

TOP BANANA...

by Charles D. Rice

Photographs by Joseph Heppner

Phil Silvers, who started out in burlesque, has found that the \$6 customers are no different from the 35-centers — they love a “boffola”

THREE days after “High Button Shoes,” Broadway’s new musical hit, opened, Phil Silvers was still swamped with telegrams of congratulations. He read and re-read them with hoarse murmurs of gratitude (he had laryngitis). One in particular brought forth croaks of delight every time he unfolded it: “LOVE AND KISSES, RITA HAYWORTH.” “Not bad,” he said, “for a guy who started out as Third Banana at Minsky’s.”

Third Banana, for the uninitiated, is a very humble station in show business. During the depression Phil played burlesque; the average burlesque company carries three comedians who are always known as First, Second and Third Bananas. (Non-comedians are Straight Men, chorus girls are Slaves, and any female performer who is articulate enough to speak lines has the dignified title of Talking Woman. But more of this interesting industry later...)

If you can catch up with Silvers between steam baths (which he is confident will cure anything from poison ivy to heart failure), you will find him a very funny fellow. You will say that he is probably worth all the noise Broadway is making about him.

In “High Button Shoes” Mr. Silvers has exhumed the almost forgotten art of the boffola, or belly laugh. Many Broadway people think he is the next big new comedian, due to follow in the footsteps of Danny Kaye, Bob Hope and Jimmy Durante.

Broadway is happy at the turn of events, because practically everyone in show business is a close friend of Phil’s. The public is apparently happy too, since it is buying nearly \$40,000 worth of tickets each week. Mr. Silvers is happy because he collects a percentage of this sum — which, his friends insist, he spends mainly on steam baths.

The Jackpot

SILVERS is particularly happy because he’s been knocking around in movies for seven years without quite reaching stardom; now he returns to his home town and suddenly hits the jackpot.

Silvers treads the boards in “High Button Shoes” as Harrison Floy, a cheerful swindler who will gladly sell you the chain off your own watch. Charging about the stage, hawking everything from fake real estate to “genu-wine ‘Pantagonian’ diamonds, folks — only thirty-five cents,” he follows in the grand tradition of W. C. Fields and Groucho Marx.

Because of his horn-rimmed glasses, Silvers also reminds one of Harold Lloyd — or at least a sort of poolroom Harold Lloyd. As a matter of fact, his glasses, like Lloyd’s, have no lenses. Real glasses are seldom worn on the stage because they flash light rays back at the audience. “I wish I could wear my regular glasses,” he says.

“I’m blind as a bat without them. Some night I’m going to trip over a chorus girl and break my neck.” He thinks for a moment and adds, “Of course, if it gets a laugh, we’ll keep it in the show.”

Outside of steam baths, the most extraordinary thing about Silvers is his wife, Jo Carroll Dennison, who must certainly be one of the prettiest girls in the North Temperate Zone. (In fact she won the Miss America title in 1942 and was a movie starlet for a while.) Miss Dennison is from Texas and finds the New York climate rigorous, but says she’ll stick it out as long as Phil is so happy. “He’s like a kid with a Christmas tree. The show’s a hit and he’s back with his old friends.”

“Talking Woman”

BEING an intelligent young woman as well as pretty, she has put her spare time to use by enrolling for some courses at near-by Hunter College. Phil is very proud of her scholarship. “Brilliant girl, brilliant!” he says. “A real Talking Woman if ever I saw one.”

In the early stages of “High Button Shoes,” Phil was hardly as happy as he is today. Constant rehearsing made his throat buckle up like an accordion, and his part seemed to him hopelessly unfunny. When the show tried out in Philadelphia the local critics gave it a terrible roasting. Silvers, they said, was particularly tragic.

During the next three weeks, while the show was in Philadelphia, Phil and his stooge, Joey Faye, threw out a lot of the original material and substituted new lines of their own invention. Some of their gags were resurrected from old burlesque days, which goes to prove that a joke which makes 35-cent customers laugh can make six-dollar customers laugh even harder.

At least, opening night on Broadway seemed to prove it. Blasé first-nighters roared, and even the critics were constrained to smile. Silvers was suddenly First Banana of Broadway. “LOVE AND KISSES, RITA HAYWORTH!”

Actually, Phil didn’t start in show business as a Third Banana. He really began at the age of eight in the tough Brownsville section of Brooklyn, doing a singing act with playmates on street corners and in bars.

