

Chelmsford to Broadway to Hollywood

By GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST

The road to success, via Broadway and Hollywood, has not been the route taken by most natives of Chelmsford. That makes Mark Reed unique. Born in Chelmsford in 1890, the son of Arthur and Carrie (White) Reed. Mark attended the local school (at that time both the elementary and high school were in the yellow schoolhouse on North Road where the fire station now stands) and graduated with the C.H.S. Class of 1909. He attended Dartmouth College for one year, after which he decided to become an architect and entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Following graduation from M.I.T. in 1914, he found employment with a Boston architectural firm and was given, as his first assignment, the job of designing 10 floors of bathrooms in a hospital. Visioning a future devoted to plumbing, Mark left architecture to shift for itself and went to Harvard where he enrolled in Prof. Baker's class on theater arts.

The theater proved to be an irresistible attraction to him. He forsook Chelmsford for the bright lights of Manhattan, hoping to crash the big time — not as a singer, a dancer, or an actor but as playwright — but it soon became apparent that he was just one of the aspiring artists that had gathered in Greenwich Village.

He completed two scripts and then, while waiting to have them produced, became editor of a national woman suffrage magazine. However, before either of his plays saw the footlights, another, greater production was approaching its climax in Europe. Billed as World War I, it had Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany as the star player up to that time.

Mark signed up and, because of his theatrical experience the military, in all its wisdom, gave him a job as a truck driver in the camouflage division. After helping to conclude the "war to end all wars," he returned home in 1919 to find his first play, "She Would and She Did," on the verge of production in which Grace George starred. The play was not a success, though some nice things were said about the author.

Abandoning Broadway for the next 10 years, he returned to witness the opening of his "Skyrocket." That too proved disappointing and again Mr. Reed vanished from the theater to occupy himself (and meet the grocery bills) with fiction writing, school teaching, and factory work. Copies of some of the pulp magazines containing his stories were sent home but his mother felt they were too avant garde for display on the parlor table at 15 Crosby Lane in Chelmsford.

It was in 1935 that Mark finally struck pay dirt with his "Petticoat Fever," which enjoyed considerable prosperity in the theater and even more on the screen. Following its opening in New York, the "New Yorker" magazine editorialized that, in spite of unenthusiastic reviews by the critics "the naughty 'box office' has finally found what it likes." Lines formed at the ticket window daily.

The plot of this comedy deals with a lonesome wireless operator in Labrador and a beautiful and charming young woman who, with her fiance, descends literally from the clouds when their airplane crashes. The efforts of the visitors to be rescued and the wireless operator's attempts to prolong their visit, intertwined with two romances "amounts to a brisk and fun-filled evening with a chuckle here, a giggle there and a occasional guffaw to make the moment merrier," according to the New York World Telegram.

When "Petticoat Fever" was playing at the Plymouth Theater in Boston, the present writer was privileged to go back stage with Mr. Reed to meet the members of

the cast and study the stage setting and special effects. Among the latter were three unique types of artificial "snow" that prompted "News-Week" magazine to entitle a story: "Three Kinds of Snow Fail to Chill Petticoat Fever." The accumulation of snow in the corners of the windows was ordinary cotton batting. To give the impression of falling snow, 25 pounds of chemically fire-proofed confetti dropped from a "snow-bag" in the flies overhead. Caught in a canvas lying on the floor, it survived many a storm before wearing out. But confetti and cotton won't do when actors must come on stage after a long walk through the snow. Instead of the usual camphor flakes that don't melt and also send an unmistakable odor across the footlights, the property men used Epsom salts after lightly sponging the actors' garments with water. The moisture dissolved the odorless salts realistically within a few minutes.

After establishing itself as a box office attraction on the stage, a movie version was filmed which proved to be even more successful. "Petticoat Fever" was a favorite with community theater groups as well as the "straw-hat circuit" for many years. In 1946 the Chelmsford players selected the comedy for their spring vehicle.

Two years later in 1937, Mark Reed gave theatergoers another treat in "Yes, My Darling Daughter," based on the author's musing as to what kind of children the women prominent in the suffrage and liberal movement would have and what situations would arise in their lives when the children grew up. Lacking the coyness and whimsy of "Petticoat Fever," his second hit "told a plausible story in terms that are friendly, sensible, and humorous," wrote Ethnor Hughes in the March 20, 1937 Boston Herald. "The situation is simple, but susceptible of unexpected developments, of which the playwright takes full advantage."

Briefly, the plot revolves around a respectable middle-aged wife of a banker who is suddenly shocked (remember this was 1937) by her daughter's announcement that she will be spending a weekend, without benefit of matrimony, with a young man whom she loves but can't marry because he will be leaving immediately for two years in Belgium. The mother's protests are met by the daughter's documented evidence of the maternal past in Greenwich Village, where the mother had been a suffragette, frequently in and out of jail, and had had an affair with a promising poet. The maternal protests suddenly cease and the young couple vacation as announced.

Like its predecessor, "Yes, My Darling Daughter" became a hit in the movies as well as behind the footlights.

Mr. Reed's next script entitled, "No Code to Guide Her," went through the usual rehearsal period but "closed" just a few days before its scheduled "opening."

Outside of his writing, probably Mark's major interest was tennis, a game in which he excelled. During his college days and later when visiting his parents, he played tennis regularly on the courts of the Chelmsford Lawn Tennis Association. It was not unusual for him to win the club's singles tournament and, with a partner, the doubles as well. He married late in life and retired from the Broadway scene, making his home in Falls Church, Virginia.

Although he had produced only two Broadway and Hollywood successes, this Chelmsford native had fulfilled his ambition of placing the name Mark Reed among the successful playwrights of the period and had become financially rewarded for the years spent in gaining recognition.