



The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society

Nero Wolfe And the Performing Arts

by Margaret Goodman

AS SOME OF YOU MAY KNOW, I HAVE A very special relationship with the subject of Nero Wolfe and the performing arts. First, this is because I'm "in the business," as they say. A second reason is that shortly after joining the Wolfe Pack, Marjorie Mortenson asked me to participate in the realization of her long-suppressed desire: to stage the scene from *Death of a Doxy* in which Julie Jaquette, the nightclub singer, assaults Nero Wolfe with song. Another Wolfe Pack member, Virginia Gilbertson, was enlisted to set Julie's song, "Big Man, Go Go" to music. Robert Hughes and Gregory Vieisades appeared as Nero and Archie, respectively. Archie himself describes this encounter as "one of the most impressive floor shows the old brownstone has ever seen." There are certainly no other episodes in the Corpus where we are presented with so complete a libretto or with the opportunity to see a performer in action. There are, however, an amazing number the performing arts, and even novels in which some area of performance is central to the plot. For those who are statistically minded, there are only three novels and fourteen stories which have no reference whatsoever to theater, music, radio, television, or film.

Julie Jaquette is, I think, one of the most delightful of Stout's performer creations. Not only does she know how to make an unforgettable entrance but, as we know, she loves orchids, she can recite the alphabet backwards and she calls Mr. Wolfe "Nero." She has a proper appreciation for Fritz's hedgehog omelette and, in spite of the fact that she is earning about \$1,000 a week as a nightclub headliner, she helps nail the murderer so she can get \$50,000 to go to college. Actually, in 1966 when the novel takes place, it didn't cost \$50,000 even to go through an Ivy League college, so she must have had some other plans for part of the money!

To continue with nightclubs, since we've started in that area, Archie comments in *Death of a Doxy* that he's seen quite a few of the Manhattan spots, mostly with Lily Rowan. For this report I will not include a complete rundown of all Archie's nightclub visits, but I will touch upon other nightclub performers. The only other major nightclub character in the Corpus is Jewel Jones in diel - again, notice a "J.J." Of course, Julie Jaquette's real name was Amy Jackson and Jewel Jones is really Mrs. Meegan, but if anyone has any theories at to why Rex Stout was drawn to "J.J." for nightclub names, I would be interested in hearing. Another nightclub performer included in diel, Jerome Aland, has the distinction of being disliked by a Labrador retriever, a unique accomplishment in my experience. Then we have Jimmy Vail of FINL who "had made a big splash at the Glory Hole in the Village with a thirty-minute turn of personal chatter, pointed comments on everyone and everything," and who dies under a statue of Benjamin Franklin. Finally there is Dora Bassett (nee Miller) in AFAM, whose name change to Doraymee didn't help her singing career so that she was forced (!) to go into TV commercials.

Bands are referred to in detail mainly in non-nightclub situations. *Champaign for One* features a band at the party in the Grantham mansion, consisting of a piano, sax, two violins, clarinet, and traps. The bandleader, "a guy with broad shoulders and a square jaw," comes in handy later as the person Archie correctly identifies as someone who is willing to call the cops in spite of Mrs. Robilotti's commands to the contrary. At another party at Lily's place (rode), we have piano and fiddles playing "These Fences Don't Belong." And in *Death of a Dude*, Monroe County, Montana provides us with a violin, an accordion, and a sax playing "Horsey, Keep Your Tail Up." (Incidentally, if either of these three musical masterpieces is real and if anyone knows them, I think they certainly should be featured at some future Wolfe Pack event!)

