After the Civil War, when much of American show business was first developing into its familiar form, a great many common people found a temporary escape from the concerns, frustrations, and anxieties of modernization in the fantasy world of musical comedy, a world of dazzlingly beautiful productions, lovely women and handsome men, happy romances and even happier endings, and light-hearted humor, music, song, and dance. Early American musicals borrowed from European ballet, with its short-skirted women, from European extravaganzas, with their spectacular scenery, from European operettas, with their semiclassical scores, and from other American popular entertainment forms, with their folk-based songs, popular dances, earthy humor, burlesques of high culture, and their total disregard for dramatic continuity. Even though, or perhaps because, musicals were unlikely blends of elitist European culture and American popular entertainment, they proved extremely popular in the late nineteenth century.

The term "musicals" actually covered a wide-range of shows, from comic operas to variety revues. Some of the productions defied classification, but three basic types of musicals eventually evolved: the spectacular extravaganza; the show centered on everyday life, language, and lore of common Americans; and the European-based op-
eretta. The lavish extravaganzas "educated" their audiences, just as Barnum’s museum had "instructed" an earlier generation. But late-nineteenth-century Americans’ curiosity focused not on the wonders or freaks of nature but rather on the nations and peoples of the world. The United States was becoming a world power, and show business brought the world to its audiences in its lavish productions set in exotic lands. These extravaganzas also appealed to and represented Americans’ pride in the size of the nation’s products, wealth, and power. Like the Centennial celebration that featured the largest buildings and machines ever seen, the opulent stage spectacles were truly breath-taking in scale and grandeur, making conspicuous consumption at least temporarily available to common people in the age of the “Robber Barons.” The musicals that centered on common people reasserted the importance of average Americans, offered catchy songs and popular dances, and provided new themes, new characters, and new heroes for the new age. Coming well after the anti-aristocratic diatribes of pre-Civil War show business and at a time when common people’s lives became extremely difficult and trying, the third form, the operetta or Comic Opera, offered democratic Americans a chance to experience vicariously the almost dreamlike upper-class world of elegance, grace, and order. These three strains remain part of the American musical stage to this day.

In the summer of 1866, Henry C. Jarrett, an aspiring young New York City theater manager, with the financial backing of Wall Street broker, Harry Palmer, brought a European ballet troupe to America and outfitted it with beautiful sets and the latest sexy French costumes. Since the late 1840s, European ballet dancers had proved great attractions in the United States (more for the women’s short skirts than for the dancing), so Jarrett and Palmer looked forward to making a nice profit. But before the new troupe could open in New York, the theater it was booked into, The Academy of Music, burned down and the only other suitable theater, Niblo’s Garden, had already booked an untired melodrama, The Black Crook. Jarrett and Palmer grew desperate as their high-priced company lay idle, not earning a cent. William Wheatley, the manager of Niblo’s, felt uncertain about his shaky new production, so when Jarrett and Palmer suggested combining their two shows, Wheatley leapt at the chance to add a certain draw to his bill, even if it did produce an improbable combination of European ballet and spectacle with a melodrama loosely based on Faust. But since American audiences were accustomed to hodge-podge bills that mixed serious drama with variety acts and farces, few people at the time realized that Niblo’s polyglot production of The Black Crook was a landmark production in the history of American show business, the first major step toward both the burlesque show and the musical comedy.

The show was an instant sensation, but certainly not because of the story: Hertzog, the black crook, contracts to deliver one soul a year to the devil in exchange for magical powers and an additional year of life. Meanwhile, evil count Wolfenstein kidnaps the heroine, Amina, and throws her lover, the hero, Rudolph, into a dungeon. As the end of the year approaches, Hertzog, who has singled out Rudolph as his annual victim, magically frees Rudolph from his cell and convinces him to
set off in search of a fictional treasure supposedly buried deep in the forest. On his quest, Rudolph saves the life of a dove—white, of course—from a serpent. Lest the symbolism escape the audience, the dove immediately turns into Stalacta, the fairy queen, who exposes Hertzog’s fiendish trickery. The tide has turned in favor of Virtue. In true melodramatic fashion, goodness is ultimately rewarded (Amina and Rudolph are married), and evil is punished (Wolfenstein is dead and Hertzog, the black crook, is carried off to hell by the agent of darkness).

