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Book Author(s): Mark Dawidziak

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Chapter One: Setting and Scene

Any good piece of theater should adequately set the time and place.

The Great Depression—1933.

It was no time to be an aspiring actor in New York. The Depression had reached its lowest ebb.

Since the early part of the century, the American theater had become increasingly centralized in an area of Manhattan known as Broadway. Indeed, “The Great White Way” has established itself alongside Berlin, Paris and London as an international cultural capital. To many, the American theater and Broadway were synonymous. So, when the country’s economic collapse ravaged the city, the toll was dearly felt on the American theater as an institution.

With fewer dollars to be spent, ticket sales plummeted along with the number of productions. Broadway producers and managers, natural speculators in the stock market, had suffered enormous losses and few chances were being taken on either new playwrights or performers. Some producers, such as Sam Harris and the Schuberts, managed to weather the storm. Others, notably Arthur Hammerstein and A.H. Woods, declared bankruptcy. Flo Zigfield, one of Broadway’s greatest names, was wiped out.

“Nowadays,” went comedian Eddie Cantor’s ominous observation after the Stock Market crashed, “when a man walks into a hotel and requests a room on the 19th floor, the clerk asks him, ‘For sleeping or jumping?’ ”

Cantor had little reason to laugh. He was only one in a legion of Broadway actors, playwrights, directors and producers who had literally lost entire fortunes overnight. The walking wounded included such prominent theatrical figures as Harris, George S. Kaufman, Alexander Woollcott, Irving Berlin, Groucho Marx and Max Gordon. Groucho would later recall with more than just a touch of bitterness how he starred in the “Follies of 1929.”

Movies—motion pictures, films, the flickers, talkies—were a cheaper and more productive form of entertainment, and Broadway, Vaudeville and the legitimate theater felt the impact of this rising popularity.

Stars and “big names,” however, could easily launch into new projects and recoup their losses. As galling or demoralizing as the loss of personal fortunes were to Broadway’s elite, they had one financial advantage—their reputations. It was the rank and file actor who was particularly hard hit. The words “Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime?” seemed to sum up the stark city environment of breadlines and corner applectarts run by former Wall Street wizards.

Author and columnist Heywood Broun, deeply disturbed by the growing deprivation in the Broadway sector, helped produce a revue to benefit out-of-

work troupers. Despite the affable writer's sincere intentions, *Shoot the Works* had a short run and did little to help the unemployed actor.

On a more practical level, the Stage Relief Fund desperately tried to cope with alarming unemployment. By 1933, the Actor's Dinner Club had been set up in the basement of New York's Union Methodist Church to offer balanced meals to less fortunate thespians. Years later, Bob Porterfield would recall taking advantage of these cheap meals and the opportunity to trade shop-talk with his fellow actors.

Still, in spite of all the grim developments, 1933 brought the first real reason for hope since the crash of '29—better known in theatrical circles by the *Variety* headline, "Wall St. Lays An Egg." Although the country would never really pull out of the Depression until World War II stimulated the economy, the inauguration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as 32nd president made many feel that "happy days" were indeed here again.

Roosevelt declared a bank holiday one day after his March 4 inauguration ceremony and set the NRA into action. Compared to Herbert Hoover's quiet brand of leadership, this whirlwind of activity gave the nation a sense of recovery.

It was 1933 and a still unknown novelist named John Steinbeck had published a poorly received work titled, *To A God Unknown*. Groucho, Harpo, Chico and Zeppo released their last film as "The Four Marx Brothers," a wild satire on war concocted by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby, *Duck Soup*. Perhaps their greatest film, it too was trounced by the critics.

Tobacco Road, a shocking play of human degradation, became the talk of Broadway, while two of New York's wickedest wits, Messrs. Kaufman and Woollcott, teamed up for the disappointing *The Dark Tower*.

Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart had temporarily left Broadway for some lucrative movie offers. Hollywood had stepped up its efforts to provide escapist entertainment to a Depression-weary nation and in 1933...skinny Stan Laurel and tubby Oliver Hardy sneaked off to the *Sons of the Desert* convention, telling their wives they were going to Hawaii for their health. Meanwhile, *King Kong* carried the lovely Fay Wray to the top of the Empire State Building; Claude Rains pulled his disappearing act in *The Invisible Man*; Walt Disney was delighting audiences with an average of two Mickey Mouse cartoons each month; Wallace Beery and Marie Dressler recaptured their wonderful *Min and Bill* chemistry with *Tugboat Annie*; premiere Broadway dancer Fred Astaire made his film debut opposite Joan Crawford, Clark Gable, and the Three Stooges in *Dancing Lady*; Frank Capra, a former gagman for Mack Sennett, garnered some increased respect as a director with his *Lady for a Day*; James Cagney showed he was more than just a tough-guy gangster type by tap dancing his way through *Footlight Parade*; and sultry Mae West sang "A Guy What Takes His Time" in *She Done Him Wrong*, a spoof which co-starred an up-and-coming Cary Grant.

For those who preferred to stay at home for their entertainment, Kate Smith,

Rudy Vallee and Paul Whiteman made up the vanguard of radio's musical stars, with Amos n' Andy, Ed Wynn and Fred Allen offering humorous interludes, and Clem McCarthy and Mel Allen handling the sportscasting duties.

Golfing great Bobby Jones was in Augusta, Georgia, laying the foundation for a tournament that would eventually draw international attention. It would be called simply, *The Masters*. A pathetic Italian giant named Primo Carnera, owned and manipulated by the mob, sat on the heavyweight boxing throne. The most inept of all champions, he would be knocked to the canvas eleven times the following year against an opponent "the boys" could not buy off: Max Baer. Baseball was still the national pastime and the New York Yankees its premiere team, although the year before seemed to be the last truly great season for the Bronx Bombers of Ruth, Gehrig and Dickey.

A survey revealed that reading had become America's favorite form of recreation. Radio placed second, while films ran third. Although entertainment and sports thrived in a nation escaping the harsh realities of the Depression, there were enough fads and headlines to capture the country's imagination.

Jigsaw puzzles became a fad in 1933, along with long fingernails popularized by Marlene Dietrich. Columnists ruled the newspaper world, with Walter Winchell, Westbrook Pegler, Broun and Franklin Pierce Adams leading the pack. And a new weekly news magazine, appropriately titled *Newsweek*, hit the stands with its breezy, summary format.

Prohibition was repealed in 1933 and the "great experiment" was relegated to a select list of notorious historical failures.

The man behind the kidnapping and murder of the Lindbergh baby a year earlier was still at large, as was John Dillinger. In New York, mobster Dutch Schultz was recklessly continuing his ill-fated rise to power. Somewhat more calculating, Charles "Lucky" Luciano was figuring out a way to put the "organiz- ed" into "organized crime."

A man with a Charlie Chaplin moustache had consolidated his power in Germany to the point of total authority. With Germany under his thumb, Adolf Hitler would soon look to other countries to conquer. On another continent, Japan reached out to invade the area of China known as Manchuria, setting into motion the series of events that would culminate in World War II.

And into this atmosphere of a world exploding with change in 1933, the Barter Theatre opened its doors in Abingdon, a town rapid change had passed by....

Abingdon: one of the oldest communities in the Southwest region of Virginia. It first appeared on a map by surveyor Thomas Lewis as "Burkes Garden." The site was renamed by no less than Daniel Boone, who camped there during his first trip westward about 1760. According to legend, Boone and his companion, Nathaniel Gist—who were forging the famed "Wilderness Trail" to Kentucky—made camp at a spring near where the present county jail is located, only to have their dogs attacked by a wolf pack from a nearby cave. The wolves' den at the crest of a hill is now the location of the Cave House, a well-

known local landmark. Abingdon's first official name thus became Wolf Hill.

Since Wolf Hill naturally became a "crossroads to the West," an actual village was quickly established, complete with a church. But the very first building erected was a powder magazine, later a courthouse leveled by Northern troops in 1864. When a fort was constructed in 1776 on Captain Joseph Black's farm, Wolf Hill became Black's Fort—a distribution point for mail and supplies. And, that same year, the Virginia General Assembly named the settlement the seat of the newly established Washington County, named after the general from Virginia early in the struggle for independence and long before he was acknowledged as "The Father of his Country." The General Assembly also changed the name of Black's Fort to Abingdon in October, 1778.

