The Genesis of Toby: A Folk Hero of the American Theater
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# The Genesis of Toby

## *A Folk Hero of the American Theater*

THE VERY NATURE OF FOLKLORE usually precludes any possibility of watching the process of its development. If we know the actual creator of the work of folk art, this knowledge tends to forbid its classification as folklore; and in an art of such public nature as the theater, folk activity would be especially inhibited, since theatrical effect is usually controlled by one or two professionals or a very small professional group.

Yet, paradoxically, in the development of the popular theatrical character "Toby," we have a full record of his ancestry, knowledge of his very beginnings in Fred Wilson's portrayal of Tobe Haxton in *Clouds and Sunshine,* and the story of the development and modification of the character through audience response throughout the next twenty years.

This extraordinary tale has been noticed and written about for the past thirty-five or forty years in Sunday newspaper feature articles and theatrical journals, but it has been presented uncritically and inaccurately. Here is Toby's story, told as accurately as careful study of the printed records and the tradition handed down orally and through personal correspondence permits.

Although theater historians have lately begun to take some notice of the tent repertory companies,[1] their history along with that of the companies playing the small-town theaters or "opera houses" during an earlier period, has been generally neglected, and the creation of the Toby character either scorned or ignored. This attitude grew out of the contempt of the cities for the small towns and the resulting prejudice that the only theatrical activity worth writing about was that of the big cities. Even so, this small-town theater, with its own traditions and techniques, flourished completely independent of the metropolitan theater. In time a distinctive literature of melodrama and comedy based on the tastes and attitudes of the audiences developed, and two distinctive comedy characters originated: the "Toby," the red-headed, freckle-faced youngster who is smarter than he looks, and the G-string, the garrulous and officious old man who is too easily gulled. Nevertheless, both the plays and these two characters have their roots in general theatrical tradition.

These buffoons, both the old and the young, are almost as old as dramatic literature itself. Each appears in the comedies of Plautus, the one as the impudent clown slave who is not so stupid as he looks, and the other as the tyrannical father who is not so clever as he thinks. In any discussion of the prototypes of Toby, William in *As You Like It* and Abel Drugger in Johnson's *The Alchemist* are always mentioned; but it was not until a little over a hundred years ago that the character of Toby in his typical American form of comic rube youngster began to develop, and a little over fifty years ago that Toby finally became his name once and for all.

One of the earliest plays with a proto-Toby in the cast is the William Pratt version of *Ten Nights in a Barroom*,[2] first presented in Boston in 1847, where he is named Sample Switchell. In a twentieth-century version used by the L. Verne Slout Players of Vermontville, Michigan, he is described as "Comedy, Toby (or originally) New England rube." In the earlier version of the play he is described as "a Yankee tippler, very much alive."

Another proto-Toby appears on the American stage at the Broadway Theater in New York, March 7, 1851—Toby Twinkles, in a play called *All That Glitters Is Not Gold* by Thomas and J. M. Morton.[3] The play is of English origin and had had a premiere performance at the Olympic Theater in London on January 13 of the same year. Toby's entrance is described thus: "he enters with his back to the audience sparring and hitting out violently with both hands," certainly an entrance characteristic of the later Toby. His nose has just been broken in a fight at the mill where he was defending Martha Gibbs, a beautiful but poor mill worker. His costume for the first act is "blue vest, moleskin trousers, apron and sleeves (Brown Holland), paper cap," but there is no mention of a red wig, for Toby did not acquire this characteristic until Fred Wilson's naturally red hair established the convention.

In these and many other plays the conventional American rube comic was established in the American theater and had definite audience appeal in small towns, particularly in the Midwest. Toby himself, however, with his own name and characteristics different from the usual rube comic, crystallized from a factual incident. The sudden popularity of Fred Wilson when he first played the conventional country boy or silly kid began the development of the character, and the subsequent demand of audiences that this role be played with the actor always using at least two of the features Wilson added, red hair and freckles, and always thereafter appearing under the name of Toby, established once and for all the basic conventions of this part as future audiences knew them.