The major value of the plot was not in its melodramatic machinations, although they were no more implausible than many others, but rather in the abundant opportunities it provided for spectacular special effects. "The scenery is magnificent," the New York Tribune’s critic observed, "the ballet is beautiful; the drama is—rubbish." To house what the producers agreed should be an elaborate extravaganza, they remade the Niblo’s Garden stage. Every floor board moved in grooves, allowing crews to change the shape and structure of the stage during the production; trapdoors popped open and closed all over the floor; and the new machinery raised and lowered huge sets in seconds from the cellar, to the stage, to the rafters. The first act, devoted
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to plot development, dragged. But when the "Grand Ballet of Gems"—the gems portrayed by scantily clad women—opened the second act, the extravaganza, excitement, and sexual stimulation began. Besides the two hundred well-shaped female legs daringly displayed in flesh-colored tights, the production dazzled audiences with its special effects: scenes magically rising out of the floor, fairies soaring through the air, shimmering stalagmites and stalactites glistening in Stalacta's crystal grotto, a "hurricane of gauze" sweeping through a mountain pass, the dramatic appearances of satan, and a sensuous "pas de demons" dance in which four leotard-clad women wearing no skirts were possessed by the devil, demonstrating their possession with their devilish gyrations. On it went. For five and a half hours, the production's special effects and cavorting women stunned audiences, finally culminating in one last spectacular scene: "One by one, curtains of mist ascend and drift away," a critic gasped. "Silver couches, on which the fairies loll in negligent grace, ascend and descend amid silver rain. From the clouds drop gilded chariots and the white forms of angels. It is a very beautiful pageant." American audiences had never seen anything like it.

The "beautiful pageant" ran an unprecedented 474 performances in its initial New York engagement. To maintain interest in it during the sixteen-month run, the producers regularly added new attractions to the already sensational show: an opulent ballroom scene, two new balleets, a military music and drill production number, one hundred and fifty children in a "baby ballet," and an "original and wonderful mechanical donkey." The production was revived in New York City eight times between 1868 and 1892, while touring companies performed it throughout the nation, the original producers having franchised the exclusive territorial production rights. The most controversial facet of the production, its generous display of women's bodies, drew strong denunciations from ministers and newspaper editors. "The police should arrest all engaged in such a violation of public decency," bellowed James Gordon Bennett in the New York Herald. But by the mid-1860s, such condemnations of the show as "Sodom and Gomorrah" and "ancient heathen orgies" seemed only to increase attendance. The times were changing.

Besides the leering old men that reviewers discovered in the front row seats and the large masses of common people in the gallery, high-society people went "slumming" to the production, some of the women in the audience reportedly rivalling the female performers in showing off their bodies. Society women attended The Black Crook in dresses with so much décolleté, one satirical journal sniped, that they were cut "V" shape in the back and "W" in the front. No one could stay away from the new sensation. Loving crowds as he did, P. T. Barnum could not resist the chance to make an appearance before the production's large audience. "Now watch the fuss they make over me," he boasted expectantly to a friend as he conspicuously swaggered into the theater. "In a moment you'll hear them say, 'there's Barnum—there in the box.' But the patrons, focusing their attention on the stage and buzzing about the production, either did not notice or did not care about Barnum's presence—not even when he leaned far out of his box and loudly raised his voice.

As the first American musical show to achieve a long, prosperous run, The Black Crook demonstrated the huge potential audiences for lavishly mounted productions featuring music, dance, and pretty women in scanty costumes. But The Black Crook, based
on European ballet and extravaganza, was far from an American show business form. The story of American musicals in the late nineteenth century is the story of the adaptation and naturalization of European productions to American tastes. American audiences loved grandeur, opulence, and colossal scale. And they loved looking at pretty women. But they preferred foot-tapping music, recognizable dances, understandable dialogue, and folksy humor. They liked European form and performance style, but they wanted American content. These two impulses—European sophistication and American vitality—continued to run throughout the history of American musicals. It was fifty years of experimentation and stupendous productions before producers found a satisfying, distinctively American blend.

