

CREATING TRADITIONS,
EXPANDING HORIZONS

A
HISTORY
of
TENNESSEE
ARTS



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The Traveling Toby Tent Show

THE TRAVELING TENT SHOW, FOUND THROUGHOUT THE SOUTHERN AND MIDWESTERN UNITED STATES, was a major theatrical force that was responsible for keeping rural theater alive from before the turn of the twentieth century through the 1930s. The term “Toby show,” in its heyday, denoted a traveling vaudeville-type melodramatic tent show featuring a character called Toby. Toby is defined in *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, which draws from material by Robert Downing, as “a stock character in the folk theatre of the United States, a bucolic comedy juvenile leading man in provincial repertory companies of the Mississippi Valley and the Great Southwest.”¹ Though many scholars thought the last traveling tent company retired from the road in 1963, in fact there were a very few companies that struggled, with the assistance of private and governmental funding, into the 1990s. The last remaining traveling tent show company is the Hard Corn Players currently based in rural Robertson County, Tennessee.

Toby was the star of the tent show. The plays presented in nearly all Toby/tent companies began as popular scripted melodramas with the Toby character added. Later, due to Toby’s popularity, tent show troupers began writing plays for him. Toby shows were placed in rural settings and addressed the unique and important qualities of country life and rural values. Toby personified rural values including honesty, integrity, and responsibility. The character description of Toby was standard. He was portrayed as a red-headed, freckled-faced, silly-kid, rube character. His costume and make-up consisted of four basic elements: a red wig, freckles, a blacked-out tooth, and baggy, tattered clothing. Because of these conventions, the audience recognized Toby the minute he appeared on the stage. Though each Toby actor employed these costume and make-up basics, their characters variously reflected their respective conceptions of Toby and regions wherein they performed. In the southern Appalachians, for instance, the Toby character was often a



Traveling Toby Tent Show interior for the Bisbee's Comedians. Courtesy of Dawn Larsen and the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana.

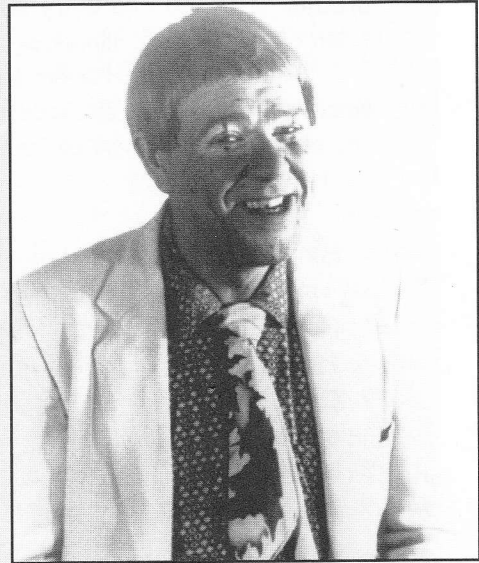


hillbilly. Toby's comic antics were also a major trait of his character. He was well known for his low comedy. The Toby actor, "with his stock of winks, facial contortions and other tricks acquired through long experience on the boards, always brought the audience to life."² Fellow troupers knew Boob Brasfield (sometimes called the "king of Tobys") to be a master of comic facial expression: "He would hitch up his baggy britches, stare stupidly across the footlights and the audience would scream with laughter."³

Though tent shows were most popular during the first two decades of the twentieth century, Toby shows peaked somewhat later, in the late 1920s and through the 1930s. The genre began in the late nineteenth century with the rural and small-town Americans' desire for entertainment at their local "opera houses," places where New York touring theatrical companies to smaller opera house repertory companies offered amusements and entertainment. The progression from permanent opera house to temporary canvas theater seems to have occurred for two reasons. First, since opera houses were hot in the summer, they often closed for that season. A tent could provide a well-ventilated performance space and an extended season. Second, and more significant, a tent provided a company a place to perform in towns that boasted no theater or community building, most especially those in the rural South. The most significant increase in the numbers of companies touring came a decade later, due to the agricultural prosperity ignited by World War I and the development of the automobile, which allowed theater companies to expand their circuits to those smaller communities throughout rural America not supported by the railroad.

