

Chapter Ten

THE STAFF REVUES

*We saw a little water by the golf course,
It looked something like the smelly River Clyde,
But when we got our cameras geared,
The whole darn thing had disappeared,
Let's name it old St. Andrews-by-the-Tide.*
— From “St. Andrews-by-the-Tide”

THE 1950S AND early 1960s were a happy time at the Algonquin. Almost every year for more than a decade the staff put on carefree and outrageous variety revues at the Casino, featuring kick lines, blackface routines, parodies of popular songs, magic shows and even some serious ballet. They quickly became a hotel tradition. Guests would sometimes call ahead to get the dates for that summer's revue so that they could plan their vacations accordingly.

It was the golden era of the television variety show. Even if staff do not remember being influenced by anything in particular at the time, this form of entertainment was big business by the early 1950s. Ed Sullivan's *Toast of the Town* and *Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour* started it off in 1948. Other shows hosted by Arthur Godfrey, Milton Berle, Red Skelton, Sid Caesar, Jack Benny, Steve Allen, Lawrence Welk, and Dinah Shore followed through the 1950s.

Appropriately for the Algonquin, the television variety hour seems to have gotten its start in the hotel business. The variety show was an essential part of the Borscht Belt circuit, a conclave of Catskills summer resorts to which New Yorkers, mostly Jewish, flocked in the summer months. Sid Caesar, Imogen Coca, Danny Kaye, Neil Simon, Mel Brooks, and Woody Allen all launched themselves into show business in the

Bill Leonard
Herb. Hand
John...
Marian...
Blair MacLeod

Wed. and Thurs.
August 18 and 19
Casino:

Ben...
Bill...
Paul...

A

Bob...

L

Mary Baker
Frank...
Ray...
Tom...

A

C

ART
E

Isabel
Wood

Donald...
Mary...

Mary-Jane Magee

Co-Producer and Director
-Mary Jane Magee
-Al Redner.

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Borscht Belt; it was considered basic training. By the late 1940s, the genre had moved to Canada and Norman Jewison was putting together superb variety shows at the Banff Springs Hotel.

THE VERY FIRST Algonquin summer shows were actually operettas orchestrated by a remarkable young Montrealer, Ian MacMillan. The fun began in tragedy. In June 1949, before the hotel had opened for the summer, a terrible accident occurred: a young Ottawa waitress, Marilyn Noells, dove into Katy's Cove and broke her neck. The hotel seems to have been at fault. It was early in the season, and staff had apparently not been informed of the variation in water levels as the tide drained and refilled the cove. By the end of the summer Manager Cashman had been transferred to another hotel, and later Noells's father won a large court settlement. For the moment, however, more immediate assistance was required, and staff chipped in to raise money for their colleague.

MacMillan, a music student, worked as a Casino attendant in the summer of 1949, and he put his musical gifts to work to raise money for Noells. MacMillan had been teaching music in the Sherbrooke area. He played sixteen instruments, including piano, and had already had several compositions published. He planned to continue his studies at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston in the fall. On August 22 and 23, he and the sixty members of the hotel staff who had formed the Algonquin Theatre Group presented an operetta entitled *A Guardsman's Duty* at Andraeleo Hall. A romantic piece set in Hungary in the late eighteenth century, it focused on a troupe of honour guards and their ladies. Some of the choruses were written for eight-part harmony with solo leads. Given the complexity of the piece, it seems likely that this was a work in progress, whipped into shape for this urgent occasion.

The event was sponsored and attended by the cream of St. Andrews summer society. Lieutenant-Governor D.L. MacLaren was there, as were Sir Montague Allan, Senator Cairine Wilson, Sir James and Lady Dunn, Howard Pillow and Mrs. Pillow, Olive Hosmer, Lady Mortimer Davis, Hon. Marguerite Shaughnessy, and many more. Cuddy O'Brien recalls that everybody was dressed to the nines, and it was like an evening at the Met. Music was provided by the Algonquin orchestra under the direction of Clarence Sawyer. The production sold out both nights, and it was reviewed glowingly by ex-Mayor Worrell in his weekly column for the *Courier*. He remembered in particular the final scene in the gypsy camp, with the beautiful background of fields and woods, campfires burning brightly, and a group of handsome young men, bound in captivity and surrounded by a score or more of beautiful young women.

