knows coming, but they're going to laugh anyway. They're in on it with you.

It's not about me these days, anyway. It's about them. It was always about them. That's why they've got the upstairs dressing room and I'm down here next to the furnace. I like to think some of those folks wouldn't like the show as much without me, though. It's like I used to say to Ellie. We wouldn't have the show without pasties, right? And what holds a pastie on? Glue. And the comics hold the girls together. Without us it'd just be dirty. With us, it's entertainment. We're the glue that holds the pastie to the breast of burlesque.

Don't you quote that. Don't you dare quote that. I want to work again. I got Minsky's in a week. Besides – I might want to use that in my book. Excuse me if I change while we talk.

Lou removes his jacket and shirt and sits down in his shirt sleeves. He begins to powder his face.

(singing) Down by the old, mill stream...

I been singing all my life. Mama Draskovich wanted a singer. She loved music. She always told me, she would say, "Louis, Boy, you have such a nice voice. That voice is going to be your fortune some day." I used to make candy money singing. People would give me pennies. I'd buy a little something for me, take the rest of it home to mama. Usually. I was a kid – what are you going to do? I made a fortune for a kid back then.

Turns out that shtick only works as long as you're nine. I hit thirteen and people stopped throwing pennies. I got chased with a lot of brooms. I was getting my baritone then, and mama said I needed to stop singing on corners and get myself on a stage.

What stage? I didn't know from stage. Mama didn't do anything but cook and take in cleaning. Papa was a tailor. Papa was a tailor and a practical joker. He had a sign out front, "Ask about our half off deal." Folks would come in and try to give him half the money for a suit – he'd hand them a sleeve.

Ask any tailor – that's no way to build a business. Papa was in and out of business all the time. He moved shop more than his customers changed pants. All right – that wasn't difficult in our neighborhood.

Rimshot

Mama took in cleaning, papa sold individual sleeves – what did we know from stage? It's not like you walk up and say "Hey, mister, I'm a thirteen year old kid who wants to be in your show. Let me up on stage." So I stood on street corners. I got chased with brooms.

One day I'm standing on the street corner singing and this kid, Charlie, who lived down the block comes up and asks me if I want to make some money with my singing. Says he ran into a guy who's got a stage act – got dates booked and everything. Not that I knew what that meant. All he needs is two kids who can sing – a tenor and a baritone. He sings

tenor, I sing baritone, between the two of us we can make some money. Just one week of rehearsal and then a three month tour on the road.

I go running home and mama is so proud. Papa is too, but he can't show that, you know. He's got to be worried for his poor boy. So I tell him all about the guy whose act we're doing. A former preacher who's got an entire gospel act lined up. Spreading the word of the Lord in song. A charitable man who gives to little starving orphan kids.

What?

Of course it wasn't true. I hadn't met the man yet – I didn't know who he was. I didn't know him from Adam. I was looking at money in my pocket. But more important, I was looking at three months on the road. Three months of steady work on the stage as a singer.

The next morning Charlie and I go meet this Mr. Harris. Charlie warns me on the way there that this guy's a little cracked, but I figure I can deal with cracked for three months on stage. I figured Hell, three months on the road and then straight to a life in the opera singing *Rigoletto*.

Mr. Harris opens the door – I swear as my name is Louis Draskovich – in a floor-length purple dressing gown. He's got red fingernails. I've got to say, up until that point I'd only heard of folks like him.

Mr. Harris was casting two young men – a baritone and a tenor – to sing backup for him in his act. His act was “Mrs. Harris and the Shoeshine Boys.”

Make sure you get that right. *Mister* Harris was casting backup singers for *his* act – as in, the act that *he* did – *Mrs.* Harris and the Shoeshine Boys.

I know, I know – female impersonators on the stage ain’t nothing new. Not on the vaudeville stage, not on the burlesque stage, not on any stage. But I was thirteen years old drinking tea from a flowery teacup in the middle of a middle-aged bachelor’s apartment and talking about how we’re going to be following up “Pretty Blue Bonnet” with “The Prettiest Girl Around” and going into our grand finale – a song *Mr.* Harris had written for *herself*, “My Dear Fanny.”

Charlie and I were expected to provide our own clothes for the act, but Mr. Mrs. – as we started calling him – was going to provide our props for us. We each got a hat and a purple shoeshine box.

Yes, purple.

Shoeshine box.

And on the end of each one in cut glass was “Shoeshines, 5¢.”

I could hear every kid on the street laughing at me already. But *Rigoletto* was within my grasp.

Mr. Mrs., it turned out, had done the act once before – did pretty good with it, too. So when he decided to do it again, a couple of the theatres he called even remembered his act. Only problem was his shoeshine boys weren't boys any more, so he needed us.

We sang through the songs a couple of times and Mr. Harris told us to be back at nine the next day and we'd begin our rehearsals "in earnest." I didn't know where Earnest was, but I hoped it didn't have as many doilies.

Rimshot

We spent a week rehearsing that show into the ground. Eight hours a day we'd go up on the roof of Mr. Mrs.' building and dance around like idiots learning the choreography while he'd croon and pout, and I thought to myself, "This is showbiz!" I bought my first cigar the last day of rehearsals because I knew I was a bigshot vaudeville singer now.

The next day I said good-bye to my mama and papa and started down the road with Charlie, puffing on my cigar. You mind?

Lou snips and lights a cigar

We got on our train with Mr. Mrs. who had decided for the occasion of traveling to our grand debut to remove his fingernail polish and put on a suit. Charlie and I lugged the cases with our shoeshine boxes and Mr. Mrs.' costumes up the steps to the train and

settled in, and Mr. Mrs. told us that we were on our way to our first engagement in Poughkeepsie.

So it wasn't quite as far out on the open road as I hoped. Still – the stage. Charlie showed me he'd gotten himself his first grouch bag. You know that? Little bag you wear right around your neck. Keep your wallet and everything in it when you go onstage, that way nobody can go into the dressing room and clean you out. Somebody tried to tell me Groucho named himself after the grouch bag he wore. I've met Groucho. Ellie introduced me to him. Trust me. He didn't name himself after the grouch bag.

