

THE NANCE

BY DOUGLAS CARTER BEANE



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For Nathan Lane

Author's Note

I have to thank George Chauncey for his wonderful book *Gay New York* for the research. It was quite inspirational. I also have to thank “Something Weird” videos for a lot of the old burlesque routines. They always came down to ten basic sketches, which were stitched together with different characters and lines. There were never authors of these sketches, they just were handed down and new jokes were inserted. I have included as many of the basic sketches as I could.

I also want to thank every man over the age of seventy that I met at cocktail parties while I was writing this play. I apologize for grilling you about burlesque routines that you saw in your misspent youth, but I have to say it was astonishing what you remembered. I used as much of it as I could. And the rest, I made up.

—DCB

THE NANCE was originally produced on Broadway by Lincoln Center Theater at the Lyceum Theater, opening on April 15, 2013. It was directed by Jack O'Brien; the set design was by John Lee Beatty; the costume design was by Ann Roth; the lighting design was by Japhy Weideman; the sound design was by Leon Rothenberg; the original music was by Glen Kelly; and the choreography was by Joey Pizzi. The cast was as follows:

CHAUNCEY MILES	Nathan Lane
JOAN	Jenni Barber
CARMEN	Andrea Burns
SYLVIE	Cady Huffman
NED	Jonny Orsini
EFRAM	Lewis J. Stadlen
ROSE	Mylinda Hull
CHARLIE	Geoffrey Allen Murphy

CHARACTERS

CHAUNCEY MILES

JOAN

CARMEN

SYLVIE

NED

EFRAM

ROSE, the wardrobe mistress**

CHARLIE, a stagehand**

**These are non-speaking roles added by Jack O'Brien to fill out the backstage life of the Broadway production. Please use them at the director's choice. If you do not use them, you simply may cut Rose's one line.

*Find out what they like,
And how they like it
And let 'em have it just that way!
Give 'em what they want
And when they want it
Without a single word to say!*

— Fats Waller
*Performed at the
Irving Place Theater, 1937*

THE NANCE

ACT ONE

Scene 1

“Meet You Round the Corner”

An automat in Greenwich Village. January 14th, 1937. A number of tables fills the space. A wall is filled with the small doors and their purchases. The three women of the cast are dressed as men and sit with their backs to us. Someone is asleep at a table. Chauncey, an elegant, refined man, expertly dressed in the style of the latter half of the 1930s, sits at a table, leisurely enjoying his ham sandwich. An old queen (played by the same actor who portrays Efram) stops by the coffee station. With a tad too much flourish, he takes a tea bag, places it in his cup and fills it with hot water. He walks by Chauncey and makes a great show of flirting with him, Chauncey makes a greater show of snubbing him. The old queen “harrumphs” and walks to a table off to the side. Ned, a handsome, masculine young man, slightly frayed at the edges, walks over to the coffee station and picks up a dirty mug. He looks either way, then washes it out with hot water. He then looks both ways again and fills it with hot water. Ned walks over to the table next to Chauncey and sits. He sets down his hot water. Looks sheepishly left and right, adds ketchup and stirs. Chauncey sees this and says, without looking at Ned:

CHAUNCEY. I daresay the finest dish here at the automat is the tomato soup. People come from miles around for it.

NED. I'm down from Buffalo.

CHAUNCEY. Though that seems a tad far.

NED. Up by Niagara Falls and — I just got into town, forgot my wallet. Lost it. Actually I lent it to somebody and they stole it.

CHAUNCEY. Does the story I choose to believe reveal my personality?

NED. I just got here, in from out of town. I'm gonna be working soon — just a little short right now.

CHAUNCEY. You, me, and Singer's midgets. You see, I am in the show business. I am in a constant state of short. Would you like half of my sandwich?

NED. You don't have to.

CHAUNCEY. I warn you, it is ham. I'm an actor, that might be considered an act of cannibalism.

NED. Uhm, yeah. Sure, thanks, mister. *(He starts to get up.)*

CHAUNCEY. *(Hissing with anger.)* Sit down, you idiot, you want to get us both arrested. Just ... stay where you are. *(Ned sits down and is confused. Chauncey says with more ease, again without looking at Ned.)* There was a raid last night at the Childs on Fifty-second Street. We are being a little more cautious. Do, but do, be discreet, dear. *(He puts half of his sandwich onto another plate, pulls something from his pocket and places it under the plate. He then walks by, slyly sliding the sandwich onto Ned's table, and walks over to the urn. He pours himself another cup of coffee and looks out the front door. Ned begins to devour the sandwich and slurp down the "soup." Chauncey goes back to his seat and again says, without looking at him.)* Where are you staying while you are in town?

