

Three Ladies of Vaudeville

by ROBERT LIECHTI



NORA BAYES

Nora Bayes, known as the American Yvette Guilbert, was born in Joliet, Illinois, her real name Dora Goldberg. She was the possessor of a natural contralto voice which could turn into an unexpected baritone. Delivery was strong and with little motion while singing Miss Bayes had great ability to put over a song and was rated a fine comedienne. Five times married, most notably to hit songwriter and fellow star, Jack Norworth; both **SHINE ON HARVEST MOON** and **TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALLGAME** from the pen of her hubby, great hits for the vaudeville duo. Bayes herself insisted on billing which read "**NORA BAYES**, assisted and admired by Jack Norworth", thus recalling to mind similar billing on English music hall by a beloved pair. At their breakup, Norworth came to live in our house where he had an apartment and my father, the caretaker, and Bayes remained in their town house on West End Ave., down the street. At one time the former Fields Music Hall atop the 44th St. Theatre was called the Bayes Roof. Out of vaudeville, she starred in the **ZIEGFELD FOLLIES** of 1908, 1909; the latter with Sophie Tucker and Eva Tanguay; with Norworth in **THE JOLLY BACHELORS** in 1910 and also **LITTLE MISS FIX-IT**, 1911. Other shows, **MAID IN AMERICA** with one of her husbands, Harry Fox, and **HER FAMILY TREE** and **QUEEN O' HEARTS**, latter 1922.

EVA TANGUAY, was only a fading legend when I finally saw her at the 81st Theatre, emerging out of velvet drapes, fullstage, in her distinctively gowned tights, gloves and slippers, to strut and shout her theme song, **I DON'T CARE** and the telling line, "My voice may sound funny, but it gets me the money, so I don't care", told the tale. Renault's impression of her, with the Tanguay wig, was tender but not true; the Palace Theatre orchestration brought out the beauty of the song. (And due to the uncertainties of the finances at the Theatre Museum where Hal and I collect our data, facts are a bit scanty.) Tanguay was said to have had a "Maniac" manner, mad attire

with streaming wild blond hair, and likened unto a "tornado". She was good at creating her own billings and at times called herself, "The Cyclonic Comedienne, who put the 'tang' in Tanguay" or "That Mad Prancer". **VARIETY** called her, "the Betty Hutton of her time" and found her "beautiful and talented" and photos of the period indicate this. I knew her third husband, Alan Parado, who at the time was Francis Renault's pianist and even to this date plays locally in town. She was a top salaried headliner in vaudeville and also received top pay for early talkie shorts. 1909 saw her in the Follies with Bayes, Tucker and Norworth, but temperament of which the first two had plenty, saw to it that she did not remain; from 1913 till 1925, in the "two-a-day" and known as a record salary breaker on the Keith circuit time. Played smaller houses at lower rates in 1931, later joining a Fanchon & Marco unit, doing 4 to 5 shows a day. Eva Tanguay made her only full length movie **WILD GIRL** for Selznick about 1916. Her entire act was much affected by the Salome dance craze started by Maud Allen and Gertrude Ettinge and Renault among others in their acts. Other songs in the Tanguay



EVA TANGUAY



ELSIE JANIS

repertoire, "I Can't Help It!" and "Whistle and Help Me Along". She died at 68 in 1947.

ELSIE JANIS, known as "Little Elsie" in 1906 in vaudeville, had achieved some fame for her imitations of noted theatrical stars, and at 16 was starring in her first part on Broadway in *THE VAUDEVILLE CUP*. Other shows in a brilliant career, *THE HOYDEN*, 1907, *THE FAIR CO-ED*, 1908, *THE SLIM PRINCESS*, 1911 and then co-starring with MONTGOMERY & STONE in *THE LADY OF THE SLIPPER* in 1912. Then in 1915, in *MISS INFORMATION*, in the revue *THE CENTURY GIRL* with Leon Errol, Sam Bernard and Frank Tinney. In 1922, Miss Janis came out in her own show, *ELSIE JANIS & HER GANG*; then two revues to wind up her career, those of *PUZZLES OF 1925* with Walter Pidgeon, Borah Minnevitich and in the variety show, *FRANK FAY'S VAUDEVILLE* with Frank Fay and Eva Le Gallienne.

Born in Columbus, Ohio, March 1889 as Elsie Bierbower, her mother became the most famous stage mother in U.S. theatre history, always in the wings, influencing contracts, guiding and protecting her child, and it was only at 42, following her mother's passing, that Miss Janis married for the first time. Dominating mothers one recalls of varying degrees; the mother of comic Milton Berle, the charming unobtrusive mother of Clifton Webb, and the "mama" of Gypsy Rose Lee and June Havok, whose true story is told in the musica

GYPSY with Merman so brilliantly portraying the role.

ELSIE JANIS became known for her work entertaining soldiers during the first World War as "the Sweetheart of the A.E.F." and one of her most endearing portraits is in the khaki uniform and tin hat, all smiles!

Her London debut was in 1914 and in Paris the year was 1921; concerts here from 1923-25. She was a charter member of ASCAP and collaborated with Jerome Kern, Edmund Goulding on the hit *LOVE, YOUR MAGIC SPELL IS EVERYWHERE* among others. She was a film writer and production supervisor in Hollywood and wrote the early sound film "CLOSE HARMONY", and was the author of four books, *LOVE LETTERS OF AN ACTRESS*, *STAR FOR A NIGHT*, *BIG SHOW*, and *SO FAR SO GOOD*, the last her autobiography. She died in Los Angeles, in February of 1956, a talented and versatile artist, and a true luminary of variety, for even without her mother in the wings, "little Elsie" showed her true mettle in life!

