



Harrigan & Hart

Pioneers of Broadway



An 1880s guidebook reported that “A visit to New York would be as incomplete to the countryman if he did not see Harrigan and Hart, as if he had by some strange mistake missed going to Central Park.” Harrigan’s plays, complete with music numbers and starring Tony Hart, were not just the talk of New York City. They were the talk of the country, with the tunes being sung from coast to coast. One song, “The Mulligan Guards,” was so popular that British author Rudyard Kipling has British troops singing it in India!

Tony Hart, one half of this duo, was also an Elk, as were many members of the performance company.



The angelic face of Tony Hart

Tony Hart was the stage name of Antonio Cannon, who was born in Massachusetts and attracted to theater from an early age. His parents were less enthused about his theatrical leanings. In fact they sent him to reform school in an effort to keep him from the stage. But at the age of thirteen, he escaped from the Westborough reformatory and hit the road, doing stints as a bootblack, newsboy, and singer (not to mention joining a circus or two). All of these early life experiences were to serve him well as a performer with Harrigan, whose plays and songs often featured characters struggling on the margins of society.

It was in a Chicago shoe shine parlor that the 16 year old Antonio Cannon had the good fortune to meet Ned Harrigan, who was 26, performing in town, and looking for a partner. The collaboration was so successful that one is rarely mentioned without the other.

By all accounts, Tony Hart was a physically beautiful man. As theater historian E.J. Kahn relates, this made him gifted at female roles: “Tony Hart had a round, clean-shaven face that Harrigan once likened to that of an angel on a Valentine, but he was no mere female impersonator. He could, and did, fill masculine roles as expertly as feminine ones. In one play, he had six parts—three male and three female—and in another he played both a mother and her son. ‘His imitation of the manners, gait, movements of the body and facial expression of a young girl was absolutely wonderful,’ one New York critic exclaimed after observing Hart in skirts. ‘We could hardly divest ourselves of the idea that the performer before us was not a female.’ The detective William Pinkerton, an expert at seeing through disguises, once refused to believe that Hart was a man even after being taken backstage following a performance and allowed to scrutinize his costume and make-up at close range. Pinkerton was not persuaded of

the truth until Hart had pulled off his wig and let loose with a few robust phrases that could only have been learned in a boys’ reform school.” (Kahn, 8-9).

Pinkerton wasn’t just any detective. He and the agency he headed virtually defined the idea of a private detective. In fact, during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, private detectives were most commonly referred to simply as “Pinkertons.” Perhaps Hart refined these skills on the road, where studying expressions might mean the difference between a meal or going hungry!



Ned Harrigan, “America’s Dickens”

Ned Harrigan’s plays were known for being funny, topical, interspersed with catchy tunes, and featuring spectacular stage effects. But they also took most of their characters from what New Yorkers used to refer to as “the struggling classes.” Harrigan may have exaggerated their traits and thrown them into absurd situations, but his sympathies were always clear. This earned him the title, “America’s Dickens.”

As with humorists today, Harrigan and Hart were able to explore social tensions that might otherwise be too divisive to handle. Foremost among these was the place of recent immigrants to the United States.

Both Ned Harrigan and Tony (Cannon) Hart had parents from Ireland. They had direct experiences



to draw upon in a series of nine plays revolving around the antics of the Mulligans, a fictional family of recent Irish immigrants. Today, when to most people Irish simply means green beer on March 17th, we may not realize the hostility Irish immigrants faced. As in this Thomas Nast cartoon, the Irish were often portrayed as a separate, ape-like “race.”

The Elks, as a fraternity welcoming Irish members, was a rarity. And the stereotypes in Harrigan’s plays, where the Irish and other ethnic groups “have their ways” but also good hearts, were actually progressive for the times. The ethnic humor and comic resolutions in Harrigan and Hart productions had an underlying message that ethnic tensions could be resolved, that differences could end with laughter instead of bloodshed.

In their quest for authenticity, Harrigan and Hart would roam the streets of the city, offering to buy particularly colorful or authentic clothing from people they encountered. Often these clothes would then have to be boiled to make them sanitary, but otherwise they went unchanged. They were also careful students of the accents, neighborhoods, and quirks of the various communities streaming into New York City at this phase of its history.



The sad eyes of Johnny Wild

Harrigan and Hart’s productions involved many early Elks and frequent Elk venues such as the Theatre Comique on 514 Broadway. Johnny Wild was an especially popular character actor in the company. Ellis’ history of the Elks notes that “in *A Terrible Example* he created the reckless tramp, which formed the model of subsequent characterizations of that type found in vaudeville and farce comedy. Nature had endowed him with a humorous temperament and a pair of inexpressibly sad eyes. He had a record of playing on Broadway, New York City, for almost thirty continuous years.” (Ellis 275)



Hart (left) & Harrigan in “Ireland vs. Italia”

Sources: Ellis, Charles. *An Authentic History of the BPOE*. Chicago: BPOE, 1910. E.J. Kahn, Jr. *The Merry Partners: The Age & Stage Of Harrigan And Hart*. NYC: Random H, 1955. —Warren Hedges, BPOE #944, 2004



left to right: John Hart (Elk), Tony Hart, Ned Harrigan, Charley White (PGER), G.S. Knight, Gus Williams (Elk), Billy Barry, Tony Pastor (Elk), Billy Gray