A Tough Act To Follow

by Pat Cook

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STORY OF THE PLAY

You think it's easy to be a Broadway agent in the 1950s? Ask Leo Mintz, a one-time big shot who now represents bird acts, roller-skating kids who recite poetry and flea circuses. However, Leo's problems are just starting when known gangster Louie DeMarco enters and employs Leo, against his will, to represent Louie's protégé, the lovely Christine. As if this weren't bad enough, Leo promptly falls in love with her.

"They should just as well type up a label which reads 'East River' and slap it on our foreheads!" scowls Liz, the secretary and bouncer for said agency. Then, to throw everyone off the track, Leo stages a 'War between the Sexes' - a prizefight between Marlene, Christine's chaperone, and Maxie, a punch-drunk boxer.

Lines fly faster than bullets in this Damon Runyonesque tale as Leo finds that true love, indeed, sometimes follows a very rocky road. Snoopy columnists, wise-cracking newspaper girls and even the cops get into the action in this rollicking send up of the Fabulous '50s, which, as everybody on Broadway knows, is A Tough Act To Follow.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(14 actors to play 19 roles)

LEO MINTZ: Sneaky but loveable New York Agent.
LIZ POMEROY: Leo's wise-cracking secretary.
BEBE: The office gofer.
SCAT: A hepcat musician.
FRANCIS: Pushy stage mother.
PROFESSOR: Overblown literate type.
LYDIA: Lady ventriloquist.
DUKE: Young method actor type.
ADELAIDE: Francis's roller-skating daughter.
DOC: Long-suffering manager of Maxie.
MAXIE: Punch-drunk but congenial boxer.
LOUIE DeMARCO: Soft spoken but threatening hood.
MARLENE: Large chaperone to Christine.
CHRISTINE: Lovely, unassuming starlet.
NOLA BAINES: Pushy columnist (double cast with Francis).
OFFICER FLANERY: Irish cop (double cast with Professor).
KIP: Cynical newsgirl (double cast with Adelaide).
INGA: Actually Lydia in disguise but this name needs to be in the program anyway.
BIG MURRAY: As with Inga, this is really Duke but the name needs to appear in program.

TIME: The mid-1950s.
PLACE: The outer office of the Leo Mintz Booking Agency.

A Note From the Playwright

In this tribute to Damon Runyon, the characters are drawn in broad strokes and should be played as such; not overacting per se but more of a slight cartoonish touch is needed. Also, there are suggestions for double casting to keep the cast size small if needed. All the parts (with the exceptions of INGA and BIG MURRAY) may be played by individual actors. However, if or when double casting is utilized, the audience will be used to it by the time that INGA and BIG MURRAY show up and, in the very unlikely event one or two of them may recognize the actors playing the roles as having appeared earlier, not get "wise" to them.

Hand Props

A deck of cards; script; spangled cloth; flea circus including a small platform with a tiny high-wire, seesaw and merry-go-round; clipboard, ventriloquist's doll, brown paper sack, nail file, pad and pencil, several bills, a wallet, camera, bucket, mop, dust rag, newspaper, badge, flowers, and several guns.

Setting

This Damon Runyonesque tale takes place in the fabulous 50s, and in the world of show business, things are changing all over. Well, maybe not as fast as they are in Leo Mintz's booking office. The outer office itself, housed in one of the older New York cobblestones, consists of four doors. The first door, SR, leads to Leo's office. The second door, USR, leads to the file or "client" room. The third door, USL, leads to a rehearsal room and the fourth, SL, leads to the outside hall. The furniture in the room is old but kept up and comfortable. Liz's desk is near the SR wall, at an angle to meet the rest of the room. There are two chairs accompanying but not necessarily agreeing with the desk; the first behind the desk and the other in front. A telephone rests on the desk and an overflowing trash can lives on its downstage side. A large couch is located near the center of the room, in front of which is a coffee table, which holds various "showbiz" magazines and a telephone. A round table with assorted, mismatched chairs sits near the USL corner. File cabinets, bookshelves, a coffee pot, an old radio, plus some other unidentifiable items live against the US wall.