The very first mention of the performing arts in the Wolfe saga occurs right away in *Fer-de-Lance* and, appropriately enough for 1933, it is the radio. Since this is perhaps the only place that we encounter Wolfe "enjoying" a performance, I think it's worth reading the entire section:

'Wolfe was as nice as pie that evening. I [Archie] got home in time to eat dinner with him. He wouldn't let me say anything about White Plains until the meal was over; in fact, there wasn't any conversation to speak of about anything, for he had the radio going. He was accustomed to say that this was the perfect era for the sedentary man; formerly such a man could satisfy any amount of curiosity regarding bygone times by sitting down with Gibbon or Ranke or Tacitus or Greene but if he wanted to meet his contemporaries he had to take to the highways, whereas the man of today, tiring for the moment of Galba or Vitellius, had only to turn on the radio and resume his chair. One program Wolfe rarely missed was the Joy Boys. I never knew why. He would sit with his fingers interlaced on his belly, his eyes half closed, and his mouth screwed up as if there was something he would spit out any minute. Frequently I went for a walk at that time . . . I have my radio favorites all right, but the Joy Boys seem to me pretty damn vulgar.'

By the time of *The Red Box* three years later, Wolfe has added another program, "The Pearls of Wisdom Hour" to his "favorites." He says to Archie:

I purposely dial the station which will later develop into the Pearls of Wisdom, and I deliberately bear it. It's discipline. It fortifies me to put up with ordinary inanities for days. I gladly confess that after listening to the Pearls of Wisdom, your conversation is an intellectual and esthetic delight.

Near the end of FERD, and also in LEAG, Archie again refers to Wolfe keeping the radio going all through dinner, behavior which will be particularly interesting when we consider his attitude toward television. In RANG we learn that there is a radio in the office and in the dining room, and in SLNT Wolfe makes a specific reference: I heard Raymond Swing on the radio this evening; I know what's happening."

Archie's relationship to the radio is primarily as something to wake up by. In GOLD he tells us that his bedside clock radio is normally set for 7:30, but on this particular morning it is set for 6:30 and unfortunately wakes him with "one of those goddam cheerful morning jamborees." Between 1953 and 1961 he's sleeping later and his taste has improved. In FINL he sets the radio for 8:00 AM and WQXR (one of New York's leading classical music stations), though he tells us that it's for the news bulletins.

A radio program is central to the plot of course in ANDB, where we have the murder occurring on the air, perpetrated as it turns out by the star of the show. There is, therefore, an enormous amount of material about the broadcasting field in this novel, but I will confine myself to the conflicting opinions about Madeline Fraser's work that we get from Archie and Wolfe.

From Archie we hear ". . . there was no getting away from it that Eraser was good. Her voice was good, her timing was good, and even when she was talking about White Birch Soap you would almost as soon leave it on as turn it off." And from Wolfe: "I mean the purpose she allows her cleverness to serve. That unspeakable prepared biscuit flour! Fritz and I have tried it. Those things she calls Sweeties! Pfui! And that salad dressing abomination - we have tried that too, in an emergency. What they do to stomachs heavens knows, but that woman is ingeniously and deliberately conspiring in the corruption of millions of palates. She should be stopped!"

In COOK the turning on of a radio is the signal for a murder, and in BOOK we have a radio tuned to WNBC - first "Life of Riley" and then to Bill Stern - as the background accompaniment to a murder. In SCND we have Wolfe asking for, and getting as a fee, the removal from the air of a news commentator, Paul Emerson. (I confess that this always struck me as a little petty since all Wolfe has to do is not turn on his radio in order not to be annoyed. It reminds me of my own father who used to turn on the "Today" show every morning apparently just so Barbara Walters could send him into a towering rage by the time the rest of us got up!) In RBOX the radio is turned on full blast to the band of the Hotel Portland Surf Room in order to cover "any sound of voices that might come from the hall as Wolfe escorted his guest from the elevator to the front room." Finally, in "The Squirt and the Monkey" we have Archie dealing with two radios going full blast at the same time, which he says made his brain start to curdle.

As the years pass, television comes to the office on West 35th Street and we get repeated descriptions of Wolfe's feelings. In *Father Hunt* Archie says, "The television was on and he was standing in the middle of the room glaring at it. Presumably he had been so riled that he had picked on the one thing there that would rile him more,"

In GOLD we hear, "Wolfe was in the office looking at television, which gives him a lot of pleasure. I have seen him turn it on as many as eight times in one evening, glare at it from one to three minutes, turn it off, and go back to his book." We get more specific information from MIDN: "It was Sunday evening, when he especially enjoyed turning the television off. Of course he has to turn it on first, intermittently throughout the evening, and that takes a lot of exertion, but he has provided for it by installing a remote control panel at his desk. That way he can turn off as many as twenty programs in an evening without overdoing." Finally, in PASS, "Wolfe shook his head. I turn on the television rarely, only to confirm my opinion of it."

