

THERE'S A GHOST IN TIMES SQUARE!

by Sandra Frazier



A Message from George M. Cohan

One morning in January 1995 I turned on the radio for a few minutes to ease the drudgery of sitting in a traffic jam in mid-town Manhattan. Within that few minutes, I chanced upon an AM news station that announced there was a ghost haunting one of the old abandoned theatres near Times Square. In recent past, I'd read of some plans to renovate that part of the Great White Way, but couldn't remember any of the details. I only vaguely remembered that some big corporate moguls were planning to transform the tattered area into some sort of entertainment Mecca. I wasn't interested. Too young to ever have experienced Broadway in its heyday and not knowing any descendants of those times, I only knew about what I'd read and fantasized about the theatre.

The Times Square Ghost had been spotted on several occasions and a number of mediums had been called in to investigate. I was told later that some of these mediums ran out of the theatres horrified at what they considered to be evil entities lingering in the old, abandoned buildings. I thought how ridiculous; I knew full well what was going on. But I had to call my mother, Elizabeth Baron, the nationally-known trance medium, to get her to "tune in" and find out what was really happening. When I asked her to tune in, she closed her eyes and pictured the ghost and told me that this particular spirit had something to do with President Franklin Roosevelt. She said that fact would rule out any other suspects. Right away I knew my mother had to come to the theatre and use her gift as a trance medium to try to communicate with the spirits.

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So I called CBS and asked to speak to the reporter who was investigating the story. I couldn't reach him, but passed on the information and soon they introduced my mother to Maria Alvarado, the manager of the Times Square Business Improvement District who would take her to the old Sam Harris Theatre where the hauntings were occurring. When my mother contacted Maria, they immediately connected and right away she was able to tell her that it was a kind and loving spirit that was dwelling in the Harris Theatre. Maria was pleased because she was the only person who had seen the apparition. She said her boss had actually asked her to find a good trance medium to handle it, but she hadn't been successful in finding the right one.

Soon after, arrangements were made for my mother and two friends to come to Times Square and so Friday night, February 23rd, they found themselves in the midst of the haunted theatre at 226 42nd Street. She asked the five people in attendance to sit with her on the plastic bags Maria provided to cover dust and dirt at the foot of the empty stage. Maria showed them pictures from long ago of the grand opening of the Sam Harris.

After meditating alone for a while, my mother announced that it was the spirit of George M. Cohan who was haunting the remains of the grand theatre that now lay in ruin. Its tattered curtains obscured the movie screen, which had been placed in front of it in the days when movies replaced theatre. The dressing rooms backstage were boarded up. The chairs in the auditorium were covered with stains and dirt. Yet it was obvious how beautifully ornate the theatre had once been. The partial remains of a chandelier were left dangling from the ceiling. But the imagery these momentous relics invoked had to be set aside to take care of the business at hand – to assist the lost soul of Cohan in completing the unfinished business he had returned to deal with. So all five people sat with my mother in a circle, they quieted themselves, and she led the group in a prayer to the Universal Source to assist them in being in touch with the spirit.

As the group sat quietly holding hands, someone heard the melody of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* blaring across the stage... "born on the fourth of July!" Like most Americans, they had, of course, heard the song many times, but had never known its true origins. It was a song that had epitomized Cohan's spritely, energetic performance style. An immensely popular songwriter of the early century, Cohan had the ability to put into words and music what all of America was subconsciously feeling. He took the old traditional tune from the 1600's and made it his own. He was awarded the Congressional Medal by President Roosevelt for writing *Over There* and *It's a Grand Old Flag*. Cohan complemented his commercial appeal by claiming to be born on the fourth of July, when he was actually born on the 3rd! He even built a large theatre on Broadway with his name over the canopy and decorated it with American flags and other regalia symbolizing his career, and came to be known as the King of Broadway.

The mood was so powerful and intense that mom's friend Glennis, a young executive from North Carolina who was in attendance, started blurting out messages from some unknown source, "I see an hourglass. Time is running out. We must change our priorities in this country!" Maria Alvarado told us she saw the spirit of a young, blonde-haired

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woman dressed in a beautiful flowing ball gown from the early 90's. It was magnificent with its gold fabrics and ornamentation. Glennis also saw the same woman on that stage.

My mother could feel George M. Cohan reaching out from the Great Beyond. She heard him say that Maria (in her past life) had been his wife in the early 1900's and she sensed that he was unhappy about the fact that people had not taken an interest in restoring the old theatre.