NED. Up on, uhm, Riverside Drive, they call it.

CHAUNCEY. Well. Riverside Drive. And here we are in Greenwich Village. That's quite a trip for a young, hungry boy. A bus and an El train at least. And so many other automats to be found in between. One would almost assume that you had heard of this particular automat. And of appearing at this particular automat at this particular time in the evening. *(Ned just chews and looks forward.)*

Ah. Or maybe you're a copper. We live in such ... arresting times, as they say.

NED. I don't know what you're talking about.

CHAUNCEY. For future reference, there are only three things that I am ever talking about, dear heart. There were four, but then they've gone and cast Barbara Stanwyck as Stella Dallas. One is

politics, I am absolutely mad for politics, I like mine Republican and conservative. Say something nice about Roosevelt and prepare to have your eyes scratched out. Two is the show business, love it all, legit, movies, radio, even, dare I say, burlesque. And third, my dear heart, can you guess what the third might be?

NED. I don't — we're in New York, Yankees?

CHAUNCEY. And somehow, no. No, the third thing I am interested in is finding the places, in whatever city I am currently in, where the boys meet the boys. (*A significant pause.*) Of which this automat is one. And that, dare I say, has even been heard of as high up as Riverside Drive.

NED. I, maybe, heard about it from some friends.

CHAUNCEY. And the next sound we hear is a minor chord.

NED. I'm not — I'm just — how do you know I'm not a cop?

CHAUNCEY. Because your hands are so filthy. Commissioner Valentine never lets his boys get such — but then I don't know for sure, really, and that can be part of the fun. You could be a cop, you could be a dream lover, you could be a punk who wants to clobber me and take all my dough. It's not knowing until the eleventh hour that can be something of a thrill. And after last night's little roundup at the "So Gay Corral" at Childs. There's just buckets more tension and buckets more thrills. (*A moment, then.*) Tell me, do you like burlesque?

NED. I uhm — no — I'm just —

CHAUNCEY. Have you ever heard of — oh, what's his name, terribly talented fellow, Chauncey Miles — something like that?

NED. No.

CHAUNCEY. You haven't?

NED. No. I heard of some of the strippers, but never any of the fellas.

CHAUNCEY. The reason I brought burlesque and Mr. Miles — I believe his name is — up is. He's over at the Irving Place Theater — what a hole, but some of my ... bachelor friends and I, we go and stomach the dear girls removing their frocks — all done completely oblivious to the beat coming from the orchestra and then — he comes out — this Mr. Miles person. He does this sort of ... pansy act. He is too too much, really. I hear in real life he is a pansy, which is kind of like a Negro doing blackface. Which some of them do, Bert Williams did that. W.C. Fields says that Bert Williams was the funniest man he ever saw, but the saddest man he ever knew. W.C. Fields does a great drunk act, and I hear in life he's really a drunk. We seem to have come full circle here and I'm really not

sure why. Oh, I know. Yes. Chauncey Miles, in his act, says, "Meet ya round the corner in a half an hour," only he does it — (*Limp wrists are up as he imitates the pansy.*) "Meet ya round the —" (*The others on the floor all look at him.*) Sorry, my mistake, I forgot there's no camping allowed in this part of the forest. (*A moment. He then says quietly but deliberately.*) I noticed that there is a newsstand right around the corner. If we leave here together, someone may be watching. If you will notice, please. Underneath your plate is a dime. Enough to buy you a nice piece of pie and a cup of coffee. (*Ned looks, it is there.*) You can get those downstairs and sit downstairs and eat them downstairs. That should take you twenty minutes. You can then get up and go to the newsstand, you can look at the magazines, I suggest something published by Henry Luce, and I will meet you there. Meet ya round the corner in a half an hour. And then you can come home with me. To my glamorous apartment in the exclusive Hell's Kitchen section of Manhattan. Or you can just eat the pie and coffee and run away. Or you can just pocket the dime and never look at my ugly face again. (*Ned thinks for a moment then gets up. He turns and starts to say something.*) Don't say thank you now or I'll know it's over. This way, for the next half-hour, I can believe there will be an assignation. (*Ned leaves quickly. There is the sound of a drum roll which grows crazy, and a drop of a street [burlesque-style] suddenly crashes. This will be used over and over for any location onstage. The only addition will be a prop piece of each scene. This first one is a lamp post [inflatable] that states "Irving Place." Efram, the First Banana of the burlesque show, enters, and we are onstage at the Irving Place Theater.*)