A few years later Gus Edwards heard him on the boardwalk at Coney Inland, recruited him for his famous kiddie revue. Phil worked with Edwards for three years. Then his voice changed and he got fired. He tried another vaudeville act as a juvenile comedian. After a couple of years, vaudeville died (he wasn’t specifically responsible). Finally he went into burlesque. Success! Third Banana . . . Second Banana . . . First Banana! A hundred and twenty-five bucks for only 28 shows a week!

Silvers says he never realized how happy he

gladaseeya!



PITCH MAN: Phil sounds like Groucho Marx, looks like a poolroom Harold Lloyd

was in burlesque. "We did the noon show while we were still yawning. Then we did three or four more shows and yawned off the stage to bed again. But we never had a worry. We didn't need much money because we could never get away long enough to spend any. Best of all, there was almost no rehearsing."

A burlesque rehearsal, according to Phil, amounted to this: The stage manager would say "Hey, what are you guys going to do for next week's show?" The First and Second Bananas would say, "Oh, we'll open with the 'Lemon and Grapefruit' bit, and then we'll do the 'Sailors on a Desert Island' bit and the 'Two Eggs, Fry One on One Side and One on the Other Side' bit, and then we'll close with 'Oh, Doctor, I Feel So Good.'"

"O.K.," the stage manager would say, "But you'd better switch the 'Two Eggs' bit. Abbott and Costello used that here three weeks ago. Why don't you try the 'Lying On My Veranda' bit?"

There are about 200 such "bits" that have been used in burlesque from time immemorial, and every Banana is expected to know them all. "We seldom tried anything new," says Phil. "We didn't want to startle the customers. They liked to read their newspapers in between strip acts."

They Even Applauded

NEVERTHELESS, the customers started dropping their newspapers when Phil came on. Some even applauded. After a while Broadway comedians dropped in to catch his show and swipe some of his ad libs. Columnists began to mention him. That was the end of his carefree days. Producer Lew Brown gave him a part in a musical comedy. The show turned out to be a dubious effort called "Yokel Boy," but Silvers himself did well enough. Louis B. Mayer signed him to a Hollywood contract.

That was in 1940. Phil spent the next four years trying to get onto the movie lot (the guards won't let you in merely because you have a contract). Meanwhile he took a job in a Hollywood night club, became the talk of the town. As a result he was actually offered a part in a picture, and he passed the guards with thumb upon nose.

In the past two years he's appeared in a string of musical extravaganzas, such as "Coney Island," "Cover Girl" and "Diamond Horseshoe." He was nearly a sensation.

But not quite a sensation.

Perhaps the truth is that Phil Silvers is basically a Broadway Banana, and needs a flesh-and-blood audience that he can actually hear laugh. Anyway, he had to get back on a stage to hit his real stride.

A few years ago Phil was entering a restaurant with comedienne Patsy Kelly, and a kid came up to ask Patsy for her autograph. She signed the notebook and said, "Say, you better get Phil Silvers' autograph too. He's going to be a big star some day."

The kid looked him up and down. "I can wait," he said, and walked off.

Well, sonny, you've waited long enough. Sign him up quick. Where can you find him? See that cigar store down the street? Just walk on past it till you come to a sign that says "Al's Steam Baths." *The End*



STUDIOUS, beautiful Jo Carroll amazes Phil

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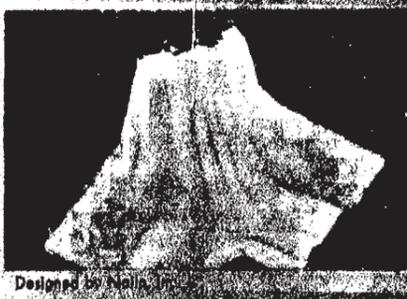
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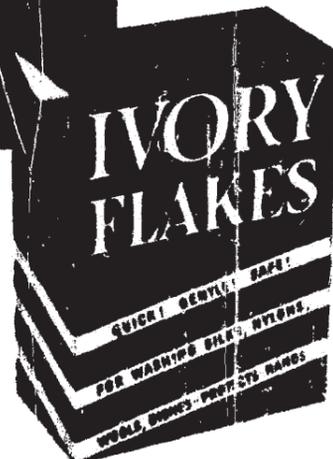
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