About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, but overlooked American plays of the twentieth century . . . what Henry Luce called “the American Century.”

The company’s mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to surrender our moorings to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all Americans, of all ages, origins and points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These audience guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

The American Century Theater is a 501(c)(3) professional nonprofit theater company dedicated to producing significant 20th Century American plays and musicals at risk of being forgotten.

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The Playwright: June Havoc (1916–2011)

Actress, Singer, Writer, Marathoner, Survivor

Most theatergoers know her as Baby June, the perky and pint-sized vaudeville headliner kept forever in blonde curls according to the 1959 musical Gypsy, based on the memoirs of her more famous, but less talented sister, stripper Gypsy Rose Lee. But June Havoc had a remarkable show business career and epic life that shouldn’t have to play second fiddle to anyone.

She was born Ellen Evangeline Hovick on November 8, 1916. Blonde-haired and blue-eyed, she was a natural performer and began acting in silent film shorts when she was just two years old. Soon renamed June, she was driven by uber stage mother Momma Rose Hovick, whom June would later describe, with bitterness, as “insane” and “a monster.”

By age five, “Dainty June” was making $1,500 per week in vaudeville revues, but she was also desperate to escape the suffocating control of Mama Rose. She ran off and married the first of her three husbands at age thirteen, a dancer in her act, Bobby Reed. In a scene that never made it into Gypsy, Rose had Reed arrested and even attempted to shoot him (her gun failed to go off) at the police station. June’s frantic marriage quickly failed and was probably never consummated. Meanwhile, Havoc’s vaudeville work dried up as the Depression deepened. She tried working as a model, performing in the Catskill Mountain resorts of upstate New York, and handling various odd jobs, finally becoming a regular in dance marathons, the formative experience of her life.

She made it in Hollywood and on Broadway, never a huge star but a respected, versatile, and, most important of all, steadily working one. Havoc is best remembered for her work in the 1940 Broadway production of the Rodgers and Hart musical Pal Joey and for her roles in such feature films as Gentleman’s Agreement (1947), in which she played Gregory Peck’s Jewish secretary who changes her name and finds herself accused of anti-Semitism.
Havoc went from the grinds and sprints of the dance marathons to Broadway in 1936, in *Forbidden Melody*. Her success in *Pal Joey* came when she was only twenty-four, and the show launched her in Hollywood (along with fellow cast member Gene Kelly, who was also “discovered”). In 1941’s *Four Jacks and a Jill*, she played a singer who quits her band, thus allowing Ray Bolger to hire Desi Arnaz. She supported Janet Blair and Rosalind Russell in *My Sister Eileen* in 1942 and played a comic role opposite Joe E. Brown in *Casanova in Burlesque* (1944), as a stripper who blackmats college professor Brown into giving her the lead in a production of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Havoc was off the screen from 1945–47, but upon her return, she appeared in *Gentleman's Agreement* and was suddenly “hot” again, not entirely in a good way. The role of the Jewish woman hiding her ethnicity caused Havoc, who was not Jewish, to be widely assumed to be so, thus prompting her name to be brought up in a House Committee on Un-American Activities hearing in 1947 as a potential “subversive.” It didn’t kill her career, though: Havoc was a genius at finding work.

When good film roles began to wane, she turned to television and the stage. In 1949, Havoc appeared on an episode of the anthology series *Fireside Theatre* and played Anna Christie in ABC’s 1952 *Celanese Theatre* production. She starred in a dramatic CBS series in 1954 called *Willy*, as a small town attorney coping with sexism. Havoc excelled at playing strong, smart, defiant women because she was one. She was also smart and literate, despite her lack of formal schooling, serving as a regular panelist in the late 1950s on *The Last Word*, which had fun with the quirks of the English language.