MacMillan's success encouraged him to try his hand at yet another oper-



Ian MacMillan, lower left, at a staff farewell, 1949 or 1950. CUDDY O'BRIEN

OPPOSITE *Autographed A la Carte Program*, 1954. GARY DEGEER

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etta the following summer: *The Princess and the Woodcutter*, his own composition. Again he assumed total control, writing, directing, and even designing the costumes and props. The piece was staged entirely by Algonquin staff after only five weeks of rehearsal. Again, the performance was a fund-raiser, this time to benefit the Passamaquoddy branch of the Canadian Legion.

The *Woodcutter* was played by Kenneth Jennings of Bathurst, New Brunswick, then a medical student at McGill, and the *Princess* by Betsy Kennedy of Toronto. Montrealer André Menard, who had been studying ballet in Paris, appeared in this, as in the previous production, as the leading dancer. The chorus of fifty-five voices wore elaborate costumes made by members of the group. A young drummer named John Petrinka was recruited from the Algonquin orchestra to play the tympani. Because he could not read music, he was told by MacMillan simply to watch his baton, doing a roll on the right drum when it moved right, and a roll on the left when it moved left. Petrinka remembers MacMillan as an affable fellow, a bit erratic at times, but thorough. The excellent crowds applauded loudly.

That was MacMillan's last summer at the Algonquin. He was back at Mount Allison University in the fall of 1951, and a picture of him survives from that year in a performance of *The Intruder*. For some reason he left without taking a degree.

IN 1953 THE staff staged the first summer variety show, *Front Please*. Under the direction of Judy Graham and Don Stephens, it was performed for two nights in late August to packed houses. The venue was the Casino, and the master of ceremonies was bell porter Victor Burt.

Something of the fun and creativity that was put into that production is reflected in an incident recalled by Cuddy O'Brien. As he walked into the lobby one morning he was annoyed to see a group of bellmen playing golf. As he approached they began to whisper, "Here Comes the Captain! Here comes the Captain!" Then they jumped back, saluted, and sang a parody of Frankie Lane's "Lucky Old Sun," ending with:

But that lucky old captain's got nothin' to do
But stroll around the lobby all day.

It was a poke at O'Brien on several levels. Like Lane's sun, with nothing to do but roll around Heaven all day, O'Brien had nothing to do but stroll about, giving orders to his lackies. "And they put that in the show," says O'Brien.

The show was more or less impromptu, a hodgepodge of whatever the cast was able or prepared to do on short notice. As with later productions, hotel life itself was a minor theme. "Front please" is the call for a bellman to come to the front desk, and some of the skits made fun of normal situations



Two skits from "Front Please:"

TOP Wilma Clark.
BOTTOM Gary DeGeer and Bill Leonard in a guest's borrowed clothing. VICTOR BURT

in hotel life involving staff and guests. Manager Pat Fitt, for example, had a peculiar walk, and when greeting guests would thrust out his hand and bark, “Fitt’s the name!” One of the mimics on staff had this idiosyncrasy down perfectly, and Fitt, it is recalled, had a fit. As for guests, some fun could be poked at them as well, but Al Redner, kitchen steward and producer of the 1954 show, recalls that this was done very discreetly, and no one ever got into trouble for it.

Most remember the shows as nothing too serious, just a lot of fun, sometimes outrageous, with clowning around, comic skits, and a lot of cross-dressing. There were top hats and Algonquin maidens, college cheerleaders and cavemen, and the *de rigueur* kick line. But there was no swearing—men might swear among themselves, but never in front of a girl or an audience—or serious sexual innuendo.

The shows included real talent, too. Wilma Douglas of Toronto, now Wilma Clark of St. Andrews, worked the cash register during the summer of 1953. She had been singing professionally with the Leslie Bell Singers in Toronto since 1946 and returned to the internationally known choir after her stint at the Algonquin. In *Front Please* she remembers holding a paint brush and singing “A Little Whitewashed Building by the Barn,” with a chorus joining in.

