

New Introduction

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The team of Joe Weber and Lew Fields was the dominant musical comedy team at the turn of the last century. The team created classic comedic characters and routines that continue to influence the many comic duos who followed them. They also formed their own theatrical troupe, running a theater in New York City for many years where they produced successful revues that combined music, dance, and song. So famous were they in their day that they were a rare popular act that inspired a full-length biography published by a major publisher. This new edition brings this long-out-of-print classic to a new generation of theater lovers.

The team's first biographer, Felix Isman (1873–1943), knew them well. Isman was a colorful theatrical producer who got his start speculating in New York City real estate; he also amassed a large collection of fine art, some of which is now part of the Frick Collection. Married three times to three actresses, he made headlines as a bon vivant and man about town. Isman presented Weber and Fields on stage for a gala evening celebrating the Jubilee year (or fiftieth anniversary) of their partnership. So it's no surprise that, although this book was published in 1924, Isman concludes his book in 1912, the year of the Jubilee performance, making Isman one of the stars of the biography. His book, first published in 1924, was written less than thirty years after Weber and Fields first teamed up. In addition, many of the characters in the book were still alive and performing. It's as close to an eyewitness account of those heady days of the beginning of the US theater as you can get.

To set the stage, let's look at the earliest years of the birth of musical comedy and the theater in general. The last decades of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth saw great changes in US theater. These eras saw the beginnings of burlesque (then meaning topical spoofs of current shows and society), variety (later known as vaudeville), and the first steps on the way to an American musical theater. During this period, performers often based their onstage personas on the latest immigrant groups that were flooding into the United States. Reflecting the new emphasis on these characters, in 1912, Jean Schwartz and William Jerome composed the song "If It Wasn't for the Irish

and the Jews.” Mentioning noted theatrical producer David Belasco, one of the verses went:

I really heard Belasco say
You couldn't stage a play today,
If it wasn't for the Irish and the Jews.

Schwartz and Jerome were correct. In terms of writers and performers of early musical theater, there were two great teams that for all intents and purposes invented the American musical: The Irish team of Harrigan and Hart and the Jewish team of Weber and Fields.

The earliest were Edward Harrigan and Tony Hart, two Irish-immigrant gentlemen. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, they produced, wrote, directed, and acted in their shows. The comedy team celebrated the multicultural stew that was New York's Bowery. Their shows were paeans to life amid the new immigrants who strove to make a new beginning in New York City. They had an especial bonhomie for the residents of the Lower East Side no matter what their ethnic background. To them, the neighborhood melting pot made all men equal.

Following in that team's footsteps was another comic team, Joe Weber and Lew Fields. These two Jewish producers, directors, authors, and performers opened their first theater on Broadway in September of 1896. After years in the small time, they were ready for the big time. And so famous were their talents that they became the prototype of all the comedy partners who followed in their footsteps. Like Harrigan and Hart, the team based their characters as new immigrants. Weber and Fields were disguised as “Dutch” comics, taking the name from the slang term for Germans, “Deutsch.” Of course, no mention of their heritage ever entered the act—it was just an excuse for the team to have a funny accent and a funny view of life in the big city. From then on, they always appeared as the characters Mike and Myer.

They usually made their entrances onstage with Fields pushing Weber, who complained, “Don't push me, Meyer, don't pooosh me!” Mangling the language was an integral part of their act, one that Americans new to the shores could easily identify with and that other entertainers could mine for their own characters. Weber and Fields's malapropisms forged the way to other comic acts like radio's Parkyakarkus (Harry Parke), the movies' Jack Pearl (aka Baron Munchausen, “Vass you dere, Sharlie?”), and Burt Gordon, the mad Russian (“How dooo you do!”), and on through the decades into television with Bill Dana as José Jiménez (“My name—José Jiménez”).

Lew Fields played the taller and slimmer character and Weber the shorter and much fatter one (due to a lot of padding). Weber once said that “all the public wanted to see was Fields knock the hell out of me.” That part of their legacy was handed down to the comics in characters like the tall, gangly Mutt and short and squat Jeff. The movies also emulated the team; Laurel and Hardy and Abbott and Costello both featured tall and short characters, as did the



Photo 1. Weber and Fields as Mike and Myer.

Three Stooges decades later. Television gave us the short, fat Toody and the tall, skinny Muldoon on *Car 54, Where Are You?*

Fields realized that their theater ticket sales would boost exponentially with a star at the helm. In 1897, Weber and Fields brought English music hall star and male impersonator Vesta Tilley to the Music Hall. To Fields, she reminded him of a teenage boy trying to act like an adult. She was charming, and audiences loved her. But Oscar Hammerstein also wanted Tilley for his theaters. A bidding war ensued, and Hammerstein lost, with Tiller receiving the astounding sum of \$1,250 a week from Fields. In today's dollars, it would total to around \$40,000 a week! She went on a tour of vaudeville theaters under the auspices of Weber and Fields. Her nine-week tour netted \$50,000 in 1897 dollars!