By the early 1960s, as her acting appearances on the small screen became insufficiently abundant, June Havoc turned to talk shows. In 1964–65, she hosted *More Havoc: The June Havoc Show*, which played on the title of her 1959 autobiography, *Early Havoc*. She was still ready for TV roles in her seventies, appearing on an episode of *Murder, She Wrote*, and in 1987 even had a regular role for a time on the ABC soap, *General Hospital*.

In 1963, Havoc co-directed her ambitious autobiographical play *Marathon ’33* on Broadway, earning a Tony nomination. She promoted the show whenever she could after that and saw it become an inspiration and source for the Oscar-winning film *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?*, starring Jane
Fonda and Gig Young. She appeared in a national tour of *Sweeney Todd*, and in 1985, she hit the London stage with a self-authored one-woman show, *An Unexpected Evening with June Havoc*.

“Dainty June” really never stopped working until the very end. Outliving her sister by three decades, June Havoc finally died last year, finishing a wild and successful entertainment career that was indeed a marathon.

*Marathon ’33: A Production History*

—*Tom Fuller*

*Marathon ’33* opened on December 22, 1963, at the ANTA Playhouse in New York City and was produced by the Actors Studio. It closed on February 1, 1964, after forty-eight performances. There were thirty-seven actors in the cast, many of whom doubled smaller roles, and the onstage music was by “Conrad Janis and his Tail Gate 5.”1 The show was nominated for three Tony awards: June Havoc, Outstanding Director (Dramatic); Julie Harris, Distinguished Dramatic Actress; and Lee Allen, Distinguished Supporting or Featured Dramatic Actor.

A canvass of the newspaper history reveals that there have been at least eleven productions of *Marathon ’33* since then. Three have been by professional companies, and eight have been at universities or other academic venues.

1 Janis, most famous for playing Mindy’s father on *Mork & Mindy*, performed extensively in a variety of genres. His home page, [http://www.conradjanis.com/index.php](http://www.conradjanis.com/index.php), includes a *Marathon ’33* playbill cover and a photo of him signed by June Havoc, and lots of other information. His “Tailgate” band was a New Orleans-style jazz band that at various times included trombone (Janis), trumpet, piano, clarinet, drums, saxophone, guitar, and string bass.
Further research might well find more, but it is unlikely that any other professional company has produced the show during that time.² In a telephone interview in 1983, June Havoc said that she had seen ten “professional and university” productions and was withdrawing the U.S. professional rights because she hoped to direct another production here. Kander and Ebb tried to get Havoc to sell them rights to turn her play into a musical, but she, still hoping to do more with the play herself, turned them down. (Their project became the 1997 musical (a flop) *Steel Pier*, which prominently features a dance marathon with many similarities to the one described in *Marathon ’33*.)

In February of this year, *Marathon ’33* premiered in Pittsburgh, performed by an all-college cast. This musical adaptation of Havoc’s play was approved by the playwright shortly before she died, and was overhauled by Tomé Cousin and Peter Gregus.

Here are the dates and basic information for each of the eleven known productions.

**Professional Productions:**

   Strawdog Theatre Company  
   Cast: 33

   Royal Alexandra Theatre, Shaw Theatre Festival  
   Cast: 39

1. Washington DC • May 13 - June 14, 1987  
   Horizons Theatre

**Nonprofessional Productions:**

8. Viera, Florida • November 21, 2008  
   “Starhawk Productions,” Viera High School  
   Cast: 36

² The 1987 Shaw production claimed to be only the second professional production of the piece, “except for one producer who wanted to bowdlerize it.” The Abingdon Theatre Company in New York did one performance of a show also called *Marathon ’33* on October 19, 2009, but it was a fundraiser with dance lessons, famous guests, dinner, and dancing, and a short stage presentation that was only loosely based on Havoc’s play.
   Sir James Dunn Theatre, Dalhousie University Department of Theatre  
   Cast: > 40

6. Montréal, Québec • November 22 - December 1, 2002  
   DB Clarke Theatre, Concordia University Theatre Department  
   Cast: 18

