GEO. COHAN MEANS IT; TO PRODUCE NO MORE PLAYS

Popular Actor Manager Feels Strongly the Unionizing of Actors, but Anticipates a Return to Old Conditions---Meanwhile He Will Go to Europe and May Write a Play

Thinks Bright Dramatic Day Will Dawn Here, but Playwrights Must Have More Than an Idea---'Upstart' Stars Make Public Suspicious --- Cohan Can't See Ibsen, but Loves Shaw

George Michael Cohan, America's most popular comedian and successful playwright, who has renounced a leading position as producing manager, largely because of unionized actors.

By LAWRENCE REAMER.

"THIS pulling up the roots," said Mr. Cohan, pulling up his shirt sleeves simultaneously, as if that might hurry the job—"this pulling up the roots after so many years takes time—more time than anybody would think."

The roots are up, all right, in the former Cohan offices at 237 West Forty-fifth street. The office furniture on the first floor is piled in rather dusty disorder. Deserted desks look out pathetically from the corners. A detached telephone board stands in the middle room as a mute witness to the suspension of business. Stretched on the floor is the long black and gold sign which used to proclaim from the facade that George M. Cohan had converted the brownstone residence into an office building for his own business. Mr. Cohan's office is the front room on the second story. There is still his desk. Sitting there, he is directing the pulling up the tiniest tendril, for the Cohan activities are at an end.

"A wire comes from Oakland," says E. W. Dunn, for years Mr. Cohan's other self, as he opens the door noiselessly and looks in, "saying they would like mightily to have 'Mary' for two weeks."

"Out of the question," is Mr. Cohan's uncompromising answer to the question into which Mr. Dunn's observation gradually grew.

With the pulling up going on like that, it will not be long before Mr. Cohan can start off on the postponed motor trip which is going to begin his long vacation now that he is for the while altogether out of the theatre. He says that nothing else in his future is settled but that motor trip. But afterward?

There Is a European Trip in Prospect, but Not Settled

"Maybe a trip to Europe, which I am anxious to see," he rather reluctantly admitted, "although even that is not definite. I have been abroad several times, but always as the rapid tourist. I went over for several weeks, usually met all the friends I had in New York over there on a trip like myself and then came back again. Now I want to stay longer and make the acquaintance of the Old World in a different way."

Mr. Cohan's pleasures are interesting to himself just now. It may be that they will be profitable to him. But it is his work that is productive of the pleasure that he has given this country. So the reporter for THE NEW YORK HERALD wanted to know when he was going to be far enough along in that vacation that made it necessary to pull all the roots up to think of work again and what sort of work it was going to be.

"A play?" he repeated, introspectively, as if he were weighing the question with himself. "I think I might feel like writing a play after the air has cleared. You see, a dramatist ought not to be burdened with managerial duties. It isn't the best preparation for playwriting to sit and receive telegrams that the leading lady of this company is threatening to resign in Omaha, while the manager of this one is drunk at Indianapolis. A man ought not to have those responsibilities when he wants to write plays. I was reckoning the other day that during my partnership with Mr. Harris I acted for 750 weeks and wrote fifty plays.

"Then there was the duty of reading the numerous manuscripts. I think I never read less than a thousand plays a year while we were together. I certainly read three a day on an average. I don't mean that I read every word in them, but enough to know if there was anything we wanted.

"We never hoped to find plays, you know. In all those years we never got but one play ready to be produced. That was 'The Fortune Hunter,' by Winchell Smith. I was looking for ideas in the plays that we might utilize, even for ideas behind the plays, for often the dramatist had not brought them out."

How could it happen that there was still so much work for the manager?

"I am afraid the answer is that American dramatists don't write complete plays. They have an idea and they set out to express it in the form of a play. But they don't tell their story in the right way or they don't tell it at all. The reader has to look for it. If it's a good one the manager is willing to get a play out of it himself. Then there is the greatest importance in the way a character or a set of characters may speak. A line couched in the wrong language, the use of the incorrect words in stating a fact or a feeling, that may ruin the following ten minutes of a play. Then the scene is spoiled and the poor scene may ruin the act. Of course, the playwright may not know that. It takes a manager of experience in producing plays. Look at the immense service, for instance, David Belasco may be to a playwright. He knows just when the language fails to express a sentiment as it should be expressed.

