



**THE IMPACT OF POPULAR THEATRE ON THE AMERICAN WOMEN'S  
SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT WITH AN EMPHASIS ON PLAYWRIGHT GEORGE M.  
COHAN AND HIS PRODUCTION OF *LITTLE JOHNNY JONES***

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Abstract

Playwright, actor, producer and composer George M. Cohan popularized American theatre in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with his emphasis on comedy and contemporary plots. Much of Cohan's work contained elements of social change and historic events such as World War I and II, the Great Depression, and the Women's Rights Movement. Although Cohan's portrayal of war, patriotism and immigrant identity is clearly stated throughout a number of his plays, his images of women, feminism and women's suffrage are less obvious and change drastically throughout his career. These portrayals of social change also need to be analyzed in greater historical context due to their stark differences from today's gender roles. This work will focus on what George M. Cohan's work said about women and women's rights in his first hit, *Little Johnny Jones*, and how and why these images changed throughout the rest of his career.

## Introduction

Playwright George M. Cohan was born into show business in the late 1800's. The son of two Vaudeville writers and actors, Cohan braised the stage at an incredibly young age and proceed to write and act for the rest of his life.<sup>1</sup> He would become a household name by the mid 1910's for works such as *Little Johnny Jones*, *Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway*, *The Little Millionaire*, and *The Man Who Owns Broadway*.<sup>2</sup> By the 1940's, several of his plays and musicals, including *Little Johnny Jones* and *Little Nellie Kelly*, had already been turned into movies.<sup>3</sup> Cohan's work is known for strong American patriotism, Irish-American identity, and themes of money, theatre and war. Much of Cohan's work was influenced by World War I and II.<sup>4</sup> Cohan is credited with bringing Vaudeville and Broadway into the contemporary with his themes and comedy.<sup>5</sup> Although his work isn't reproduced very often in the present, Cohan's work greatly influenced popular theatre in the decades after, many of which we still see on Broadway and the West End. George M. Cohan's work provides a nuance between theatre and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as 20<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century theatre.

Cohan started his writing career during the rise of the American Woman's suffrage movement. His portrayal of the movement, and women as a whole, are potentially telling both of his personal beliefs and the beliefs of his audience. Cohan's shows go through a variety of themes surrounding American patriotism, Irish pride, and his view of the theatre world.<sup>6</sup> Cohan's

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<sup>1</sup> John McCabe, *George M. Cohan: The Man Who Owned Broadway* (New York, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1973).

<sup>2</sup> McCabe, *George M. Cohan*.

<sup>3</sup> *Little Nellie Kelly*, directed by Norman Taurog, 1940.

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*Little Johnny Jones*, directed by Mervyn LeRoy, 1929.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Titrington Craft, "Becoming American Onstage: Broadway Narratives of Immigrant Experiences in the United States" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> McCabe, *George M. Cohan*.

<sup>6</sup> Craft, "Becoming American."

early plays are filled with a wide range of female characters. From the standard, girly, background dancers who flirt with all the boys (typical of musicals in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) to the strong, working woman with a voice and a cause, Cohan gives all of these women a place in his shows. They hold almost equally respected opinions and stage time to their male counterparts.<sup>7</sup> As Cohan's career took off following the success of *Little Johnny Jones* in 1904, his plays started to shift in the opposite direction. Cohan's shows portray a general shift away from strong female characters and the portrayal of controversial political topics, and towards his personal identity and very male-centric scripts.

### *Little Johnny Jones*

George M. Cohan wrote and produced his first hit musical, *Little Johnny Jones*, in 1904. *Little Johnny Jones* was one of Cohan's most famous musicals, and it included the famous tune "The Yankee Doodle Boy."<sup>8</sup> The musical was later made into a film (multiple times) and became a popular American piece.<sup>9</sup> *Little Johnny Jones*'s themes of wealth, royalty, fame, love and patriotism continue to play key roles in the majority of Cohan's following theatre pieces. These themes were also representative of Cohan's life and public identity.<sup>10</sup> *Little Johnny Jones* was a strong start to Cohan's long and influential writing career.

*Little Johnny Jones* surrounds a plot of a horse derby, a swindling scheme, and star-crossed lovers. Set in early 20<sup>th</sup> century London (modern at the time), *Little Johnny Jones* draws similarities from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* with plot surrounding Jones and Goldie's love

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<sup>7</sup> George M. Cohan, *Little Johnny Jones* (New York, NY: Sanger & Jordan, 1921).  
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George M. Cohan, "The Man Who Owns Broadway," 1909.