So there we are – two kids traveling with Mr. Mrs. We got to Poughkeepsie and stashed our stuff at the YMCA. Charlie and I stashed our stuff at the Y. Mr. Mrs. had a room at the Windsor Hotel. You ever stay in the Windsor? I make it a point to stay in the Windsor every time I find myself in Poughkeepsie. The Y won't have me any more – says it right there in the name, “*Young Men's*.”

Rimshot

The next night we made our big debut. We went on right after Simon Smith and his Dancing Spaniels. Ever follow a dog act on stage? Worst spot on the bill. You spend a fortune on shoes.

Rimshot

Charlie and I get out there and we start the whole thing out. We got this whole bit about walking around the street looking to sell shoeshines. Then out comes Mr. Mrs., and our jaws about fell through the floor.

See, Mr. Mrs. always wore his purple dressing gown and red wig when we rehearsed on his roof. We'd never actually seen him all dolled up. He comes out on the stage in a floor-length, bright red evening gown with elbow-length gloves, eyes painted purple, lips painted red, and false eyelashes so big I almost backed into the orchestra pit getting away from 'em.

Rimshot

The only thing bigger than his eyelashes was his blisters. I lived in New York. I've seen padded bras before. But this was ridiculous. He's wearing these heels and he wobbles while he walks. Now, I've seen good female impersonators since. They all know enough to wear heels they can walk in. They've all got good sense. And they don't have shoeshine boys backing them up, either. Some use bellboys.

Rimshot

One more thing. Charlie and I had noticed something in our grueling week of rehearsal. It was not what you would call subtle. Actually, it was pretty much the first thing we ever noticed.

Mr. Mrs. couldn't carry a tune in a bucket.

Maybe he'd been a good singer once, but he hadn't been singing in a long time. So he'd croon and pout and bat his eyelashes. And Charlie and I are dancing around with our purple shoeshine boxes trying our damndest not to laugh because while we'd gotten used to Mr. Mrs.' singing, we were seeing him do it in full costume *for the first time*. All

along we thought we could carry the act. We figured it was a dance number mostly, and with two good singers in the act we could kind of make Mr. Mrs. sound better. But with the dress and the boobs and the heels and the eyelashes – suddenly we weren't in a vaudeville act any more. We were in a freakshow.

And the audience. They're sitting there all the way through "Pretty Blue Bonnet" with their mouths open. Just hanging open. They don't know what to make of this any more than we do. But Mr. Mrs. just keeps on going. Just keeps on acting like there's nothing at all wrong.

Then about halfway through "The Prettiest Girl," it happened.

The audience cracked.

Somebody got the joke. Which was funny in itself, because there was no joke to be gotten. But now somebody had decided that this was, in fact, a comedy act we were seeing. And there was a chuckle. Then another chuckle. Then somebody laughed. And somebody guffawed. And the next thing we know, you can't hear "My Dear Fanny" over the laughs.

Now that made sense to me. I always thought it was a funny song. But it turns out that Mr. Mrs. was very proud of it. He – She – Whatever he was, had written this tender, touching song about her poor departed terrier, and the entire audience was laughing at it.

When Mr. Mrs. sang, “I hope some poor boy finds my Fanny and loves her for his own,” he meant it to be serious. And the audience was tearing him – her – to shreds with their laughter.

Okay. So Charlie breaking down and laughing probably didn’t help matters.

I would have stopped him, but I was laughing so hard I dropped my shoeshine box.

I know that this sounds strange, but you should have seen the act that followed us.

Mr. Mrs. was horrified. Crushed. Completely broken. Backstage he – she – pushes past me and Charlie and screams something about the tour being cancelled before barreling out onto Main Street, wig, evening gown, and all.

Charlie and I tried not to laugh too loud. There was another act on the stage, after all.

We showed up at the Y, and that’s where the trouble began. Remember Charlie’s grouch bag? He was so proud of having a grouch bag like a real performer. But he didn’t know how he was supposed to use it. He put all his valuables into it and then – instead of wearing it like any sane person – put it in the bottom of his trunk.

When we got to the Y, we found out Mr. Mrs. had gotten there first and had presented himself as our guardian. He had picked up our trunks for us and left instructions for us to meet him.

But he didn't say where.

Or when.

You ever try to walk from Poughkeepsie to New York City?

Me neither. Because I'm smart.

Between the two of us – meaning between me, because all of Charlie's money had been in his bag – we had maybe enough money for a ticket home. The only thing we had to work with was our shoeshine boxes. So Charlie suggested we start shining shoes. Which would have been a great idea. If either one of us had actually known how to shine shoes. It would have been an even better idea if either one of us had actually *had* anything in our shoe shine boxes except for the rags we each used as dance props. So we split up and agreed to meet back at the Y once we had each sold our shoeshine boxes.

I got lucky. About two blocks down the road, I came across a shoeshine boy who had a box that was almost beat to pieces. I showed him my shoeshine box and told him he could have it for five dollars.

After he stopped laughing at me, he agreed it was pretty solidly made and it looked like it'd hold everything he was doing. But he said I'd better make it three dollars, because he'd have to strip the paint off it or folks would laugh at him.

I was young. I wasn't going without a fight. I told him that the paint wouldn't take long to strip off, and the wood itself was worth four.

He told me that was true, and we should make it two dollars because he'd also have to take the cut glass off the end, too. Especially since he charged a dime.

What could I do? I bowed to the superior businessman and I took the two bucks. He was a real shoeshine boy. I just played one on stage.

I got back to the Y and I waited with my two dollars burning a hole in my pocket. I couldn't imagine what we were going to do. If Charlie didn't pull at least five for his shoeshine box we could kiss home good-bye forever. I'm sitting there trying my best to put a smile on my face, but mostly just looking like a stupid, miserable kid when up rolls Charlie with a big bag of dimes in his fist. So I ask him how much he got for his box, and he says, "Enough."

"How did you get all that money?" I said.

“Sold it to a shoeshine boy,” he says.

“And you got that much?”

“How often do you get a chance to buy a diamond-studded shoeshine box? Think of the benefit to your business.”

“How did you get him to take it?”

And he smiles real big, and he says, “I just left it there for him.”

And I say, “But he paid you for it?”

“Well, kind of. It was more like he wasn’t paying attention to his money at the time.

Don’t worry, though. I left him a note. Right in the box. ‘For a full refund, contact Mrs. Harris, c/o the Windsor Hotel.’”