Can't Hide From Cohan When a Play Has Been Rewritten

"I think I can tell in seven cases out of ten, maybe in nine cases, just when a play has been rewritten, just what parts of it, moreover, have been done by a different hand. Of course, I ought to know after all the plays I have read and all I have rewritten."

Mr. Cohan believes that the manner of producing plays has vastly improved, but he does not believe that there is as much in the play itself as there used to be. Enlightened direction has led the actors to produce a play more in accordance with nature, and then there has been a long stride forward in the matter of scenery and lighting.

"But the great demand for plays," he said, "has had the effect of weakening, as it were, their content. Some of the so-called comedies have not enough in them for more than a good fifteen minute vaudeville sketch. In the field of American comedy, for instance, there has been no progress. I used to write vaudeville sketches for our family when I was only a boy. I was always looking, naturally, for comedy. So I made it a habit to see what the stars like Nat Goodwin, Roland Reed, Sol Smith Russell and the popular funny men of that day used to act. Honestly I cannot find to-day any comedy so good, for instance, as 'A Gilded Fool,' which Henry Guy Carleton wrote for Nat Goodwin. The playwrights in those days would take a character, develop it gradually and make you like him, whether you wanted to or not. What would formerly have been contained in one of their comedies in those days would make three or four now.

"Then, the American playwright doesn't go on developing. A brilliant start, one or two plays that make you say, 'Well, he's the man we've been waiting for,' and then the end comes. Why that happens I cannot tell, but it does. Take the case of a playwriter that Mr. Harris and I once brought out under a five year contract. He wrote one fine play. Then there came a second, which was even better. There seemed every reason to believe that a remarkable American dramatist had appeared on the scene. But he has never equalled the two good plays again, although he is writing to this day."

Bright Day for Drama Is Dawning in America

In spite of some of the fault that he finds with the dramatists, Mr. Cohan believes that the brightest day of the American drama is due.

"The future of the theatre in this country after a few of its blights have been removed—and they are certain to go—will be more brilliant than anybody to-day realizes. Perhaps it may come in our time, but it is certainly not to be delayed many years more. Then the drama will deal with every question of the day in just the spirit it should. I don't mean that there will be preaching or any kind of pontificating on the stage, but good plays that will interest every man will treat of questions in ethics and politics. They won't be highbrow, but they will be intelligent in the highest degree. Otherwise the people will not tolerate them. The public is going to cease to regard the theatre merely as a means of entertainment. The best thought is going to be attracted to the service of the drama, and we will have a theatre of which any country might be proud. I have gradually seen the change coming in the spirit of audiences. A manager notices those things; so does a playwright. I have been both, you know."

While he studied the American comedies of a quarter of a century ago, Mr. Cohan found his greatest pleasure in another kind of play.

"We all have our stage memories," he said, "of plays that seem to us the most delightful in the world. I loved in my youth the massive, sensational London melodramas, such as 'The Soudan,' 'Romany Rye' and the rest of them, as well as their American imitation, 'The Great Metropolis,' which was the American specimen of the kind and is, by the way, of historical interest as being the first production that Klaw & Erlanger ever made together. Of course, there are none of these plays now, since the sensations of the moving pictures are so much greater."

Mr. Cohan never, it appears, sees the moving pictures—or hardly ever.

"There are two kinds of moving pictures I go to see," he admitted. "One is the Chaplin films. I go to see him because he is an artist. There I find something unique in his technic, some real mastery of his medium that delights every other professional. Then I go to see the plays of David Wark Griffith. He makes pretty pictures. The rest of them I never go to. To me one is the same as another. I never get over the impression that I am looking at photographs. They may be moving. But of the illusion of life or drama I never get the least intimation."

