

TODD CONTINUED

Savoy and a trained penguin named Pete. This somewhat improbable group was billed as *Bring on the Dames*. The actor who put Pete the Personality Penguin through his routines had to keep his costume loaded with herring, which sometimes made things a little uncomfortable for the rest of the cast during the summer months, but the unit was a hit for more than a year.

Snapping his suspenders, Todd set out to establish himself on Broadway. His first two attempts—with the plays *Call Me Ziggy* and *The Man from Cairo*—were colossal flops, but on his third try he definitely made it with an all-Negro musical, *The Hot Mikado*.

Initial inspiration for the gutbucket interpretation of Gilbert and Sullivan's gentle fantasy had come from a WPA production in Chicago. Todd made plans to open a wilder, jazzier version of his own on Broadway. Before he could get his curtain up the WPA troupe hastily closed in Chicago and moved to New York. Todd charged the WPA with obstructing private enterprise and yelled for his Constitutional rights. At one time in 1939 there were three jazz *Mikados* running in New York. But the Todd version won out. It not only starred Bill Robinson, one of the greatest tap dancers who ever lived, but also provided a special bakelite floor for him to dance on, a soap bubble waterfall 40 feet high and an erupting volcano.

All this and El Gruesome too

IN the summer of 1939 Todd took *The Hot Mikado* across the East River to the New York World's Fair. There during the fair's first year the entertainment section was dominated by its foremost concessionaire, Billy Rose, with his *Aquacade*, starring Eleanor Holm. Todd's ego bristles at the thought of being dominated by anyone in any field, and in the second year he topped Rose with the *Dancing Campus*, featuring name bands and a floor big enough to hold 12,000 jitterbugs; the *Streets of Paris*, featuring Gypsy Rose Lee, and *Gay New Orleans*, which was housed in a 10-acre replica of that city's French Quarter. The latter concession featured a girl revue staged by Hassard Short plus a Spanish aerialist billed as El Gruesome, who four times a day jumped from the top of a 100-foot pole and dangled hair-raisingly with the end of a 30-foot rope noosed about his neck.

After the fair closed, Todd wrapped up Gypsy Rose Lee, the *Gay New Orleans* revue, a pair of name bands and some show-stopping vaudeville acts and shipped them to Chicago. He took over and renovated the old *Rainbow Gardens*, a huge but defunct cabaret on the North Side, and opened it as the *Michael Todd Theater-Cafe*. Upsetting every nightclub tradition, he ran his establishment according to the principles of Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln, aiming the entire operation at the common people. Admission was 50¢, dinner 75¢ (the most popular dessert was Jello); champagne cocktails cost a quarter, cigars exactly what they did at any tobacco store and hat-checking was free. The plain people of Chicago loved the theater-cafe to the tune of approximately \$65,000 a week.

This was just too tempting for Chicago's gangsters to make their hands behave. The Nitti mob, heirs of Al Capone, began moving in and pressuring Todd's backers and several unions involved in the club's operation. A cover charge was instituted; food and drink prices soared; hat-check girls set out their saucers for tips; cigars cost abominably; there was no more Jello to be had. Todd finally sold his stock and left Chicago.

He returned to Broadway, and at his shows thenceforth good seats came to \$4.40, \$5.50 and later \$7.20. In the 2½ years between June 1942 and February 1945—when New York was crammed with servicemen and defense plant workers hungry for diversion and willing to pay for it—he produced four lavish musicals, each of which played to capacity houses for long runs: *Star and Garter* (609 performances); *Something for the Boys*, with Cole Porter music, starring Ethel Merman (422); *Mexican Hayride*, with another Porter score, starring Bobby Clark and June Havoc (481); and *Up in Central Park*, starring nobody in particular (504). Even Todd's flops paid off. *Catherine Was Great*, dealing with the ravenous empress of Russia, which Mae West not only starred in but wrote, failed in New York, then cleaned up on the road; *The Naked Genius*, a stark drama about a stripper, which Gypsy Rose Lee wrote, sold to Hollywood for around \$150,000.

On the night *The Naked Genius* opened, Todd presented Miss Lee with a jeweled compact. She left it in a restaurant after the show. Todd recovered the compact and recovered the money he had paid for it. Then he made another purchase, this time at Gimbels department store, and sent it to her. "You won't leave this in no restaurant," he told her. It was a huge nude, entitled

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