The name Toby comes without any doubt from Tobe Haxton, the name of the country boy comic, or "first comedy" as it was always called by the rep actors, in an old melodrama, *Clouds and Sunshine,* by W. C. Herman. The generally accepted version of the adoption of this name is told in *Theatre Arts,*[4] by Robert Downing, who says that he did four years of research, including personal interviews with Fred Wilson, in preparation for his article. In one interview Downing describes the incident that prompted the permanent adoption of Toby as the name for all future silly-kid characters. According to Downing, this happened in Crawley, Louisiana, where Wilson was playing with Murphy's Comedians. Wilson and Horace Murphy, the proprietor of the troupe, were strolling down

the main street of the town when they were accosted by a ten-year-old Cajun boy, who had seen their show the previous night. He observed that Murphy was taking his clown out for a walk. When Murphy stopped to talk to him, he found that the youngster was puzzled by "the funny man," for he had seen Wilson as Toby Haxton in *Clouds and Sunshine* on Monday night, on Tuesday night as Toby Green in *Out of the Fold,* but on Wednesday as Bud in *Won by Waiting.* This was perplexing to the young fan, for he could see no reason for the change in name from Toby to Bud if the actor was to look, dress, talk, and act the same in all three parts.

Murphy was a man wise in the ways of show business. "He and Wilson," says Downing, "applied Toby's name to all silly-kid parts in their repertory" from that time on. Downing dates the story in 1909. This is the legend, and, indeed, it is a legend. The principal items are without doubt founded on fact, but the details of the story may be inaccurate and the date and place are almost certainly incorrect. The title page of the copyrighted edition of *Clouds and Sunshine* in my possession bears the date 1911. It came from the office of Alex Byers, proprietor of the Chicago Manuscript Play Co., who operated his company during the early years of the century in the old Palace Hotel at Clark and Hubbard streets in Chicago, and who was the first big supplier of new plays to the rep shows.

The Copyright Office of the Library of Congress gives the date September 5, 1911.[5] Robert L. Sherman in *The Drama Cyclopedia*[6] gives 1911, but places the performance at Lafayette, Louisiana. Since no such town as Crawley is listed in any atlas, probably Sherman's citation of Lafayette as the place of original performance is correct.

Horace Murphy[7] also adds a mild corrective to the story Wilson told to Robert Downing. He says, "regarding the boy asking about Toby, there was no such incident." When Murphy took Wilson to task for the story, Wilson replied that he had used "author's license." Actually, he explained, "it was an old man who met us on the street and said, 'Hi, Mr. Murphy, I see you have your idiot out for some fresh air.' " When Murphy asked Fred why he had told the story as he did, he replied, "I'd rather be called a clown than an idiot."

Regardless of whether the questioner was a boy or an old man, or whether Wilson was called an idiot or a clown, the incident is based on fact. Its significance lies in the first suggestion by a member of the audience that, even though the plays were different, the same name should be given to the character played the same way every night by the same man with never-changing physical characteristics.

Acting on this hint, Murphy gave Wilson instructions to convert all the "first comedy" parts in their shows to the Toby character. Tobe Haxton of *Clouds and Sunshine,* whose first name easily and naturally shifts to Toby, must therefore be considered the first to emerge as Toby himself.

Most of the popular bills between the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first ten years of the twentieth century had the silly-kid or country-boy part. In *Out of the Fold* he was Bobby Jenkins; in *Call of the Woods,* Eben Quackenbush; in *Way Down East,* Hi Holler; in *Lena Rivers,* Joel Slocum; and in *Won by Waiting,* a rewritten version of a much older play, *Marian Gray,* he is Bud Fisher. In *Over the Hill to the Poorhouse* he is named Eben and is listed in the

cast as "b. f." or blackface comedian. In other plays he is called Si, Zeb, Pete, and Jake. All of these roles were given the name of Toby after Wilson's success as Tobe Haxton, and the actor, no matter what his own complexion, was required to wear a red wig and a freckled make-up. Even in such old and well-established plays as *St. Elmo,* in which the "first comedy" role is known as Van Jiggins, the name was sometimes changed to Toby and the make-up almost always changed to red wig and freckles.

Horace Murphy adds that when Alex Byers heard of Wilson's success, he ordered his staff, which included W. C. Herman, George Leffingwell, and Lem Parker, the first playwrights to write exclusively for small-town, midwestern showmen,[8] to write plays with a similar comedy lead. But what was this character like, who changed the names of all popular comedy parts to Toby?