EFRAM. (*Sings.*)

THE GIRL IN UNION SQUARE
WITH THE FLOWER IN HER HAIR
EVERYBODY'S LOOKING FOR LOVE
THE DAME ON IRVING PLACE
WITH THE POWDER ON HER FACE

EVERYBODY'S LOOKIN FOR LOVE
SO IF YOU SEE A NUDE BOY WITH AN ARROW
WON'T YOU GIVE THE CHARMING LAD A SHOVE
DON'T BE STUPID
THAT IS CUPID

AND HE'S AIMING RIGHT AT YOU, KID
EVERYBODY'S LOOKING FOR LOVE
EVERYBODY'S LOOKING FOR LOVE

Say boys, welcome to the Irving Place Theater. The big show has just begun. Everybody is looking for love! Now, they say the quickest way to the human heart is with a song! So let's sing a little, shall we? (*Chauncey swishes in, dressed as the burlesque "nance." He has an overly-tailored suit which gives him something of an hourglass figure, and he has a wild tie, a gaudy pocket square, and a Gerbera daisy in his lapel. His manner is funny, but also an outrageous exaggeration of an effeminate male homosexual. His one hand seems to always be on his hip, the other flits about like a dove.*)

CHAUNCEY. Hi, simply hi! Did someone say we were to be singing?

EFRAM. You wanna meet some ladies? Or are you in it for art's sake?

CHAUNCEY. Art who?

EFRAM. Say, waittaminute, are you a nance?

CHAUNCEY. Well, I don't know much about art, but I know what I like!

EFRAM. Are you a pansy?

CHAUNCEY. Doesn't necessarily mean I'm a bad person!

EFRAM. Well all right Nancy-Nance, let's let the singing begin. I brought these here music books.

CHAUNCEY. I'm usually more comfortable with a hymn. (*To audience.*) What? What? I like to play with the organ. What? What? I love love love when the organ swells? Oh, you brutes!

EFRAM. Let's sing, shall we?

EFRAM and CHAUNCEY.

THE GIRL ON FOURTEENTH STREET
WITH THE SMILE OH SO SWEET
EVERYBODY'S LOOKING FOR —

(*Sylvie, a burlesque "talking woman" enters. She walks across the stage, her every move accompanied by the beats of the drummer. As she passes the boys, she drops her purse at Efram's feet. While waiting for him to pick up the purse, she stands motionless except for the clock-like swinging of the hips. Efram and Chauncey, of course, stop.*)

EFRAM. That pretty lady dropped her pocketbook. (*He retrieves it.*) Pardon me, miss. You dropped your pocketbook.

SYLVIE. (*She doesn't even look inside the purse.*) Thank you, sir, and I can see without even looking that all my money is still there. Just for that, you can ... (*She does a jazzy sort of box step.*)

THE NANCE

by Douglas Carter Beane

4M, 4W

In the 1930s, burlesque impresarios welcomed the hilarious comics and musical parodies of vaudeville to their decidedly lowbrow niche. A headliner called “the nance” — usually played by a straight man — was a stereotypically camp homosexual and master of comic double entendre. THE NANCE recreates the naughty, raucous world of burlesque’s heyday and tells the backstage story of Chauncey Miles and his fellow performers. At a time when it was easy to play gay and dangerous to be gay, Chauncey’s uproarious antics on the stage stand out in marked contrast to his offstage life.

“A heartfelt new play set in the twilight of burlesque.” —**The New York Times**

“A nearly perfect work of dramatic art ...” —**The New Yorker**

“A heartfelt period piece about coded and censored gay life in 1930s New York ... this is Beane’s finest straight (well, straight-acting) play since The Little Dog Laughed.” —**Time Out (New York)**

“Douglas Carter Beane has found a way to use the campiness that is his primary theatrical color to relevant and moving effect ... THE NANCE never hides its emotions behind a cloud of camp, nor does it settle for easy applause-sign trickery. (Even the political jokes are understated.) It shows you the real pain of a real man, and makes you feel what he feels.” —**The Wall Street Journal**

Also by Douglas Carter Beane
THE LITTLE DOG LAUGHED
AS BEES IN HONEY DROWN
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and others

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