In October 1868, a show opened in New York that was destined to break The Black Crook’s consecutive performance record. Although the new production offered a wide range of attractions, including its own “Baby Ballet,” the first American roller-skating troupe, circus acts, bicyclists, subterranean grottoes, a lavish panorama of Naples, and stunning special effects like a steamboat ex-
plosion and fire, it featured a male star who substituted pantomime comedy for sex appeal. George L. Fox began his acting career in George C. Howard's first production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but later specialized in mime, becoming America's greatest pantomimist. The plot of *Humpty Dumpty*, even less important to the show than *The Black Crook*'s, bore scant resemblance to the Mother Goose stories from which it drew its title. The original fairy-tale characters appeared only briefly, a Fairy Queen transforming them into commedia dell'arte figures. Humpty Dumpty, for example, became the Clown—others became Harlequin and Pantaloon. The evening's entertainment mixed production numbers and pantomime comedy heavily laced with pathos. Fox a critic applauded, "was not content to please merely by being knocked down numerous times and jumping over tables and through windows. His muteness and passivity, were infinitely more ludicrous than the bustling antics of other clowns, as also was his affectation of ignorant simplicity and credulous innocence." Fox starred as The Clown over a thousand times before his death in 1877. His unique talent for evoking in his audiences a wide range of emotions accounts for his popularity when imitations of him failed. After Fox's death pantomime as a major American show business feature lay dormant for decades until motion pictures revived this comic art and Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd perfected it. But if pantomime in musicals died with Fox, extravaganza and lavish production certainly did not.

In 1874, *Evangeline*, nominally a parody of Longfellow's poem, joined the growing number of lavish extravaganzas trying to cash in on *The Black Crook*'s and *Humpty Dumpty*'s great successes. But it was not just another spectacular production. It was a major step in the evolution of American musicals. Besides being the first show to be billed a "musical comedy," it was also the first to have an original score and to rely on common language, popular music and dance. Although supposedly a burlesque, a parody of Longfellow's poem, the play had little connection with it, using settings as far from the poem's Nova Scotia as Arizona and Africa, along with gimmicks as diverse as a spouting whale, a dancing "cow" played by two men in one costume, a woman in tights playing the male lead, and three-hundred-pound George Fortesque wearing a dress in a leading female role.

After seeing a touring English burlesque troupe and finding it "highly depressing" because of the peculiar density of the British humor," Edward E. Rice and a friend decided to see if they could do better. The result was *Evangeline*, a show that initially opened to fill a two-week summer-scheduling gap at Niblo's Garden with an economical production. But with its wide variety of features, the show became an unexpected and long-lived success, with versions of it touring the country for thirty years. Although Rice originally set out to win the "respectable family" audiences that were offended by the sexual excesses of *The Black Crook* and the early girlie shows, he managed to spice up his show by casting women in male roles and dressing them in tunics and tights. But this was not primarily a leg show. Besides the dancing cow, Rice's other unique creation, a mute observer wandering in and out of the production with a sometimes comical, sometimes philosophical attitude, intrigued audiences. Combining production numbers like a balloon trip to Arizona—a distant and exotic land at that time—with a varied series of songs, comedy routines, and dances, Rice created an appealing eve-
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ning’s entertainment that continually drew large audiences, despite critics’ condemnations. “What is there in Evangeline,” one reviewer wondered in 1880, “that should ever have gained for it the amount of public favor it has enjoyed?” Few tried to answer the question directly, but Rice and many other producers unsuccessfully tried to reproduce Evangeline’s success. With its blend of sexuality and “cornpone,” its contrasts between a huge man in a dress and a shapely woman in the hero’s clothes, its earthy puns that one critic called “slanguage,” its distinctively American content, its dancing cow, its silent observer—commentator who seemed in some uncertain way to raise the level of the production above that of the ordinary musical-comedy extravaganza, the original continued to outdraw and outlive its successors.