Mr. Cohan has a good word to say for the cinema, however, even if he does not care for it himself.

"The moving pictures have been a great help to the drama. They have built up an army of theatregoers. Men and women who saw the moving pictures, but had never been in the habit of going to the theatre, acquired after a while the desire to see a real play. Then they realized how small a part of drama was the substitute they had been satisfied with, and were from that time regular theatregoers.

"The movies did one harm to the theatre. They shut out of existence the stock companies which were such a valuable training school for the actors. But I don't believe they will be powerful for long. The so-called 'feature picture' may continue equally popular; indeed, I have no doubt it will. But the neighborhood movie theatres are rapidly losing their public. They have none of the control of the people in search of cheap amusement that they possessed a few years ago."

Stock? At the repetition of the word Mr. Cohan looked up.

"Why, of course, there was never such a training school for the actors as the stock companies. And I don't mean the old stock companies of Daly or Wallack or the Boston Museum. Stock was good in many cities until ten years ago—no, until eight years ago. There were excellent companies in many cities. There the actors learned their profession. A man who acted thirty or forty parts every year was going to know something about his business when he finished. Nowadays the actor has no training equal to that.

"Of course, there is a much too excessive supply of players. There are eight to every role to be acted. I won't say how good they are, but they are numerous. I know it was always said that I managed to find good actors for my companies, but I often had this or that actor that I had seen in my mind and wrote a part to suit him. Then, I remember all I saw, and when the time came for this or that kind of a part I got hold of him. But casting is not easy. I should find it difficult to cast a play with all the field to select from. How in the world could a manager be expected to cast his plays when he has only Equity or Fidelity lists to select from?"

Upstarts Are Not Stars In Mr. Cohan's Estimation

Mr. Cohan when he looks in the sky sees few stars.

"You don't call these upstarts stars just because their names happen to be up in electric lights, do you?" was his way of commenting on the ability of the youthful lights of the theatre. "I know of mighty few stars. My idea of a star is an actor who is so indispensable that without him the play would have to end. I call Willie Collier a star. What in the world would a Willie Collier play be without him? Frank Bacon is a star, for who in the world could act the hero of 'Lightnin'' as he does? Elsie Janis is a star, for without her what would an Elsie Janis play be? There are a few of that kind, and among them is Fay Bainter. She is, in my opinion, one of the young women who are really entitled to that honor. I never saw her in a play that she did not make it. But mighty few of them are stars in the sense I understand the word. It's a singular thing that young women who set out with every promise of doing big things just don't make good, for no reason that anybody can discover. I saw an actress several years ago who seemed to me certain to make a career. She was beautiful and she seemed full of talent. Then, she had already learned something about her art. It looked as if nothing could stop her. She went on—for a year or two. Then the change came, and the last thing I heard of her she was in pictures. Often a little success is too much. They get their heads swelled, develop bad habits and then gradually pass out of view.

Like *Rose Dartle* the reporter only wanted to know, and he murmured something about the theory that the popular man or woman is announced as a star in order that the public may be attracted by this personality.

"Don't you believe it," was Mr. Cohan's emphatic answer. "These new stars keep people out of theatres. Already the public is on to their character. In the theatre next door 'The Bat' has been playing all season. Now, if the managers, Wagenhals & Kemper, should change their advertisements and add 'with Jane Doe,' or some other more or less unknown person, I am positive that the business would take a fall of 50 per cent.

"'Ah,' the public would say, 'there must be something the matter with that play, else they wouldn't have put in a new star.'

"Just so sophisticated has the public become. Just this suspicious has it grown of these unknown people who are proclaimed stars by the electric lights. That is the inevitable result of trying to strengthen a play by a half baked star nowadays."

"There is nothing under the sun which so much interests Mr. Cohan as the causes that led to his retirement from the theatre. But he believes that the allegiance of the actor to unionized labor will in its way have a good effect. It will clear the air in the theatre, which is very necessary. That the actors themselves will soon see the error of their way, he does not doubt. The radical element among them, he thinks, has misled them to a degree they did not realize.