Rimshot

That. That was my introduction to show business. You get on stage once, and you can never get away from it. It didn’t matter that we barely made it home. It didn’t matter that our grand three month tour had fallen flat after only one performance. It didn’t matter that we’d lost all the money we’d been paid by Mr. Harris. Charlie and me both knew that we had to get back on the stage.

It wasn't the last time we worked together, either. It was about five years after that we set ourselves up with another guy – Mitch – in a musical act. We were the Brick Shedhouse Trio. And we sang gospel. And pretty girls would walk by, and—

Okay. Here's the set-up. The three of us were the Brick Shedhouse Trio, right? Three no-account bums on the streets convinced that they're going to be national singing stars. Especially once we get nailed down our rendition of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot."

[At this point, if two additional males and at least one female are available, the actual sketch can replace the following monologue].

So we sing "Swing Low" complete with appropriate hand gestures. In some states they were appropriate. In other states they could get us arrested. Anyway, we're going straight through the song when this gorgeous dame walks by and drops her handkerchief right in front of Mitch. Mitch goes up and says, "Excuse me, ma'am, but I think you dropped this."

And she looks at him and flutters her pretty little eyes and says, " Why thank you, kind sir. You deserve a reward for your honesty and generosity. I live right around the corner on the third floor. Why don't you come up in half an hour and let yourself in?" And takes off on those gorgeous stems of hers.

Mitch, needless to say, being of sound mind and body, takes off after her to go claim his reward, turning the Brick Shedhouse Trio into a duo.

So now we're singing "Swing Low" with our handgestures again. And now right by us walks this gorgeous dame. A different dame than before. And she drops her handkerchief right in front of Charlie. Now, Charlie, he's not the smooth character Mitch is. Plus, he stammers, so he goes up to her and returns her handkerchief to her, saying, "Ex-c-c-use me, m-miss. I th-think you dropped thisss."

And she, wiping herself off with her handkerchief, says, "Why, thank you, kind sir. You deserve a reward for your honesty and generosity. I live right around the corner on the fourth floor. Why don't you come up in half an hour and let yourself in?"

And Charlie, being of not so sound body but definitely sound mind, takes off right after her.

So now I step forward, all by my lonesome, and I say, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, presenting Mr. Brick Shedhouse, himself." And back into "Swing Low." Complete with hand gestures. And wouldn't you know it, right in the middle of the first verse, on comes another gorgeous dame who drops a handkerchief right in front of me.

Now I'm no fool. I know the game by now.

So I pick up the handkerchief and I walk over to the girl, and I says to her, “Excuse me, ma’am, but I think you dropped this.”

And she says, “Why, thank you, sir.”

And I say, “Now, wasn’t that honorable?”

And she says, “It sure was.”

And I say, “And wasn’t it generous?”

And she says, “It sure was.”

And I say, “And don’t you want me to meet you around the corner on the fifth floor in half an hour?”

And she moves in close and says, “Well, why don’t you come up now?”

Completely floors me. And I’m stammering like Charlie now, “Well, uh, you see, uh, I got a show. I’m Mr. Brick Shedhouse and I’m doing a show and uh—“

And she reaches out and strokes my chest, and says, “Oh, come on, it’ll only take a few minutes.”

“Well, uh, I do this, uh, show, and I – could you do that a little bit higher?”

“Of course, is this better?”

“Ooh, yes. Yes, yes, yes.”

“Now don’t you wanna come on around the corner?”

“Well, I—show, and I, uh, swing low, y’know, coming – could you do that a little bit lower?”

“Is that better?”

“Ooooh, yeah. Little bit faster now. Just a bit. Please?”

“Like this?”

“Ooooh, yeah. I just – the show and the song and I had a trio and—“

“Now don’t you wanna come around the corner with me?”

“Well, I, uh – ooo. I think it’s a little late for that.”

Rimshot.

I loved that bit. That was some of the most fun I ever had on stage. And the girls didn't hurt.

We hooked up with another act for a while. It would always follow right on us...

Lou opens his trunk and withdraws a black hat with attached curls.

Alas, poor Yonik. I knew him. And that's as close to Shakespeare as you'll ever hear a bum like me get. Yonik Persky. He ran the candy shop right down the road from my house. Remember I told you about getting pennies for my singing? Whenever I bought candy, I'd buy it from old man Yonik. Truth is, he was a little blind – so sometimes I could get extra candies out of him.

I used to spend all my free time there when I was a kid. Mama used to ask me where I learned those words I was using at the dinner table, and I'd tell her that old man Yonik used them all the time. And she'd say, "Well, I'll just have to ask him what they mean then, won't I?"

Nice thing about working a Jewish act is that the theatres don't care what you say in Yiddish, as long as it's not a Yiddish theatre. I got kicked out of a show once when I was sixteen for my language. We were doing a "pay me now" bit, and without thinking I said, "Now wait just a damn minute." I walked off stage and the manager handed me my picture and told me to get out. Just like a lot of vaudeville theatres, they had a language policy. Hold on. Somewhere in here...

Lou pulls a metal sign out of his trunk and reads it.

“Don’t say Hell. Don’t say Damn. Don’t say Ass. You’re never too good to be shipped back to the bush leagues.” They kept my paycheck as a fine.

But me? I still got their damn sign.

You can say things in Yiddish you can barely get away with in English. For that matter, you can get away with them in practically any language except English. *Tuckus. Derriere* – French, see? Sounds romantic now. I knew a girl from England – a creature something rare. Everywhere she went, she went with a London *Derriere*.

Rimshot.

Where was I?

Looks at hat.

Oh. Yes. Yonik. I loved old man Yonik. I loved him so much I put him on stage. With this. He didn’t wear these, actually, but every comic who works Jewish wears it – why should I be any different?

I’d walk out on stage with a bag – just like I’d come from market. And this is what I’d say...

Note: The following monologue is excerpted from a longer piece entitled

“The Market Basket,” originally written and performed by Aaron

Hoffman in 1914.

I tell you, I don’t know whether I’m dead or alive; but I think I am.

Rimshot

Lou looks into the basket.

I am walking from one store, full with robbers, to the next store, full with thieves: I am walking till both my feet on the bottom is wearing out – and so far, only one time I find one butcher what give me the right weight and the right price. And that one early this morning. But I couldn't buy nothing from that fellow. I was asleep yet.