Since Europeans and European innovations regularly influenced the American musical comedy, it is fitting that three Hungarian emigrant brothers—Imre, Bollosy, and Arnold Kiralfy—raised extravaganza to its nineteenth-century heights in the United States, heights that left no room for embellishment until twentieth-century technology made new stage effects possible. Arriving in the United States in 1868, the performing brothers gained experience in the pioneering American extravaganzas, Arnold by dancing in an 1868 revival of The Black Crook and Imre and Bollosy by working as Harlequins in an 1871 revival of Humpty Dumpty. The brothers quickly realized that American audiences loved realistic large-scale spectacles, the kinds of productions they knew from Europe, and they resolved to create their own lavish shows. In 1875, the Kiralfy’s truly dazzling production of Jules Verne’s Around the World in 80 Days opened in the rebuilt Academy of Music. Focusing on the most exotic and romantic aspects of the story—Suez Canal, Hindustan, Calcutta, the Taj Mahal, a Brahmin cremation, elephants, an Indian raid in the American West, and “Fetish Dances, and Oriental Groupings by Lovely Maidens in Sumptuous Attire”—the show brought what seemed the entire world to American audiences with unprecedented realism. “Nothing so splendid has ever been seen in this city,” marveled a critic in New York, the city that had seen The Black Crook, Humpty Dumpty, Evangeline, and every other American extravaganza.

Like other successful businessmen in and out of show business, the Kiralfys meticulously planned every detail of their production. They discovered that using pastel colors for their backdrops, for example, created an atmosphere of spaciousness, beauty, and fantasy. It also threw the actors in the foreground into vivid relief, giving each scene a deepened sense of proportion, scale, and realism. The Kiralfys were the first American producers to make tree branches with irregular naturalistic patterns. Although audiences probably did not notice these little touches, they all added to the overall effect of the productions that seemed truly extraordinary even in the age of extravaganzas. But it was not attention to detail that attracted huge audiences for the shows; it was continual innovation. The Kiralfys boasted of their 1883, Excelsior, for example, that the “novel electric effects [were] by the Edison Electric Light Company, under the personal direction of Mr. Edison.” The electric lighting was a special attraction; gas still provided the bulk of the illumination.

George L. Fox as the Clown in Humpty Dumpty. NYLC.
Lest Edison’s new gadget not prove a great enough lure, *Excelsior*’s subject was no less than the entire story of the rise of modern civilization. Cast members took the parts of metaphorical figures like Light, Darkness, and Civilization as well as portraying peoples from all over the world—Indians, Arabs, Englishmen, Chinese, Turks, and Frenchmen—in a wide range of settings. Besides its many American performers, the huge cast of the gigantic production that had something for everybody also boasted the Parisian Eden Theatre Ballet Company, The Venetian Ballet Troupe, and “the most distinguished artists of the Scala Theatre of Milan.” After three acts and twelve lavish productions, the show climaxed with “The Triumph of Light over Darkness and Peaceful Union of Nations.” Such productions, that neatly encapsulated the history of man, culminating with the United States, of course, provided frustrated late-nineteenth-century Americans with a reassuring sense of order and of national importance as well as with “information” about the world.

In 1888, after the brothers had split up, Imre staged *The Fall of Rome* as an outdoor spectacle on Staten Island using tons of armor, a huge ballet, elephants, chariot racing, and a cast of 2000! Three years later, he carried the extravaganzas to an absurd level, by combining with Barnum and Bailey’s Greatest Show on Earth to stage Imre Kiralfy’s Sublime, Nautical, Martial and Poetical Spectacle: *Columbus and The Discovery of Amer-*
ica. The spectacle began in Spain with the expulsion of the Moors, and then followed the career of Christopher Columbus: beseeching Isabella for funds, crossing the ocean (quelling a mutiny en route), discovering Indian-infested America, and returning to a triumphal reception in Barcelona. With the combined resources and talents of the nation's biggest circus and its greatest producer of extravaganzas, the Columb us show brought the originally European, ballet-based extravaganza to its nineteenth-century culmination, giving it American content, American form, and American grandeur, with the discovery of the nation as its theme and a circus as its cast.

