

Background History and Public Perception of R. H. Burnside

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Robert Hubbethorne Burnside was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1873, into a family that was largely involved in theater. His father, George Burnside, was the manager of Gaiety Theatre in Glasgow and his mother, Margaret Thorne, was an actress. Burnside's involvement in theatre began at a young age when he performed in several local productions.

Burnside <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-e1ff-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

By age 18, he had transitioned into being an assistant stage manager at the Alhambra Theatre of Variety, a popular music hall in London that housed variety productions that included ballet numbers, opera music, and comedy sketches. Surrounded by popular variety shows, it was this environment that inspired Burnside in his writing and directing of the extravagant variety productions at the Hippodrome.

Hippodrome

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In 1894, Burnside moved to the United States to direct and produce shows for American actress Lillian Russell, who had been impressed by his talents when she visited London. A few years later, he began to write and direct musicals on Broadway. Some of the first productions he wrote include the operetta *Sergeant Kitty* in 1903, and the musical comedy *The Tourists* (1906) ("Burnside, R.H."). These first productions were very different from the productions he is now famous for because they had a main plot that followed a few principal characters. His more popular productions were large-scale revues that combined circus acts with songs and dances, like those that could be seen in Vaudeville performances of the early 1900s.

Burnside's career was transformed in 1908, when the original owners of the Hippodrome, the Shubert brothers, hired him as the theatre's artistic director. While it is unknown how exactly he earned this position, Burnside's past experience as assistant director of a successful London and writing skills showcased in his work for Broadway and Lillian Russell most likely impressed the Shuberts. In 1915, the Shubert brothers were replaced by Charles Dillingham, in part because their old-fashioned melodramas no longer attracted audience members and the Hippodrome was losing money. Dillingham was one of the most important and major producers of the early 1900s. He produced shows for actor Fred Stone since 1906, when he produced *The Red Mill* (Mordden, pg 56). Dillingham decided to revamp the style of the Hippodrome productions, and with Burnside's help, began a long run of unique and lucrative revues (Bloom). This transition of power most likely benefited Burnside in the long run because Dillingham's experience and power provided him a platform to which he could further his name and cultivate the American public's praise. He had the influence and professional connections that attracted other major characters of the early 1900s theatre world, and he had the ability to choose from a wide range of lyricists, composers, writers, and directors for the performances he produced. Dillingham's fame helped Burnside cultivate his own reputation.

The Hippodrome itself also played a significant role in bringing about the publicity Burnside received. It was a large playhouse that was famous for the musical theater extravaganzas it housed starting in 1905. The Hippodrome's large size allowed writers and producers to create shows with spectacular and unusual elements such as shows that included

circus acts, large-scale dance numbers, pageants, ballets, ice skating, high diving into water tanks, and specialty acts from entertainers such as Houdini (“Burnside, R.H.”). Unlike Burnside’s earlier productions, these musical shows did not follow any kind of storyline at all. Some other shows that were running around the time that *Good Times* did were *Night Boat*, a satirical story about a pretty girl on a boat and *Tickle Me*, which was a comedy that featured jazz and a love story. During this era of musical theater, many of the productions either focused on glamour and romance or were vaudevillian acts involving multiple performances of singing and dancing. Burnside’s Hippodrome productions were a combination of the vaguely plot-driven romance musicals and the multiple-act vaudeville sensations of the late 19th century and early 20th century, except on a much larger scale and production budget. Other extravagant revues that Burnside’s wrote and directed at the Hippodrome include *Hip! Hip! Hooray!* (1915), *Happy Days* (1919), *Tip Top* (1920).

The main audience for American musical theater in the 1920s was the upper middle class and middle class individuals and families. Burnside’s large, extravagant shows provided entertainment that was not politically charged or offensive, which made his Hippodrome shows attractive to all Americans. The extravagance of the Hippodrome shows was widely loved because it was a form of entertainment that had never been produced before, at least on the same scale. It fascinated the American public and especially in the case of *Good Times*, the shows provided an escape from the overall dismal mood of the United States at the end of World War I in 1920. According to musical historian Ken Bloom, the title of the show, “Good Times”, was a celebration of the good times that were ahead now that the war was over. Also, Burnside was clever in utilizing an already popular kind of musical theater format, that of the Vaudeville variety show, and making it more accessible to audiences of all ages. Burnside’s shows mostly included circus-esque acts, and left out the scandalous acts that could often be found in the burlesque shows of the early 1900s. The accessibility and appropriateness of the content of Burnside’s shows widened the show’s audience to include middle and upper class families of all ages.

While Burnside’s productions were widely popular and loved by many, so was Burnside himself. His name became synonymous with large-scale revue productions and the grand Hippodrome Theatre. According to The Lambs, a professional theatrical club of which Burnside was a member, Burnside was a hardworking man who was determined to attain his vision for each musical. While his personality was intense and he required the cast members to practice until they were exhausted, Burnside was still liked and admired by the cast for his dedication.

