

# Talent and Perseverance Important, but Billy's Not One to Underestimate Luck

**Editor's Note**—Today's guest columnist is Broadway's most fabulous producer, currently on the boards with "Carmen Jones" and coming up with "The Seven Lively Arts."—**DOROTHY KILGALLEN.**

**BY BILLY ROSE.**

**NEW YORK, July 8.**—Perhaps the most underestimated element in the Broadway scene is the element of luck. Sure, you have to have talent and perseverance. But, it seems to me you can't get too far on those alone. You still need luck.

I don't want you to get the notion that I'm doing a mock-modesty act when I say I have always been a lucky guy. I honestly think I have been.

For instance. Along about 1917 I was walking along Riverside Drive, aimless, restless, not quite sure what to do with myself. I sat down on a bench, picked up a newspaper which happened to be lying there, and read an ad calling for expert stenographers for the War Industries Board.

That sounded like a hunch to me. I was a pretty good stenographer, I had won some medals, and this seemed like a fine opportunity. I took the next train to Washington, got the job, and met Bernard M. Baruch—who has been a staunch friend and guiding influence throughout my life.

If I had not sat down on that particular park bench . . .

## A GOOD FRIEND.

In 1935, Jimmy Durante and Paul Whiteman were well started on the rehearsal of "Jumbo." The show was going nicely, the elephants were pawing the ground nervously, and everything looked wonderful—except that I didn't have a theater, and the only theater which had a menagerie and which fitted this particular type of show, the Hippodrome, was in the hands of bankers who didn't want to be bothered booking any shows.

I sent a cable to Baruch, who happened to be on the Normandie bound for Europe, explaining my dilemma. The next morning the president of the bank which held the mortgage on the Hippodrome phoned me, and turned over the keys to the theater without further ado. If I had not met Baruch . . .

## FORT WORTH BREAK.

I was in Hollywood on a visit, after "Jumbo" closed and was wandering around the Metro lot. Suddenly a voice hailed me. I looked around and saw Rufus LeMaire hanging out of a window. He called me into the office and showed me a wire he had just received, a few minutes earlier, from Amon Carter in Fort Worth. Carter asked LeMaire to suggest a producer for the Fort Worth Frontier Fiesta. That very night LeMaire and I were on a train to Fort Worth. A few days later I had a contract paying me \$1,000 a day for 100 days.

If I had not been strolling around the Metro lot just at that moment . . .

## AQUA IDEA.

I was in Cleveland. The city fathers had sent for me and asked me to give their World's Fair a replica of the Casa Manana I had built in Fort Worth. I wanted to do something a bit different if I could, and was pondering the problem. One night I took a slow stroll along the shore of Lake Erie. And I saw two little girls swimming to a record of "The Blue Danube." Immediately, I thought, if I could multiply those two girls by 100! And the Aquacade was born.

If I had not gone walking at that particular moment . . .

## SENSE OF HUMOR.

One of the swimmers in that first Cleveland Aquacade was Eleanor Holm, who later became my wife. I've often wondered who those two kids were swimming in Lake Erie. I owe them a lot.

About 20 years ago I wrote a song entitled "That Old Gang of Mine," which was accepted for publications by Leo Feist. The publisher then lost faith in the song and buried it. I was sure it had merit, but couldn't convince my publishers, so I arranged for

them to release the rights to Irving Berlin's company. Still it was no go. There were no important acts to introduce the song and get it started.

I bought myself a large prop lamp-post, lugged it onto a train and went to Boston with it. In Boston, then, there was an important vaudeville act named Van and Schenck. They were in the Follies, they were very important, and I didn't know them. I went to the stage door, lamp-post and all.

Intrigued, they let me introduce myself. I told them that Diogenes went looking for an honest man with a lamp, and I went looking for a singer with a lamp-post. They laughed and let me show them the song. They liked it. They sang it. It became one of the biggest hits of all time.

If Van and Schenck had not happened to have a sense of humor . . .

## GOLDEN IDEA.

There was an Ascap dinner for Gene Buck at my Diamond Horseshoe. During the evening, Oscar Hammerstein and I sat at the bar, next to each other, chatting. He told me about an idea he had, an Americanization of the opera, "Carmen," with an all-Negro cast. It sounded exciting to me. I asked him to let me see the script, he had titled "Carmen Jones."

If that party were held somewhere else other than my saloon, if I were not, by accident, sitting next to Hammerstein . . .

## LUCK IN REVERSE.

We were in Boston with "Carmen Jones." It had opened in Philadelphia and got a wonderful reception. It had gone on to Boston, and the people loved it. We were ready for New York—but there were no theaters. No theaters available and none appeared in the looming. I had a quarter of a million dollar show, a potential Broadway hit, but what was I to do with it? We couldn't stay on the road forever.

There were not even any theaters available on the road. It looked like we might have to put the production into storage. And then one day I got a phone call from New York. "Artists and Models" had opened and was ready to close almost in the same breath. The biggest, most appropriate theater in New York, for purposes of this show, the Broadway, was available.

## WAIT AND SEE.

I was walking down Broadway and bumped into Kelcy Allen, who always has some pleasant reminiscing to do. He told me he had heard somewhere that the Ziegfeld Theater was for sale. I went home and checked. I put my attorneys to work. A few months later, Ben Marden and I paid out \$630,000 in cash, and became the proprietors of the house.

A year from now I'll let you know whether I ought to be grateful to Kelcy or punch him in the nose.



**DUART PERMANENT**

OPEN  
OUR OPERATOR

**DOLLAR**

THIRD FLOOR MOORE BLDG