5. Fort Lauderdale, Florida • October 5 - 14, 2001  
   Griswold Theatre, Florida Atlantic University (Edward Villela, dance consultant)  
   Cast: 25

4. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania • May 1995  
   Physical Theatre Project (jazz dance company), Point Park University  
   Cast: 23

3. Marblehead, Massachusetts • August 1991  
   Summer Stage, Aldrich Performing Arts Center (mixed high school & college)  
   Cast: 25

2. New York City, New York • November 10 - 19, 1983  
   Maguire Theatre, SUNY College at Old Westbury  
   Cast: 43

1. Toronto, Ontario • June 30, 1979 - July 7, 1979  
   George Ignatieff Theatre, Trinity College  
   Cast: 16
Dance Marathons of the 1920s and 1930s

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Dance Marathons (also called Walkathons), an American phenomenon of the 1920s and 1930s, were human endurance contests in which couples danced almost nonstop for hundreds of hours (as long as a month or two), competing for prize money. Dance marathons originated as part of an early-1920s, giddy, jazz-age fad for human endurance competitions such as flagpole sitting and six-day bicycle races. Dance marathons persisted throughout the 1930s as partially staged performance events, mirroring the marathon of desperation Americans endured during the Great Depression. In these dance endurance contests, a mix of local hopefuls and seasoned professional marathoners danced, walked, shuffled, sprinted, and sometimes cracked under the pressure and exhaustion of round-the-clock motion. A 25-cent admission price entitled audience members to watch as long as they pleased. Dance marathons were held in Spokane, Seattle, Yakima, Wenatchee, Bellingham, and elsewhere. They occupied a slightly disrespectful niche in society, and many towns banned them, finding them disruptive, disturbing, and even repugnant.

Callus Carnivals

Dance marathons were known as "bunion derbies," and "corn and callus carnivals." Promoters called them "walkathons." Social dancing had only recently acquired a veneer of respectability through the efforts of wholesome married dance teams like Vernon and Irene Castle. At a time when many churches still considered dancing sinful, "walkathon" was a less threatening term. But today we remember these endurance contests of the Great Depression as "dance marathons."

Dance marathons were both genuine endurance contests and staged performance events. Professional marathoners (often pretending to be amateurs) mixed with authentic hopeful amateurs under the direction of floor judges, an emcee, and the merciless movement of the clock to shape participatory theater. Both grim spectacle and vaudeville-based amusement,
dance marathons offered an inexpensive chance for audiences “to be entertained and while away time” (Calabria, p. 21). They also offered audiences the Depression-era novelty of feeling superior (and feeling pity) toward someone else.

**Virgin Towns**

Top contestants vied for the chance to win hundreds or (rarely) thousands of dollars, but promoters of a successful dance marathon walked away with much more. Promoters sought "virgin spots"—towns where a marathon had not yet been staged. Novelty (and prodigious advertising) was required to draw large crowds. Virgin towns also had the advantage of a citizenry unburned by dishonest promoters who skipped town without paying their bills. Promoters tried to arrange local sponsors such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars or the American Legion in order to enhance respectability.

Despite their controversial status, during the 1930s dance marathons were entrenched in American culture. Dance marathon historian Carol Martin reports that nearly every American city of 50,000 people or more hosted at least one endurance dance marathon. Washington was no exception: Contests were held in Spokane, Seattle, unincorporated King County, Bellingham, Spanaway, Wenatchee, Fife, Vancouver, Yakima, and probably in other towns as well.

**Desperately Entertaining**

Seattle passed an ordinance prohibiting dance marathons within city limits on September 5, 1928. This ordinance was prompted by the attempted suicide of a Seattle woman who had competed in a 19-day marathon held in the Seattle Armory, and placed only fifth. Bellingham passed a similar ordinance on January 26, 1931, and Tacoma passed one on June 10, 1931. On March 13, 1937, the state of Washington passed an act prohibiting dance endurance contests statewide.