Rimshot

I tell you, when you go out to do the marketing, money goes like water. Worse than water.

Every Saturday night when I take a bath – I am wishing that money was like water. When I want more water, I turn on the hydrant.

Rimshot

And the only way I can satisfy a family of money eaters like I got it; I got to be a hydrant.

This afternoon I start out with a two dollar bill to buy things for supper. And all I got is meat, fish, eggs, coffee, sugar, butter, and a couple vegetables, and would you believe it, I ain't got left more as a dollar and a half.

Rimshot

I don't know what is going to be the end from this country, unless it is the finish.

Rimshot.

It was bad enough for a poor man when we had sitting fat in Washington, President Taffy. But when the Democrackers came out and put up Wouldn't Wolfson for President of Washington, he said it was going to be different.

He say, if I vote for him, the market basket will be full.

So that November, I go to the pulls, and I make him elected. And maybe you think he's appreciating this? No sir!

When I wake up the next morning, the market basket is empty like always. And you can believe me, if the poor people is waiting till the politicians shall fill up the market basket, pretty soon we will have to eat the basket.

Rimshot

When I was a single man, I had no worry from nothing. The price of food could go up, I wouldn't care how high, and it wouldn't bother me. I was boarding.

I lived by Mrs. Mendelsohn – she keeps a fine boarding house – everything first class. Of course it was expensive – three dollars a week. But it was worth it.

Believe me, what I ate in a week you couldn't buy for five dollars.

Neither could Mrs. Mendelsohn.

Rimshot

I don't know what was the matter with that woman. When I started in to board by her, she said she is only happy if the boarders like her cooking, and eat up everything on the table.

And you can believe me, she never had a boarder that tried more as me to make that woman happy.

Rimshot

I treated her like a son.

Rimshot

I made her feel like it was my own home.

Rimshot

It was terrible the way she treated me. The only time she treated me nice was when I was sick for a week, and the doctor forbid I should eat anything.

Rimshot

In the two years I boarded with that woman, I paid her as regular like the clock in the parlor. Half the time it was stopped.

Rimshot

And how you think Mrs. Mendelssohn appreciated a good boarder? She tried to raise the price on me. She wanted me I should pay four dollars a week.

No matter how much I tried, I couldn't eat any more. So why should I pay an extra dollar?

Rimshot

So I got married. Not that I wanted to get married, but I didn't want to get done out of a dollar.

Rimshot

And now I got a wife. I tell you, she is never satisfied. I don't like to say it, but if she was laying dying and I gave her in her hand Heaven, she wouldn't be satisfied – I would have to give her Hell.

Rimshot

But when you see the way a woman goes out to do the marketing, you can see how the money goes.

Not that I'm a stingy fellow. I don't expect anybody to sell me anything for less than it cost.

If I get it for the same, I'm satisfied.

Rimshot

I don't care if a man makes a little profit on me. I don't care how little.

Rimshot

When a man makes a nickel on me, he deserves it.

Rimshot

But every week she wants more money for the table. She says the children don't get half enough to eat. And that makes me feel bad. I'm a good father. I can't stand it to see my children don't get half enough to eat. So I say to her:

“From now on, I'm going to do the marketing myself, so I can make sure they will get half enough.

Rimshot

So I went to Eppstein, the grocer. I thought I'd patronize him first. He's a good friend of mine. He's got such a fine grocery store, you wouldn't believe it. He even keeps cream.

And he keeps real milk, too. Pure – guaranteed.

And let me tell you, with milk people can't be too particular. He told me himself that some cows ain't healthy, but when you drink his milk, you have nothing to fear from any cow.

Rimshot

Eppstein, the grocer, is a nice feller; only his hand is so heavy. It must weight at least two pounds.

One thing Eppstein keeps that you can depend on and that's butter. Other places before you buy butter, you got to ask to smell it. But at Eppstein's you don't have to ask. You can smell it so soon as you come in the store.

Rimshot

And the prices he charges for his butter. Forty-five cents a pound. And he don't sell butter what comes in a tub. Everything must be now style, fancy – only print butter he sells.

It's wrapped up in one piece thick paper to keep it dry and another piece paper to keep it clean, and yet another piece paper to keep it fresh and another piece paper to tell the name and address where the butter belongs from, and yet another piece paper from the

health department what says butter is butter, then before they weight it comes yet more paper, wrapping paper.

You pay forty-five cents and you get half pound butter and half pound paper.

But anyhow, Eppstein is a pretty nice fellow. His place is packed with customers. I am glad to see that. The cashier, she's got a little office in the front. When I was going out with the check in my hand, she was talking to a customer. That cashier is a nice lady.

I didn't want to interrupt her.

Rimshot

Why should I bother people that are busy? It pays to be a gentleman.

Drums. At this point, an optional act may perform.

Lou returns to the table, taking off the hat.

Yonik sold well for a good time. I played some class gigs with that act. I could always get a gig playing Jewish. And the topical bits – the Presidents, the politics. People always say that stuff gets old too quick. You ever known a President who didn't promise things would get better? Change the names around and the whole act is new. And it's even funnier when things *do* get better.

See, this kind of philosophy is the sort of thing I think would make a great book. *The Lou Drake Story*. Topical humor is fantastic. Especially when it's timeless.

Rimshot

What? What was so funny about that?

Look. I do this act. Maybe you've heard of it. A couple of friends and me. I'm not doing it tonight, but we do it in all the big towns. I stay at Minsky's more than a week, you can bet we'll be doing it there. Topical humor the whole bit. And the best part is, even the hoochie koochie girls can get in on it. It don't take much – they just need to know a couple of lines.

Knocking.

STAGE MANAGER

You're needed upstairs, Mr. Drake.

LOU

Duty calls. It's probably nothing – remind me where we were when I get back.

Exit Lou

Brief Intermission

Act II

Knocking.

STAGE MANAGER

Thirty minutes, Mr. Drake.

Note: With one or two additional men and three additional women, the actual sketch can substitute for the following monologue.

