

VAUD RATS

A Ukulele Operetta

Short Version

by K. Brian Neel

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king (at) kbrianeel (dot) com

ACT I

SETTING: an abandoned warehouse, circa early 20th Century. Raw wooden crates are stacked high in various states of decay against a brick-and-wood painted canvass backdrop. Other various items are strewn about. Stage left, an industrial-type door.

Outside the door, we hear a tap-tap-tap of running feet. The shoes halt and retrace their steps, ending just behind the door. A knock. A rattling. Silence. Again, a rattle, this time more heavily. Suddenly, it swings open as if split at the seam.

CECIL B. DEUKULELE stands framed in the archway. He looks like he's been through the ringer. He wears a once-nice grey, pin-stripe morning suit with a bowler cap. One of his hand's holds a small beat-up suitcase; in the other, a uke-case. He peers into the room. Swallowing his breath, he crosses the threshold and searches for signs of habitation. None to be seen, he kicks the door shut and steps on stage. Our hero sets down his baggage center, reaches up to pull the cord of a hanging light and plops down wearily upon on the suitcase. He looks around, a little relieved, a little disgusted, very weary.

He uncorks the uke and begins strumming a sad set of chords...

'HAS BEEN' OVERTURE

Something in the audience catches his eye. He moves closer to investigate. Suddenly, he jumps back in fright.

CECIL: Double hockey sticks!

He climbs atop the suitcase, wavering a bit.

CECIL: Rats.

A major infestation. Or minor, depending on the audience size.

Shock evolves into wry laughter. He arms himself with the uke and begins, singing to the rats:

TRAVEL SONG

This is a song about traveling.

A song about train whistles and plane engines,

Truck horns and squawkin' bus drivers.

A song about big city neon nights,
Cold pavement, strange faces,
Dark alley entrances to Chinese restaurant cocktail clubs.

A song about greasy roadside diners,
Orange Naugahyde,
Bottomless cups of black coffee,
Bottom-full 3am waitresses.

A song about grassy field praries,
A song about snowy mountain retreats,
A song about Bavarian anachronistic towns.

A song about nowhere
Where lost is a way of life

*(Vocalizing Chorus.
Yodeling Chorus.)*

That was a song about traveling

A traveler navigates to the stars
Like dice in a game of craps
Arriving and leaving, leaving and arriving,
Until the leaving becomes the arriving
And the arriving becomes exploratory surgery.

To a traveler, every stranger is a best friend,
And a friend is just someone
To say farewell to in the morning.

To a traveler, familiar is a shackle,
And home is a death sentence.

The final G chord lingers... and ends.

CECIL: Very Much. Very Much. Most generous audience I've had in weeks. Only audience I've had in weeks.

Cecil hesitantly lowers himself to the floor and takes in the place. He finds, among other crap, a rolling cart, a coat rack, and a sheet.

Hope you don't mind some company this evening. Just a one-night-stand, mind you, no extended run. Don't worry, I won't get too comfortable. Not that this isn't a charming place you have here. A little dusty. A little dingy. A little hot. But that is a beautiful wall you have over there. You know what that wall reminds me of? This one over here.

Cecil puts the suitcase on the rolling cart and opens it. He undresses, putting the clothes in the case. Beneath it all, he sports an old-timey one-piece white cotton undergarment.

I feel right comfortable here, amongst my fellow rats. That's right, I'm a rat myself, or was, once upon a time: card carrying member of the "White Rats of America" performer's union. Mind you, I

joined after the original eight were blacklisted. I see some white rats here tonight. (*halts, shocked.*)
Just keep gnawing on whatever it is you're gnawing. Liver and let liver, that's my motto.

Don't mind me, I'm not exactly real, anyway. Performers aren't real, no. They're entertainments,
little candies for you to savor and swallow. So just sit back and let me guide you through a tour of an
authentic variety performer...

MUSEUM OF ME

CECIL goes into a shuffle and snap dance with a cappella patter:

Welcome to the museum of me,
Witness the life-size taxidermied--
glued, stuffed, sewn, fluffed
varnished, polished, waxed, buffed--
Performer of the Vaude-du-ville.

He ends on one knee in the classic "ta-da!"

CECIL: Where to begin? Every life has a beginning. And so does this one...

*He picks up the instrument and steps inside the suitcase on the rolling cart, like a preacher in
a pulpit. Throughout the song, he takes various poses -- birthing, curled like a sleeping babe,
twirling around, etc. -- all inside the suitcase, at times coasting around the stage on the rollers.*

DAYLIGHT MOON

Chesapeake Henesy, a Protestant Minister,
Preached one Sunday the judgment Revelations.
Pregnant wife Gloria, ill with listeria,
Collapsed on the alter 20 days premature.

Be quiet little boy,
cold arms keep you warm
hide like a daylight moon
a daylight moon

Pa named him Benjamin, but never felt comfortable
raising this odd, estranged, separate being.
One dark night Benjamin crawled from his bassinet,
That day on he made him sleep in a cabinet.

Invisible little boy,
Bright hiding little boy,
Shy as a daylight moon
a daylight moon

Instrumental.

Pa took to preaching to drunks and the homeless.
Oft he brought his son to pass pious propaganda,
In the bustling hubbub, Benjamin was swallowed up.

Lost and confused he wandered into a Burlesque.