Interrupted by the noise of the construction and sanitation workers in the area, hurriedly, my mother asked Maria to get up on the stage and sing to try to bring back the mood of that by-gone era when Cohan was king. Shy and hesitant, she walked on stage but once she arrived, felt quite comfortable as though she belonged there. My mother told her to sing the first song that came to mind, so she began to sing a song from the musical *Grease* entitled *Sandy* and then Maria said "Sandra Dee." My mom and Glennis looked at each other as if, indeed, they had seen a ghost. She sang, "Sandy, you can make a new start..." It had been a message to me, Sandra D., as I am known by my married name... for I was the one who should have been but was not in attendance.

Then she started singing *America, the Beautiful*, "America! America! God shed His grace on thee!" (Maybe a message from Jaco.) It was haunting and exciting all at once! Suddenly the door slammed and the workers were back. There was not enough time and the mood had been shattered. So they decided it was time to leave. Maria stepped down from the stage as though she were returning to the present after travelling in time. As my mother started to join the others who were already walking out the lobby door, she had a deep psychic impression of a man in a dark suit. At first he stood to the right of the stage close to the door connected to the only occupied room. When she started to leave, he turned and walked away sadly saying to himself, "They didn't get the whole message! They won't do anything about my situation, my dilemma!"

My mother and her friends returned to their hotel on 7th Avenue where she was to go into a full trance, with the help of her detective friend, Howie Comen, to bring through her guardian angel, St. Catherine of Siena. She lay down on the sofa, sang and prayed and gave St. Catherine permission to take over her body, mind and spirit to bring forth messages from George M. Cohan. The following is the transcription of that evening's trance session:

Howie: What is the gist of what happened tonight, St. Catherine, and what is Cohan trying to tell us?

Catherine: This man is a very high spirit. He was a high spirit when he died. He may have had a very physical side and he may not have had very much patience; however, he had loyalty beyond belief. This person will never reincarnate because he is out there with other angels and can manifest when he wishes to. He is an angel with a message [for the modern age].

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And we believe this to be his message: It is very important that the people of America, especially in New York City, to start looking at their values and priorities and especially at the creative side of themselves.

Catherine: He is not necessarily attached to that building; however, he has been married to that young woman Maria in a past life. She was his first wife. He is not so attached to the building, although he wishes that the building be restored as a legacy to all the artists, such a landmark to New York City; and he believes that there are people who would be interested in doing just that. He believes the place could be used for talent shows for young talent to help get started in show business. He feels there can be grants from the government, from the National Endowment for the Arts and from wealthy stars and he wishes that this be publicized so that these people come forward to exercise their abilities.

Howie: Should we go back there tomorrow?

Catherine: It matters little whether she returns; however, much work needs to be done to get this information out. I wish Elizabeth to go into other theatres and tune in to other frustrated spirits who have the same desires as this man. [She did indeed do so in the future.]

Howie: What about the disasters predicted for New York City. What does George M. Cohan think of the fate of the city?

Catherine: These disasters could be prevented if everyone got back to the "grand old flag" and does not practice far right-wing or far left-wing beliefs but walked harmoniously with truth and love down the middle of the path. Most of all, he wishes you to get in touch with your creative side which could bring nothing but positivity to the planet and to America.

* * *

They looked out the window of their hotel overlooking Times Squares and were amazed that the one hotel they chose out of all the places to stay in New York City was the one opposite the proud statue of George M. Cohan at Duffy Square - the only memorial to any Broadway performer ever erected in the famous district. Mom looked over at Howie, her close friend and the one private investigator who had worked with her on many hauntings in the past and said, "Well, Howie, it's all in a day's work! Who're ya gonna call? - Ghostbusters!"

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My mother flew back home to Charleston. A few days later I was once again driving over the 59th Street Bridge one day late in February, when I heard her voice over CBS radio telling about how George M. Cohan's ghost is haunting the Sam Harris Theatre. The first segment was quite impressive - how she was telling all of New York City to get back to

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the good old American values for which these things stood. Watching the skyline fog go by was truly surrealistic and amazing as I listened to my mother speaking to all of New York City - doing just what Mr. Cohan had instructed her to do from the spirit realm. The announcer spoke:

George M. Cohan takes an encore, long after his death, though. WCBS reporter, Lou Miliano, says the great songwriter and entertainer is haunting the old Sam Harris Theatre off Times Square. ["Give My Regards to Broadway" sung by James Cagney begins in the background.]

Give my regards to Broadway

Remember me to Herald Square,

Tell all the gang at 42nd Street

That I will soon be there.

Whisper of how I'm yearning

To mingle with the old-time throng,

Give my regards to old Broadway

And say that I'll be there ere long.

...immortalized by Jimmy Cagney, George M. Cohan virtually owned Broadway during the first half of this century and now says medium, Elizabeth Baron, "He's back!" She sensed his spirit during a visit to the abandoned Sam Harris Theatre on 42nd Street.