Further evidence indicates the American public’s love and praise for Burnside, which includes newspaper articles that reviewed his productions. In a *New York Times* review of *Good Times* from August 10, 1920, the critic comments that this show is the Hippodrome “at its best.” They describe the set as having two jeweled towers flanking the stage and a cast wearing gorgeous costumes. They further list some elements of the production, including an equestrian group, a clown, and elephants. In addition, they list the main characters and tell us which actors are reoccurring. The praise the critic exhibits for the performance indicates an appreciation for the individuals who helped create it, of which includes Burnside who both wrote and directed *Good Times*. While the critic does not directly praise Burnside, he does praise Charles Dillingham and the “direction” in which he takes the Hippodrome. This “direction” refers to the distinctive, fast-paced revues that Dillingham, Burnside, and their pool of musical theatre professionals created from the 1910’s to the 1920’s. Burnside’s genius created these stories and

interweaved the acts of the musical in a way that delighted and surprised every person that went to see his shows.

Another review from the *New York Clipper* on August 18, 1920 directly praises Burnside, as well as graciously compliments *Good Times* specifically. The author commends Burnside, stating that “to Burnside goes the credit for developing this human and decorative mass into something substantial.” He even goes as far as to say that *Good Times* is “positively the greatest and most worthwhile one of its kind the country has ever seen.” This kind of review is similar to many others that were written about Burnside and his shows. The language and tone they utilize reveals the respect and admiration critics had for him as a librettist and director. Their reviews also help give us insight into how the general public perceived Burnside because they served as advertisements for the show. If a critic liked it, readers were more likely to go see the production. Once the readers saw the magic of Burnside’s shows, they could understand how the critics felt and what they were describing in their newspaper articles.

Burnside also managed to create and maintain his reputation as a talented and unique director through his inclusion of star performers. The cast of *Tip Top* included famous American actor Fred Stone, who starred as the main character, Tipton Topping. Fred Stone started his career by performing circus acts and minstrel shows, then later gained his star status as a Broadway star and film actor. Stone starred in a main role in an earlier Globe Theatre production, *Chin Chin* (1914).

Good Times also included star recurring Hippodrome star performers such as Ferry Corwey, Joe Jackson, and Belle Story (Billy Rose Theatre Division). Corwey was a British clown who made his American debut in *Good Times*, and immediately garnered praise from the American crowd.

Joe Jackson:

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47de-fed6-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

He was later featured in other Hippodrome shows, such as *Get Together* (1921), and gained popularity from his role in the large-scale productions. Another popular clown included in *Good Times* was Joe Jackson who was an Austrian cycling champion who decided to create a comedy act when he accidentally took the handle bars off the bike during a show. Joe Jackson’s especially alarming appearance and talent made him unique and widely popular. As for classically trained performers, Belle Story was one of the most renowned members of the Hippodrome recurring cast. Belle Story was an American singer who was famous for her coloratura soprano voice that could manage difficult runs and trills. She made her first appearance at the Hippodrome in 1916 in *Hip! Hip! Hooray!* (“Belle Story Collection”). Burnside and Dillingham’s ability to find uniquely talented performers aided in creating their distinctive multiple act extravaganzas, which differentiated them from any other musical theatre production ever seen before by the American public. The sense of risk in their productions coupled with the grandiose aesthetic impressed audiences both at home and abroad.

Burnside was the creative genius behind the story and the general stylistic direction of the show, but he could not have gained his popularity without the creativity and labor of the other creator of the show, such as the composers and costume designers. In the creation of *Good Times*, composer and lyricist Raymond Hubbell and costume designer Will R. Barnes worked alongside Burnside. Hubbell began as a pianist and arranger for popular music publisher Charles K. Harris (a Tin Pan Alley pioneer), but transitioned into writing works for the Ziegfeld Follies.

He became the musical director of the Hippodrome starting in 1915, around the same time Charles Dillingham and Burnside began producing and directing shows at the theatre. His catchy tunes were loved by the audience and Burnside's lyrics made the song more memorable. Some of the most popular songs from *Good Times* include "You Can't Beat the Luck of the Irish" and "Hello Imagination." As for Barnes, he was an Australian designer known for his playful costumes that could be found on Broadway from 1898 to 1924. He worked on many Hippodrome productions including *Happy Days* (1919), *Everything* (1918), and *Better Times* (1922). His costumes were bold and featured bold patterns and contrasting colors that provided a visually stunning setting for Burnside's productions to occur.

In the case of the other 1920 Hippodrome production, *Tip Top*, Burnside worked alongside other amazingly talented composers and writers such as Ivan Carlyll and Anne Caldwell. Ivan Caryll was a Belgian operetta and musical comedy composer who was renowned for the operettas he wrote for Broadway and West End shows in the 20th century. He had worked on other Hippodrome productions before *Tip Top*, such as *Chin Chin* (1914). Anne Caldwell was one of the first successful female American librettists of the early 20th century, who wrote both popular music and Broadway shows. She had also worked on other productions with Burnside and Dillingham, including *Watch Your Step* (1914). The creative talent that was available to work alongside Burnside helped give his productions a pretentious edge that attracted the attention of people who knew of the musical importance of the composers and librettists, such as Raymond Hubbell and Anne Caldwell.

The most successful era of R. H. Burnside's career is defined by his time as artistic director at the New York Hippodrome. During his time there, he was able to collaborate with reputable members of the musical theatre community and create his own unique style of production. While he was a creative genius, Burnside would not have been able to reach the level of popularity and public admiration he did without the professional connections that the Hippodrome afforded him.

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