The 1954 revue was titled *À La Carte*, with the obligatory pun on hotel life. Directed by Mary Jane Magee and Al Redner, it featured cancons, saloon girls, a square dance, serenades courtesy of Dave Hurst and his Lobby Lullabiers on washboards and ukuleles, a farm skit, and a routine about the longest bar in Texas, with bellmen Gary DeGeer and Bill Leonard dressed in the wild stripes and checks of one of the hotel’s guests. Assistant Accountant Terry Grier, later president of Ryerson, sang with his barbershop quartet, the Razor Blades. He recalls that some of the acts polished their presentations by performing earlier in the season at Casino dances while the band was taking a break.

In 1954, Don Williams was starting his long career at the Algonquin as one of the hotel’s better-loved managers. Williams had a sense of humour and occasionally

“ST. ANDREWS BY-THE-TIDE”

A HIGHLIGHT OF the 1954 revue *À la Carte* was this song by Dave MacDonald. A whimsical glance at the area’s thirty-foot tides, it took a poke at the disappointment of some visitors at finding the moniker “St. Andrews-by-the-Sea” inaccurate twice daily.

*We’ve travelled twice around the world,
From Bombay to Fort Worth,
We’ve water skied in Venice,
And won loving cups in tennis,
We’ve seen it all!
But there’s just one thing we want to know.*

Chorus:

*What happened to the sea at St. Andrews,
Where are the mermaids and the octopoo?
There are no ships or sailboats to speak of,
Not even any Indian canoes.*

*Now when we came way up here for the summer,
We thought we’d see the ocean so blue,
But now every day we see Passamaquoddy Bay,
And a weather-beaten jelly fish or two.*

*We brought along our swimsuits in a suitcase,
From America’s finest springboards we have dove,
But much to our dismay as we reached the great seaway,
The little sign said “Caution, Katy’s Cove.”*

*We saw a little water by the golf course,
It looked something like the smelly River Clyde,
But when we got our cameras geared,
The whole darn thing had disappeared,
Let’s name it old St. Andrews-by-the-Tide. ~*

SCENES FROM *SUITE 55*

PROGRAMME



MASTER OF CEREMONIES—Victor Burt

CAN CAN—Sally Denny, Mary Jane Magee, Ann Henderson, Penny Bishop, Vicky Jori, Joan Carlisle, Pam MacCready, Jean Tweedy, Peggy Ross

WELCOME EVERYONE—Your Dining Room Staff

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE—Mary Jane Magee & Don Steward

GOOD MORNING—Waitresses and Waiters

IT'S A LOVELY DAY TO-DAY—Joan Gair & Terry Grier

EAT UP YOUR BREAKFAST—Gary DeGeer & Bill Leonard

THREE IN ONE—Clair McLeod

I WANT TO BE LOVED BY YOU—Mary Kay Martin

THE DIP—Jimmy Gregory

DOWN ON THE FARM—Reverend Doctor Rufus, Reverend Farm-Hand-Andy



INTERMISSION

SALOON GIRLS—Pat Walker, Mary Kay Martin, Marge Lightbody, Ann Keene, Mary Lee Scringer, Joan Lustig, Pat Whitby, Pat Knight

RAZOR BLADES—George Walker, Clair McLeod, Terry Grier



SCENES FROM *SUITE 55*

BIRTH OF BLUES—Penny Bishop

ISTANBUL—Liz Thompson, Edith Chisholm, Ann Keene, Ann Henderson, Carl Evans, Ray Hinton, Herb Handler, Gord Handman, Mary Jane Magee

I CAN DO ANYTHING BETTER THAN YOU—Joan Gair & Terry Grier

MYRANDA ANTHANSOUSALA—Diverse Piano Versions

SHOOTING OF DANGEROUS DAN MCGREW—David Hurst, Al Tanton, Mary Kay Martin. Narrator—Marg McLellan

SQUARE DANCE—Nan Cumberland, Lee Porter, Mary Irving, Marg McLellan, Julian Merry, Willy Watt, Dennis Anglin, Irv. Schliemer, Dave McLeod

