

## Episode 10: 'Pins & Needles' - A 1930's Garment Workers' Musical

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:00:21] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast that aims to shine a light on British Columbia's rich labour heritage. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. This month, we bring you the remarkable story of 'Pins and Needles', one of the most unlikely hit Broadway musical revues ever. Not only was the show funded and created by a union, every one of the singers, dancers and performers were members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, who had low paying factory jobs in the sweatshop textile industry. And in the fall of 1938, 'Pins and Needles' came to Vancouver for two evening shows and a matinee. Here, as elsewhere, audiences were enthralled. They couldn't get enough of the singing, dancing members of the ILGWU and their pointed songs that were both catchy and progressive. One of the songs was so good, it was recorded by jazz great Cab Calloway, 'One Big Union for Two' nudge, nudge.

**Music: 'One Big Union for Two' sung by Cab Calloway** [00:01:31] I'm on a campaign to make you mine. I'll picket you until you sign in One Big Union for Two. No court's injunction can make me stop until your love is all closed shop in One Big Union for Two. Seven days a week, I want the right to call you mine both day and night. The hours may be long, but 50 million union members can't be wrong. When we have joined up, perhaps there'll be a new recruit, or two or three. For that's what teamwork can do, in One Big Union for Two....

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:02:25] We'll get back to the Vancouver shows in a bit. But first, some background. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union was founded in the United States at the turn of the 20th century. It was one of the few unions to have a membership consisting almost entirely of women. Deplorable working conditions in the textile industry galvanized union organizing. Locals followed in Montreal and Toronto, then Winnipeg and Vancouver. In the 1930s, embracing the progressive politics of the times, the ILGWU invested in innovative programs for its members, cooperative housing, education and recreation and cultural pursuits such as art, drama, music and dance. At some point, the union's cultural director, Louis Shaffer, had this crazy idea - let's put on a show! Even crazier, the show would be performed by textile workers themselves. He hired a socially conscious, little known music dabbler named Harold Rome, to write the songs and the lyrics. Then the real work began. A handpicked cast of 45 workers had to be trained from scratch. They rehearsed from 7 to 10 at night, after finishing their factory shifts. This went on for 18 months. Cutters learned to tap dance. A quartette of pressers and knitwear men became expert at harmony. And so it went. All that effort paid off. The show opened on November 27th, 1937, and it was a hit from the start. The revue soon moved from Fridays and Saturdays to six nights a week. Performers went from getting 50 cents a night for dinner to actors salaries. And best of all, they were excused from their regular factory work. In one skit, the actors describe the kind of work they did in the factories. They followed this was a witty and tuneful number, 'Sing Me a Song of Social Significance', performed here by Nita Carol and Alan Holt.

**Music: 'Sing Me a Song of Social Significance' sung by Nita Carol and Alan Holt** [00:04:43] I'm tired of moon-songs, of star and of June songs. They simply make me nap. And ditties romantic drive me nearly frantic. I think they're all full of pap. History's making, nations are quaking. Why sing of stars above for while we are waiting father time's creating new things to be singing of. Sing me a song with social significance. All other tunes are taboo. I want a ditty with heat in it, appealing with feeling and meat in it! Sing me a song with social significance or you can sing 'til you're blue. Let meaning shine from

every line or I won't love you. Sing me of wars and sing me of breadlines. Tell me of front page news. Sing me of strikes and last minute headlines. Dress your observation in syncopation! Sing me a song with social significance, there's nothing else that will do. It must get hot with what is what or I won't love you. [piano] I want a song that's satirical and putting the mere into miracle. [piano] It must be packed with social fact or I won't love you. Sing me of kings and conferences martial, tell me of mills and mines. Sing me of courts that aren't impartial. What's to be done with them; tell me In rhythm. Sing me a song with social significance. There's nothing else that will do. It must be tense with common sense or I won't love you.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:07:13] Much to their surprise, critics loved the show. Heywood Broun, founder of the American Newspaper Guild, called it the most amusing musical revue of this or any other season within the recent memory of man. The renowned Walter Winchell hailed it as one of the best musical shows of the year. John Mason Brown of the New York Post wrote, 'it manages to say serious things lightly and to indict with a song and a smile'. And on March 3rd, 1938, 'Pins and Needles' was put on at the White House for President and Eleanor Roosevelt. Four months after leaving her factory, job, performer Nettie Harari could scarcely believe it.