Their shows weren't ramshackle, slapped-together stews of music, plot, and lyrics. They weren't afraid of paying top salaries to important stars. Typical of the kinds of shows at the Weber and Fields' Music Hall was *Helter-Skelter*, which opened on April 6, 1899. These shows included parodies of straight plays, with interludes of music, dance, and song. Julian Mitchell, the team's stage director, went on to greater fame as principal director of *The Ziegfeld Follies*. Included in the arsenal of performers was Bessie Clayton, wife of Mitchell (when they married she was sixteen and he was thirty-two). In September of that year, the team's next show, *Whirl-i-Gig*, played thirty-three weeks, with Clayton again exhibiting her terpsichorean talents.

Clayton was also featured in the subsequent show, *Fiddle-Dee-Dee*, which began a new season for the theater on September 6, 1900. In addition to Clayton, *Fiddle-Dee-Dee* had Weber and Fields and their regulars, Lillian Russell, Fay Templeton, DeWolf Hopper, and David Warfield, in the cast. The next September brought a new season and the première of *Hoity-Toity*, again with all the above mainstays of the Weber and Fields troupe. It played for thirty-three weeks and then toured the country for three more weeks. This would be the final show directed by Julian Mitchell for Weber and Fields. In 1902, Victor Herbert stole him away for *Babes in Toyland*.

In 1903, the Iroquois Theatre in Chicago burned down with many casualties. The fire laws in New York City and other big cities were amended, and the Weber and Fields' Music Hall was shut down. Disagreements between the partners about renovating the theater caused the team to break up in May 1904. It wasn't only the argument over the theater that caused the breakup. Fields wanted to branch away from burlesque and go into booking shows like the new offerings up on Broadway. But Weber hedged his bets, explaining, "I believe it is a good thing to stick to success and not go experimenting. Experience has shown us where our strength is. . . . Our style of show has made us a good deal of money and a big reputation. Why shouldn't we stick to it?" And there were even more reasons for the breakup. Their 44th Street Theatre was condemned, many of the stars had retired, and business was down. But, most importantly, perhaps, was that like many performing teams, each became jealous of the other.

Fields decided to produce a new musical at the Lew Fields Theatre, *It Happened in Nordland*, on December 5, 1904, with music by Victor Herbert and book and lyrics by Glen MacDonough. Naturally, Mitchell directed and Bessie Clayton was featured. The show was important in musical theater's evolution, with Mitchell attempting to further integrate the songs and dances with the plot. Meanwhile, Weber joined up with Florenz Ziegfeld to produce a Weber and Fields sort of show (part musical, part vaudeville) with Ziegfeld's star Anna Held in the lead. The show was *Higgledy-Piggledy* (1904). But Weber managed to alienate Ziegfeld, and Ziegfeld opened the show himself with Trixie Friganza starring instead of Held.

In August 1906, Fields produced *About Town*, with Fields himself sharing the stage with Vernon Castle and Jack Norworth. The following year, Weber reopened his refurbished Music Hall in the form of the old Weber and Fields burlesques, with *Hip! Hip! Hooray!* opening on October 10, 1907. But with all the new, up-to-date musicals playing, it closed after only sixty-four performances. Weber returned on January 2, 1908, with a satire, the aptly named *Merry Widow Burlesque*. Franz Lehar, composer of the show upon which it was based, gave his blessing for his music to be used in this satire. Many of Weber and Fields's stalwarts appeared, including Lulu Glaser, Bessie Clayton, and Mabel Fenton. When Glaser left, Blanche Ring took over and revitalized the production with her song "Yip-I-Addy-I-Ay," which became the hit of the show's six-month run. The next year, Fields cast Ring in his 1909 summer show *The Midnight Sons*. Ring stopped the show with her new song "I've Got Rings on My Fingers (And Bells on My Toes)." The show was a success, running through the summer and fall and into 1910.

In January 1912, Fields's father died, and Weber attended the funeral. Except for one brief meeting at a benefit performance, they hadn't seen each other for seven years. Riding back from the funeral, Weber sat with Fields in the back of the car. Each admitted they weren't doing so well, and Weber suggested they join forces again. On February 8, 1912, the team was back together on stage for *Weber and Fields 1912 Jubilee*. Fay Templeton returned to the fold to join the production. The show was a hit, with full houses for fourteen weeks at the New Amsterdam Theatre, grossing \$405,000, at the time the largest gross ever for a musical. The engagement was cut short by commitments for the show to play across the country—a tour of thirty-three cities in one month! Marie Dressler joined the tour in Templeton's place, and after the tour, she appeared in a vaudeville revue with Lew Fields producing.