LOU

Look at me, all dressed up. I been down to the Union Hall. I been down the Union Hall with my brothers – all of ‘em. You know what the boss man is trying to do to us? The boss man wants to cut our wages. He can’t cut my wages. He already cut my wages, from soup to nuts. He already cut the soup. The next cut’s the nuts, I ain’t doing that.

Rimshot

I got my brothers with me and if they try anything like that, we’ll hold together and we’ll *strike!*

(To reporter)

That’s how the act begins. Now in walks the first girl, right? And her line is, “Did somebody say ‘Strike’?” And I say, “Yes, I said it. What can I do for you?”

And she says, “Well, I’m a member of the hat maker’s union, and we stand with you guys.” You gotta keep the lines simple, not every stripper can be Gypsy Rose Lee.

“All right,” says I, “we’ll bring you into the union. We’ll stick together and if the bosses try anything, we’ll *strike!*”

And in walks a second dame, who says, “Did somebody say ‘Strike’?” You see how these lines are repeating? Makes it funnier. And easier on the strippers.

“Yes,” I say, “we said it. We’re in the union and we’ll stick together.”

“Well, I’m in the coat maker’s union,” she says, “and we’ll stand with you guys.”

“Great,” I say. “Welcome to the union. Here’s what we do. The bosses wanna cut our wages. They try anything, we’ll *strike!*”

And in walks a third dame. “Did somebody say ‘Strike’?”

“Yes, I said it. Who would you be?”

“I’m in the skirt maker’s union, and we stand with you guys!”

“Welcome aboard, welcome aboard. Now let’s get one thing clear. Nobody puts anything over on the union. Just let them try anything. We’ll *strike!*”

Now we got three girls on stage and finally on rushes my buddy. “Lou,” he’s saying,
“Lou, Lou! I just came from the Union Hall! The hat makers just went on strike!”

“Strike,” I say, “then let’s get started! Run back and bring back some more news.” Then I
turn to the girls. “Hear that girls? The hat makers are on strike!”

“Well, what do we do?” they say. Now this is pretty much their line for the rest of the act.
Makes it easier on them, see?

“Let’s take off our hats,” I say. “Hat makers are on strike, we won’t wear hats!” And off
come the hats. “They’ve gone too far,” I say, “and now we’ll *strike!*”

On comes my buddy. “Lou, Lou! The coat makers just went on strike!”

“Run back, boy,” I say. “Run back and bring back any more news you get. Hear that
girls?”

“Well, what do we do?”

“What else? Take off our coats.” And we all take off our coats. “They’ve gone too far,
and now we’ll *strike!*”

And on comes my buddy – figured out what his cue is by now? “Lou, Lou! The shirt makers just went on strike!”

“Back! More news, I say!” Then I turn back to the girls. “Did you hear that? The shirt makers are on strike now!”

“Well, what do we do?”

“What else? Take off our shirts.” And off come the shirts. Now the girls are all in their bras, doing what they do best. And I say, “They’ve gone too far, and now we’ll *strike!*”

“Lou! Lou! The pants and skirt makers just went on strike!”

“Of course they did, you beautiful boy, you. Run on back and bring back all the good news you can. Did you hear that girls?”

“Well, what do we do?”

“What else? Take off the skirts. I’ve already got my pants off.” Now they’re in their skivvies, I’m in my boxers – always good for a laugh if I do say so myself – and we say, “They’ve gone too far, and now we’ll *strike!*”

“Lou! Lou! The underwear makers just went on strike!”

“Of course they did. Stick around this time, junior, you might learn something. Did you hear that girls? The underwear makers are on strike.”

“Well, what do we do?”

“Off with the underwear! Now!”

Rimshot

If the sketch is performed in place of the monologue, here is where the play resumes.

You got the joke, right? I love that joke. Now – how do we end the bit? That’s the question. It depended on the town. Most places, we just had the girls start to reach for their underwear, then suddenly realize what they’re doing. They run off stage, big laughs and applause from the audience. Some theatres just brought the lights down on that last line – let the audience fill in the blanks.

One time in Chicago, we decided it would be fun if we got our friend Barney to end the sketch. Barney was doing a doctor sketch that day, but he also did a good Irish policeman. So we had him dress up as in his officer’s costume and run onstage to arrest these union kids for performing burlesque without a license.

Great joke. Kind of sad the audience wasn't in on it. They thought it was an honest-to-God raid, and they ran screaming out of the theatre trying to get away from the cops. Of course, it was just Barney.

I miss Chicago. Chicago is a great town. You can get away with a lot in Chicago. Or you could. Ten years ago I was in the State Congress Theatre. You know that story? Hinda. She did this act – sexy little number. She'd run her hands up her sides and moan and groan while she shook and shimmied her hips. She's got two costumes on while she's doing this dance. She was supposed to only have the one on – the one under her chorus outfit. But the zipper got caught backstage.

So with the stage manager telling her to get out there now or she's fired, Hinda turns around and – like a trooper – hops out on stage and starts to shimmy for everything she's worth. And while she's shimmying, pieces of her top costume start to come off. And they're dropping all over the floor and she's kicking them away and still shimmying and the audience is *roaring* now. She gets down to the end and she has almost nothing on – just her heels and that damn smile of hers, cutest smile you've ever seen. And she picks up all of her clothes she can reach, winks, and skips off the stage.

Now. That night when the police came to the theatre, it wasn't just Barney in his costume.

I never understood that. Burlesque has always been an adult thing. I've worked vaudeville. I've worked burlesque. There's not much difference between them except that in burlesque you always know your audience is more adult.

We were doing an act there that night. Beautiful sketch. It was a doctor sketch. We all loved the sandwich butchers, but we'd played in a few theatres where the sandwich butchers just didn't understand that they were supposed to stay out of the theatre while we were performing. Oh, they stayed out while the girls were on stage. But let even one comic set his poor foot out of the wings and they'd be out selling sandwiches and tobacco and toys to take home to the kids. So we decided we'd have a little fun with the audience

—

With two more men and one woman, the actual sketch begins here in place of the following monologue.

We get out there and out through the theatre walks the sandwich butcher. "Sandwiches. Cigarettes. Rubber balloons. Sandwiches, cigarettes, rubber balloons."

"Look," says my pal Doug, who's playing the doctor. "Can't you see we're working here? When we're on stage you stay out in the lobby. Now, you promised."

