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National Museum of African American History and Culture

Playbill for Ain't Misbehavin'

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[[image - drawing of usher & 2 patrons]]

USHERETTES

When the Uris Theatre opened for business five years ago, house manager Neil Howard gathered his 19 usherettes together for a pep talk. "People come to the theatre to get away and have a good time," he said. "And the usherettes are the first members of the cast they see. It's your job to set the atmosphere and make the audience feel at home before the curtain goes up." Yul Brynner evidently agrees. When his current revival of *The King and I* opened at the Uris, he arranged to meet all the women personally in order to wish them a long and happy run.

For most usherettes (the majority are women, though there have always been some men in the ranks) working in the theatre is a convenient part-time job, tailor-made for students and women with families. The usherettes are due at the theatre one hour before the curtain goes up and half the crew is free to leave 20 minutes after the show begins. (The other half remains through the end of the show and long and short shifts alternate at each performance.) The basic duties of an usher or usherette are simple — to seat people and make them comfortable before the show; to handle any difficulties that should arise; and, of course, to distribute *PLAYBILL* to every Broadway theatregoer.

Many usherettes have been in the business for a long time and most have one thing in common — they love the theatre. Ethel, a veteran of 29 years, saw every performance of *South Pacific* during the three months she was a substitute at the Majestic. Generally she watches bits of shows here and there (usherettes, though they are assigned to one theatre can frequently arrange through the union to substitute for one another), then she decides "if I want to see the whole thing." Ethel seldom sees shows except as an usherette — "It's just like somebody working in a candy store. You don't eat candy when you leave work."

Kay, an usherette for 18 years, says that her fondest recollections are of the APA-Phoenix Repertory at the Lyceum. "They did exceptional shows that changed every week. That was nice for the usherettes because we got to see a variety of things. They were very friendly people too, who always invited us to parties and treated us as members of the cast."

Not everyone who begins a theatrical career in the aisle is satisfied to stay there. Fran recalls, "I worked with Lauren Bacall at the Longacre 30 or 35 years ago in *Johnny-Two-by-Four*. She used to take a patron down to his seat in the orchestra and then just stand there staring at the stage. She was very attractive and you could see she was filled with ambition. But she didn't last very long in that job. She just wanted to be near the theatre."

At least one glamorous star at the height of her career played an usherette. When Richard Burton was appearing in *Hamlet*, every performance was sold out. So when Elizabeth Taylor wanted to see the show, she'd come in a dark dress, put on an usherette's collar, and stand in the balcony where nobody recognized her.

If usherettes see more shows than most people, they also get to meet more stars. Lorraine has been an usherette for 26 years, many of them



at the Palace, where Judy Garland used to come out and sit with the girls before her shows. "She always gave us a party when she played there, and a gift. She was a beautiful person who always had time to say, 'How are you today, girls?'"

After nine years of experience, Josephine has devised a simple rule of thumb:

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"The bigger the stars, the nicer they are." When Lenny opened at the Atkinson, Josephine remembers that Jane House gave each usherette a big red rose. And even after all these years when Cliff Gorman comes back to see a show – "he always remembers all the girls and says hello. Joe Silver gives everybody a big kiss."

Of course there are certain hazards to the profession. Often ticket holders settle in the wrong seats and are adamant, even belligerent above moving. Then it is the usherettes job to effect a switch tactfully, quickly and forcefully. They must also police the theatres for surreptitious smokers and guard against an unauthorized stampede backstage after the show. "Once when Harry Belafonte was playing the Palace," says Maureen, who has been working there for 20 years, "I was told to keep everybody out. Charlton Heston tried to get by, but I held my ground . . . Besides," she laughs, "I didn't recognize him."

Rock groups, relatively newcomers to the Broadway scene, present some special problems. One elderly usherette complained of dizziness and had to be excused early when "Mott the Hoople" was at the Uris. It seems she got a contact high seating patrons in the balcony.

Usherettes, like just about everyone else in theatre, worry about unfavorable reviews, which sometimes spell a show's early demise. Josephine can tick off a string of plays at the Atkinson which pleased audiences and her, but which displeased the critics. Kay watches the TV reviews to see if her friends in other theatres will be working or not.

Most usherettes think theirs are great jobs and many urge their sisters and daughters, their brothers and sons to follow them into the business. Kay admits that sometimes it's "like a night on the town." And Fran says that she would pay \$25 to see Annie, but she's glad she doesn't have to because she's seen it five times already. Says Ethel, concentrating on the challenge rather than the fringe benefits – "You have to be a little bit of everything in this job – a hostess, a nurse, a psychologist, sometimes even a bouncer."

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