In 1934 when the American Social Hygiene Association asked police chiefs across the nation about their municipalities’ laws regulating endurance dance contests, the replies showed "deep antipathy" (Martin, p.130) toward the marathons.
Opponents to dance endurance events included movie theater owners, who lost money when their patrons attended a marathon instead of a movie. Churches and women’s groups objected on both moral grounds (the contestants’ dance positions resembled dragging full-body hugging rather than social dance positions) and for humanitarian reasons (it was wrong to charge money for the dubious privilege of watching bedraggled contestants become increasingly degraded). The police found that marathons attracted an undesirable element to their towns. Certainly the marathon promoters and professional dancers (who almost invariably collected the prize money) were transient and invested only in short-term gain.

This gain was cumulative for those to whom it befell: “In their heyday, dance marathons were among America’s most widely attended and controversial forms of live entertainment. The business employed an estimated 20,000 people as promoters, masters of ceremonies, floor judges, trainers, nurses and contestants” (Martin, p. xvi). Within Washington communities where dance marathons took place, advertising dollars went to newspapers and radio stations. Venues were rented and license fees paid. Local sponsors gained attention for their businesses. Food concessions for both spectators and contestants also brought money into local coffers.

Dance marathons opened with as great a fanfare as the promoter’s press agents could muster. Each major promoter had a stable of dancers (known as horses, since they could last the distance) he could count on to carry his event. These professionals (often out-of-work vaudevillians who could sing and banter and thus provide the evening entertainment that was a feature of most marathons) traveled at the promoter’s expense and were "in" on the performative nature of the contests (including the fact that the outcomes were usually manipulated or at least loosely fixed).

Food, a Roof, and Hope

Known euphemistically as “experienced couples” (The Billboard, April 14, 1934, p. 43), professionals did their best to blend in with the hopeful (often desperate) amateurs. For all contestants, participation in a dance marathon meant a roof over their heads and plentiful food, both scarce during the 1930s. President Herbert Hoover's promised prosperity "just around the corner" eluded most Americans, but dance marathon contestants hung their hopes on the prize money lurking at the end of the contest's final grind.
Contestants, who danced in pairs, were required to remain in motion (picking up one foot, then the other) 45 minutes each hour, around the clock. Dancing was often loosely interpreted to include shuffling along while shaving with a special mirror hung around the female partner’s neck, writing letters on a special folding desk hung around one’s own neck, reading the newspaper, knitting, or even sleeping as one’s partner supported one’s weight. The "carrier" in such a couple often tied the "lugging" partner’s wrists together with a handkerchief and hooked them around the carrier’s neck for additional security. Women carried their sleeping male partners, despite the inequality of height and weight. “It was the women who kept up and mostly men who faltered” (Broun).

The rules during this "walking act" portion of the marathon were that feet keep moving up and down and that contestants’ knees never touch the floor. Knees touching the floor brought immediate disqualification. To encourage lagging couples to continue moving, the floor judge sometimes used a ruler to flick the legs of contestants who were not shuffling with sufficient alacrity. In extreme cases partners were fastened together with dog chains to prevent them from drifting apart.

**How Long Can They Last?**

Contestants who learned to adjust to this around-the-clock motion danced on as the sign above them ticked up the hours and ticked down the number of contestants remaining. Always, written on placards surrounding the dance floor and endlessly repeated by the marathon emcee was the question: “Ladies and Gentlemen, How Long Can They Last?”

Contestants were expected to dance full-out during the heavily attended evening hours. A live band played at night, whereas a phonograph often sufficed during the day. The longer the marathon wore on, the more endurance events the contestants found themselves subjected to. Sprint races, long periods without medical care, removal of rest periods, along with the more common shin splints, bunions, blisters, and fallen arches soon whittled down the number of participants.