Some feel the name came from the Duke of Abingdon by way of friends in the area. Still others contend it was simply taken by pioneers from the town of Abingdon in England. Most, however, say "it was named after a parish in which Martha Washington worshipped as a girl."

Southwest Virginia's first post office was established in Abingdon in 1793, the only post office in Washington County as late as 1833.

"By the late 1830s," reads one widely distributed local history, "Abingdon had grown to be an established merchant town with hotels and taverns for the wagonmasters, mercantile houses, tanyards, grocers, wheelwrights, blacksmiths, shoemakers, house carpenters, stone masons, bricklayers, jewelers, and one millinery shop. It had everything the settlers further west would want from the civilized east, plus all the things demanded by the merchants and their families."

"Creating the atmosphere of the town," the narrative continues, "are the buildings from Abingdon's past. The McDonald Tavern on East Main Street is the oldest building in Abingdon, built in 1779. On Court Street is the first brick dwelling, built for William King in 1803. Other beautiful homes line Main Street, one of the most famous being the General Francis Preston home, built between 1830 and 1832, which is now the center building of the Martha Washington Inn."

Actually, the stately Preston home was turned into the Martha Washington College for Girls in 1853. It was temporarily used as a hospital during the Civil War. Another school, the Stonewall Jackson Institute for Women, eventually set up offices and classrooms on a hillside several blocks from Main Street about the turn of the century.

An industry boom hit the surrounding towns in the 1880s, but Abingdon remained a small, elegant community tucked in the beautiful, rolling hills of Southwest Virginia. Located in a fertile valley between the Blue Ridge and Appalachian Mountains; lying between two main forks of the Holston River; and in the shadow of Mount Rogers, Virginia's highest peak, Abingdon existed through farming—mainly dairy, tobacco, cattle and poultry—very light industry and its two colleges.

In 1930, Abingdon was near four "good-sized towns": Bristol, Tennessee-

Virginia, a railroad center with a state line running down its main street and a focal point for a five-state area; Johnson City, Tenn., the largest with a population of 25,000; Kingsport, Tenn., the home of the growing Tennessee Eastman photochemical plant; and Elizabethton, Tenn.

The area boasted little in the way of cultural heritage, with the exception of an already national reputation for country-western music. Indeed, when the Victor Talking Machine Company sent representative Ralph Peer to “the mountains” in 1927 to audition “hillbilly” talent, the moon-faced agent set up shop in Bristol. The surrounding hills and hollows of Appalachia echoed with the sound of grassroots music made by generations of families on crude, handcrafted instruments. The nasal lyrics sprung from an isolated existence spent working in the coal mines of Southwest Virginia, laboring on the railroad lines, scratching a living from a sometime fertile, sometime rocky soil, and praising the Lord from a pine pew. Records, once all the rage, were being threatened by the popularity of radio, and the major recording labels were scrambling to find new and fresh artists to boost dwindling sales. Into Peer’s makeshift studio strode Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family—A.P., Maybelle and Sara. Those 1927 recordings made in Bristol started a national craze for country music. The event is recognized as the birth of the country-western music industry.

Still, inhabitants of the region saw nothing special in either Rodgers or the Carter Family. And it was hard to fathom all the fuss being made by the rest of the country. Music was a way of life, but it was certainly no way to make a living. Or, as one old saying went, “a man who played the banjo wasn’t worth the bullet to shoot him.” Although Southwest Virginia and Upper East Tennessee were the richest areas for musicians and country songs, it was all taken for granted and the industry soon set up headquarters some 300 miles away in Nashville.

Mainly descended from Scottish, Irish and English stock, the residents of this area were extremely religious—Presbyterian, Baptists, Methodists. To them, music was for singing in church, humming in the fields, or playing during Saturday night get-togethers in the kitchen. Ironically, it was their hymns and rich folk music heritage that served as a cornerstone for so much of the growing country-western music field.

As for the stage, it was considered a wicked place—the playground of the devil, “the legs of Satan.” An actor was a shiftless no-account who couldn’t make an honest living. Into Abingdon, into this time, into this environment, arrived Bob Porterfield and his company of New York actors in 1933.