In 1905, when the $2,000,000 Hippodrome Theatre, "the largest, safest, and costliest playhouse in the world," opened in New York City, extravaganza at last had a properly palatial home, the Radio City Music Hall of its day. Besides boasting the most modern theatrical machinery in the world, two huge stages capable of holding six hundred performers and one hundred and fifty animals at the same time, and seating for over 5000 patrons, it featured on its downstairs floor a restaurant, a cafe, a menagerie, and a sideshow. The shows drew huge crowds, but the management made a profit from its extremely expensive productions only by running each extravaganza for an entire year. The 1905 opening show set the pattern, offering a circus and a ballet in the first half and a full, two-act realistic war spectacle, Andersonville, in the second. From 1907 to 1915, the Shuberts, who rivalled Ziegfeld as the nation's most lavish producers, ran the Hippodrome, offering an incredible array of actually colossal spectacles: Wild West shows; full two-ring circuses; naval battles in huge water tanks; automobile races; airplane dogfights; huge fires; fierce tornados; howling hurricanes; and the "Wars of the World," a kind of "Destruction's Greatest Hits," including the Crusades, the French Revolution, the Mexican-American War, and the Civil War. The 1913 show, America, dealt with the United States from the landing of Columbus to the evening rush hour at newly completed Grand Central Station in the opening scene! Subsequently, the audience visited the New Orleans levee, the Alamo, a New England farm, the East Side of New York, and the Panama Canal—each reproduced in lavish detail.

The productions and the theater itself were the stars at the Hippodrome, not the music, the performers, or the large numbers of shapely chorus girls. The shows continued in
their grand manner until 1925, when their appeal (perhaps undercut by motion pictures) decreased so much that the Hippodrome became a vaudeville theater, returning to its former glory only occasionally, as it did in 1935 as the home of Rodgers and Hart’s grandly produced circus musical, *Jumbo*. During its heyday no other productions—not even Ziegfeld’s—compared to the Hippodrome’s for sheer grandeur and magnificence. But like a huge lumbering dinosaur, it could not survive a basic change in environment. The Hippodrome could not compete with motion picture technology’s one-time-only production costs and frequent changes of bills. But it and the other extravaganzas that preceded it demonstrated that American audiences loved grandeur and huge spectacular pageants set in exotic lands, both of which motion pictures ultimately made into highly profitable box-office fare. The grand theaters, like the Hippodrome, the show business palaces, also made luxury and splendor available, at least temporarily, to anyone with twenty-five cents to spare, just as their stupendous shows “educated” the public about exotic lands and peoples, about the “magic” of new machinery and inventions, and about the glories of American history. Except for making spectacle a permanent feature of musicals, these huge shows, which more closely resembled circuses than normal theatrical produc-
tions, in the long run contributed little except glitter and glamour to the development of musical comedies.

While lavish spectacles dominated American musicals, small-scale, unpretentious musical productions that were focused on common people began to claim a place on the musical stage. In 1879, Nate Salisbury's Troubadours, a small group of traveling entertainers, returned to New York City from a Western tour through the Beaver Dam Concert Halls of the heartland. In New York, the troupe filled an open, off-season date at the San Francisco Minstrels' theater with a light-hearted, low-budgeted show, The Brook, which ran only two weeks but deserves an important place in the history of musicals.

The Brook was the first known production to employ what later became American musical comedy's distinctive characteristics. It told a story about average people and used vernacular music and dance to do it. The Brook featured no extravaganza, no machinery, no ballet, no elaborate choreography, no huge cast, and no women in tights. Its cast of five acted out the story of ordinary people going on an ordinary picnic, with somewhat embellished ordinary "hazards": salt spilling into the jam, fishbait "flavoring" the coffee, vinegar spicing up the sandwiches, and ants running all over everything and everyone. To these, Salisbury added a watermelon basket containing theatrical costumes instead of melons, which gave the picnickers a credible excuse to dress up, dance, and sing. After their frolic by the brook, they returned home and the play ended. It just ended—no great transformation scene, no huge production number, no extravaganza.