Archie's only exposition of his own feelings are in SLPT: "I have no TV favorites, because most of the programs seem to be intended for either the under-brained or the over-brained and I come in between, but if I had, 'Show Your Slip' wouldn't Be one of them. It it's one of yours, you can assume you have more brains than I have, and what I assume is my own affair." And later, "I kept my eyes on 'We're Asking You' clear to the end. I didn't learn much. They were asking what to do about extra-bright children, and since I didn't have any and intended to stay as far away as I could from those I had seen and heard on TV and in the movies, I wasn't concerned."

From PASS we know that Archie also has a color set in his room, and from RANG that Fritz had one in his den. The latter is put to good use by Wolfe and Archie to frustrate possible electronic eavesdropping.

Television provides us with a number of characters. In PASS it is the vice president of a TV network who has been murdered by another network employee. There are three TV producers identified: Raymond Thorne in *Father Hunt*; Leo Bingham in *MAMA*; and Jerome Arkoff in *DEAD*. Carol Berk, a "TV contact specialist," whatever that is, gets taken out for food and drink by Archie at the end of home, in spite of the fact that: a) on first viewing he considered her a borderline case on the question of whether it was a pleasure to look at her or not; and b) she later called him "a crummy little stooge."

I find two television performers in the Corpus: Sylvia Venner in *Please Pass the Guilt* and Dick Vetter in "Fourth of July Picnic." Again note the similar names. (In the same family we also have Malcolm Vedder, a Broadway actor, in "Disguise for Murderr.") Possibly my favorite mention of TV in the Corpus is in *In the Best Families*:

...as I sat in the semi-darkness scowling at a cosmetic commercial, some obscure sense told me that danger was approaching and I jerked my head around. It was right there at my elbow: a Doberman Pinscher, looking larger than normal in that light, staring intently past me at the screen.

Mrs. Rackham... spoke hastily and loudly above the noise of the broadcast.

'Don't try to pat him!'

'I won't,' I said emphatically.

'He'll behave,' she assured me. 'He loves television.'

And later in the same scene, Archie analyzes TV's effect on his work.

Television is raising hell with the detective business. It used to be that a social evening at someone's house or apartment was a fine opportunity for picking up lines and angles, moving around, watching and talking and listening; but with a television session you might as well be home in bed. You can't see faces, and if someone does make a remark you can't hear it unless it's a scream, and you can't even start a private inquiry, such as finding out where a young widow stands now on skepticism. In a movie theater at least you can hold hands.

Movies come in for their fair share of attention in the Wolfe saga. Archie goes to the movies, suggests going to the movies, or threatens to go to the movies more than a dozen times (four times in *Fer-de-Lance* alone!). We never know the names of the films, but we do get a lot of movie star names tossed around. For the record there appear to be 22 cinema actors/actresses identified in the *Corpus*:

ACTOR/ACTRESS	APPEARANCES
Dana Andrews	WOMN
John Barrymore	cord
Ray Bolger	door
Charlie Chaplin	mana
Gary Cooper	WILL, orch
Bette Davis	MAMA
Mia Farrow	MINR
Lynne Fontanne	FERD, OVER
Clark Gable	orch
Greta Garbo	LEAG
Sir John Gielgud	DEAD
Jackie Gleason	SLPT
Paulette Goddard	BEST
Mary Louise (Tex) Guinan	RBOX
Julie Harris	MIGH
Boris Karloff	BEST
Hedy Lamarr	orch, WOMN
Charles Laughton	BAND
Victor Mature	help
Sir Laurence Olivier	BASE, pois, next, CLIE
Gregory Peck	RANG
Elizabeth Taylor	GAMB, BOOK, RGHT, kill

In *Black Orchids*, of course, we have the famous scene where Archie resents being referred to as a ten-cent Clark Gable. He thinks of himself as more like Gary Cooper.