Toward the end of 1912, the partners mounted another show, *Roly Poly*. Audiences at the opening on November 21, 1912, flocked to the Broadway Theatre to see Weber and Fields stalwarts Nora Bayes, Bessie Clayton, and Marie Dressler. Frank Daniels and Jack Norworth, along with the two comedians, commanded the male contingent. The show sported two songs that achieved success outside of the production, including "Way Down in C-U-B-A" with music by Nora Bayes (Norworth's wife) and Antonio Torroella Chijo and

a lyric by Norworth, and “When It’s Apple Blossom Time in Normandy” by Harry Gifford, Tom Mellor, and Huntley Trevor. As usual for a Weber and Fields show, none of the original songs in the show became hits. But the houses were full for two months.

In 1913, Weber and Fields appeared on movie screens around the country. The film was *Popular Players of the Stage*, shot in an early color system, Kinemacolor. Other stage celebrities in the film included Lillian Russell, Anna Held, and Eddie Foy. The Weber and Fields All Star Company toured in 1914, with Nora Bayes and others of the team’s stalwarts, but with war in Europe on the horizon, it closed after only three weeks.

In early 1918, Weber and Fields decided to reunite again and revise their early musical, *A Pack of Pickles*. Their new version sported the apt title *Back Again*. The show was booked into the Chestnut Theatre in Philadelphia, with the Dolly Sisters among the company, but it never came into New York City.

In 1921, Lew Fields toured the country with Nora Bayes and a young Fred Allen. That tour was conducted by Richard Rodgers, who was only nineteen at the time. Rodgers (and Larry Hart) had already collaborated with Fields by contributing songs to Fields’s 1920 musical *Poor Little Ritz Girl*. In 1923, the partners were back before the film camera for an early talking picture. They memorialized their famous pool hall routine for a Lee DeForest Phonofilm sound short. On April 15, 1923, the film premiered at the Rivoli Theatre on Broadway.

In 1925, the team was enjoying one of their regularly occurring farewell tours. This one made it to the Palace Theatre as part of a nostalgia booking. On the bill with them were Marie Cahill, Cissie Loftus, opera star Emma Trentini, and the team of Blossom Seeley and Benny Fields. It was so successful that it was held over for a second week. But the team decided to leave the production when Marie Dressler, once their employee, got better billing than they did.

On November 15, 1926, the duo appeared with Will Rogers and Mary Garden on the November 15, 1926, debut of the NBC Radio Network. It was so well received that in 1931, NBC gave them their own series. Weber and Fields also reunited for the December 27, 1932, inaugural show at Radio City Music Hall, when the partners made what would be their last stage appearance as a team.

Lew Fields went on to appear in the film *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* as himself. The pair didn’t appear together on stage again, but as partners they appeared in the films *Blossoms over Broadway* and *Lillian Russell*. Fields died in 1941. Joe Weber followed the next year.

Their legacy continued, however. Lew Fields had three children, and they all had a major impact on theater. Herbert contributed libretti for early Rodgers and Hart shows and went on to write scripts for several shows in collaboration with his sister Dorothy: *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Something for the Boys*, *Up in Central Park*, and *Arms and the Girl*. Dorothy wrote the libretti and lyrics for *Redhead*, *Sweet Charity*, and *Seesaw*, as well as over four hundred songs for theater, Tin Pan Alley, and movies with collaborators like Jimmy



Photo 2. Lew Fields and family in front of their New York City home. L to r: Dorothy, Lew, Frances, Mrs. Fields, Herbert, and Joseph. New York Public Library, Digital Collections.

McHugh, Jerome Kern, and Cy Coleman. Brother Joseph Fields, in collaboration with Jerome Chodorov, wrote the film scripts to *My Sister Eileen*, *Junior Miss*, and others and wrote the libretti to the musicals *Wonderful Town* and *The Girl in Pink Tights*. Joseph also collaborated with Anita Loos on the musical *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and with Oscar Hammerstein II on *Flower Drum Song*.

Weber and Fields's routines also influenced generations of performers. Their comedy might seem a little hoary to today's audiences, but at the time, their routines were up-to-the-minute. As the century turned, immigrants poured into New York City via Ellis Island. One of their routines spoofed problems in communication between the new Americans and established New Yorkers. In one routine, a newly arrived citizen asks the conductor, "Can you tell me where I get off to Watt Street?" The conductor replies, "What street?" And hilarity ensues. It's pretty creaky stuff—but think of Abbott and Costello's "Who's on first?" routine, which was a direct descendent of Weber and Fields's act.

This text was originally published in 1924 and includes terms that were in common use at the time to describe theatrical performers and genres. We have chosen to leave these terms unchanged to remain faithful to the original text.