<sup>8</sup> Cohan, *Little Johnny*.

<sup>9</sup> *Little Johnny Jones*, directed by Mervyn LeRoy, 1929.

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*Little Johnny Jones*, directed by Johnny Hines and Arthur Rosson, 1923.

<sup>10</sup> McCabe, *George M. Cohan*.

story. Goldie, the niece of female reformer Mrs. Kenworth, is set up with the Earl of Bloomsburg, a member of the British nobility. Goldie, however, is in love with American jockey Johnny Jones and vice versa. Goldie dresses up as the Earl in order to gain knowledge and perhaps sway her aunt and her aunt's swindling fiancé from making her marry the Earl. Goldie is ultimately successful but confuses everyone in her methods of persuasion by dressing up as the Earl and later disappearing when Jones' sportsmanship is questioned. At the same time, Anthony Anstey, our villain and an American businessman, is engaged to Mrs. Kenworth for her money and is in the process of striking up a business deal with Sing Song, a leader in the San Francisco Chinese lottery. The London derby, which Jones is participating in, brings all of these characters together.

The women in *Little Johnny Jones* are particularly interesting from a social stand point. They represent an array of different opinions and social identities. One of the most intriguing groups of women are "the Reformers" (social reformers most likely). These women are against the Chinese lottery in San Francisco and any sort of gambling, while their name typically represents suffragettes. They've come to London to protest the horse derby. Cohan may have aligned these two beliefs as both "progressive," but he is unclear in his reasoning. The Reformers in *Little Johnny Jones* are a seemingly made-up group to provide a plot point for Cohan. At the same time, their name connotes that they are also proponents of women's suffrage. Quotes throughout the play surrounding women's rights leads us to believe that they are in fact suffragettes who also happen to dislike gambling.<sup>11</sup> Although the Chinese lottery did exist in San Francisco, and the Women's suffrage movement was made up of social reformers and gained momentum during this time period, there is no evidence that women social reformers were against the Chinese lottery. Cohan may have been trying to correlate the two merely to

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<sup>11</sup> Cohan, *Little Johnny*, [Act 1: p.2,26]

draw two social issues into his play, however, we have no way of knowing his intentions behind correlating these two movements.

These elements of social and political discourse do add to the play, especially toward the characters of Mrs. Kenworth and Anthony Anstey. Mrs. Kenworth, the leader of the San Francisco Reformers, and her allies in this play make multiple remarks throughout the production about being strong willed women. At the same time, comments about her being to “nosy” are also made behind her back. Although she is a feminist by many accounts, Mrs. Kenworth still believes that a young girl cannot know what she wants, especially when money is involved. This theme is a large paradox in Mrs. Kenworth’s character; Mrs. Kenworth is given a particular feminist freedom that many of the other women don’t possess in this musical. Other than her role as a suffrage leader, she aligns herself with other outspoken characters and speaks up equally. The fact that positive and somewhat feminist comments even exist in Cohan’s production says a lot about his views and the views of the people around him on the women’s suffrage movement, the role of theatre in social movements, and the role of women in society. The popularity of this show (leading two national tours) also shows the receptiveness of the American public to ideas of strong women and female suffrage.

Mrs. Kenworth and the female Reformers are continuously ridiculed throughout *Little Johnny Jones*, mostly behind their backs. Mrs. Kenworth’s lying fiancé and a money seeking gambler, Anthony Anstey, is by far the most sexist character in *Little Johnny Jones*. Right from the beginning he makes fun of Mrs. Kenworth’s Reformers. This is mainly because he is a gambler and therefore disagrees with the Reformers values, but he makes sure to use their identities as females against them at the same time. He makes many comments throughout the musical that continue to belittle women from the Reformers and Mrs. Kenworth to Goldie and a female reporter named Florabelle Fly. Anstey makes sure to tell his male allies that he is taking

Mrs. Kenworth for her money and that Goldie is too young and childish to make her own decisions. For example, in the first act Anstey remarks to his friend McGee, “Cheat me out of one hundred thousand dollars a year, will you? Wait till you are Mrs. Anstey...I’ll soon teach you and your crusading band of fool women to stay at home and mind your own business.”<sup>12</sup> Such lines continue throughout the play. Although the initial conclusion is that these lines play negatively on the women’s suffrage movement, I would argue that Anstey’s portrayal as an ‘unlikeable’ character acts to counter-act his negative notions about women therefore giving off a positive impression of the women’s suffrage movement.

