

While New Zealanders Flock to the Marcus Show and the Hollywood Honeys, In America

Vaudeville Fights For Its Existence

By J. Gifford Male

IN Australia and New Zealand the legitimate stage and vaudeville are experiencing a remarkable return to favour; are booming in an unprecedented manner. Artists such as Ruth Draper, Tibbett, Nicola, have done record business. The Russian Ballet, the Marcus Show and Mr. Howard's Hollywood Honeys have had, in stage jargon, a "clean up." But in America, according to comedian Billy Nelson, who recently passed through New Zealand on his way to Australia, vaudeville is fighting for its life. Perhaps that is an exaggeration. Vaudeville, in various forms, will never be entirely displaced in America. But a definite and bitter battle is being waged between vaudeville and pictures. The pictures have not been entirely unsuccessful.

LOOK at it this way, says Billy Nelson. Ten or 15 years ago you would never have had folks like the Howards and Violet Carlson touring this part of the world.

Sure, vaudeville's going big in Australia, but it's a long way to go, and if there was plenty of work back home, not many would make the trip.

This, Billy claims, is what has happened. Once one of the most profitable avenues for vaudeville artists in the U.S. was picture theatre work. Then the motion picture companies began to figure it out that if there was no vaudeville, they would sell more pictures, and began insisting that

no vaudeville should go on the same programme with their pictures.

Another disturbing factor, says Billy, is Major Bowes, he of the famous "Amateur Hour." Winning an amateur hour contest, can be the worst thing that can happen to a youngster. He goes into vaudeville, and because he's clever, and is billed as an amateur, he's a great success.

Then the glamour and the bright lights get him, and he decides to turn professional. But he soon finds he is just another of a great legion of professionals. He's in "fast com-

pany," and it's seldom he makes the grade.

Result is that after 12 months of disillusionment, he realises vaudeville will never be a career for him, and returns to ordinary life, only to find, likely as not, that his old job isn't open to him.

Moreover, the Major is so anxious to get jobs for his amateurs that he undercuts. So a six-act vaudeville programme may include five professionals and one underpaid amateur. Some professional artist has lost that job.

A hopeful feature, however, is the interest being taken in vaudeville by the Amalgamated Federation of Actors, which is affiliated with the powerful American Federation of Labour.

"The Federation sees that acts don't get kicked round, and it's doing a great job of work," says Billy.

Meet The Nelsons

BILLY NELSON, it should be known, is only one half of his act. The other half is Irene Knight (Mrs. Nelson in private life) and they specialise in that rapid-fire, wise-cracking comedy which the great American public so dearly loves.

At the present time they're actually in Australia, working the Tivoli Circuit for Frank Neil, so there's a chance that by the time they arrive in New Zealand (they will be coming over in the near future, they expect) they will be retailing a brand of humour that will reflect the liveliest characteristics of both America and Australia.

Both are old, seasoned troupers. Not in years—they appear to be in the very early thirties—but in experience. Billy has been on the stage since 1920, and he has done pretty near everything a comedian can do. He has worked in burlesque and vaudeville, in night clubs in pictures and in radio.

He met Irene Knight when they were working together in a road-show in Washington,



WISECRACKS FLY thick and fast when Irene Knight and Billy Nelson are on the job. They are Mr. and Mrs. Nelson in private life.

D.C. Irene used to play the violin, but somehow they ended up as a comedy team.

They've worked most styles of comedy in their time. Once they specialised in "daffy" comedy, but suddenly another daffy comedy team flashed into prominence, and became so well known all over America that Billy and Irene had to make a sudden change. The other team consisted of George Burns and Gracie Allen.

One of the Nelsons' most profitable radio contracts was with the Warner Brothers' hour from a Los Angeles station, and they've worked with some of the best-known radio stars in the U.S., including Judy Garland and Bob Burns.

Judy Garland, when they worked with her, was only 11 years of age, but she could sing "blues" just as well as she can to-day.

Like Billy Nelson, Bob Burns is an old and seasoned trouper. He worked hard in vaudeville for nearly 18 years before he got a break, and now, what with radio and movies, he is earning well over 5000 dollars a week, and rapidly becoming a second Will Rogers.

About Burlesque

ONE thing Billy Nelson is not ashamed of, and that is the fact that he has worked in burlesque. The rather low form of vaudeville known in America as burlesque may justify the opinion most people have of it, but it is the best possible training ground a vaudeville artist can have.

Billy can remember the days when he had to do two and even more different shows a week, and each show several times a day. In the course of a week he would be playing straight, junior comedian, and dancing and singing. You just had to be versatile, capable of going on and giving your best at a moment's notice.

Some of America's most famous comedians have gradu-

ated from burlesque, Billy points out. Joe. E. Brown, Jimmy Savo, Bert Lahr, and many others besides.

But Billy hasn't much of an opinion of strip-tease artists. They can't do anything else but take off their clothes, he says. A new act for them is buying a new dress and taking that off.

The Nelsons have many friends still in burlesque, and they're not a bit too proud to meet them and correspond with them.

One of the chief worries of a comedian's life, needless to say, is the unending search for new material, new gags. Many comedians work in together, and Billy himself exchanges ideas and sketches with several burlesque comedians.

Necessary Changes

CHANGES have to be made, of course. Billy will receive a 12-minutes sketch which has been used in burlesque, and by the time he has pruned the "bluest" lines, and made it suitable for an average vaudeville audience, it will be a six-minute sketch.

Similarly his friends in burlesque will receive a six-minute vaudeville sketch, and by the time it has been "jazzed up" for a burlesque audience it will be twice the length.

The Nelsons have seen many of their friends get lucky breaks in Hollywood. Bob Burns is just one.

Once they happened to make friends with a slight, dark, vividly pretty girl who had a job in the chorus they were working with. She was too fresh and unsophisticated, too much the ingenue for the other seasoned chorus girls; she was obviously not intended for "hoofing."

Several months later the Nelsons were seeing a movie in another city, when the ingenue's name was flashed on the screen. She was in a leading part, with big billing. She was Carol Hughes.



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