Fred Wilson's creation of this part was accidental. He says, "I came into this world with a shock of unruly red hair and later acquired a flock of freckles that all the make-up in Stein's laboratory couldn't have improved upon. The character was just myself plus a hickory shirt, patched jeans, boots with run-down heels and a battered hat."[9]

Mrs. Evelyn Wilson Barrick, Fred Wilson's daughter, adds, "Dad played a lovable country bumpkin as you see him every day in every city and town on every street in the world! He needed no wig—his hair was naturally red—rarely wore make-up—too busy talking to people and enjoying them to bother, I do believe!"[10]

Don Melrose, Kansas City actors' agent, in an article on Wilson in *Bill Bruno's Bulletin,*[11] says that Fred was a real comedian who "wowed them every Monday night with Toby." Children and even a great percentage of the adults in the audiences did not easily remember the names of the other characters he played, but they always remembered Toby. They also remembered his two chief characteristics, his red hair and his freckles. Wherever Wilson played, no matter what part he was playing, he was called Toby. When the boys and girls and even the grown-ups saw him offstage, they would invariably greet him as Toby. And so Toby's name and personal characteristics were stamped upon Fred Wilson forever by his audiences.

During the years following Wilson's first success, whenever the advance agent arrived in a town ahead of the Murphy show he would be asked if Toby was with the show again. Melrose concludes, "In asking about any play, the question would be, 'Is Toby goin' to be in it?' In fact, nearly all the questions asked by the customers were in regard to that 'darn fool TOBY.' " Bill Bruno appends a wry comment to this article, a comment which reflects the opinion of many showmen after other actors had badly abused the role: "Now that the crime has been pinned on Fred Wilson, we take up the question of 'Who was the first G-string?' Help!"

And so Wilson became known as Toby not only to the Murphy audiences but to other actors as well. When Wilson's own company was playing the Overholser Theater in Oklahoma City both in 1914 and 1918, it was billed as the Toby Wilson Stock Company.[12] And Robert L. Sherman in the reference to *Clouds and Sunshine* in *The Drama Cyclopedia* lists the comedian as Fred (Toby) Wilson.[13]

It was not long before Wilson's success became known to the whole small-

town show world. Managers began to follow Murphy's lead and feature their comedians as Toby, always with the red wig and freckles. Some actors simply adopted the conventions established by Wilson without any reference to their originator. Some were more ethical. Mrs. Barrick says, "When a light comedian graduated to a full-fledged comedian, many, many asked Dad if they could use the name Toby. I can recall Barrett Nevius thanking my father. He had written him but wanted to do it in person! Since I had known Barrett as a child, the incident stuck with me!"

Tobys proliferated all over the small-town show world, and in time Toby, instead of the conventional leading man, became the featured role. One of the earliest plays which featured Toby as the most important character is *Sputters,* by actor George Crawley, a play in which stuttering is added to Toby's other social difficulties.

On the other hand, during the great years of the tent shows—the period following World War I and ending with the beginning of the depression in 1930—many managers, such as Elwin Strong, Walter Savidge, and Ralph Moody, continued to present what was called the standard repertory, ignoring the Toby shows. If they did present one, they always chose a Saturday night when the show was followed by the taking down and packing of the tent and all the other equipment. Toby shows usually did not require elaborate production, depending for their success on the abilities of the leading comedy actor. The general opinion of most tent-show people coincided with Bill Bruno's, for with playing by an unskilled and conceited actor the role could become grotesque and unbelievable. But when financial troubles really hit the shows in 1930, they were forced either to go out of business or present Tobys. Their former audiences had deserted them in favor of talking pictures and the free entertainment offered by radio. They turned to the Toby shows in a desperate attempt to attract an audience, but the audience this time was one largely unacquainted with the living theater. A few of the tent-show people were successful enough to keep their shows alive, and here again it is Toby as a kind of people's hero that makes him significant. Originally his name had been applied to him by the audiences who watched Fred Wilson play the character. His red hair and freckles were accidental though original characteristics, but Wilson's popular success could have quickly disappeared if his characteristics and those variations brought about by his successors had not represented something deeply fundamental to the thoughts and feelings of their audiences.

