

The **Damon Runyon** **T H E A T R E**

The Damon Runyon Theatre was another of Alan Ladd's *Mayfair Transcription Company* productions. Ladd, long an admirer of 'The Brighter Side', Damon Runyon's long-running newspaper column, initially signed Pat O'Brien to star as 'Broadway' in the program. Indeed we have an *alleged* audition from the program, titled "Princess O'Hara" in which O'Brien and Wendy Barrie are heard announcing the [next](#) production of the series, 'A Piece of Pie'. Newspaper listings of the era describe Pat O'Brien slated to cut all 52 [programs](#) upon completing principal filming of the *Howard Hughes/RKO* feature, *The Boy with Green Hair*. But the quixotic Hughes decided the 'message' element of *The Boy with Green Hair* was a bit too risky for late-1940s audiences. He directed that the film be re-shot, as needed, to remove the social intolerance message from the completed celluloid.

Newspaper accounts cite O'Brien as anticipating a New York recording session for all 52 episodes of *The Damon Runyon Theatre* sometime during the Summer of 1948. But owing to the re-shoot and re-cutting of *The Boy with Green Hair*, the movie wasn't completed until September of 1948. This may--or may not--explain Pat O'Brien's absence from the remaining episodes of *The Damon Runyon Theatre*--or whether any were recorded beyond *Princess O'Hara*. Given the common practice of cutting two to five transcribed recordings in one session, one might well imagine that O'Brien recorded as many as five Damon Runyon Theatre programs before his performances were cut short. But it's intriguing to wonder how many of the episodes they actually did record before O'Brien had to rush back to RKO's West Coast studios to complete *The Boy with Green Hair*.

As it turns out, Ladd tapped short-lived veteran Radio actor *John Brown* to voice the recurring 'Broadway' character so central to the exposition of every episode of *The Damon Runyon Theatre*. As most fans of the program would attest, *John Brown's 'Broadway'* was as good as it gets in Radio. Brown had already begun performing a similar character on *My Friend Irma* (1947) as Irma's (Marie Wilson) shiftless boyfriend, so the leap to yet another Lower East Side accent wasn't that great for Brown. Indeed, one wonders if Brown ever got out of character for the seven years that *My Friend Irma* aired over CBS.

Yet another stumbling block for many new programs produced in 1948 was the infamous 'Petrillo Ban' on producing any new professional Radio recordings. The following is from the *Time Magazine* article of December 29, 1947:

"Cocky little James Caesar Petrillo just sat back and waited. Recording companies rushed symphony orchestras, hillbilly bands and blues singers in & out of studios, trying to record as much as possible by January 1, when Petrillo's ban on record-making becomes effective. Record officials gloated that they had piled up a big enough backlog of new records to [last](#) a year or more. They were hopeful that Petrillo's Musicians' Union might not be able to stand so long a layoff.

Last week, James Petrillo pointed his stubby finger at a point they had apparently overlooked. The Taft-Hartley law prevented record companies from signing a new contract which would pay royalties to a union-administered fund—but the record companies had obligingly recorded a year's supply under the old contract. All those phonograph records to be doled out over the bleak months ahead, he thought, would net his union around \$10,000,000.

The record companies looked as if they had been hit over the head with a kettledrum. Together with men from radio, television, and phonograph manufacturers, they formed a united industry committee to fight Petrillo. But Petrillo wasn't budging an inch: "We are never going to make records again—ever. That's one New Year's resolution we've made and one we are going to keep."

James Caesar Petrillo was president of the American Federation of Musicians, who had successfully imposed a

ban on professional recordings between 1942 and 1944 until an appropriate royalty system could be established to the benefit of his union members. Petrillo successfully reimposed the ban for most of 1948--it was finally lifted on November 22, 1948. Indeed, then Freshman Congressman Richard M. Nixon made headlines taking up the cudgel for the Recording Industry in an attempt to thwart Petrillo's union.

This is the reason the same music theme is employed in both the alleged *Pat O'Brien* audition recordings and the final production pressings of *The Damon Runyon Theatre*. Having dodged two potential stumbling blocks, *Ladd's The Damon Runyon Theatre* was first aired over independent radio station KSEL, Lubbock, Texas.

The program was soon heard over most major outlets between November 1948 and December 1951. As with Mayfair's other syndicated programs, the production quality and engineering is superb. Veteran Mayfair producer *Vern Carstensen* again supervises the production and *Richard Sanville* directs. Mayfair writer *Russell Hughes* adapts Damon Runyon's wonderful short stories, maintaining the very *Runyonesque* flavor of both the dialogue and settings.

But what is it that makes a character or storyline *Runyonesque*? For three generations of Americans, a *Damon Runyon character* evoked a social archetype from the Brooklyn or Midtown demi-monde elements of New York society. Think of it as the *Bizarro World* version of New York's 'The 400'. Runyon spun fascinating, tongue-in-cheek tales of gamblers, hustlers, actors, and gangsters--and their *dolls*. Most self-respecting denizens of Runyon's fanciful world preferred colorful monikers such as 'Nathan Detroit,' 'Big Jule,' 'Harry the Horse Thief,' 'Good Time Charlie,' 'Dave the Dude,' or 'The Seldom Seen Kid.'

Runyon spun his tales in a uniquely vernacular style that mixed overly formal speech with richly colored slang. This idiomatic language was invariably spoken in the present tense, quite deliberately devoid of any contractions. Runyon is credited as the first major American writer to "stylize both the language and the behavior of gangsters and depict them as another part of the socio-economic system, showing how the underworld provided clients with gambling, sex and hard-to-get sports tickets and, during Prohibition, with liquor," according to Cornell University English Professor, *Daniel Schwarz*.

Runyon's flamboyant street characters, with their aggressive one-line retorts, have shaped the world's image of 20th Century New York City for over eighty years. That's the charm and flavor that makes each of these recordings so timeless. Those familiar with Runyon's work will remember that the famous *Frank Sinatra*/*Marlon Brando* vehicle *Guys and Dolls* (1955) was based on Damon Runyon's unique vision of New York City and its inhabitants--and the long-running play of the same name. Indeed, had *Guys and Dolls* been filmed six years earlier, one might well imagine that *The Damon Runyon Theatre* may have been named *Guys and Dolls*.

The Mayfair rendition of *Damon Runyon's* fascinating world remains as true to form and substance as both the 1200-performance *Guys and Dolls* stage play and the Oscar-nominated *Guys and Dolls* film. Runyon's most celebrated short stories were spun into a 52-week long, seamless atmosphere of a New York City that shaped popular perceptions of The Big Apple throughout the remainder of the Golden Age of Radio and the Golden Age of Television as well. Veteran dialecticians *Gerald Mohr*, *Herb Vigran*, *Sheldon Leonard*, *Luis Van Rooten*, *Alan Reed* and *Lionel Stander* gave every program of the run an authenticity and indelible flavor that were imitated in both Radio and Television for decades to come.

The Damon Runyon Theatre stands as one of Mayfair's finest contributions to The Golden Age of Radio and remains a valuable addition to any Golden Age Radio collector's library. As an artifact of American Society it represents an invaluable time capsule of period vernacular. But most of all it stands as an enduring reminder of the genius of Damon Runyon's insight into the class warfare that evolved during and after the Roaring 20s and The Great Depression.

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For the Old Time Radio Researchers, I'm your announcer, _____.