Special endurance events were heavily advertised and drew large crowds. “Stumbling, Staggering, On They Go! Who will be the next to be carried off the floor?” promoter Rookie Lewis advertised of a 1936 dance marathon in
Fife (The Tacoma Times, July 21, 1936). The local press kept a death-watch as contestants dropped out: “The thrilling sprint periods which are in effect at the Hal J. Ross Walkathon in the Century Ballroom each night are proving to be the Waterloo of an average of one contestant each day, with more eliminations expected as this grueling event continues,” trumpeted The Tacoma Times about another contest in Fife (August 1, 1935, p.8).

Many competitors developed signature songs or comic routines. Performed through their perennial exhaustion, these numbers induced the audience to shower the performer with coins. Dancers then gathered up this "floor money," also called "sprays" or "silver showers." Professional comedians who were not contestants also entertained the crowd.

Couples also used sponsorship to generate extra cash. Local businesses paid these couples a small stipend in exchange for wearing the company’s name as they competed. Marathoners also sold autographed picture postcards of themselves to the fans. The price was usually 10 cents. “Dancingly yours,” many read.

Fifteen minutes each hour were allotted for rest. When the air horn signaling a rest period sounded, the contestants exited the dance floor for curtained-off rest areas filled with cots. These rest areas were segregated by sex. Contestants trained themselves to drop instantly into deep sleep as soon as their bodies touched the cots. After 11 minutes the air horn sounded again and the contestants filed back onto the dance floor to begin another hour. Female contestants who didn’t wake at the end of 11 minutes were revived with smelling salts (and slaps), and male contestants were often dunked in a tub of ice water. A Seattle Post-Intelligencer reporter visited the cot area at the 1928 Seattle Armory marathon.

“Here in the half-light they lie, these sprawling, unconscious forms, their cots side by side, their clothing hung in listless disarray ... a girl is sprawled, her lips moving in pain, as she moans incoherently, and jerks her hands. Bending over her is a man, her ‘trainer’ apparently, who massages her swollen feet with some ointment. Beside her, another girl is lying, her mouth open to reveal her gold-crowned molars, while flies crawl across her closed eyes and buzz against her chin” (Alice Elinor, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, August 8, 1928).
**Romance Amid Pain**

Medical services were available to contestants, usually within full view of the audience. Physicians tended blisters, deloused dancers, disqualified and treated any collapsed dancer, tended sprains, and so on. "Cot Nights," in which the beds from the rest areas were pulled out into public view so the audience could watch the contestants even during their brief private moments, were also popular. The more a marathon special event allowed the audience to penetrate the contestants’ emotional experience, the larger crowd it attracted.

Marathons even featured marathon weddings performed in the arena for a still-shuffling bride and groom. These events (sometimes genuine but usually staged) resulted in gifts for the lucky couple from fans and local businesses.

Spokane audiences enjoyed the “Grand Public Wedding of the Ohio Sweetheart Team. The wedding of Florence Ollie and Jack Stanley, Couple 22, will take place on the Walkathon Floor amidst all the remaining contestants as attendants” (*Spokesman Review*, August 5, 1935, p.5). The event was broadcast on radio station KGA.

Another popular event was watching a contestant "frozen alive" in a block of ice, a trick done with four hollowed out ice-blocks put together with a person inside. Such an event was advertised as an “added attraction” during the May 1931 Spanaway “Washington State Championship Walkathon Contest … Moro: ‘The Man They Cannot Kill’ Frozen in a cake of ice twice daily” (*The Tacoma Times*, May 20, 1931).

**Twelve Square Meals**

Most marathon promoters fed contestants 12 times a day -- oatmeal, eggs, toast, oranges, milk, etc. Couples had to continue the shuffling dance motion while they ate the humble but filling meals. These meals were served at a chest-high table since the contestants ate standing up. Twelve meals a day during the Great Depression was a powerful inducement to many who joined endurance marathons. At a time when many out-of-work Americans were standing in bread lines or simply going without, many marathon contestants reported that, despite the constant motion, 12 meals a day meant that they actually gained weight.
Women constituted up to 75 percent of dance marathon audiences. They watched contestants with the stamina to endure as weeks melted into months. They became invested in the emotional and often sentimental stories the emcee wove about the contestants: the sweetheart couples, the local favorites, the married couples who needed prize money to put food on their children’s plates.

