**Wayburn, Ned (b. 30 March 1874, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; d. 2 September 1942, New York, New York)**

**Summary**

Ned Wayburn was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 30 March 1874, and raised in Chicago. He studied at the Hart Conway Chicago School of Elocution while working as an engineer for the family business, Weyburn (sic) Machinery Co. There, he was trained in military drills and in ‘harmonic Gymnastics’, by a second-generation Delsarte teacher: Ida Simpson-Serven. He worked in vaudeville as a pianist, while developing dance acts with integrated lighting effects. Moving to New York, he gained a reputation with Feature Acts. Among his 300+ dance direction and stage direction credits are three groups of shows to which he brought innovations: plotted musical comedies with Lew Fields for and about contemporary 1911-1914 businessman audiences, topical revues, especially with Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr., and roof garden revues. He was equally famous for developing individual specialties for performers in vaudeville and on Broadway. Wayburn ran a New York studio and home-study Course, which he advertised as delivering ‘Health, Beauty and Independence’ to prospective women students. In the 1920s, he added radio production and training and was experimenting with television revues just before his death in 1942.

Wayburn was the third generation of inventors and engineers in his family. Trained in engineering, he absorbed both the taste for experimentation and the habit of patenting, copyrighting, or at least documenting his innovations. He integrated facets of industrialization in his dance directing and training systems, in the studio, and his Home-Study Course.

Wayburn began his experiments with dance and technology in vaudeville, combining dance movements with lighting effects, from projections to phosphorescence. He came to the attention of Broadway producers with a series of feature acts, performed by pony choruses and soloists. His long career included innovative modern-dress musical comedies developed with Lew Fields, but he is best remembered for his work on revues, most notably multiple editions of Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr.’s *Follies,* including the 1919 and 1922editions, as well as Roof Garden *Midnight Frolics* and productions for the Century Theatre.

Gaining practice and influence from the sheer number of musicals, revues and vaudeville acts, Wayburn is most memorable for his codification of the chorus hierarchy. As dance director, he divided the women chorus dancers into five categories by height and assigned each a range of techniques. For example, the shortest dancers were a pony chorus, doing unison musical comedy tap-and-stepping. He supported this practice through his school and home-study course, in which, after a foundation of exercise, his staff taught musical comedy dancing, tap-and-stepping, ‘modern Americanized ballet’, acrobatics, eccentric dance, and ballroom-derived techniques.

Wayburn was also known for developing the two methods for balancing the individual performers with the chorus. He built production numbers that varied chorus’ stage movement with ‘interpolated’ specialties of dance, music and/or comedy. For example, in the Act I finale of the *Passing Show of 1913*, he fit four completely different dance acts – a tandem team, an exhibition ballroom team, a toe dancer, and a acrobatic dancer who worked with swords – into a comedy scene parodying the recent Suffragist March and Pageant in Washington, D.C.

Most successful dance directors ran New York studios as a training ground for new talent and coached more experienced performers and made a specialty of developing acts that focused on those performers’ abilities and individualities. Wayburn added a Normal Course for teachers (a practice more associated with Denishawn and concert dance), and a thriving ‘Home-Study Course’. All taught the full set of dance techniques, as well as movement and stagecraft fundamentals based on his third-hand Delsarte training, and exercise system. He used a particularly modern advertising slogan for his enterprises, promising ‘Health, Beauty and Independence’ to potential students, as well well-paying positions on stage, screen and radio.

He continued to experiment with the technology of theatre and dance, developing patented innovations in revolving stages, lighting gels and effects, and new taps and floor treatments to emphasize the aural possibilities of tap dancing. As well as live theatre, he adopted networked radio as a favored performance form, developing both equipment and training methods for that new technology. He was equally enthusiastic about the possibilities of television and was scheduled to present two December 1941 broadcasts from the New York World’s Fair, but they were cancelled after the United States’ entrance into the Second World War.

There are so few contemporary sources for documented dance in vaudeville and early twentieth-century Broadway that Wayburn could be seen only as a codifier, but his importance also includes his role in the development of the two basic structures: the dance routine (directly and through its influence of popular song) and the production number, which integrated solos and chorus routines. Both of these structures still inform musical theatre and all forms of popular entertainment.

Ned Wayburn died in New York, September 2, 1942.

**Barbara Cohen-Stratyner**

**References and Further Reading?**

Cohen-Stratyner, Barbara. ‘Welcome to “Laceland”: An Analysis of a Chorus Number from the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1922* as staged by Ned Wayburn’. *Musical Theatre in America: Papers and Proceedings Sponsored jointly by the American Society for Theatre Research, the Sonneck Society, and the Theatre Library Association*. Ed. Glen Loney. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984, 315-322.

Cohen-Stratyner, Barbara. *Ned Wayburn and the Dance Routine: From Vaudeville to the Ziegfeld Follies*. Society of Dance History Scholars, 1996.

Wayburn, Ned. *The Art of Stage Dancing: The Story of a Beautiful and Profitable Profession, a Manual of Stage-craft.* (1925) re-printed in facsimile, New York, New York: Belvedere, 1980.

**Paratextual Material**

Sheet music cover for Ziegfeld Follies of 1922

“It’s Getting Darker on Old Broadway” (Gene Buck & Louis A. Hirsh)

New York Public Library Image ID g99c458\_001

<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/70cb8fd2-3a86-325f-e040-e00a180662f3>

Evelyn Law

White Studio photograph, c. 1918

New York Public Library Image ID Variety\_0007va

B-dance parading to front of the stage, ZF of 1924

White Studio

New York Public Library Image ID psnypl\_the\_5166

Helen Barnes in ZMidnight Frolic of 1915 balloon costume

White Studio

New York Public Library Image ID: variety\_0595v

“Spend Your Money While You Live”

Sheet music cover showing Wayburn as songwriter/performer

Howley, Haviland & Co., 1899

New York Public Library Image ID: 1256599

Dolores as the White Peacock in Ziegfeld Midnight Frolic

White Studio?

New York Public Library Image ID: psnypl\_the\_5360

“Ned Wayburn Examining Chorus Girls”

Auditions, probably for Feature Act, ca. 1905

Library of Congress ID: ggbain 08411 http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ggbain.08411