Feels Intensely Trouble Unionizing Has Brought Theatre

"Of course," he says, biting his upper lip and speaking with an intensity that all but kept the words from passing through his partly opened mouth, "this thing is going to straighten itself out. There is no doubt of that. But the bitterness this row has engendered will last for years. Nobody who is not in the profession can tell how deep it has sunk into men's hearts. They talk about it now as if it were something fresh that had happened yesterday, so vivid is their feeling about the troubles that the union has brought into the theatre."

Mr. Cohan keeps on staring out into Forty-fifth street, or, rather, far beyond it, further even than Forty-second street, which was his resting spot in the happy days before the strike. No other subject can bring the look of gravity into his face or start the tremulous drawing down of the upper lip as the discussion of the strike. He would, in spite of the pain which the thought causes him, rather talk of it than anything else. But he was led back to the actor.

"He hasn't only himself to blame for the lack of skill which is common to most of them to-day," he said. "They not only try to confine themselves to certain types after a while, but they are willing to let the managers compel them to do the style of character in which they make a success. It happens after a while that their services are in demand only for certain roles. When there are none of these they are without employment. Managers, of course, call on them only when they have a part to be acted similar to those in which these men have already been successful. So you see how this specialization works around in a vicious circle for the actor and his art."

Mr. Cohan sees no place in his vision of the greater and glorified American theatre for the co-called "bedroom" farces.

"The man who produces them as well as the public that sees them are alike a disgrace to the American theatre. But there is possibly less stigma on the theatregoers. Look in on the third or fourth night of one of these shows. You will not find a theatre public. There is a totally different kind of man there. These men are to be identified by their habit of carrying about pictures which they show secretly, stories they tell under their breath or salacious bits of newspaper printing or typewriting they draw out of their pockets. The earmarks of this kind of person are easy to recognize. It is not the theatregoers who support these plays. I am sorry to say that they do make money for their producers. One man has made a million or more out of them. And he is the one man who does not have to prostitute his position in this way, as he is a showman in every sense of the word and could make just as much in any kind of play. These pieces after a while seem to poison the people who deal in them. The French originals on which they were once modelled had some humor. These American pieces have only their dirt."

Why the cities outside of New York have so little interest in the theatre to-day is another question that Mr. Cohan thinks he can answer.

"The public lost all confidence in the promises of New York managers," he said, "after they had been for years sending poor companies in the New York successes. They kept getting worse and worse. 'Go in and clean up,' was the motto of the managers. So the cheaper the actors the better. Mr. Harris and I used to pay more for our No. 2 company than for No. 1, because we wanted to keep the confidence of the public in the smaller towns. But the average manager thought only of what he could get out of the towns and give as little as possible in return. So the end came. The public deserted the theatres for the moving pictures, where they could at least see the actors the manager promised. Now there is no public for No. 2 or No. 3 companies anywhere. The poor old goose has been killed."

What This Popular Actor Thinks of the Ibsen Drama

Any playwright with as many ideas about the theatre as Mr. Cohan reveals must have his own theories as to Ibsen in the playhouse, Ibsen the great, unacted.

"I have read the Ibsen plays and seen most of them. Whether I read them or saw them on the stage, I was always interested. But I have never been able to focus the Ibsen drama in its relation to our practical theatre. In other words, it has seemed to me that the Ibsen drama is distinctly literary and not of the stage.

"Shaw," here Mr. Cohan's smile was more comprehensive and sincere than it had been at any other time; "Shaw I love."

And so complete were all the outward and visible signs of complete reaction to the Irish dramatist that it was not necessary to interrogate Mr. Cohan any further along those lines.

Mr. Cohan, who is now 42, tells proudly of the songs he used to sell for $10 when he was only 15 years old. He has the clear eye and the fresh skin of youth. Long before he had to legally be abandoned the beverages now by law forbidden to him. But he never missed them. Men of such natural vivacity and enthusiasm never do. Nor could men of less natural energy walk three miles every morning just for the health which he now possesses in such full measure that a mere two years out of the theatre will seem but a brief vacation. He has won all that it can give him already. All its honors have been shown to him by a devoted public. Maybe there will be something new for him when he comes back in two years. If there isn't the public will probably just keep on giving him the same old things, which so far have been the best in its power.