The object of the show, Salisbury explained, was "the natural reproduction of the jollity and funny mishaps that attend the usual picnic excursion." Unlike most musical productions of the day, it was not intended to be dazzling, awe-inspiring, or greater-than-life. As one critic observed, "it held nature up to the mirror." It made common people and everyday life subjects for musicals as well as for popular plays, while also perpetuating the prevalent stage image that the country, not the city, was the source of happiness and joy. The Brook and other similar productions provided a successful career for Salisbury until he took over management of the Buffalo Bill Cody shows, the sort of abrupt change that is "normal" for ambitious show business people. Because of Salisbury's success and because his type of show, then known as farce-comedy, was easy to finance, produce, and cast—without requiring ballet skills, trained voices, or large productions—Salisbury's Troubadours soon had many traveling competitors, troupes who carried the light musical comedies to the Beaver Dams of America, added a realistic, unpretentious quality to musical entertainment, and demonstrated that the American vernacular—the language, songs, dances, and humor of the common people—provided excellent material for musicals.

In 1879, the same year that Salisbury opened his rural, western-tested The Brook in New York City, Edward Harrigan and Tony Hart—a team that came to be known as the American Gilbert and Sullivan—opened their urban Bowery-tested Mulligan Guards. Harrigan established urban ethnic groups as major characters on the American stage. "It began," Harrigan recalled of his approach, "with the New York 'boy,' the Irish-American, and our African brother. As these grew in popularity," he explained, "I added the other prominent types which go to make up life in the metropolis and in every other large city of the Union and Canada. These are the Irishmen, Englishmen, German, Low German, Chinese, Italian, Russian, and Southern dandy." As desperately
Harrigan and Hart poster showing many of the team's features. NYLC.
as late-nineteenth-century Americans wanted to seek refuge from their troubles in rural and frontier myths and to believe the population was homogeneous, the nation had to come to grips with the city and its increasingly diverse population. Beginning with Harrigan and Hart, continuing through the work of Charles H. Hoyt, and culminating in George M. Cohan’s early-twentieth-century triumphs, the musical stage made urban life and people much more attractive and understandable.

As minstrels had first done thirty years before, Harrigan and Hart and their successors brought the vitality of the folk into show business. But they drew their characters from the ethnic neighborhoods of New York and other cities, not from the backlands. Unlike minstrelsy, Harrigan’s comedy laughed with as well as at minority groups. Harrigan and Hart, like Gilbert and Sullivan, chronicled and satirized elements of their societies with a new realism, lively humor, and captivating music. But while the Englishmen focused on the upper classes, the democratic Americans concentrated on the lower classes. “Polite society, wealth, and culture possess little or no color and picturesqueness,” Harrigan observed in terms that might have been lifted out of the 1830s and 1840s. “The chief use I make of them is as a foil to the poor, the workers, the great middle class.”

As a boy, Harrigan, the librettist and dramatist of the team, got a good taste of New York city workingmen and of popular entertainment. Quitting school in 1859 at age fourteen, he knocked about as an errand boy, printer’s devil, shipyard apprentice, and child actor, once giving a stump speech with Campbell’s Minstrels at the Bowery Theatre. After he shipped out to New Orleans and San Francisco, he again found his way from the wharf to the stage, turning comic caricatures of Negroes and Irishmen into a successful show business career in the late 1860s. As part of a two-man act, he drifted back from the West to New York and back from vaudeville to minstrelsy. In Chicago with a minstrel troupe, he met Tony Hart, a fifteen-year-old minstrel female impersonator. They formed a partnership that endured and prospered for fifteen years. After several years of touring, they settled down in 1873 for a two-year contract at the Theatre Comique in New York City, where composer David Braham joined the team. Braham became the Sullivan to Harrigan’s Gilbert. In the mid-1870s, the “Mulligan” material began to appear, first as skits and finally as full-length productions.

