

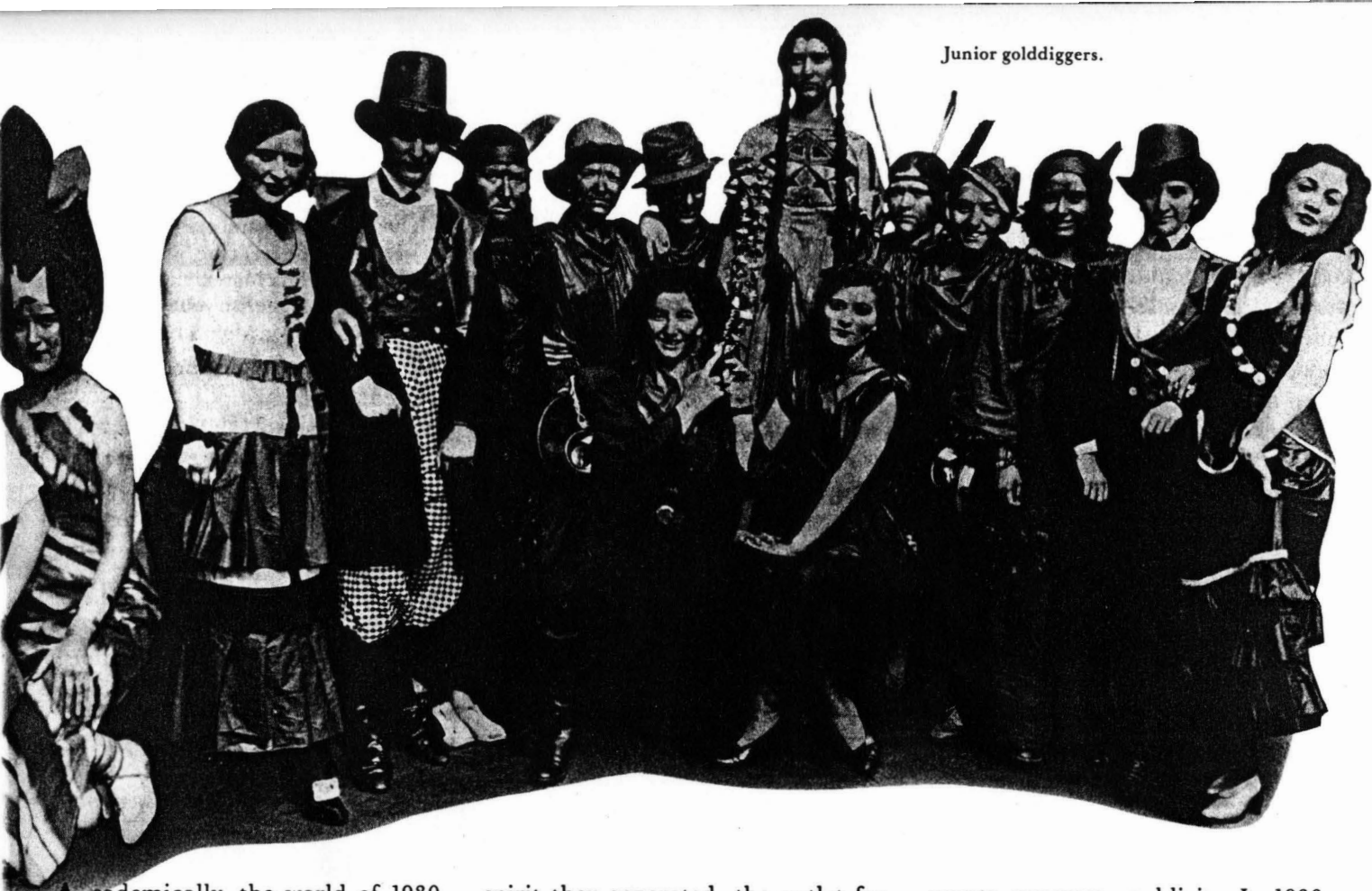
Some Egyptian sophomores.

A couple of Naughty '90s seniors.



# HUNTER at the ROXY

by Lyda Pinkus-Rochmis ('30)



Academically, the world of 1930 was still secure; it had not yet crash-landed into the Depression, and despite the Stock Market Crash, there was little apprehension about the state of the world as the girls of Hunter gaily prepared for their fourteenth annual satire-and-song fest, the *Sing*.

*Sing* was a rite of spring, an outpouring of talents not utilized in classes. It was to Hunter what the Whiffenpoofs were to Yale, the *Lam-poon* to Harvard, the Triangle Show to Princeton. It was more. It was the campus they had to create, the school

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*Lyda Pinkus-Rochmis ('30) is now retired and living in Reston, Virginia, after a thirty-seven-year-long career as a teacher of speech and English in the New York City high schools. Holder of a master's degree from Radcliffe, she is the author of many articles in educational journals, and with Dorothy Doob, emerita professor of communications at Hunter, she is co-author of the text, Speech Therapy (John Day, 1970).*

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spirit they generated, the outlet for all they did not have. And it was important enough in the life of the city for *The New York Times* to headline it. In 1930, it landed in the largest and most appropriate theatre of the time, the Roxy. How the theatre was obtained is a rare and generally unknown bit of backstage Hunteriana.