EBB TIDE—Singer: Peggy MacIntyre. Dancers: Pam MacCready & Al Redner

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE MORNING AFTER—ANON

VACATION OF A.B. MCPHEE—Betty Evans, Doris Livingston, Dave MacDonald

DAVE HURST & HIS LOBBY LULLABIERS—Dave Hurst, Dave MacDonald, Bill Leonard, Gary DeGeer

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

God Save the Queen



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partied with the staff. One time O'Brien and his familiars stayed rather late in the music room, singing and playing the piano. When Williams and his wife arrived on the scene, a few feared consequences, but instead he ordered a bellman to get a bottle from his cottage, and they all stayed up until three in the morning, singing. Williams was wise enough to be wary of letting staff have full control of the revue, however. He and Assistant Manager Barker Campbell sat in on rehearsals to make sure nothing shocking or offensive was going to get on stage.



PREVIOUS SPREAD *Scenes from Suite 55:*

PAGE ONE TOP, MIDDLE AND BOTTOM *Dario's Darlings, Harry the Dip, and Algy's Calypso Carnival.* JOHN WILLIAMSON AND TERRY GRIER

PAGE TWO TOP, MIDDLE AND BOTTOM *A Day at the Desk, Marilyn Spencer and Swan Lake.* JOHN WILLIAMSON AND TERRY GRIER

Suite 55 Program
LILA HAUGHN



MANY OF THE regulars were back for *Suite 55* in 1955. It featured "Algy's Calypso Carnival," "Vaudeville Revisited," a few Hawaiian routines, and an energetic number called "Dario's Darlings," a kind of tribute to the maitre d' Charles Dario, remembered by staff as an excitable Italian. Something new, a little more serious than usual, appeared in two numbers, "Swan Lake" and "Oriental." They were choreographed by Josef Horvath, working as a chef that summer on loan from the Royal York in what may have been his first year in the country. Mary Jane Magee recalls that he was a recent immigrant and that before entering Canada he had been a dancer of note with the Czechoslovakian Ballet Company, perhaps its lead male dancer. She and her friend Ann Henderson, a talented violinist, knew nothing about ballet but simply followed Horvath's lead. Magee remembers that their dance, as well as being rather amusing for themselves, was well received by the audience.

On the lighter side, a cute song called "A Day at the Desk" must have caused Manager Williams a twinge of apprehension:

When you check in at the desk be sure to ask the clerk:
"Does the room have running water, and will the toilet work?"
Always ask about the price before you sign your name,
Or you're apt to find it difficult to leave the way you came.

If the bed is a double instead of a twin,
If the view is disappointing and the sunshine won't come in,
If the closets are like boxes and you can't unpack your grip,
Don't flip—tip!

The revues continued through the years, with new routines mixed among the old ones, dusted off after a year in the suitcase. In 1956 the Shufflers, with Pat Miller and Jackie MacDonald, were back. Gary DeGeer and Victor Burt continued their antics on ukulele, and the Quoddettes did their kick line. There were several popular parodies of 1920s favourites, such as a Charleston number, plus the expected antics revolving around hotel life.

The Staff Revues



TOP Finale, Staff Revue, 1956. To the right "The Shufflers," Pat Miller and Jackie MacDonald. VICTOR BURT



BOTTOM Heads of Staff, 1956. Back Row Center Manager Don Williams. AL CORBETT

Elvis Presley's "Blue Moon" made its appearance in 1956, both on his recording and on the far-distant stage of the Algonquin Casino. In this incarnation the singer was Marie Peaker. "Mr. Presley" himself made an appearance in one routine, in what grotesque parody one can only imagine. It was only a few weeks later, on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, that Presley was carefully televised only from the waist up.