And the sandwich butcher says, "Sorry, I'm just trying to make a living," and walks out the back of the theatre.

So in walks the dame – Ellie was onstage with us then. Great talking girl. Give her straight bits, give her comic, she can work with it all. And pretty, to boot – the audiences loved her.

“Doctor,” she says, “I have the worst pain in my side.” And off we run. Standard little doctor bit. A couple of sawbones jokes and the doctor tells her, “Don’t worry, miss. We’ve sent for a specialist. Doctor Plummer should be here any minute.”

“Did someone call for a plumber?” I say, walking in with a big red wrench in my hands.

“Oh, thank goodness you’re here, Doctor Plummer,” says the doctor.

“Hear you had a problem with the old pipes,” says I.

“Oh, do you really think that’s the problem?” says the girl.

Rimshot

“Now, hush,” says the doctor. “Doctor Plummer knows best. Well, Doctor Plummer? Are you going to examine the patient?”

Pause

“What. Right here?”

“Yes.”

“In front of all these people?”

“Of course.”

“I had no idea this was such a loose town.”

Rimshot

So I start poking and prodding and the doctor’s poking and prodding. I’d take the wrench and act like I was turning her toe with it, and then when the laughs would start to die, Ellie – she had great timing, Ellie – she’d say, “Doctor, it’s my side that hurts.”

“Oh, your side,” says I. “Sounds like stiffness of the alcagojerial-something to me.”

“Well,” says the doctor. “Don’t just stand there – rub her side.”

So I start rubbing her side, saying, “Rub ‘er side, rub ‘er side, rub ‘er side...”

“Oh, Doctor Plummer,” she’d say. “Now it’s my neck that hurts.”

“Quick, Doctor Plummer, rub her neck!”

“Rub ‘er neck, rub ‘er neck, rub ‘er neck....”

“Oh, Doctor Plummer, now my feet hurt.”

“Quick, Doctor Plummer, rub her feet!”

“Rub ‘er feet, rub ‘er feet, rub ‘er feet...”

And in through the audience walks the sandwich butcher, shouting, “Rubber balloons!
Rubber balloons!”

Rimshot

Blackout.

Here the script resumes if the optional scene has been used.

Thunderous. Every time. The audience couldn’t get enough of it. I loved that act. Barney was always the sandwich butcher. As for me and Doug, we were good. We were real good. Best on the circuit. But Ellie *made* that act. You should have seen the look on her face – just an instant right before blackout, but the audience caught it every time.

Let me explain something to you about Ellie. You run into someone like Ellie maybe once in a lifetime. If you’re lucky.

Knocking

STAGE MANAGER

Twenty minutes, Mr. Drake.

LOU

Thanks! You mind?

Lou relights his cigar.

Like I was saying – you run into a girl like Ellie once in a lifetime. My once in a lifetime came in 1921. She was working with Doug when I first ran into her. Doug and I had done a few shows together, but she was new. I didn't know who she was, but I knew I was gonna steal her. The audience loved her.

So I taught her one of my favorite bits and we gave it a tryout. Little thing I liked to call "The Sale." I play a guy who's just managed to land the princely sum of \$100.

With one additional woman, this sketch can be performed in place of the monologue.

"One-hundred dollars," I say. "I got one-hundred dollars. Oo, I'm lucky today. The things I could do with one-hundred dollars. I could buy myself fifty two-dollar steaks. Yes, sir, my luck is looking up."

On walks Ellie in her mink coat and she is bawling her eyes out.

"Oh, now," says I, "what seems to be the problem here?"

"Oh, you wouldn't understand," she says, sobbing. "My husband and I are about to lose our apartment."

“Oh, terrible,” I say. “Terrible thing to happen.”

“My husband gave me the money to pay the rent,” she says, “but a man grabbed my purse and I lost every penny of it. Now I don’t have the rent and if I can’t come up with it before my husband comes home from work we’ll both be in big trouble.”

“Wish I could help, really. Wish I could help. What are you going to do about it?”

“Well, I was heading down to the pawn shop to see how much I could get for my mink.”

“Let me see,” I say, and she hands me the coat. “Oh, that’s fine, fine. Only wish it were real mink. You should be able to get ten dollars for it.”

“Only ten? But I thought it was worth at least twenty-five.”

“Oh, no, not at a pawn shop. You won’t get a price that good at a pawn shop.”

And now she breaks down crying again.

“Oh, come on,” says I. “Don’t cry. I’ll tell you what. Maybe I’ll meet a nice girl today. I’m feeling lucky. And when I do I can have a nice mink coat to give her. Tell you what. I’ll give you the twenty-five dollars.” And I give her the twenty-five dollars and I turn to walk away.

But Ellie starts crying again. So I turn back. “Oh, come on,” I say. “What’s wrong now?”

“Twenty-five dollars just isn’t enough.”

“Not enough?” I say. “Where are you living, the Taj Mahal? Well, what else have you got? You want to do business with the pawn shop you need something to pawn.”

“I was thinking I could sell my skirt,” she says. “I figure it’s worth twenty-five dollars.”

“Oh, I hate to break it to you, kid. But not to a pawn broker it ain’t. Maybe five bucks.”

And down she goes crying again.

“Aw, look here,” I say. “You don’t got to cry over this. Look. I’ll give you twenty-five for the skirt. You get twenty-five, I get the skirt, maybe I’ll meet a nice girl for the mink and a nice girl for the skirt. I feel lucky.” So I give her the twenty-five and she takes off her skirt and hands it to me. Always got a few catcalls from the audience. I turn to go, but wouldn’t you know it – she stops me again, crying.

“What now?” I say. “You’ve got fifty dollars already.”

“But it’s not enough,” she says. “We’ll lose the apartment and my husband will be angry with me.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“I figured I could sell my shirt.”

All right. Now I know what the game is. “Twenty-five, right?” I say.

“Fifty,” she says.

“What is that, inflation?”

“Twenty-five for the left and twenty-five for the right.”

“Right,” I say. And I give her the fifty and out comes the shirt. Now the audience is really loud. And they get even louder when they realize I’m not walking away this time.

“Oh, boy,” I say. “I knew I’d meet a nice girl today. Man, am I feeling lucky. Okay.

What next and for how much?”

“What?” she says, standing there in her skivvies.