Gumpertz, Freak Magnate, Tells of Queer Business

Searches World for Human Eccentricities, and Having Found Them, Show Work, Travel, Etc., Overfills His Time

THE next time a bore shoots at you the highly bromidic observation that "it takes all sorts of people to make a world" you can impart an interesting, if not exactly edifying, twist to the conversation by remarking right back "indeed, yes; so Gumpertz has found, at any rate."

Doubtless, he'll want to know who Gumpertz is, and there you'll have your entertaining conversation smoothly started. For then you will go on to explain that Gumpertz is the man who makes a business of discovering "all sorts of people."

It is the oddest business in the United States, and in Europe, too, for that matter, inasmuch as Gumpertz operates there, also. He deals in strange people. He is the freak magnate of the world. He has every midget, giant, transparent man, boneless woman, tattooed girl, three legged gentleman, turtle-backed boy, ossified man and every human ostrich—everything in the freak catalogue working for him.

Or, maybe, it is the other way around; that all the freaks in the world have got Gumpertz working for them. He has cornered the freak market. They are all under contract to him. If you want a cute little giant in your home, you must see Gumpertz. If you think the new bungalow would be ornamented by a nice snake charmer, or if you decide that an Australian bushman, a real sword swallower or a young lady who draws cartoons of prominent men with her toes, would lend a unique flavor to your next banquet or musicale, you just simply have to go to Gumpertz.

He has the only supply available and he keeps everything in stock. He gets telegrams from all parts of the country reading something like this:

Gumpertz Gets On the Job, Furnishing a Human Pin Cushion

"Rush one fat woman (young), four dwarfs and a wild man for the Elks Street Carnival in Sturgeon Bay, Wis." Or, perhaps the wire will read after this manner: "Can use one human pin-cushion, one lady glass-eater and a half woman week of July 1. Chamber of Commerce fair, Princeton, Ky."

Then Gumpertz gets right on the job, and if you think it is any easy task he has on his hands you are greatly mistaken. If the order is only for the tiniest midget he has in the shop he has to scurry about and reserve a compartment in the Pullman car, for that's the way freaks travel. They all travel in style, not to speak of luxury. They have to have a personal representative, usually a member of the family, and they are obliged to travel in compartments for obvious reasons of privacy; also often for physical reasons. Can you imagine a 400 pound woman, the kind billed as "the marvellous mountain of flesh" trying to negotiate the aisles of a fast moving coach on her way to the dining car? The thought is too harrowing to dwell upon. And can you fancy the effect that would be caused by the appearance in a dining car of a perfect lady, jauntily attired and with about four feet of auburn beard hanging from her chin?

Samuel W. Gumpertz, to dignify him with his full name, told the Sunday HERALD a lot of inside stuff about the freak market and the business in general the other night in his office down at Coney Island. He is an old showman, though not an old man. He has been in the show business in some capacity or other for thirty years or more; went into it as a boy and is known all over the country as an advance agent and manager of road companies. When I first knew him he was running a stock company out in St. Louis and a staving good company it was, with such competent players in it as Minnie Seligman, Marie Wainwright, Victory Bateman, the late Larry Hanley, Malcolm Williams, Gus Weinburg, Frank Losee and Hugh Ford, who later became eminent in the profession as a stage manager. Mrs. Gumpertz, by the way, will be pleasantly recalled by New York theatregoers as the comedienne Evie Stetson, who was a member of the famous Weberfieldians when the Broadway burlesquers were at the top of their popularity.