In a particularly striking scene towards the end of the show a male character named Wilson tells Mrs. Kenworth outright: “Give up this band of reformers and let the Chinamen alone. Don’t dictate to anyone whom they should marry. Stay at home, do your knitting and sewing and let the rest of the world take care of itself...Now don’t mind me that was on my chest and I had to get it off- that’s all.”<sup>13</sup> Mrs. Kenworth isn’t given a chance to respond, and the scene continues on. This portrayal of Mrs. Kenworth, as a busy body, aligns with her persona as a female reformer and as a member of high-class setting Goldie up for marriage. These two images, as previously mentioned, are paradoxes to her persona as a feminist and advocate for women’s rights. The reasoning for this anti-suffrage outburst is most likely one or both of two reasons. It is an insertion of differing views on women, the suffrage movement, and feminism, or it simply there to get a reaction out of his audience. This line has no real impact on the plot itself. I would argue that although this line is very poignant and striking, Mrs. Kenworth and women’s rights are still portrayed in a positive light throughout the majority of *Little Johnny Jones*.

Another character whose identity as a strong female prevails throughout *Little Johnny Jones* is San Francisco reporter Florabelle Fly. Florabelle is in London to report on high society

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<sup>12</sup> Cohan, *Little Johnny*, [Act 1: p.8].

<sup>13</sup> Cohan, *Little Johnny*, [Act 3: p.4].

at the derby. She has no romantic connections to anyone in the play. As her job is to report for the gossip section, she does come off as somewhat of a busy body or meddler, and comments are made about her position. That being said, the fact that Cohan has a single, working woman and a key character in this show shows his mild tolerance, or at least acknowledgement, of social change towards women's rights. Unlike Mrs. Kenworth, Florabelle doesn't have any defining moments with a male character belittling her other than a couple of snide comments. Henry, Goldie's friend and ally, makes a comment to Goldie following a confrontation between the three of them. Henry says, "I've never liked those female newspaper men."<sup>14</sup> Although this is in the context of Henry standing up for Goldie, this comment clearly shows a divergence from the norm that Florabelle is in the journalism industry. This may also be a dig at newspapers, a particular writer or a critic of Cohan's as he was known to make public digs at critics and the media throughout his career. Generally, Florabelle is respected for her work aside from this comment. She also seems to be highly regarded by her fellow female characters, many of whom see her as a strong and outspoken woman and perhaps more outspoken than themselves. She has a particular feminist empowerment dialog with Mrs. Kenworth in one scene where they are discussing women's rights. Mrs. Kenworth and Florabelle are talking to the Captain of their boat about sailors when the following dialog ensues:

Mrs. Kenworth: Brave fellow. I like brave men. (Captain wells out.) I adore brave women who stand by their rights. (Turns to Fly and back again.)

Fly: (Aside): Here's one who stands by her rights alright, alright, alright.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cohan, *Little Johnny*, [Act 2: p.10]

<sup>15</sup> Cohan, *Little Johnny*, [Act 2: p.5]

These lines act strongly in favor of women's rights as Florabelle and Mrs. Kenworth make their stances on women's suffrage public to one another and members of the ship. This scene, along with others, portrays Florabelle as a strong feminist and an advocate for women's rights.<sup>16</sup> The respect she is given throughout the show, with regards to a couple lines from Goldie's friend Henry, show her in a positive and empowered light.

Goldie, the niece of Mrs. Kenworth, plays a very interesting role as a budding feminist and ridiculed female character. Because of Goldie's age and social standing, everyone around her seems to have ideas of who she should marry and what she should do with her life. She is in school and exemplifies many characteristics of a strong female, such as her pursuit of Johnny Jones and her Shakespeare-esque act of cross dressing to get her way. She also has a platonic male friend by the name of Henry who acts as her co-conspirator and ally. The script almost makes the audience expect Henry to profess his love for Goldie by the end the show, but he respectfully doesn't. Although Goldie does partake in some very childish acts, such as running away when she doesn't get her way and confusing all of her friends and loved ones by dressing up as her potential future husband, she ultimately follows her heart and gets her way. Her actions identify her as a 'modern' woman while her social status and role models still see her as a young woman 'too naive' to make decisions that will impact her for the rest of her life.