In his musical plays, Harrigan spun an intricate web of East Side New York’s ethnic life, the Irish at the center and the others—especially blacks and Germans—intertwined with them. Set in his fictional “Mulligan Alley,” the plays centered on Walsingham McSweeney’s The Wee Drop Saloon. Across from the bar stood a two-story tenement, containing an Italian junk shop and Ah Wung’s Chinese laundry and rooming house. Next door stood the headquarters of a Negro social club—whose elaborate ritual, including the Royal Burn-Alive Brotherly Grip, was the precursor of Amos ’n Andy’s Mystic Knights of the Sea. Occupying the first floor of the club was a policy (numbers) shop run by Welcome Allup, the husband of the Mulligans’ Negro maid, Rebecca (a role that Tony Hart starred in as one of his female impersonations). Dan Mulligan and his wife Cordelia were the focal points of the plays. But characters representing the other ethnic groups played critically important roles in the series. The Negro characters, all played by whites in blackface, provided the Irish’s major competitors, and, though still stereotyped, they had a humanity
ON WITH THE SHOW

Design by Charles W. Whitman for a typical Harrigan and Hart scene. NYLC.

that was unusual for the nineteenth-century stage. Rebecca held her own in a running battle of words and wits with the Mulligans, and Palestine Puter proudly led the black Skidmore Guards, whose marching rivalled Dan Mulligan's Irish Guards. Gustave Lochmuller, a German butcher married to an Irish woman, provided Dan's political opponent and verbal sparring partner. These major characters, supplemented with other ethnic personalities, presented a dazzling array of big-city culture conflicts, ethnic humor, heavily laced with slapstick, catchy song and dances, and typical special effects like waterfalls, storms, and fires.

Although all his ethnic characters were important, Harrigan's most important achievement was presenting the Irish-American in a sympathetic way. Dan Mulligan, Harrigan's major character, which he himself played, came to America in 1848, fought in the Civil War, bought a grocery store, and became a successful local politician—a model American success story. Since the 1840s, Irish-Americans had had to endure strong prejudice in America including stereotypes of them as heavy-drinking brawlers, lazy fools who sold their votes, and agents sent by the Pope to subvert American democracy. Beginning in the 1850s when large numbers of Irishmen became minstrels, the minstrel show began to modify these negative images, but it was not until Harrigan traded his blackface make-up for his own face, his Negro dialect for his Irish brogue, that show business portrayed the Irish as real people. His Irishmen were laughed at, but they were also laughed with; they drank hard, but they also worked hard; they took graft, but only when they could not get jobs. Harrigan also praised their strong sense of group loyalty, applauded their heroism during the Civil War, lamented the human anthills they had to live in, and denounced the discrimination they had to endure. Although his and Braham's songs and skits did not endure, they pervaded the show business of the day with their humane portrayals of the Irish, portrayals that strongly influenced the great many people who knew nothing about ethnic groups except what they saw on stage.

The impact of Harrigan's messages was greatly enhanced because he was a superb entertainer, not a preacher. "I never dig up the mire in my plays," he explained. "It is only the lighter, better side of East Side life which I attempt to show." This did not mean that he portrayed only happy, carefree tenement dwellers. It meant that he knew the value of humor for communicating a serious message. "They may draw a tear—but only one," he explained of his instructions to his actors, "and a laugh must follow. The tear is necessary, or the character would not be well-drawn. There is pathos or tragedy in every life east of Elizabeth Street. The audiences must be aware of this, but only vaguely. My plan," he con-
cluded in a 1903 interview, “is always to let the spectators do the thinking if they want to.” He knew he had to keep his patrons laughing, if he wanted to keep them as patrons. When in 1882, for example, he got too serious about the plight of a Jewish pawnbroker in _Mordecai Lyons_, applause and attendance decreased. He quickly returned to his own ground with _McSorley’s Inflation_, the story of an Irishman who runs for Congress courting the Negro vote and faces complications when his wife, played by Tony Hart, somehow finds herself in the middle of a “Colored Convention” and is rescued by a brigade of Irish market women in a rollicking romp of slapstick and ethnic slurs. “McSorley is Mulligan with a new name,” a reviewer applauded, “and the Comique [Theatre] has regained its popularity,” a popularity based heavily on working class people.