Sound Effects

The radio plays music at random times, such as "Sweet Mystery of Life" and other dramatic scores from the era.

Scene 1

(AT RISE: LIZ is at her desk, trying to talk on the phone; SCAT is playing cards at the USL table with BEBE; PROFESSOR and FRANCIS are leaning on the desk, trying to get LIZ'S attention; and LYDIA is doing her ventriloquist act near the couch. Lying on the couch is DUKE, reading lines aloud from a script. On the coffee table rests something covered by a spangled cloth.)

LIZ: *(Trying to hear the phone.)* What? No, I said we already sent over that act! He should've been there hours ago! No, it was a bird act! Bird act! You know, some of the act are birds, some aren't? Right, a BIRD act. They do tricks. No, not card tricks, that's a magic act; this is a BIRD act. What? They did? Well, I wished you had TOLD us you have a cat!

FRANCIS: *(At the same time.)* Miss Pomeroy, if you'll just give us a minute of your time. I just KNOW that Leo Mintz will thank you. Just five minutes of Mr. Mintz's time, that's all we need. My daughter Adelaide is a child prodigy which, I don't have to tell you, is rare. Talent like this is hard to see! Even WE had a hard time finding it in her!

PROFESSOR: *(At the same time.)* My dear Elizabeth, I can assure you that this remarkable presentation that I am offering is beyond any of the usual ramshackle fare seen trodding the boards in our present time. This is a breakthrough, if I may be so bold, in the veritable art of the theatre! *(HE indicates the coffee table.)*

DUKE: *(Reading, at the same time.)* "Don't get hooked up wid me, Charlene. I am no good fer youse. I go where the wind blows, where the wolves run. That's why you can't come along. Unless you are good at blowing and runnin'. I ain't got time fer no affiliations of your sort. I am a no-goodnik."

LYDIA: *(To her puppet, at the same time.)* A funny thing happened to me today on my way to the theatre. *(The puppet's voice.)* I sure hope so because most of your material stinks. *(HER voice.)* MY material? *(Puppet.)*

LYDIA: *(Continued.)* Well, it sure isn't MINE! *(HER voice.)* What makes you say that? *(Puppet.)* YOU do – you make me say EVERYthing! *(HER voice.)* Now, why don't you give me a break. *(Puppet.)* Fracture or concussion?
SCAT: *(At the same time.)* Hey, girl, how many cards did you take?
BEBE: I didn't take any cards.
SCAT: What?
BEBE: I said I didn't take ANY cards.
SCAT: Hey, man, what're we playing?
BEBE: Poker.
SCAT: Yeah, but what KIND of poker?
BEBE: Draw poker.
SCAT: Then you has to DRAW! How many you want?
BEBE: Four. *(HE deals HER four cards.)*
LIZ: *(Hand over the receiver.)* Hey, hey, HEY!

(EVERYONE gets quiet and looks at HER.)

SCAT: *(Hand up.)* Wait, cats. A bulletin.
LIZ: Can you people PLEASE hold it down?! I'm trying to find out something here!
BEBE: What, Liz?
LIZ: I think somebody ate one of our acts!
DUKE: Wow – this is a tough business!

(BEBE rises and moves to LIZ.)

PROFESSOR: Don't tell me the illustrious Leo Mintz is hiring out cannibals now?
BEBE: Don't be ridiculous, we don't do no cannibal acts. *(To LIZ.)* Do we?
LIZ: Only because the illustrious Leo hasn't thought of it yet.
LYDIA: *(Moves to LIZ.)* But did you hear our opening?
FRANCIS: Stand in line!
PROFESSOR: Exactly my thoughts; I have jurisdiction here, hence she shall see my act first.
LIZ: *(Rises.)* Look, you don't have to impress ME!
FRANCIS: But you have Leo's ear!

End of Freeview

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