"This theatre represents all the different theatres here. He wishes that the building be restored as a legacy to all artists such as a landmark to New York City," my mother responded over the air.

Then Lou said, "Maria Alvarado runs the Times Square Tourism Office. She's seen him and she believes."

"I think that would be the ultimate - his ultimate dream," she said. "And then maybe he could finally rest in peace."

Alvarado may have more at stake, Baron says she was Cohan's first wife - in another life!"

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My own long lost heart still lives in those old, dead, forgotten theatres of the past. I've often felt the strange attraction I know must have been that I'd performed in these theatres in a past life. I should have been there the night my mother was bringing George M. Cohan through. Fate had it that I couldn't attend; but his message came through Maria as she sang the song from *Grease* – *Sandy*.

I knew why those old theatres were haunted. I knew it the minute I'd heard the news broadcast there's a ghost in Times Square. It's the dead and gone vaudevillians longing for the old way to return – probably the small-time entertainers who never made the big-time, who never got to play those beautiful, majestic theatres of The Great White Way. And George M. Cohan stands representative of the hearts and souls of all the old Broadway performers who "liked clean plays with a dash of melodrama, fast dancing, and easy, lilting tunes" – a far cry from what Broadway and Times Square is reputed to provide today.

Longacre Square, now known as Times Square – 42nd Street/The Great White Way – with the addition of several other theatres built in 42nd Street later, the New Amsterdam and the Lyric made the block between Seventh Avenue and Eighth Avenue one of the finest in the city and a splendid part of the theatre district. People treated the block with considerable respect. They dressed for opening nights. They arrived ceremoniously. Even the ushers were splendidly bedizened. In 1910, there were forty first-class theatres in the Broadway district, and the phrase "42nd Street and Broadway" stood for revelry and delight.

Broadway, in 1900, was 1-1/2 miles long and there were 16 theatres. In 1950, it decreased to less than half that length and there were only 3 theatres left on Broadway. In 1974 – nine blocks and two theatres were all that remained of the glorious district Cohan once knew and loved.

Now Times Square is trashed and the only successful theatres are attended by tourists and rich people. The ghosts are sad that the middle class you and me and our neighbors – can't see the show the way it used to be – great, affordable, family entertainment. I knew what I'd feel if I'd walked through that old theatre – days from long lost memories I can't explain. Although there is hope since it was announced in the 14 March, 1995 issue of *The New York Post* that "Mayor Giuliani and the City Council... came up with a deal some say will make Times Square virtually porn-free."

The day after the trance, I drove all over 42nd Street making up show tunes, singing, and filming the cold, dreary, sorry sites of The Amsterdam, The Lyric and the other former theatres standing there in wait for all the big, cold business people with their big, cold corporations to come in and make it a high-tech bazaar, a Mecca of glitzy computerized images as catastrophically ending and unwelcome to the ghosts as the '94 Woodstock festival was to the left-over hippies of the 60's. I'm almost positive Cohan was singing my sentiments - these words - through me that day:

New York ain't been good to me...

but I love it still.

I'm not willing to give up.

That is, not until

all the clouds fall from the sky

and in the hall's not one dry eye.

New York ain't been good to me...

but I love it still!

Broadway's peak was from 1917 to 1928. During that time, there were approximately 70-80 theatres in New York. But thirty some years later, the statue of Cohan was dedicated the year in which I was born which was also considered the beginning of the end of the "Era of Good Feelings."

Oscar Hammerstein II's most visible legacy to Broadway – a statue of George M. Cohan – illustrates the endemic irony of Broadway; the greater man celebrates the lesser. At the tip of a tiny, slatternly park at Broadway and 46th Street, the old Yankee Doodle man carries a cane in one hand and a soft hat in the other and looks over the theatre district with a leisurely air of approval. But the Broadway the statue looks at began to lose its cheerful personality about the time the statue was erected – another irony. By the time of the 70's, the territory had faded to the point where Cohan would not have recognized it. Business corporations with monumental assets and no interest in people intruded on a neighborhood that had once been congenial to the public.

The glorious buildings were replaced by structures "that represent a cold, self-possessed industry... totally detached from the crowds that stream through Times Square." These places are houses and not homes. Theatre-goers are now customers and not guests. Unlike during it's heyday, the 70's saw many theatres dark during long periods which was like a bad omen to these ghosts that lingered.

In 1972 some enthusiastic theatre owners rescued the Ritz on 48th Street from several years of neglect and some pornography, and reconditioned it at considerable expense. Its first production closed after one performance. Its second had two performances. It had a tenant for five weeks during the next season... Herman Levin, producer of the legendary "My Fair Lady," believes that the day is not too distant when ten theatres will be enough... Broadway had always been risqué and scandalous and, when possible, shocking. But it had never been degenerate until Times Square became a garbage dump for sex.