Going to the movies is used as an alibi twice (*Too Many Clients*, *Too Many Women*), and in help the threatening note which begins the story is clipped from a movie ad. Only two movies are mentioned by name: "The Best Years Of Our Lives" in *Too Many Women* and "Coleoptera" in *A Right to Die*. Only one fictional character is or was involved in movie-making: Mrs. Claire Horan in *Golden Spiders* was a former movie actress.

As is appropriate for a body of work set in New York, the greatest number of references by far are to the legitimate theater. There are thirteen specific references to playwrights, and eight of these are to Shakespeare. There is one more if we count Dr. Vollmer's reference to the "Lady Macbeth syndrome" (*Please Pass the Guilt*), another still if we include Hattie Annis's assertion that Wolfe would do fine for Falstaff ("Counterfeit for Murder"), and yet another if we count Malcolm Vedder's reflections on Othello and strangling ("Disguise for Murder"). We could also add another, perhaps the most delightful of all, Llewellyn Frost's assertion in *The Red Box* that "the cops from the Inspector down are about as good as Fanny Brice would be for Juliet." These add up to a grand total of twelve references to the Bard. Four of the Shakespeare references are made by Archie, including his one-upsmanship job on Wolfe in *Some Buried Caesar* when Wolfe has never heard the word "prat."

Archie says he's looked it up, but he doesn't tell us where, so for those who want to know, it's from "The Merry Wives of Windsor," Act IV, Scene 2.

The other playwrights, each of whom comes in for a single mention, are Congreve, Albee, Tennessee Williams, Sophocles, and Kaufman and Hart.

Broadway actors and actresses figure significantly in the *Corpus*. There are fifteen characters who are Broadway performers, including one actor and one actress who are murderers, and three actresses who are murder victims. In addition, we have two producers (*If Death Ever Slept*, *The Red Box*), one author whose novel has been made into a play (*The League of Frightened Men*), one playwright (*Plot It Yourself*), two Broadway backers ("Poison a la Carte", "Eeny, Meeny, Murder, Mo"), one lyricist who averages a million dollars a year in royalties for his musicals (*Plot It Yourself*), and one costume designer ("Blood Will Tell").

There are passing references to people being at the theater in four stories, in three of which their attendance serves as an alibi. In home Archie is told that Carol Berk is attending "Guys And Dolls" when she's really hiding in a closet. Two real actresses and roles they were famous for are mentioned: Julie Harris in "The Lark" (*Might as Well be Dead*) and Lynn Fontanne in "Idiot's Delight" (*Over My Dead Body*). Two real Broadway theaters are mentioned: the Longacre (*Might as Well be Dead*) and the Majestic (Method Three for Murder). Amazingly, both are still standing and in use.

Sardi's is mentioned twice (*Father Hunt*, "Poison a la Carte"). Only one song from a Broadway musical is cited by name: "Oh what a beautiful mornin'" (*Golden Spiders*). Four times Archie mentions going to the theater himself (*The Final Deduction*, *Plot It Yourself*, *Might as Well be Dead*, "Murder is No Joke"), but in only two cases do we know the name of play - one real, "The Lark" (*Might as Well be Dead*), and one fictional, "Thumb A Ride" ("Murder is No Joke"). We know that he was so taken with Sarah Yare in "Thumb A Ride" that he saw it four times. However, he makes no observations about "The Lark" except to supply Wolfe with the running time of the first act.

Grand operas make only a minimal number of appearances in the *Corpus*. Opera is central to the plot, of course, in "The Gun with Wings", which deals with the murder of a Metropolitan Opera tenor, the previous assault on him by a baritone, and the question of how a gun got to the base of Caruso's bust. In *Black Mountain* Archie demonstrates his Italian for Wolfe: "I picked up the bag. Andiamo." Wolfe replies, "Where the devil did you get that?" To which Archie answers, "Lily Rowan, at the opera. The chorus can't get off the stage without singing it." But most important of all, in *Some Buried Caesar*, opera provides Lily's pet name for Archie - Escamillo.