Johnny Jones, Goldie's love, sees her as a lover and almost as an equal. He is attracted to her because of her tenacity when they first encounter each other: Johnny instantly falls in love with Goldie when she calls to him from the stands of a race that he "better win" for her because she bet money on him.<sup>17</sup> Jones elevates Goldie's appearance as a strong woman by his love for her 'fiery' traits and outspokenness. He regards her highly for her personality above her identity

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<sup>16</sup> Cohan, *Little Johnny*, [Act 2: p.5]  
and

Cohan, *Little Johnny*, [Act 1: p.4]

<sup>17</sup> Cohan, *Little Johnny*, [Act 1: p.22]

as a wealthy heiress. Jones' treatment of Goldie acts as a positive portrayal of equality between men and women and therefore of women's rights and feminism.

Cohan using the story line of an American heiress marrying into British royalty is an accurate depiction of the daughters of American empires. During the turn of the century, rich American families, with almost everything, forced their daughters into royal marriages to receive an official title to their family name.<sup>18</sup> Members of British royalty often obliged purely for the means to support their empires. As British society began to rely less and less on these elite families, their money quickly faded away. Money from newly wealthy American families, eager to elevate their status in society, brought about the opportunity to support these traditional nobilities.<sup>19</sup> American 'princesses,' as they're commonly known, have made several appearances in more modern theatrical productions; the most famous production being ITV's *Downton Abbey*.<sup>20</sup> The stories of Americans becoming members of the nobility have captured audiences and authors for a century now. In *Little Johnny Jones*, Cohan, like the writers of *Downton Abbey*, makes a point to incorporate an interesting fact of American upper-class history while critiquing American obsession with status and money.

The strong female characters in *Little Johnny Jones* are feminists and suffragettes. Their role in this production, 16 years before the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, shows social progress, and the turmoil surrounding it.<sup>21</sup> The fact that this show toured the United States and was so successful suggests that the American public in the early 1900's was accepting of working women and

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<sup>18</sup> *Million Dollar American Princesses*, "Wedding of the Century," episode 2, Smithsonian Channel, first broadcast January 11, 2015, hosted by Elizabeth McGovern.

<sup>19</sup> Anne de Courcy, *The Husband Hunters: American Heiresses Who Married Into the British Aristocracy* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> de Courcy, *The Husband*.

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*Downton Abbey*, ITV, first broadcast 2010.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Const. amend. XIX.

women's suffrage. Overall, *Little Johnny Jones* stands as a positive representation of the American women's suffrage movement.

### Cohan's Work Post-*Little Johnny Jones*

Cohan's plays that were produced after *Little Johnny Jones* follow similar romantic plots of a young, wealthy woman being set up to marry a wealthy man that she doesn't love.<sup>22</sup> With the exception of a few lines in specific plays, Cohan shies away from themes of politics and feminism and focuses more on themes such as the theatre world, divorce, and even his own career. His plays also tend to be more male dominant in both casts and scripts. In the late 1910's and early 1920's, there was a large increase in male dominant plays and a decrease in feminism and strong female roles.<sup>23</sup> As Cohan's work became more and more well known, he shifted his script patterns and strategies to focus more so on the success of male characters, especially in their pursuit of women. In *The Song and Dance Man*, released in 1923, the entire first act is made up of male characters.<sup>24</sup> This strongly homosocial play leaves little room for female characters to develop and thrive on stage. Similarly, *Little Nellie Kelly*, released in 1922, also plays into a male-heavy script.<sup>25</sup> Even in shows named after women, there is a stronger focus on the men fighting over Nellie for her heart than on Nellie herself. Nellie, a working girl from the Bronx, is constantly fought over by men of all social statuses and backgrounds. The show does

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<sup>22</sup>George M. Cohan, "The Man Who Owns Broadway," 1909.

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George M. Cohan, "The Little Millionaire," 1911.

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George M. Cohan, "Little Nellie Kelly," 1922.

<sup>23</sup> Cohan, "The Man Who Owns Broadway," 1909.

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Cohan, "The Little Millionaire," 1911.

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Cohan, "Little Nellie Kelly," 1922.

<sup>24</sup> George M. Cohan, "The Song and Dance Man," 1923.

<sup>25</sup> George M. Cohan, "Little Nellie Kelly," 1922.

leave Nellie with the choice between the millionaire and the good Irish boy. In the end, Nellie stays with her Irish roots and goes for a good Irish boy. This play does show that a woman should be able to choose her man and that a respectable boy is better than a pushy man with money. However, this doesn't change the heavy focus of the show on Nellie's men rather than on her. Cohan diverges from female characters, like those in *Little Johnny Jones*, who have a career and money because they believe in a cause. Although *Little Nellie Kelly* was produced post the Woman's suffrage movement, it still stands as a representation of decreasing feminism in Cohan's plays.