Marathon audiences saw people even harder up than they were themselves. This sight, addictive, drew them back. By 1935, The Billboard magazine claimed that “the average attendance at an evening’s performance of a walkathon is about 2500 people” (Kaplan).

**Rigorous and Rigged**

In truth, the marathons were usually somewhat rigged, or at least stacked, toward certain couples. Endurance was required, and the demands of the contest grew increasingly brutal as time went on, but the audience failed to understand the degree to which the floor judge and the emcee, both employed by the marathon promoter, worked together to shape events and spin the flim-flam.

Not everyone who visited a dance marathon found it fascinating. Seattleite Blanche Caffiere once attended a Seattle-area show, and remembered that she herself was forced to stand while watching and that the contestants were boring to watch during the day when no formal entertainment was scheduled. Caffiere found it strange to watch people sleeping and eating while they stood (Caffiere interview).

Intense fatigue sometimes led contestants to "go squirrelly," especially during the wee hours of the morning. “Fatigue brought them to a state resembling a coma, a state which seemed to offer relief from the soreness of the day’s travail. During these episodes, contestants hallucinated, became hysterical, had delusions of persecution … acted out daily rituals: they talked to an imaginary companion, grinned vacantly, and snatched objects from the air” (Calabria, p.77). For the audience, watching contestants go squirrelly offered a queasy thrill.

When attendance dropped, promoters began the final push of elimination events. "‘Grinds" were continuous dancing with no rest periods. A grind continued until one or more couple fell and was disqualified, literally ground
down in exhaustion. During grinds, even the usual tricks dance partners used to keep each other on their feet (pin pricks, slaps, shaking, pinching, even conversation) were forbidden. “The George C. Cobb walkathon here, at the end of 1460 hours, had two couples and one solo still on the floor,” reported The Billboard of a 1935 contest. “For some time it seems that the kids have had a total lack of respect for derbies, treadmills, figure-eights and dancing sprints, taking them in stride and coming back for more” (November 30, 1935).

"Sadism Was Sexy"

Sprints were just as grueling as grinds but yielded quicker, more dramatic (and therefore more audience-enticing) results. A typical program for a show in which the contestants had danced more than 1,000 hours (about 41 days) was:

"Monday: Zombie Treadmills (1 hour duration)

Tuesday: Figure-Eight Races (25 laps)

Wednesday: Elimination Lap Races (male contestants)

Thursday: Dynamite Sprints

Friday: Heel and Toe Derbies

Saturday: Elimination Races (female contestants)

Sunday: The Argonne Forest" (Calabria, p.35).

Zombie treadmills involved blindfolded contestant teams, often chained or tied together, racing one another. The audience watched this blood sport, drawn by heavy newspaper promotion and live radio coverage.

Seattle native June Havoc (1912?–2010), formerly a child vaudeville star and later an actor in films and on Broadway, spent the early 1930s as a professional dance marathoner. Havoc, who was 14 when she entered her first dance marathon, wrote later of her experiences, “Our degradation was entertainment; sadism was sexy; masochism was talent” (quoted in Calabria, p.64).
Elimination contests served their purpose. Despite high stakes—having survived hundreds, even thousands of hours—usually only the top three couples finished in the money. Sometimes audiences were treated to a victory dance in which they could mix with the winners following the close of the marathon. To promoters, a successful marathon was one that generated publicity, made money, and resulted in no arrests.

The August 1935 Bellingham Walkathon at the State Street Auditorium succeeded only in the last respect. The show closed early (a publicity boycott by the *Bellingham Herald* reduced the crowd) and the victory dance was cancelled. Across Washington, however, dance marathons continued to be mounted, sometimes successfully (a September 1935 Wenatchee show generated such excitement that another "Super Show" featuring immediate brutally intense elimination events opened the day following its conclusion), and sometimes unsuccessfully (as in the May 1931 Spanaway show which ended abruptly when the promoters were arrested).