Wake up shy little boy,
A world outside for you own...
Rise with the midnight moon
the midnight moon

Instrumental Finale.

CECIL: It was years later I officially ran away from home and was officially disowned by the family. Mine is the same old story: scruffy kid dazzled by the glamorous world of variety. Strange thing is, even when you find out how grueling, vicious, and back stabbing Vaude is, you just want more.

(He picks up a wire hanger and puts his coat on it, hangs it on the coat tree and tops it with his hat.)

I began working running crew at the Liberty theater on the Moss and Proctor circuit--raising and lowering curtains mostly. Never even set foot on stage, except to sweep and mop. But I loved watching the acts from the wings. That's where I saw for the first time...

SOPHIE: ...the incomparable Sophie Faye...

(The sound of applause, she bows and exits off left where she begins singing flirtatiously to the coat-rack CECIL:)

DEMURE SOUBRETTE WALTZ

SOPHIE:

I caught ya watching me perform my act.
Come to me dressing room, let's have a chat.
Do you mind if I change into me Gatsby dress?
It's very comfortable. (I don't like underwear.)
You have a presence, you're meant for the stage.
I sense a talent, youthful and of vast array.
Partner with me, I'll show you the ropes.
Vaude is a game--lots of soirees and jokes.

(She twirls upstage and becomes an old man leaning against the wall with his back to the audience. He talks over his shoulder, gesturing with a cigar in a shaky hand. It's like he's been smoking it for two centuries.)

CHARLES: Welcome to the business of show Benjamin Henesy. 'Benjamin,' that's no good. Let's see... Ben? Benny? Benny? Benny. Benny Joe. Benny Jack. Benny... Where were you born? Doesn't matter. I was born in Carson City. Benny Carson. Benny... Phoenix. Benny Nevada. Benny Nevada, that's good. Friendly with a nod to the Donner Party. This is a gift I am giving you. Contract is eight dollars a week plus transportation. We arrange room and board--sometimes a nice hotel, sometimes a boarding house, sometimes whatever hole. You pay. That's it, tomorrow we travel to Oklahoma City. After that to Muskogee to Dallas to Huston, Galveston, New Orleans, Mobile, Alabama... finish the Kemp Circuit. Then head west for 20 weeks on the Pantages, then 25 weeks of Lowes, which brings us back to West Coast for Keith and Orpheum, 30 weeks... Oh, we buy lunches. On Mondays.

BENNY: I was puzzle-pieced into her scene in the role of a walking tuxedo.

(Nice society music plays under. SOPHIE performs AFTER THE SHOWER part 1, clutching the uke with outstretched arm as if it were BENNY.)

SOPHIE: Say—I know a joke on you. I saw you fall in the lake yesterday while you were fishing. It was so amusing. I don't know when I've enjoyed such a hearty joke. How did you come to fall in? Well, I guess you *didn't* come to fall in, did you? You came to fish. Have you caught any fish since you came? A dog fish? With a litter of puppies. You must make frankfurter sausages out of the little ones, and use the big one to guard the camp. That's a watch-dog fish. Well, certainly you've heard of sea-dogs, so I suppose you heard the cat-fish having a concert last night. They were all tom-cats. You've heard of tom-cods, haven't you? Well, why not tom-cats then? Say, you must be sure to come over to our camp and see the collection in our private aquarium. We have two compartments, and keep the little daughter fish on one side... yes, and the son-fish on the other.

(Canned applause rises from the imaginary crowd. They bow and exit.)

SOPHIE:

Audience loves me... hear that applause.
Once at the Palace I had twenty curtain calls!
I'll teach you to dance and increase your pay.
Geniuses taught me, but now they're all dead.

(The mood drops, tempo slows.)

I'm just a kid, oh, this world is so crazy.
It's overwhelming, please come here, hold me.

(Canned uke waltz music plays and they (SOPHIE and uke-BENNY) waltz around the stage, slowly at first, then building faster to a swirling merry-go-round. It ends suddenly with the back of cigar-man.)

CHARLES: She is old, Benny. Believe me. She performed in medicine shows--horse and buggy--honest to goodness. Parents came over on the boat from Ireland, had her singing in their family act when she was three--under-aged. The Gerry Society would have her father arrested after every matinee; but they'd bail him out by supper, so she could go on for the evening show. She's never not been on the road. There are roads named after her. Because she is a star. A sweet lovely little angel.

(Same society music rises. SOPHIE performs AFTER THE SHOWER part 2, this time dancing a bit with uke-BENNY:)

SOPHIE: Say—I know a joke on you. I saw you fall in the lake yesterday while you were fishing. It was so amusing. I don't know when I've enjoyed such a hearty joke. How did you come to fall in? Well, I guess you *didn't* come to fall in, did you? You came to fish. Have you caught any fish since you came? A dog fish? With a litter of puppies. You must make frankfurter sausages out of the little ones, and use the big one to guard the camp. That's a watch-dog fish. Well, certainly you've heard of sea-dogs, so I suppose you heard the cat-fish having a concert last night. They were all tom-cats. You've heard of tom-cods, haven't you? Well, why not tom-cats then? Say, you must be sure to come over to our camp and see the collection in our private aquarium. We have two compartments, and keep the little daughter fish on one side...

BENNY: *(Taking the hat from the uke, coming to life.)* and the son-fish on the other.