The 1959 staff revue, *Pardon Me But*, received a full-length review in the

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St. Croix Courier, showing that news of the annual performance had leaked to the outside world. The reporter listed eighteen skits, including a kick line by the Lobsterettes and “Casino Pete’s Magic Show.” A “cast of males dressed in exaggerated lines of women’s clothing constituted a so-called fashion show,” he wrote, “which brought the house down.” Paul Smith of St. Andrews, who went on to teach in Ontario high-schools, remembers being in that fashion show. “I had an old drape wrapped around me,” he says, “and I couldn’t walk very well, was sort of slinking along. I wore a low cut sort of gown and I had to fill out my bust with skeins of wool from Cottage Craft.” Master of ceremonies for the show was bellman Alan Casey of St. Stephen. He remembers the Casino being packed with motor coach tourists. The next day as he loaded their bags onto the coach, they gave him a rousing cheer.



Diane Inksetter. CLAUDIA CLOKE



Watching from the wings that year was a young literature student at York University named Matthew Corrigan. A lowly salad boy that summer, he spent a rather pensive first year at the Algonquin, slaving in the kitchen or taking solitary walks around the town. The next year he graduated to the far superior position of bellman and experienced a sort of coming out. The fun he saw staff having in *Pardon Me But* encouraged him to bring his magic kit to the next year’s revue. He also wrote a playlet, a behind-the-scenes look at the hotel. “We rehearsed it, I directed it, and we put it on for the guests. It made great fun of the all these people, and it was a huge success. I guess the gist of it was giving the ritzy clientele a sense of what life was really like behind the scenes of the hotel. It was humorous, got a lot of laughs, and seems to have been well appreciated, as was my magic show. I’m amazed now at my bravado of getting up there and doing my magic show, but I’d brought all this stuff with me for that purpose, and actually got up there and did it, and people were very appreciative. The first year I was so lonely and so outside it all; I barely knew anybody that first year. First of all the hours were so brutal; there was almost no time, not in the kitchen. Two years later I was more mature and a little bit more gregarious.”

TIMES WERE CHANGING. By the early 1960s the Algonquin variety revue was almost at the end of its natural existence. In 1962 there was a show after 1961 was skipped. Whether this was a regular show, part of the golf club’s end-of-year ceremonies, or an impromptu performance to showcase the singing ability of a guest’s daughter remains unclear. Claudia Tripp, a waitress that year, remembers being approached by a few members of the band who asked her and seven other waitresses if they wanted to be in a show. She recalls doing two performances, one a Hawaiian theme, with songs like “I’m Gonna Wash that Man Right Out of My Hair,” the other a 1920s routine with a Charleston, a cancan, and an “Itsy-Bitsy” something or other. They made their own costumes out of potato sacks. She phoned home to ask her

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mother to order eight pairs of red slippers from a local shoe factory, and the girls decorated them, as well as the sacks, with red ribbons. It was all completely amateurish, she recalls, but it was fun, and they were young and didn't care. She recalls that the audience, mostly convention people, packed the house and were noisily appreciative. When she went back to work in the dining room, the guests gave her a round of applause.

The last staff show seems to have been in 1965. Clyde Macdonald of Sunny Brae, Nova Scotia, now a judge in that town, has a photograph of himself in his room preparing to do his routine of the popular Bobby Rydell song, "Alley Cat." He remembers the conclusion of one routine in which a man who must have been six-foot-four and weighed 220 pounds, dressed as a woman and with all the visible hair shaved off his body, flounced from the stage and plunked himself down in the manager's lap.

The staff revue seems to have been revived only once. Mike Rouse, a bellman in the early 1980s, remembers a show in Sir William's Pub, now the health spa. That, however, seems to have been the lone entry in Algonquin show biz in that decade.

Whatever the reason for their rise and fall, the summer shows are remembered fondly by both staff and guests. There were times in the 1950s when the Algonquin did not have a lot of business, and the shows helped fill up slow hours. As Terry Grier remembers, they also helped cut across the various occupational strata of the hotel. Most importantly, the performers got to do things they might never attempt later in life. In 1953, Bill McKeown, now a retired Ontario judge, took part in some sort of tap dance routine. Asked if he had done any tap dancing since that time, he replied with a laugh, "I haven't *danced* since then." If performers were especially good at something, so much the better, but in the end, no one cared a great deal about the level of talent. Poking fun at oneself was just as good as poking fun at a guest. ☞



Clyde Macdonald prepares for his version of "Alley Cat,"
1965. CLYDE MACDONALD