Modern music comes in for a couple of passing digs. In *Death of a Dude* Archie says: "A house guest at Lily's cabin might be

anyone from a tired-out social worker to a famous composer of the kind of music I can get along without." In "Invitation to Murder" Paul Thayer is described as "Useless . . . he composes music that no one will listen to." Later in the same story we have a more complete description: "claps and rumblings . . . screeching and squealing . . . discordant jangle . . . It sets my teeth on edge." All of the above were applied to music Paul Thayer was playing on the piano, and while we're on the subject of piano, we mustn't forget that Saul plays that instrument, a fact that we learn in *Father Hunt*. Archie describes a lunch in which Wolfe and Saul debate the question whether music, any music, has, or can have, an intellectual content. Wolfe said no and Saul said yes. I backed Saul because he weighs only about half as much as Wolfe, but I thought he made some very good points, which impressed me because one recent Thursday evening at his apartment he had been playing a piece by Debussy, I think it was, on the piano for Lon Cohen and me . . . and Lon had said something about the piece's intellectual force and Saul had said no music could possibly have intellectual force. He says: "She had been at the piano, probably playing Chopin preludes. That isn't just a guess; I can tell by her eyes and the way she uses her voice. Her voice sounds as if she would like to sing . . ." Finally, in "Blood Will Tell" Saul finds the critical missing tie in a piano score of Scriabin's "Vers la Flamme."

Perhaps the fact that there is considerably less music than theater is due to Wolfe's opinion of it. Again in "Blood Will Tell", Archie tells us, "When I mentioned the title of the privately printed book ('The Music Of The Future') he made a noise – he says all music is a vestige of barbarism.

To avoid being labeled a snob, I suppose I must at least mention rodeo performers, a category that seems "iffy" to me. However, I decided to include it since they are repeatedly referred to as "performers" and also "in costume." They are central to the plot, of course, in rodeo, but a Madison Square Garden rodeo is also a fake alibi in "Instead of Evidence."

I feel I can't leave the subject of the performing arts without special reference to the phenomenon of performers' "moonlighting," taking outside jobs to support themselves. In *The Doorbell Rang* we have two actors, Jarvis and Kirby, who are central to the plot because they are hired to impersonate Wolfe and Archie. In "Poison a la Carte" our murderess is one of the twelve actresses hired to serve at table for the Ten for Aristology. It is explained that they were hired through a theatrical agency because "at that time of the year [?!] there were always hundreds of young actresses out of a job glad to grab at a chance to make fifty bucks, with a good meal thrown in." Last, I like to include the intriguing all day performance which Archie attends several times at the flower show in "Black Orchids," certainly one of the more elaborate industrial shows I have ever heard of, lasting as it does for nine and one-half hours!

Finally, since there are so many would-be actors in the world, it seems only right to give a nod to Lewis Hewitt in "Black Orchids." He was instrumental in the successful denouement of that opus because he was in the dramatic club at college and "always wanted to be an actor."

And of course we have a near miss in *Please Pass the Guilt* when Dennis Copes suggests to Wolfe:

'That was a good ad . . . That ad would have made a wonderful five-minute spot - you and Mrs. Odell, you right here at your desk and her standing with her hand on your shoulder. You would do most of the talking, with your voice. She would have been glad to pay for prime time - say ten o'clock. A much larger audience than the ad. Didn't you consider it?'

Needless to say, Wolfe's answer is "No." But then Wolfe doesn't need the validation of prime time TV to confirm what he already knows. As he says in his debut appearance, *Fer-de-Lance*: "I am a born actor."

[ED. - The Gazette is pleased to publish this article by Maggie Goodman, which she initially presented at the Ninth Annual Nero Wolfe Assembly in New York on December 5th, 1987. She is especially pleased at it's being printed since, as she says, "I feel like I've been working on it most of my life!"]

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