By the late 1930s, dance marathons had faded from the cultural landscape. Ordinances prohibiting the contests, combined with dwindling "virgin spots," discouraged promoters. America’s entry into World War II sent former marathoneers and their audiences to work and to war. Glimmers of the fad remained, however, in roller derbies, which were televised and persisted into the 1960s, and in walkathon/fun runs benefitting charity. Even dance marathons themselves resurfaced, albeit in a form so tame as to be unrecognizable, as charity fundraisers. These modern marathons are usually 12-24 hours, a far cry from the Spokane show that closed October 12, 1935, after 1,638 hours (about two months).

**Sources**

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Paula Becker interview with Blanche Caffiere, June 2, 2003, Seattle, Washington

Seattle City Council Ordinance No. 55985, “An Ordinance relating to and regulating endurance contests, repealing ordinances in conflict, and declaring an emergency,” approved September 5, 1928

Tacoma City Council Ordinance No. 10690, “Endurance Dancing and Contests,” approved June 10, 1931

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“'Nother Winner For Joe and Mary Rock,” *The Billboard*, October 19, 1935, p. 28


“Reed and Reeves Capture Rookie Lewis’ Tacoma Show,” *Ibid.*, September 19, 1936, p. 31


“Girl Marathon Dancer Tries To Kill Self,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, August 22, 1928, p. 1

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“Sprints Hard On Walkathon Teams,” *The Tacoma Times*, August 1, 1935
The First . . . and Worst . . . “Reality Show”

—Jack Marshall

Dance marathons began as innocent and harmless college competitions in the 1920s, but by the time the teeth of the Great Depression had sunk deep into American society, they quickly metastasized into a sadistic and corrupt spectacle that included tricks, stunts, twists and scams limited only by the gall and ingenuity of their producers, the gag reflexes of their customers, and the desperation of their participants.

Although the kinds of horror show marathons described by and participated in by June Havoc were banned for good—and I do mean for good—following World War II, it is clear that they were the inspiration for the glut of TV reality shows that pollute the television schedule today. Indeed, the influence of the dance marathons on these often tawdry, always manipulative and shameless shows is strong, with many of their devices and innovations being duplicated. They are just as effective as they were eighty years ago.

Here are some examples:

- Inducing people to endure discomfort, pain and humiliation for the promise of cash prizes (*Survivor, Fear Factor, Blackout, The Glass*
House, Fear is Real, Estate of Panic, Can You Survive a Horror Movie?)

- Encouraging contestants to engage in sabotage, back-stabbing, psychological warfare and other treachery as the audience watches (Survivor, The Apprentice, Big Brother)

- Dramatizing contestants’ injuries and breakdowns for the audience’s titillation (Dancing with the Stars, Celebrity Rehab, The Biggest Loser)

- Exploiting the romantic relationships of contestants during the competition (The Bachelor, The Bachelorette, Survivor, The Surreal Life)

- Bringing back eliminated contestants to torment the remaining field (The Apprentice, American Idol)

- Changing the rules mid-competition to keep a fan favorite in the competition or to increase dramatic interest (American Idol)

- Forcing contestants to compete in outrageous and increasingly difficult competitions in order to stay in the running (Survivor, Fear Factor, The Biggest Loser, many others)

- Using desperate celebrities and has-been performers as drawing cards (The Celebrity Apprentice, The Surreal Life, Celebrity Rehab, Celebrity Boot Camp, The Anna Nicole Show, and similar shows featuring Tatum and Ryan O’Neal, Danny Bonaduce, Scott Baio, many others.)

- Stripping away all privacy from contestants and allowing the audience to become voyeurs (The Glass House, Meet the Kardashians, Big Brother, Temptation Island, Blind Date, Jersey Shore, The Real Housewives of New Jersey, D.C., etc.; many more.)