**Lucie McNeil voicing Nettie Harari's statement** [00:07:57] We weren't actors. We were sewing machine operators, cutters, tailors, dressmakers. It was such an honour. It was like being given an Academy Award.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:08:08] The production was such a success, the union decided to take it on the road, both as a money-maker and as a reward for its hardworking cast, few of whom had travelled anywhere beyond New York. Leaving a replacement cast for the ongoing Broadway production, the original troupe toured major cities across the United States and Canada. Sometimes they attracted protests by those objecting to its anti-fascist, pro-worker politics. In Montreal, the show had to be placed under police protection after a gang of fascists tried to disrupt it for lampooning Hitler and Mussolini. There was no such problem in Vancouver. The first big musical revue to play the city since the start of the Depression, its three performances took place September 19th and 20th, 1938, at the large, now demolished, Empress Theatre at the corner of Gore and East Hastings. The cast was billed as, quote, just plain, simple, common, ordinary, everyday men and women who work hard for their living, unquote. On opening night, a capacity crowd packed the theatre. [crowd sounds] The Vancouver Sun sent its society pages reporter who noted the presence of, quote, a large section of local trades and labour union members who turned out in full force to support this novel theatrical undertaking of their colleagues from South of the line, unquote. There was hardly a dress suit or evening frock in the whole Empress Theatre, the Vancouver Sun added. With many in the audience tilting leftwards, no wonder one of the biggest hits in a show that was full of them was the fun song, 'Doing the Reactionary'.

**Music: 'Doing the Reactionary' performed by the Hudson-DeLange orchestra, featuring Mary McHugh** [00:11:11] Move to the right, doing the reactionary. Close your eyes to where you're bound. And you'll be found, doing the reactionary. All the best dictators do it, millionaires keep steppin' to it, the Four Hundred love to sing it, Ford and Morgan swing it. Hands up high and shake your head. You'll soon see red, doing the reactionary. [instrumental]

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:11:59] Sun reviewer Stanley Bligh was full of praise.

**John Mabbott voicing Stanley Bligh's review** [00:12:07] There is a forcefulness and sincerity in the playing of these young people, which carries conviction. Through the medium of song, dance and sketch, they present the message of the worker. But it is all done with a smile and a gesture.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:12:26] The Vancouver Province singled out three performers and what they used to do. Millie Weitz hemmed dresses. Ruth Rubinstein operated a machine that made brassieres, and Anne Brown worked in a Philadelphia sweater factory for \$15 a week. While on the road, they made \$37.50 a week. The rest of the proceeds went back to the union. Mind you, political theatre wasn't new to the 1930s in Vancouver. Both the Communist Party and the CCF put on plays they hoped would educate people about socialism and their party's platforms. Arthur J. Turner, who represented Vancouver East for the CCF and NDP for 25 years, worked with the South Hills CCF Club to stage an adaptation of the Irish working class classic, 'The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists' and a children's play about monkey rebels and the injustices of capitalism. The mighty Roberts Creek CCF staged, 'You Can't Tell Me' about the importance of unionism. Ideological plays such as these are a rarity today, but 'Pins and Needles' has lived on. After its historic three year run on Broadway, the show was revived off-Broadway in 1978, running for 225 performances. Earlier, to mark the show's 25th anniversary, a studio recording of the score was released in 1962. Among those on the album was a young singer named Barbra Streisand. 'Pins and Needles' was also put on in the UK to good reviews in 2010, and a year later, a social justice group in New York updated the show to incorporate songs from well-known Black singers, Leadbelly and Josh White, that helped the revue explore the African-American experience, which had not been part of the original production. As for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the former ILGWU merged with the Hotel and Restaurant Workers to form a new union called Unite Here. Local 40 of Unite Here is BC's union for hotel and hospitality workers. The changing focus became necessary with the gradual disappearance of hundreds of thousands of jobs in Canada's textile industry, exacerbated by free trade. But for much of the 20th century, the ILGWU was a force to be reckoned with on the shop floor and once, remarkably, on the stage. Looking back in 1978 at the time of 'Pins and Needles' off-Broadway revival, Tom Prideaux of the New York Times wrote:

**John Mabbott voicing Tom Prideaux' New York Times article** [00:15:12] As it went on, it became one of the most romantic episodes in American stage history. It lifted scores of obscure workers into a new world of success. They acquired a sense of importance as if the American Dream machine had gone into mass production.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:15:44] Maybe it's time for an updated production of 'Pins and Needles' here in Vancouver. Thanks as always to the other members of the podcast crew, Bailey Garden and Patricia Wejr. Lucie McNeil was the voice of Nettie Harari. John Mabbott voiced the two excerpts from the newspapers. Donna Sacuta provided the inspiration for this podcast and added research. The rendition of 'Doing the Reactionary' was by the Hudson-DeLange Orchestra, featuring Mary McHugh. This has been yet another look back at one of those union blasts from the past that should be much better known. We hope you enjoyed it. We'll see you next time On the Line. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh.