Book World

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# Broadway's Mean Man

*By Jonathan Yardley*

Jed Harris was a brilliantly gifted theatrical producer who for a time in the 1920s and '30s seemed to own Broadway. He pioneered what quick-

***JED HARRIS: The Curse of Genius. By Martin Gottfried.***
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ly became the Broadway style, described by his biographer as "clever, tense, urban, dynamic and, above all, contemporary." Moss Hart wrote: " . . . he continued to light up the the-

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*Broadway producer Jed Harris*

Photo on book cover from Billy Rose Theatre Collection/The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center

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# Compelling 'Jed Harris': A Tale of Broadway's Angry Man

atrical heavens with an unerring touch that had something of the uncanny about it. Production after production, whatever play he turned his hand to, was catapulted into immediate success, and his vagaries, his flaring tempers, his incisive way with a script were already a legend and fast becoming Broadway folklore."

As so often happens in show business, Harris came almost overnight to his legendary status. Born in Austria in 1900, Jacob Hirsch Horowitz was the child of hard-working, demanding parents who immigrated to Newark when he was very young. He was frequently beaten for minor misbehavior, to the point that he always regarded his childhood as "blighted" and as a result, according to a friend, "He seemed to feel as if the world owed him something. The world was going to pay for some unexpressed hurt it had done him."

Did it ever; from the instant he became a success, with the triumph of his show "Broadway" in 1926, Horowitz/Harris made the world pay, and pay, and pay. His life story, as narrated by Martin Gottfried, is fascinating less as a show-biz biography than as the chronicle of a man who spent virtually his entire adult life bringing gratuitous grief to others and destroying himself in the process. Show business has had more than its share of mean characters, but there cannot have been a meaner one than Jed Harris.

Harris' first marriage was in 1925, to Anita Greenbaum; as they drove away from the ceremony he said, "Well you got what you wanted. Doesn't it make you happy?" His second was in 1938, to Louise Platt: "On the trip back to California, Jed told her how sorry he was that he had married her." His third was in 1957, to Bebe Allen, who ended it a few months later; the lipstick message she left on her mirror for Harris can't be printed in a family newspaper.

Harris had two children. One, a daughter, was born to Louise Platt after she and Harris had been divorced. The other, a son, was the illegitimate child of actress Ruth Gordon. Of the 4-year-old child, Jones, Harris said to a friend: "That kid's no good." When Jones was 16 he stopped to say hello to his father in a restaurant; "You have got to stop bothering me," Harris told him. Asked by Dick Cavett during a television show if he ever saw his son, Harris replied: "As rarely as possible. I don't particularly like him." After Harris' death his son told George Abbott: "When I was a kid and you were working for my father, he'd always tell me what a brilliant stage manager you were. Then he'd look at me and say, 'Jones, you're a nothing and you'll always be a nothing.' "

But Abbott himself had been a victim of Harris' compulsive meanness. As director of "Broadway," he had an agreement with Harris' coproducer that he would be paid a director's fee and 1 percent of the gross receipts; Harris refused to pay the percentage, leading to an estrangement that would last until his death a half century later. George Kaufman so despised Harris that he "said when he died he wanted to be cremated and have his ashes thrown in Jed Harris' face." In 1933, on opening night of "The Green Bay Tree," Harris encountered its nervous young star, Laurence Olivier, waiting to go on stage; he whispered to him, "Good-bye, Larry. I hope I never see you again." And to William Wyler he said: "You're a weak, untalented man married to a woman who is in love with me."

Small wonder that his funeral, in 1979, drew a small crowd; everybody hated him. His first wife had told him that his genius for making enemies would hurt him, and he had replied: "I know, but I can't help it." Perhaps so; more likely he just enjoyed it, getting back at his parents by making the rest of the world miserable. Yet to women he was irresistible; Margaret Sullavan seems never to have gotten over her affair with him (like another of his former lovers, she died by suicide), Ruth Gordon continued to regard him with a certain affection notwithstanding his mistreatment of her and their son, and any number of less celebrated but equally alluring women managed to find their way into his bed.

The shows that made him famous, apart from "Broadway," were "The Front Page," "The Royal Family," "Coquette," "Our Town" and "The Heiress." His genius was for the commercial theater, though he proved himself sensitive to serious drama by directing highly regarded productions of "Uncle Vanya" and "A Doll's House." But for the last three decades of his life he did nothing of note; "The Heiress," in 1947, turned out to be his swan song. Instead he simply allowed himself to slide ever more deeply into bitterness. In the last months of his life he was hospitalized in North Carolina, where his female companion of the moment resided; his behavior was so foul that, in the words of the senior nurse, "He was the first patient in my memory who was ever thrown out of a hospital."

His biography makes oddly compulsive reading. Martin Gottfried is a prose stylist of no particular imagination or grace, but he seems to be a careful researcher and he persuaded a great many people to talk to him. The result is a book filled with one vividly recalled horror story after another; though some may find "Jed Harris: The Curse of Genius" to be merely one long sick joke, others will be, as rather against my better judgment I was, hugely amused by it.