Though statistics are somewhat contradictory, most scholars cite the Great Depression as the beginning of the end of the tent show. The depression hit the smaller tent companies hard, and many companies folded simply due to lack of funds because rural audiences could no longer afford the luxury of a ticket. Later, movies and automobiles became much more affordable and accessible to individuals in rural communities and so contributed to the tent show's demise. In the late 1950s, television came to the rural community, so it was more convenient and at least initially exciting to sit in your own home and be entertained. The few remaining companies that were on the road in the 1950s were very successful, however, since there was little competition for territory.

One of those remaining companies, Choate's Comedians, later the Bisbee's Comedians, was the largest and best-known tent company to travel rural Tennessee. In show manager Billy Choate's book, *Born in a Trunk*, he described their show's territory and season: "The Bisbee show opened at Lexington, Tennessee the first of April and closed at Collierville, Tennessee the last of October."⁴ Various versions of the Choate show, led by Choate's grandfather and father before him, traveled from the spring of 1882 to 1966 through towns in Tennessee including: Lexington, Collierville, Halls, Union City, Obion, Ripley, Russelville, Moscow, Adamsville,



Billy Choate, longtime Toby and manager of Bisbee. Courtesy of Dawn Larsen and the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana.

Dyersburg, Parsons, Linden, Hohenwold, Dickson, Waverly, Camden, Bruceton, and McKenzie. Though based in Illinois, they often wintered and rehearsed for the coming season in Memphis. Their show employed many famous tent rep show people including Boob (Lawrence) Brasfield, brother of Grand Ole Opry favorite, Rod Brasfield. Billy Choate presently lives in his hometown of Wayne City, Illinois, performing Toby show benefits yearly for the Wayne City firemen.

The Hard Corn Players have toured and performed in Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee since 1991. They are reintroducing this form of theater to rural families by bringing the last of the old-time tent shows to communities in Tennessee.

Dawn Larsen, Volunteer State Community College

Notes

1. Phyllis Hartnoil, ed., *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), 17.
2. Carol Pennepacker, "A Surviving Toby Show: Bisbee's Comedians," *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* 30 (1964): 50.
3. Jere C. Mickel, "The Genesis of Toby," *Journal of American Folklore* (Oct./Nov. 1967): 155.
4. Billy Choate, *Born in a Trunk* (Kearny, N.J.: Morris, 1994), 2

bootlegged New York stage hits. The companies usually performed vaudeville routines between acts of the featured play.

Eventually motion pictures presented a most difficult challenge to live dramatic performances, but early on the line between the two forms of entertainment was not clearly drawn, and films were not necessarily successful. In March and April 1897, just a year after film's successful debut in New York, actor-manager Oliver Taylor toured films in East Tennessee under the auspices of his short-lived Cineograph Film Company. Taylor did the narration for the films and performed character recitations to keep the audience entertained between the film selections. By the 1910s, however, movie theaters increasingly outnumbered playhouses in Tennessee's cities and towns. In a rather ironic twist, the program for a Kitty Cheatham recital in Nashville in 1915 included an advertisement for The Parthenon, "Nashville's Quality Theater" and site of "The World's Greatest photo PLAYS."³⁵ The juxtaposition of one of the stage's local stars with a movie palace that claimed to have invested thirty thousand dollars in equipment under-

scores the transitional nature of the entertainment world in the early twentieth century.

Theater managers who staged live performances tried their best to compete with the new movie palaces. In Knoxville in 1919, residents could see a silent film at any of at least four different theaters and attend such lowbrow musicals as *The Whirly Girly Show* at Staub's Theatre, which desperately tried to stay afloat. Even Knoxville's beautifully designed Bijou Theatre, which opened in 1909 with a seating capacity of sixteen hundred, began to show movies, often in conjunction with vaudeville shows, just six years after opening. In Nashville, the Grand Theatre became the Little Grand Theatre in 1908, with a program of vaudeville and movies, and the Vendome Theatre was turned into a movie hall in 1919. By 1920, there were no theaters left in Nashville dedicated to the production of plays, and nine years later, the last performance by a resident stock company for decades took place in the city. For many years during the middle part of the twentieth century, the Ryman Auditorium was the only venue in the city to stage professional literary theater, and it did so only occa-