Toby came along during a period of crisis in American social life.[14] The norm of American life as a fundamentally rural society had been changing rapidly since the Civil War and changed with even greater rapidity during the first thirty years of this century. City life became the ideal, attractive because of its glamour and its promise of greater financial rewards; progressive people were deserting the small towns and the countryside for the possibility of adventure and of riches, or at least of more money than they had ever had before. Those who stayed behind felt that they must somehow justify their unprogressive actions. And so they came to believe in certain myths—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes expressed, sometimes unexpressed. These myths that people live by may be defined as "the images, gestures, and symbols which would ob-

jectify their experience and bring to their lives a simple and comprehensive meaning."[15]

In all the plays written or contrived for the entertainment of the rural audience one generalization is always understood: that country life is essentially virtuous and that life in the city is essentially wicked. From this generalization others are corollary. The people from the small town or country are homely and unsophisticated, but unassailable in their virtue. If any go to the city and make a fortune they are invariably corrupted. The millionaire city banker of rural origin must be brought to his knees in repentance,[16] and the farmer's son who becomes a successful city businessman must be brought to see the downright wickedness of his beautiful wife,[17] for the beautiful and sophisticated are greedy and unscrupulous and ought always to be suspected, whereas the homely, even the ugly and unattractive, are diamonds in the rough.

Such was Toby. His country-boy prototypes were ugly and unattractive enough, but it was Toby who had the additional homeliness of red hair and freckles. The small-town audiences could identify themselves with him because in comparison with their city cousins they were uncouth and uncultivated. And when Toby triumphed (it is a distinct advance in dramaturgy when the playwrights make the denouement depend upon some apparently foolish action of his), they themselves triumphed, for underneath they felt that in spite of their simplicity some overseeing power would in the end give them victory over a mighty but unjust world.

Fred Wilson played Toby as a believable character. Others played him essentially for the low comedy element, even sometimes as a grotesque clown. But he had only to wear a red wig and paint large freckles on his face to be recognizable. The symbol of the red wig was so well known that Charles Worthan, who ran a successful show in central Illinois for a quarter of a century, had only to mail an advertising publication called *The Red Wig* to all rural box-holders receiving mail from the town where he had set up his tent for the potential audience to know what was in store for them.

The audiences found their esthetic satisfaction in the feelings aroused by the representation of the myth and purged by laughter. Their moral ideas were satisfied by the assurance that right had triumphed. The enactment of the plays became a kind of ritual in which the form never changed although the particular words and events varied. The myth was already in the minds of the folk when Toby appeared to personify it. Its re-enactment became a ritual which to the people who saw it was virtual history,[18] since it represented what they wanted to believe to be the truth about life.

The people had created the myth before Toby appeared. When he did appear, they gave him his name, the natural change from Tobe to Toby, a name associated ever afterward with the character, primarily because of the skilful acting of Fred Wilson. The people sustained the ritual once the plays began to be presented as Toby shows. Their applause from the very beginnings, their eager inquiries about his coming to town, showed their extraordinary approval and love for Toby. This approval and love created a popularity so great that he became the one outstanding character the rep shows produced and their one original contribution to the American theater.

## NOTES

1. For instance, Larry Dale Clark, *Toby Shows: A Form of American Popular Theatre* (University of Illinois Dissertation, 1963).
2. (New York, no date).
3. (New York, 1889).
4. (November, 1964), 653.
5. The notice from the Copyright Office Reads: "CLOUDS AND SUNSHINE. By W. C. Herman. Registered in the name of Alexander Byers, under D25244, following publication Sept. 5, 1911. No renewal found."
6. Sherman, 102.
7. Personal letter, April 8, 1965.
8. L. H. Wight, personal interview, Chicago, Illinois, April 15, 1965.
9. Downing, 653.
10. Personal letter, April 16, 1965.
11. December 17, 1936.
12. *Theatre Bulletin,* Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, December 29, 1917, and Overholser Theatre Program, 1914.
13. Sherman, 102.
14. Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1965), 1–15.
15. McLean, 2.
16. Nelson Compsten and W. C. Herman, *Won by Waiting* (Chicago, 1910).
17. Charles Harrison, *The Awakening of John Slater* (Chicago, no date).
18. Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York, 1953), 306–325.

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