But first, for the many people who do not know it, let me explain *Sing*. It was a competition among the four classes: freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Written in verse, it was a staged panorama around a theme. Once the theme was chosen, it was explored by writing committees in entrance, comic, and miscellaneous songs, generally set to popular tunes. It involved at least a thousand students. There were lyricists, composers, pianists, costumers, stage managers, singers, actors, and, for each class, a devoted *Sing* leader who conducted rehearsals and led the performance. Added to these were the committees for ticket sales, arrange-

ments, program, publicity. In 1930, *Sing* filled the 6100 seats of the Roxy Theatre.

That year, the winning seniors were tintypes of the Naughty '90s; the runner-ups, their sister class, the sophomores, came on as Egyptians. The juniors found their inspiration as gold diggers of '49, and the freshmen made a brave showing as Swiss peasants. Previous years had seen such impersonations as pirates, sailors, Robin Hoods, wooden soldiers, Dutch Cleansers, jockeys, gnomes, toreadors, cats (!), robots, Apaches, candy sticks, medieval jesters, Danes and Geats from *Beowulf*, thieves of Bagdad, Elizabethans, and Venetians.

In 1930, the seniors, in long ruffled skirts and thin waistlines, came in chanting to the tune of "In the Merry, Merry Month of May":

We went to college back in 1890  
Normal 'twas then,  
No time for men . . .

The freshmen, entering in their ragged-edged tunics and green mountain hats, dutifully saw William Tell shoot the apple off his son's head, declaring to the world and to the tyrant Gessler in particular that he had, by this act, freed himself and his compatriots. The sophomores, on the other hand, had prepared an entrance of pomp and pageantry. Dressed in tunics and dazzling headbands, they brought in the sarcophagus of Tutankhamen, singing:

Come back to primitive days,  
When men had primitive ways  
Down in the land of the Nile  
Where the croaking of the frog and  
the crocodile  
Troubled Pharaoh and his slaves  
for a long, long while.

The juniors, in contrast, swaggered in, rowdy and smudged, snapping riatas and singing to an old-time ranger tune:

Ki-O, git along boys, keep a movin'  
Buck up your courage and you  
shall be rich!  
Ki-O, git along boys, no more of  
this rovin'  
Head for the West, boys, and you  
shall be rich!

If, as some say, humor is one of the indications of how a generation really thinks, the *Sing* of that year, rolling on in its carefree way, targeting shibboleths, revealed us still on a magic carpet, high above our ivory tower.

For their comic song, the freshmen imagined themselves census takers let loose in New York City, inventorying its national groups. The sophomores concentrated on the loves of Cleopatra, confessing:

We thought her pure and innocent  
Left flat by men of bad intent.

Later, like history itself, they gave Caesar his due. The juniors, still exhorting young men to go West, some-

how managed to pick up Pocahontas, Hiawatha, and the cigar-store Indian on the way. The seniors explored careers open to them after college, averring:

We know what we want after  
college  
A career that is novel and new  
For the jobs free today fill our souls  
with dismay  
The openings for genius are few.

Such goings-on were jovial and made for good pageantry, but the thrust of *Sing* was in its retorts. These were pointed criticisms of the other classes in short, four-to-eight-line doggerel. All classes could make a retort after each class's major song in the order that their pianist reached her instrument, so that a pianist needed not only musical ability, but also physical agility. Because each retort was worth a point in scoring, and the desire to win achingly strong, each class tried hard to keep its rehearsals and songs secret from the other classes, something quite impossible to do when rehearsing in the auditorium or Exchange. Retorts, therefore, tended to be "right on the nose." A judge was stationed at the piano. Dorothy Gillam, chair of the 1929 *Sing*, filled that spot for us.

Scoring of retorts, songs, ideas, costumes, and general spirit was on a strict point system. The judging was done by members of the faculty, and to be chosen was an honor and a sign of student esteem.

If the retorts were the "sting" of *Sing*, the Alma Mater songs—original in both words and music—were its heart; they showed what *Sing* was all about. With these songs the students created a campus of the mind in flights of fancy, and they evoked as much loyalty and devotion as the greener pastures of more favored schools.

The freshmen that year sang:

You are Alma Mater,  
deserved of that name.  
We are your humble daughters  
honored by your fame.  
If hearts can love and cherish,  
and souls be ever true,  
Then, oh, Alma Mater,  
we'll always cherish you!

The sophomores prophetically de-claimed:

Hail, builders of the future,  
knowledge is your power!  
You will contribute toward  
erecting wisdom's tower. . .

The juniors found their Alma Mater "a beacon clear" guiding them "to hope and cheer," while the seniors, the sweet sorrow of parting upon them, sang:

O we have worked,  
And we have played,  
And we have sung for happy years,  
Now we bring this song  
Of fealty, Hunter, to you, to you. . .