We stood in front of the Cohan statue where there was a massive line all the way down the block waiting to buy tickets. It's the story of New York City any more – lines, lines,

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and more lines. New Yorkers are forced to waste so much of their lives waiting on line! And people have to drum up a week's wages to go out for one night of theatre.

At the turn of the century, theatre-going was a casual diversion: tickets cost \$1.50 or \$2. In the 20's and 30's musical shows charged \$4 or \$5 for the best seats, and ticket prices for dramas were \$2.50 and \$3... The common assumption was that a night at the theatre would cost a man and his wife about \$50 for two good orchestra seats, two dinners at an attractive restaurant, taxi fares, and a baby-sitter's fee. In the 70's it was \$75. In the 80's...

All the way back in 1926, people were noting the decline of the legitimate stage and attributed it to the movies. I suppose it was bound to happen. Nowadays people are lazier and would rather sit in front of a video, TV, the many cable channels, etc. It takes so much more to entertain people these days than a song and a dance. We can't imagine what it felt like to be a vaudevillian travelling the country, living out of a trunk, doing 3-4 shows a day. In the 30's some of the greatest stars that we still know and love today were mourning the death of vaudeville. In the late 70's when I was coming of age, I remember writing an essay about vaudeville and being filled with the deep desire to go to New York to meet and talk with what was left of the old performers in the broken tenement buildings. Now they're gone. And those days are gone. But what the high-financiers of today fail to realize and the young performers will never learn is that theatre, small time, big time, vaudeville houses were valuable training grounds where a novice could hone his/her craft and become yesterday's professionals of the caliber we'll never know today.

I spent my entire 26 weeks in vaudeville learning things I have never forgotten. I was fascinated from the beginning by the sincerity of these performers and have never ceased to be fascinated. I would rush to the theatre on Monday – when we joined a new bill – hurry into my make-up and stand in the wings watching the other acts. In fact, I was seldom out of the wings except for the 15 minutes when I had to be on the stage myself... Vaudeville was a real show business. I have never seen any phase of the theatre in which everything counted so much.

George M. Cohan's name was Keohane – George Michael "Cohan." 1910 to 1915 saw his greatest successes. In 1904 he formed a partnership with Sam H. Harris (of the theatre in which my mother walked through that night) which was dissolved in 1920 and reunited again in 1937. He was a man close to my heart, which is why when I heard his ghost had come back to Times Square, I felt deeply resentful and tired of the life I'd once had in me. I didn't know why I was feeling that way about someone I had such an optimistic feeling about until I read the following:

During the last ten years of his life, Cohan, a man who gave affection and also inspired it, was disillusioned and embittered. He was resentful of a theatre in which he was no longer interested. He was tired, too. Tired of the stage and of life. He did not want more than the sixty-four years which had been given him. He seldom ventured west of Fifth Avenue where he lived and died there. My mother felt the intense desire to visit St. Patrick's Cathedral that day she was here and I learned later that was where Cohan's body was brought to wake after death.

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Just before the break of day, on November 5, 1942, George lay quite still. He was gone, after sixty-four years and four months of life... [He died at 993 Fifth Avenue.] A great throng was packed into Fifth Avenue in the vicinity of St. Patrick's Cathedral... Thousands watched in tense and reverent silence as the bronzed-copper casket bearing the body of George M. Cohan was borne up the broad steps and into the church. Inside the Cathedral, as along the Avenue, there were people of all ages, creeds, classes – Catholics, Jews, Protestants – and from all walks of life – civic and state leaders, governors and mayors, doctors, bankers, lawyers, industrialists, teachers, writers, composers. Crowded into the pews were people, great and small, of this man's own profession – the theatre. Only the solemn high requiem mass in the traditional form of the Roman Catholic rite.

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On April 21, 1995, my mother returned to New York City. We had two appointments with literary agents in Manhattan. In between our appointments, we ran through the rain to revisit the Sam Harris Theatre in Times Square. Maria was still there as were all the others whose job it was to rebuild and plan anew to improve the impoverished area. She threw her arms around my mother and welcomed us to the theatre. This time I had a chance to walk through the dark auditorium where Cohan's lively feet had once tapped gracefully across the stage of this theatre named for his good friend and partner. The balcony was dark and the absent chandeliers hung imaginary and ghost-like above. I smelled it and drank it all in. I knew I'd been there in other lifetimes. Maria told us the hauntings had ceased since my mother had been there and gone. In a trance session, the following evening, St. Catherine, through my mother, reminded us that George M. Cohan need not be exorcised for he is an angel who lingers to help.