“What next? And how much? Oh, boy oh boy I’m feeling lucky today.”

“Oh, no,” she says. “This hundred will do just fine for me until my husband gets home from work.”

Rimshot

Here the script resumes.

And off she goes, leaving me with no money, hands full of women’s clothing, and the audience laughing hysterically.

We killed with that act. Killed. In Chicago – that can be a tough town. I made a deal with her – come with me and get a fifty-fifty split. That’s how much I wanted her on stage with me. There wasn’t a couple act onstage that did that kind of split. Not that I knew of, anyway. So she packed up her stuff, said good-bye to Doug and took off with me.

Chicago, 1927, we were all on stage together again. I apologized to Doug. He just looks at me, smiles, and says, “Nah, don’t worry about it. You should have seen the guy *I* stole her from.”

I had six years with Ellie. Six years when I practically didn’t have to work at all. I could throw anything at her and she’d make it funny. In return, I got half of the cash for doing an eighth of the work. Tell me that’s not every man’s dream. We split hotel rooms, we wrote new material. We were what you call joined at the hip. 1921 to 1927. Then she left me.

No, not for another man. That I could have understood.

No. She left me for a solo career.

Rimshot

Now that's just hurtful. I try to pour my heart out with every ounce of sincerity I've got and that's a punchline? Ain't I got any feelings?

Rimshot

You *do* hear that, right? You have *got* to hear that. Some day I'm going to find that drummer and kill him.

Yeah. So 1927 was just a bad year all around. Hinda got arrested, Ellie decided I was holding her back. I thought I'd try a little bit of film work. It seemed to be working all right for Chaplin and Keaton. I saw Harry Langdon back in his vaudeville days. I figured that if Langdon could make movies, I sure as hell could.

Besides, that's where Ellie was heading.

Film was about as close as I ever got to real work. And that bothered me. Up early in the mornings, help put together the set. Then off to figure out the stunts. Shoot it. Get up the next morning – repeat.

It's great if you're a star. It's great if you're Chaplin or Keaton. Or even Langdon. But if you're Lou Drake? My sense of humor just didn't appeal to them. They said that I was—
Well, I was just—

Okay. You want the truth? The truth is that I couldn't stand working in film. Watch Keaton. Keaton plays Keaton. Chaplin's got his bits. But me? I'm Lou Drake. I've never been Lou Drake the little tramp or Lou Drake the stone face. I do everything. I'm a plumber, a doctor, a grifter. I do all different sorts of characters. Yeah, I'm always Lou Drake. But Lou Drake's everybody.

Yeah. I had no character to sell. At least nothing they were buying.

Ellie used to say that I'd be the world's greatest man if I could only figure out who the Hell I was. But that's the way the game goes sometimes, isn't it? You get so swept up in everything that goes on up there – up on the stage – you forget that you're supposed to be somebody off stage, too. All my life can be summed up in comedy sketches and gigs I played in this town or that town. I got a handful of movies, and the closest any of my characters ever got to having a name was "Policeman #1." Number *one*. As in different from the other policemen. See? That's a name.

The best thing about the movies was missing out on some of the rougher patches of the business. The circuits tried to clean up the acts – tried to clean up *burlesque* while I was

shooting my movies. Holy Joe closed down the theaters in New York for a while. Those were things I was probably better doing without.

Of course, the fact is that you can only run your head into a brick wall for so long. I spent six years out there trying to make movies. Finally, I figured that the movies just weren't for me. Leave it to the Marxes. They do well enough. No reason for me to stay where I'm not wanted.

Where I'm wanted is here. Right here in this theatre, right now. They want me on that stage, they want me in front of that audience. The girls need me to hold the act together. We're not all stars, see, but we all have something to do.

Pause

What. Don't I get a rimshot for that?

Knocking. Lou jumps.

STAGE MANAGER

Ten minutes, Mr. Drake.

LOU

Thanks!

Lou begins to finalize his preparations on costume and make-up.

You see *A Night at the Opera*? Great picture. Great picture. Best those guys have ever done. Long way from a theatre in Nacagdoches, don't you think? The folks who are out there now – they got it sewn up. I got no regrets. This is where I'm meant to be. Gypsy Rose Lee – smart cookie. Smartest hootchie kootchie I ever met. Well, bumped into. She recognized me. Thought she did, anyway, couldn't place me, but said she knew me from the movies. Asked me all about it. I told her – you've got to find a character if you're going to work in movies. Even the girls. You can't just look pretty – you've got to have a personality. As in singular.

Rimshot

Thank you. I thought it was funny, too.

Let 'em have the movies. I got burlesque right here. I got Minsky's next week. No April Fool's. It's gonna be big. They've got fourteen houses in New York – seven just in Broadway. Seven. Just opened these past couple of years. This is the big time now. And guess who's opening tonight's show? That's right, me. I'm opening it tonight. I got myself a new act and everything. Hey – I may not be in the movies, but I *was*. Wanna hear?

The following monologue is excerpted from "Does Anybody Want a Comedian?" originally written and performed by Aaron Hoffman and Bobby North in 1914.

I had a good job – in the movies. You know, nowadays, "Everybody's moving it – moving it – moving it."

I'd have enjoyed the work, too. Nothing to do all day but have my face photographed – but it was too hard on the cameras.

Rimshot

The first picture I posed for was a real long one – four reels. Really. It had a great title: “Why He Kissed Her” – in four parts. A beautiful thing!

Rimshot

And there was another photo play I worked in. “The Girl With the Heavenly Eyes” – one reel.

Rimshot

You know when you work in moving pictures, they don't pay you by the week. They pay you by the foot. The first picture I posed for – just as an experiment – they broke me in. And I broke three cameras. And they paid me off by the foot. I don't know whose foot it was – but I think it was the director's.

Rimshot

I wasn't getting much salary but he raised me without my asking.

Rimshot

He had agreed to pay me ten cents a foot and if my face took well I'd get something to boot. My face *didn't* take well and he turned me around so *he* could get something to boot.

Rimshot

I don't remember just what the size of the boot was, but I know it left a lasting impression on me.

Rimshot

He said, “The shoe is on the other foot.” And it was. I know. Because a moment later I turned my back and I was *convinced* of it.

Rimshot

I didn’t see it, but I felt sure of it.

