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Ziegler, Dean, Et al:
In the Tradition of
Vaudeville's 'Best'

By Tom Donnelly

Some people think it's shocking that Ron ("Inoperative") Ziegler, a die-hard Nixon apologist, should be allowed to tour the college lecture circuit. Other people think it's appalling that John Dean, the man who did so much to bring Nixon to grief, if not to justice, should be allowed to tell the world about it for a fee. Have these critics and complainers no regard for the right of the individual to free speech and a fast buck? Don't they realize "Watergate-connected" personalities *have* to take to the college lecture circuit for a glaringly obvious reason? The reason is this: Vaudeville is dead. Why, of course. In the old days "headline personalities" used to tour

the vaudeville houses, bringing to the populace at large intimate details of the sensational doings that enlivened front pages from coast to coast. They *had* to make these personal appearance tours; there weren't any TV talk shows. Today we have TV talk shows aplenty, but they only pay \$300 or something like that *per* appearance; how could former White House habitues be expected to make out on such chicken feed as that? (They do say you get home-baked cookies from the fair hands of the hostess herself if you appear on Dinah Shore's program, but man can't live on ginger snaps alone. It takes big bread to pay those gigantic lawyer's fees, and the mortgages on those cushy homes and huge apart-

ments so many Watergate luminaries seem to live in.)

How heart-warming if we should know in our own day a kind of renaissance of the golden age when anybody—just *anybody*—could get a hearing. That is, a booking. According to Joe Laurie Jr., the author of that indispensable volume, "Vaudeville" one of the leading attractions on the Pantages Circuit in 1913 was George Schroeder, a former forger who was billed as "Convict 6630, the man who sang himself out of the penitentiary." That "sang" doesn't mean he bought his freedom by ratting on his fellow-cons, it just means the warden heard him warbling around the pen and decided a talent like that ought to be paroled. At least I seem to recall reading in some

other vaudeville chronicle that theater audiences felt Schroeder's act was his real crime.

In 1913 the Panthers theater chain gave a contract to Ed Morrell, who could tell audiences all about how it felt to be the youngest member of the famous Evans-Sontag gang of outlaws in California, and what he learned during the 16 years he served as punishment for his criminal precocity. A swindler named Barney Bertsche had a most enlightening act: He explained how crooked cops had assisted him to ever bigger swindles.

It is said that Watergate could have developed a femme fatale. That's one thing vaudeville had in abundant supply: femmes fatale. There was lovely Nan

See REVUE, C3, Col. 1

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REVUE, From CI

Patterson, who was discovered one night in 1905 sitting in a hansom cab with a freshly dead gambler named Caesar Young. "Oddly enough," said Alexander Woollcott in his account of the case, "the pistol which had killed him lay hot in the pocket of his own coat."

Nan's testimony during her trial was very much the style of certain Watergate biggies. Nan said she was looking out the cab window at the time of the shooting and Caesar must somehow or other have contrived to commit suicide, even though the state produced charts to show that he would have had to be a contortionist to have pulled the trigger himself. Immediately after her acquittal Nan was booked into his Victoria Theater by Willie Hammerstein (father of Oscar Hammerstein II).

A woman named Beulah Binford that she deserved a vaudeville engagement because, although she hadn't shot anybody, a man had killed his wife for her. In a rare burst of discre-

tion Hammerstein said no, whereupon the determined Beulah hired a theater and presented herself.

Hammerstein said "yes" to two pretty and impetuous young women who had pumped a "socialite realtor" full of holes; they couldn't sing, dance, or act, but billed as "The Shooting Stars" they fetched the customers.

What can, or will, Ron Ziegler tell them? suspicious and hostile collegians have been asking. In the old vaudeville era people got what they paid for and knew what they were getting. Evelyn Nesbit, "the girl in the red velvet swing," could tell how Harry K. Thaw killed Stanford White for having "ruined her" in the day's before she was Mrs. Thaw: Could the "unwritten law" be made retroactive? Will any of the Watergate legalisms prove to be of such abiding interest?

Of course Ziegler could beef up his act with first-hand accounts of the visits to San Clemente of Frank Sinatra, Elizabeth Taylor, Victor Lasky, the celebrated team of Abplanalp and Rebozo, and the all the other "names"

who seem to be intruding on the former President's "exile" with such busy regularity as to strengthen the rumors that Nixon is taping his own talk show.

John Dean seems to have run into trouble in the first stages of his lecture tour: His act is a bore, the customers are saying. Same thing happened to Aimee Semple McPherson when she made her bow as a vaudeville evangelist at New York's Capitol Theater. Aimee had been had been sensationally publicized for years: The charges that she had staged her own "kidnaping" capped a career that had been a matter of headlines almost from the first. But at the Capitol she turned out to be such a downer that according to her biographer, Lately Thomas, "the critics thought she actually kept customers away from a lively film that topped the bill."

Aimee took those harsh notices to heart; she cancelled the rest of her vaudeville tour. There's a moral here for Ziegler, Dean, and other touring Watergate stars. If you can't stand the heat, get out of Show Biz.