- Scripting or otherwise rigging “spontaneous” events to liven up the competition (Almost all of them)

June Havoc’s unscrupulous dance marathon impresario, Mr. Dankle, would be proud.
The Great Depression (1929-1941): So You Think Things Are Bad Now?

*Consider . . .*

- Between 1929 and 1932, incomes, on average, were reduced by 40%. Deflation took hold, reducing prices by 10% per year on goods. By 1934, nearly half of all residential loans were delinquent and over one million families lost their farms.

- In 1932 alone, 273,000 families were evicted from their homes. Between 1929 and 1932, construction of homes dropped by an incredible 80%.

- Between 1930 and 1935, nearly 750,000 farms were lost through bankruptcy or sheriff sales.

- During the 1933–1934 worst years of the Depression, the overall jobless rate was 25% with another 25% taking wage cuts or working part time. The gross national product fell by almost 50%. It was not until 1941, when World War II began, that unemployment officially fell back below 10%.

- Some regions were especially badly hit by the Depression, like the Mid-West. For example, in 1932, half of all workers in Cleveland and four out of five in Toledo, Ohio, were jobless.

- On “Black Tuesday,” October 29, 1929, the stock market lost $14 billion, making the loss for that week an astounding $30 billion. This was ten times more than the annual federal budget and far more than the U.S. had spent in World War I. Thirty billion dollars would be equivalent to $377,587,032,770.41 today.

- People who lost their homes often lived in what were called “Hoovervilles,” or shanty towns, that were named after President Herbert Hoover. There was also “Hoover Stew” (food dished out in soup kitchens), “Hoover Blankets” (newspapers that served as blankets), “Hoover Hogs” (jack rabbits used as food), and “Hoover Wagons” (broken cars that were pulled by mules).
• Millions received their daily nourishment from soup kitchens provided by churches, charity groups, and at one time, Al Capone.

• Nearly 50% of all U.S. children did not have adequate food, shelter, or medical care. In the mountain communities of Appalachia, whole families were reduced to eating dandelions and blackberries for their basic diet. Some children were so hungry, they chewed on their own hands.

• The homeless, or “hobos,” would ride on railroad cars because they didn’t have money to travel. Among those who rode the rails during the Depression were U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, Western novelist Louis L’Amour, and folk singer Woody Guthrie. They were lucky: more than 50,000 people were injured or killed while jumping trains.

• Cheap entertainment was critical to enduring the Great Depression. A record 60–80 million Americans went to the movies every week. In 1933, the prime attraction was Merian C. Cooper’s 1933 King Kong.

• Chain letters were among many get-rich-quick schemes that were inspired by the Depression, including Dance Marathons. The letters became so popular that post offices around the nation had to hire extra help.

• Criminal activity and prostitution hit new highs during the Depression, even after Roosevelt ended Prohibition in 1933.

• The most famous protest during the Great Depression was that of the “Bonus Army,” a mob of destitute WWI veterans who demanded the financial bonuses that were supposed to be to be paid to them in 1945 in 1932, ahead of schedule. The desperate vets were dispersed by the U.S. Army.

• By the 1930s, thousands of schools were operating on reduced hours or were closed down entirely. Some three million children had left school, and at least 200,000 took to “riding the rails.”
• In the absence of real jobs, many people tried apple-selling to avoid the shame of panhandling. In New York City alone, there were as many as 6,000 apple sellers.

• On May 6, 1929, Russian dictator Joseph Stalin predicted that America would experience a new revolution, and that the American Communist Party should be ready to assume the leadership of the “impending class struggle in America.” More than just Communists believed him.

• Discrimination against women became epidemic. Job-seeking women were seen as trying to take away jobs from men who had to support their families.

• Nearly 1.5 million women were abandoned by their husbands. Divorce rates and birth rates dropped.

  . . . and people paid money to watch starving, unemployed people dance for months without sleep for food, shelter, and the possibility of winning a cash prize for being the last one standing.