*Sing* was a large financial enterprise. In 1930 we were to gross over ten thousand dollars. As proof of its importance, it had begun in the school chapel, progressed to the Central Opera House on Fourteenth Street and from there to Carnegie Hall. Both were totally inadequate to house the thousands who wanted to attend. Even Madison Square Garden turned out to be unsatisfactory. True, in the Garden all *Sing* fans were seated, but the rafters echoed, distorting the music and dissipating the words in its vastness. The Metropolitan Opera House, the old one on Thirty-second Street, was tried for two years and was better acoustically, but its stage could seat only two classes. The freshmen and sophomores were consigned to the orchestra pit, using the stage only for their entrance. This situation caused a great deal of understandable resentment, as it put them at a disadvantage. So it

was that I, as chair of *Sing*, wanted desperately to find a better place.

The opportunity came. As vice-president of Student Council, I was also chairman of Chapel. Being then, as always, somewhat of an independent thinker, I decided to brighten Chapel and celebrate Hunter's sixtieth anniversary year by inviting luminaries from the world of art. Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, modern dancers, accepted and performed. Yasha Bunchuk, cellist and director of the Capitol Theatre orchestra, was also invited and came. Daniel Frohman, the theatrical producer, enlivened one Chapel program with anecdotes of the theatre. Frohman, quite an old man, came with his sister, and after Chapel, they lingered to savor the feeling of the college. Because *Sing* was already in rehearsal, they stopped to see it. I told Mr. Frohman of our problem with the Metropolitan and lamented the fact that the wonderful stage of the Roxy Theatre, then the largest in the city, was not available to us. "Why," said Mr. Frohman, "Rothafel (Roxy) is a protégé of mine. Why don't I give you a letter to him?"

A few days later, letter in hand, I passed through Rothafel's outer office with its two white Spitz dogs into the private sanctum of the great Roxy. Rothafel somehow reminded me of my father—middle-aged, of medium height, and with a quizzical look on a kindly face. Unlike my father, he had a full head of hair. He sat at the largest desk I'd ever seen and motioned me to a seat. To say that he was astonished at my request is to put it mildly, but I was the bearer of a letter from his patron, so he felt impelled to offer us something. We could have the Roxy Theatre if we could use it at a time when they did not need it; namely, a non-holiday weekday morning. In other words, exactly

when classes were in session. This should have brought our hopes to an end, but we were Hunter girls and accustomed to relying on our wits and ingenuity. I told Rothafel I would let him know.

There was only one thing to do. Classes would have to be suspended. That afternoon found me in President James M. Kieran's office. Dr. Kieran, father of the *Times* sports writer who was later to become a star of *Information Please*, was as good a businessman as he was a president. It took some persuasion and required a consultation with the Board of Trustees, but he agreed to a holiday in honor of *Sing*!

If Rothafel had been shocked by my first request, he was dumbfounded by our acceptance. The rental price he set was minimal, less than five hundred dollars. I suggested that we could provide ushers if he would give me a plan of the theatre. He would have none of that! He had been conned into letting "those Hunter girls" have his beloved theatre; he would protect it with his own ushers at no extra charge.

The night before *Sing*, my friend Lottie Warshall (now Mrs. Roslow)—she shared responsibility with me without receiving official recognition—and I took a room at the Victoria Hotel opposite the Roxy Theatre in order to be on stage at 5 am to arrange for the seating of the four classes, the placement of the piano, and the storing of properties. (Years later we learned that the hotel's reputation was not all it should be. Blissfully ignorant, we by-passed pitfall and opportunity alike).

Early morning found us backstage talking to the stage manager. At that unlikely hour, Paul Whiteman and George Gershwin were rehearsing in the pit. Hearing the chatter, Gershwin came backstage. He was an extremely sensitive musician and our

talking had disturbed him. Finding two rather attractive young women, he changed his scowl to a smile and promptly invited us to dinner that evening. I blush to admit that we two fools refused. I am not sure why we were so stupid. Perhaps we thought it was an improper advance. Maybe it was; we wouldn't have known an improper advance if we saw one.

The day of *Sing* was bonny. The Roxy, located on Fiftieth Street and Seventh Avenue was easily accessible. There was a sense of luxury in its broad interior and gilded chandeliers. It had two thousand more seats than the Metropolitan Opera House, all of them now used for seating purposes. The stage was enormous, easily seating our eight hundred participants. The ushers were punctiliously polite. Our program included a request that the audience leave promptly, as the theatre had to be empty by one o'clock. For a performance that took the better part of three hours, that took doing, but we did it. By 9:30 the theatre began filling up; *Sing* participants were already in the wings, property managers frantically checking their lists, make-up assistants glorying in the mirrored accommodations, and *Sing* leaders nervously keeping their cool. Promptly at 10 am, I stepped out to open the 1930 *Sing*.

One must wonder why so successful an undertaking, of such value to so many, a college tradition loved and revered, did not continue. Is our youth less imaginative? Are the classes too disparate to unite in a project? Has sophistication overtaken inventiveness? No, none of these. *Sing* at Hunter died just because it was eminently successful. High schools and even elementary schools began imitating it. By the time students from those schools reached college, the idea of a *Sing* had lost its novelty. *Sing* killed *Sing*.