Said Gumpertz: "I just drifted into the freak game after I joined out with Senator Reynolds and came to Dreamland some years ago. It is interesting and I like it. Through the collection of a bad debt a 'pit show,' as freak exhibitions are termed professionally, was wished on me and I ran it for a season and made money. The following season I farmed out the contracts I had to make with the funny little folks and before I knew it I had the business on my hands. Then I expanded it, until now I have agents in every city in Europe watching out for some new whim of nature suitable for purposes of exhibition. That is always the main consideration when one of my agents reports that he has found something new—can it be shown with propriety and is there the slightest offensive or unpleasant feature about it?

"Not every freak of importance and interest—I am speaking of their value to science and to medical men—is exhibited for the reason often that the exhibit would be revolting, or indelicate. One of the most remarkable human curios that a whimsical nature ever sent into the world is a woman in Texas, living down there on a ranch with her brothers and sisters. She literally has two bodies growing downward from the waist where the hips are normally joined. She has been on view at a number of medical congresses, and every showman has seen her, but no one ever made an offer to her.

"Most of the freaks come from Europe; Hungary, certain sections of Germany and of old Austria and the Balkans particularly are productive of monstrosities for a reason that is very clear when thought has been given to it. Those countries have never had the rigid marriage laws we have in the United States. Marriage of close relatives is not forbidden there, and the practice is most common. So it is left for nature to show how inexorable are her laws in the number of malformed and undersized children.

"I have come to an interesting conclusion in years of close association with these people. Instead, as one would suppose, of being sour tempered and resentful at having been brought misshapen into the world, they are, with few exceptions, bright and cheerful in disposition and cherishing unbounded affection for each other.

Demand for Freaks Increases Every Year

"Salaries for freaks differ, though there is a sort of standard rate, based upon the rarity of the attraction. What I pay them depends upon how many of the family I must include in the contract. I have to provide a nurse for my half-woman, and her husband has to travel with her, too. The demand for freaks keeps up steadily from year to year. Don't ask me to explain it. My only explanation is that it is human nature for normally formed persons to like to look at others less fortunate, only I would advise spectators never to utter one word of sympathy while standing before the platform on which a freak is sitting. They don't like it. On the other hand, they are inclined to look on you and me as the real freaks because we are not as they are.

"As a general thing freaks like to have the audience talk to them. The personality of a freak has much to do with the salary that is paid. Fat women are always in demand, and there is just as steady a market for living skeletons. Next time you are in a freak show note the crowd of women clustered around the fat girl's easy chair. And if you will listen you will be sure to hear one of them say to her husband, 'Well, thank goodness, I know I'll never get to be like that.' There's one question the living skeleton answers a hundred times a day: 'What do you eat and do you have to diet to keep that way?'

"Midgets are always popular. They seem to be a sunny lot, always joking and playing tricks on the others in the show. They are in great fear that they may grow. They seem to think that so long as they are wee they might as well be as wee as possible. One of the first remarks a midget will make to another when they meet after a year's separation, caused by an engagement, is: 'Well, tell me, did you grow any last year?' There is genuine concern and tender sympathy if one of them has to admit that the fraction of an inch has been added to the stature.

"One point I'd like to emphasize is that there are no fake freaks. This is chiefly because you can't successfully fake a freak. Persons who have survived some unusual accident sometimes apply for a job in a museum, but they are never engaged. It would kill the show if the owner exhibited anything that would turn the thoughts of a spectator toward sadness.

"I should say that the best known freak in the country and the most ancient, too, is old Zip, who is also under contract to me. If Zip were able to tell about himself we might learn that he is even older than the seventy-eight years we know him to be. Zip may look like a missing link, but he certainly is the one remaining connecting link between the show business of to-day and that of P. T. Barnum's time. Zip was an attraction at Mr. Barnum's celebrated old museum at Broadway and Ann street in 1856. The sailor who took Zip to Mr. Barnum said he had rescued Zip from a Chinese ship in the port of Singapore. 'What is it?' asked the showman and the sailor replied. 'I guess you named him,' and Zip the What Is It he has remained to this day.

"Zip has a regularly legally appointed guardian who has taken good care of his earnings as a freak and adversity will never befall the affectionaate and obedient old creature."