Another play, entitled *The Man Who Owns Broadway*, follows a character named Sylvia, who plays Goldie's counter-part, is the victim of a series of sexist comments specifically from her father. Her father makes jokes about how she belongs in a mental institution and isn't sane simply because she doesn't want to marry the man she's been set up with. *The Man Who Owns Broadway* is a very male dominated script with little room for female characters to grow and become interestingly complex.<sup>26</sup> The male characters belittle the women without retribution. I would argue that because of the dominance of male characters throughout these scripts, they leave little room for female characters to grow and diversify. Because of this, we get very flat female characters that fit into stereotypes of sweet, docile women that don't seem to have a cause or many feminist qualities in them. Overall, these shows tend to favor men a little more than women. In doing so, the women of these shows lose the feminist qualities they held in *Little Johnny Jones*.

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<sup>26</sup> George M. Cohan, "The Man Who Owns Broadway," 1909.

## Conclusion

*Little Johnny Jones* may act as an anomaly in Cohan's work, but it still stands as a potential representation of Cohan's beliefs, the beliefs of the people around him at the time it was written, and the beliefs of his intended audience. The evidence of its success also exemplifies the tolerance, and perhaps acceptance, of strong female characters and pro-suffrage ideas by Cohan's larger American audience. *Little Johnny Jones* also acts as a base from which we see Cohan's scripts progress farther and farther towards male-dominance and non-controversial themes. As his following grew and his audience diversified, Cohan increasingly started focusing his plays around a generic formula, negating his political thoughts on women as well as their portrayal as strong, working women. There are exceptions, of course, when Cohan participated in plays in his late career that are entirely political. For his general audience, Cohan centralizes around generic ideas of gender, money and love, while in his private life, he openly criticized politicians and supported a variety of causes. This shift in themes and script culture may be due to a variety of reasons including: a change in Cohan's personal beliefs; an influence of the beliefs of individuals surrounding Cohan; or a change in the needs and wants of Cohan's growing audience. These themes and beliefs have translated into how his work is performed and perceived today. *Little Johnny Jones* stands as a representation of theatre portraying multiple sides of the political spectrum. It makes fun of the women's suffrage movement while also portraying critics of feminism in a poor light. Jones and Goldie ending up together, regardless of Goldie's expected social standing, shows a breakdown of the ideas of high society marriages and power. Cohan ridicules the idea that nobility and namesake are more important than love and family.

George M. Cohan's plays, while being revolutionary to Broadway and Vaudeville, are not commonly produced in the present day.<sup>27</sup> This is due to a variety of factors including Cohan's portrayal of women and the suffrage movement. Another key reason why Cohan's plays are often forgotten is his racist representations of non-white characters, particularly Asian characters. This theme is very typical of plays and musicals produced during this time period and have continued to pollute theatre long after the end of Cohan's career. This lack of racial and social tolerance goes hand in hand in Cohan's case. Modern adaptations of *Little Johnny Jones* have been changed so much that the plot of the play is practically different, and still somewhat racist.<sup>28</sup> In the present day, Cohan's pieces act better for research and educational purposes than they do in the theatre. George M. Cohan's work continues to act transformability as present-day historians and musicologists look to his work for these representations of society, change and innovation.

Regardless of Cohan's fade of popularity into the present day, his work stands as transformative in the theatre world due to its contemporary components and influence on theatre produced following his productions. *Little Johnny Jones* and the attention it gained is a historic example of the women's suffrage movement in art and how these positive representations of the movement were accepted by the public. It also shows us how Cohan shifted away from these ideas and onto less controversial subjects in his pieces post his rise to fame. Cohan's collection of plays and musicals potentially represent not only his personal beliefs on women, theatre and identity, but also that of his audience. These plays act as sociological time capsules during decades of war and global social transformation. With the changing roles of gender in society and identities as an American and an immigrant, Cohan captured these feelings and ideas and presented them in a comedic fashion that was pleasing to people of all walks of life.

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<sup>27</sup> McCabe, *George M. Cohan*

<sup>28</sup> *Little Johnny Jones*, by George M. Cohan, Goodspeed Opera House, 1980.

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