“I’d hate to play in a theatre without a gallery,” Harrigan once confessed in a statement that epitomized his approach. His people were in the gallery, the common people he grew up with on the wharves. He not only played to them as many popular entertainers did, he played for them. They thought of him as one of them, as much their spokesman as their entertainer. He put them onstage, and they adored him for it. “It was the story of other seasons, all over again,” the New York Sun observed of a typically rousing opening of an 1888 Harrigan and Hart show, “a lusty welcoming by voice and hand, a cheer from enthusiastic throats, an overflow of ready praise. . . . Nothing else in the city’s theatrical history affords a similar spectacle; nothing else approaches it in its democratic éclat.” Mulligan was Mose the B’howery B’hoys updated and expanded to include an entire community. Seeking to capture realistically the look, tone, and feel of his people, Harrigan bought costumes in second-hand clothing stores, drew material from the streets, and developed his plays onstage instead of on paper so he could be sure that his characters, sets, and dialects all seemed familiar to the b’hoys in the audience. With encores for nearly every number and speeches demanded from each of the resident company’s old favorites on their first entrance, it often took the cast five hours to get through a three-hour show as the audiences wildly cheered their “old friends.”

Edward Harrigan and Annie Yeomans as Dan and Cordelia Mulligan, the characters Harrigan used to humanize stage images of the Irish. Detail of illustration on page 184.
Mr. John Wild as Ely Umstead

The New Rubber from Yonkers:

Here is your first case.

Get me another carriage oile not roid in that won!
THE EVOLUTION OF THE MUSICAL COMEDY

Although Harrigan and Braham's catchy songs did not endure, they were international sensations in the late nineteenth century. Besides being on the lips of minstrel troupes, vaudevillians, and New Yorkers of all sorts, the song "The Mulligan Guards" turned up in Rudyard Kipling's Kim; the British Coldstream Guards marched to it; Parisians sang it and the Viennese composer Karl Milloquecker "borrowed" it for the first act finale of his The Beggar Student. Contemporary critics, including William Dean Howells, crowned Harrigan the American Dickens, Molière, Zola, Ibsen, and a theatrical Hogarth. The passage of time has proved that Harrigan did not belong in the same category with those classic writers and artists. At the time, he seemed as significant as he did because, when European naturalistic writing had not taken root in America, Harrigan drew on urban common people, even "low-life," for his material and realistically presented its vitality on stage.

Harrigan continued to work and rework his scenes of New York's vital street life and its serio-comic ethnic conflict. And Braham continued to turn out his songs until 1895 when Harrigan leased out his theater. After that, Harrigan sporadically produced new shows, centered as always on Irish-Negro conflicts, until his several farewell performances in 1908 and 1909. Ironically, the reasons for his shows' successes spelled their doom. They successfully captured the sights, sounds, and feelings of New York City ethnic life in the 1870s and 1880s. But times changed, and Harrigan did not. His plays became period pieces, as Mose the B'howery B'boy had by Harrigan's day. Although his shows were as close to vaudeville and minstrelsy as to drama, they were an important step toward the American musical comedy that focused on common people, often on ethnic minorities or low-life. His shows brought a new reality and vitality, a new vogue for local and topical songs, and a new focus on city life and urban heroes to musical shows, making a deep impression on other producers and performers and opening the way for subsequent developments.

Following Harrigan and Hart's success, Charles Hoyt created a number of hit musical shows about city life. But, reflecting a characteristic that plagued musicals from their inception, Hoyt's shows made little if any effort to integrate the musical numbers into the plots. In one show, he even billed the songs and dances as "musical interruptions." Not limited to ethnic life or to New York City, Hoyt's series of successful urban shows had broader appeal outside New York than Harrigan and Hart's plays. His greatest hit, A Trip to Chinatown, for example, ran for 650 performances after opening in New York in 1890, the longest run of any nineteenth-century production in the nation's entertainment capital. Traveling companies also carried it throughout the nation, during this run and for years afterward. It was the disjointed, musical farce-comedy at its best—the final stage before George M. Cohan produced modern Broadway musical comedies in the early twentieth century.

Set in San Francisco, A Trip to Chinatown, had, at best, a flimsy plot: a young man and his uncle, both planning a rendezvous with the same young woman, wind up in different dining rooms of the same restaurant, the comedy resulting from the young couple's attempting to hide from the uncle, from the waiters confusing the orders, and from the young man's empty wallet. By the conclusion,