I told him he was a mighty poor director. Then he directed me to a place that I refused to go to.

He said, “When it comes to directing, I am there with both feet and I don’t take a back seat for anybody.” He was right.

He was there with both feet – and for two weeks I wouldn’t take a back seat for anybody – or a front seat – or any kind of a seat.

Rimshot

I asked him when my picture would be released. He said, “We can’t release it.” I said, “Why not?” He said, “Because moving pictures are shown in the dark and we don’t want to frighten the children.”

Rimshot

I suppose everybody has had a yearning to pose for moving pictures. And let me tell you it’s a great life – if you *live*.

I'll never forget the first picture I posed for. They gave me the manuscript to look over. It was a great part I had to play. Easy. The first thing I had to do was to leap from the Brooklyn Bridge into the river. I told the director I couldn't swim.

He said, "That makes no difference. In this picture you drown, anyway."

Rimshot

I refused to do it.

I didn't want to drown in the very first picture.

Rimshot

I wanted to live through one picture anyhow – to see how I looked. I expected them to take me out and drown me *afterwards*.

Knocking

STAGE MANAGER

Five minutes.

LOU

Thanks!

That's just the beginning. That goes on a long time. Can you believe this? I got Minsky's next week and everything's picking up for me now. I'm opening tonight. And I tell you

it's all because I'm right where I belong. It's all about being in the place I belong in right now with no illusions.

Who needs the movies? I've got Minsky's next week. I'm going to be on Broadway – legit. The Marxes played Broadway, and they were burlesque, too. But me? I'm playing burlesque *on* Broadway. It's a whole new game. Who knows where we go from here.

Well, I know where *I* go from here. I got a ticket to New York City. If April goes well I'm set. Everything's going to work out just fine for Lou Drake.

Let me tell you something. It was just twenty-four years ago that I started this business, and it has been a whirlwind since day one with Mr. Mrs. and my fellow shoeshine boy. There are folks have been in this business for thirty, forty, fifty years. I got decades left in this body, and I'm taking it for all it's worth.

You know, you should reconsider that book. You really should. I can send you letters from New York. It doesn't even have to be *The Lou Drake Story*. What's my life? Comedy sketches on the stage? A few lousy movies? Nah. I'm telling you – *The Lou Drake Philosophy*. Be in your place at your time and it all works out. What was I thinking about not having a life? I got one. Those people up there, they give it to me. And I got Minsky's next week. That's all that matters. Because it's only up from there.

You know I had a dressing room next to Mary Pickford's? There was a hole in the wall, too. I let her look.

Rimshot

Oh, come on!

Knocking

STAGE MANAGER

Mr. Drake. Places!

LOU

Thanks.

One week and I'm in Minsky's. I don't think I'm gonna be able to sleep until then.

Exit Lou

CURTAIN

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

I set out to create a show that would bring to light the history of American comedy – in particular, its foundations in burlesque and vaudeville. Along the way, I created a character who fascinates and intrigues me. I learned a lot about the timing of vaudeville humor, about what works and what doesn't, and I learned the radical difference between modern acting styles and those of turn-of-the-twentieth-century comics.

As the project currently stands, it is still very much a work in progress. The next step will involve a rewrite from the ground up following a performance of the script before a live audience. Notes on the performance will be incorporated into the next edition of the script, and production will continue.

From a personal perspective, I feel that I have gained a greater knowledge of what it is to not only act but to entertain on the stage. I understand more the drive to just make the audience laugh and the lengths to which one has to go to do it. I feel that the script will serve as a training tool for other actors interested in pursuing the same goal.

REFERENCES

- Abrahams, J. (Producer), & Tucker, P. (1954). *Dream follies* [Motion picture]. Something Weird Video.
- Allen, R. (1995). *The best burlesque sketches as adapted for sugar babies and other entertainments*. New York: Applause Books.
- Baldwin, M. (2004). *Burlesque and the new bump-n-grind*. Denver, CO: Speck Press.
- Burns, G. (1988). *Gracie: A love story*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Futterman, M. (1992). *Dancing naked in the material world*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Hoffman, A. (1914). *The market basket*. Retrieved April 1, 2007, from http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=varsep&fileName=s35757/s35757.data&recNum=0&Layout=Unscaled&itemLink=D?varstg:6:./temp/~ammem_nCYy::
- Hoffman, A. (1915). *Does anybody want a comedian?* Retrieved April 1, 2007, from http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=varsep&fileName=s38313/s38313.data&recNum=0&Layout=Unscaled&itemLink=D?varstg:10:./temp/~ammem_JfoR::
- Kent, W. (Producer). (1958). *Dreamland capers* [Motion picture]. Something Weird Video.
- Marx, G. (1959). *Groucho and me*. New York: B. Geis Associates.
- O'Brien, F. (Producer), & Connell, W. (Director). (1951). *Ding dong night at the moulin rouge* [Motion picture]. Something Weird Video.
- Preminger, E. (2004). *My g-string mother: At home and backstage with Gypsy Rose Lee*. Berkeley, CA: Frog.
- Thompson, W. (Director). (1953). *I'll sell my shirt* [Motion picture]. Something Weird Video.

Tolbert, F. (1986). *Tolbert of Texas*. College Station, TX: TCU Press.

VITA

CARL GLENWOOD WILLIAMS

- Personal Data: Date of Birth: March 30, 1980
 Place of Birth: Ft. Ord, California
 Marital Status: Single
- Education: Public Schools, Bristol, Virginia
 B.A. Double Major in Theatre Arts and English, Virginia
 Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg,
 Virginia 2002
 M.A. Professional Communications, East Tennessee State
 University, Johnson City, Tennessee 2007
- Professional Experience: Host, Silhouette Style, WUVT 90.7 FM, Blacksburg, Virginia
 1999-2002
 Journalist, The Anvil and Sprocket Movie Review, 2000 - Present
 Performer, Blacksburg Summer Arts Festival, Blacksburg,
 Virginia 2001
 Co-Host, Anvil and Sprocket Live!, 2005 - Present
 Performer, Shakespeare And Friends Renaissance Festival,
 Rogersville, Tennessee 2006-2007
- Honors and Awards: Author *The Mouser's Tales*, selected for Got Theater? Project's
 Festival of Children's Theater, 2004