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**Dramatic
Publishing**

Say Goodnight Gracie

*The Life, Love and Laughter of
George Burns and Gracie Allen*

By

RUPERT HOLMES

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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“*Say Goodnight Gracie* premiered on Broadway at the Helen Hayes Theatre”

Say Goodnight Gracie

CHARACTERS

George Burns

(ETHEREAL MUSIC: as LIGHTING OR CURTAIN GOES UP on a bluish stage filled with fog, very Twilight Zone. From the eerie light emerges GEORGE BURNS in trademark sportcoat and owl glasses)

(Spotlight on George - otherwise black stage)

GEORGE

I think I've finally figured out where I am. No sunlight. No color but gray everywhere you look. Feels like nothing's ever happened here before and nothing ever will.

(nods to himself)

I'm in Buffalo. Or then again I could be in that place called "Limbo." Sort of a waiting room between one life and the next.

(nods)

Still sounds like Buffalo to me.

(sighs)

Oh, God help me.

(MUSIC: GOD FX MUSICAL STING W/ THUNDER. **Flash of lightning)**

GEORGE (Continued)

God?

Ohhhh, God.

I uh, I hope there's no hard feelings about those three movies I made. You know the ones where I played god, God? Good, good. Well that's very nice of you to say that. Well thank you very much. I'm a big fan of yours too. I loved THE TEN COMMANDMENTS. What's that? You want me to audition for you? I'm afraid I can't do that...

(Effect: Enormous lightening **light up proc with lightning more so than previous lightning** Effect and Rumble of Thunder)

Like I said, I'd be happy to audition for you. What did you have in mind? You want me to review my life for you, in my own Words, sort of a command performance, and if it meets with your approval I get to move on up to the big time and I get to see Gracie. what if you *don't* approve?

(beat)

Straight to Buffalo.

GEORGE (Continued)

Well first of all I'm going to need a little show biz
ambiance. I usually work with a piano player, so it'd be
nice to have a little music now and then?

(Music: Gentle music cue)

GEORGE (Continued)

Terrific. Now, I know you've done this before, ...so could
you Let There Be Light?

(Effect: Light Shifts **footlights and lit proc e1.)**

And just like you did in the Garden of Eden, let There Be
People?

(George looks at the audience
as if they had just appeared.
He looks up to God.) **light up
the first 10 rows of tables on
a 3 count**

GEORGE (Continued)

Oh, just like that. Now, why don't you pretend it's the
seventh day and rest. Why don't you sit out in front there.
Well, they'll make room, for God's sake ...

(to audience)

I think we're ready...

Good evening. [optional: Oh, they talk too.]

My name is George Burns. Well, that's not my real name. My
real name is, is, is, uh -- I've been George Burns so long I
don't remember myself. "Birnbaum" "Nathan Birnbaum." That's
me, my friends call me Nattie... **(E2)** I lived for...

One hundred years, forty-nine days, seven hours, and eleven
minutes.

(beat)

My friends would always say to me: "George, may you live to

be a hundred!" Which is a very nice sentiment. Of course now I'm thinking why couldn't they have said a hundred and thirty?

GEORGE (Continued)

One hundred years and most of them in show business. You can only last this long in show business if you have a talent. I discovered early on that I had a great, great talent. So I married her. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

GEORGE (Continued)

I was born the son of Dorothy Bluth and Louis Philip Birnbaum, both from Eastern Europe. They came to this country and settled down right here... (fade E1)

(**IMAGE:** LOWER EAST SIDE
TENEMENTS circa 1900)

GEORGE (Continued)

259 Rivington Street, New York, New York. A tenement located one block away from the intersection of Bowery and Delancey. (Fade image and bring up E3 with fire escape gobos and back to E2) A tenement that housed my mother, my father, me and my eleven brothers and sisters. I keep a list of their names in my pocket here...

(Pulls out list and reads)

Morris, Annie, Isadore, Esther, Sarah, Mamie, Goldie, Sammy, Theresa, (thinks a moment) Theresa? Oh yea. And Willy. So in three rooms with a total of one small window and a skylight you had fourteen people. I remember one evening at supertime, a boy jumped up onto my father's lap. My father said to my mother, "Dassah," -- that's what he called her -- "Dassah, which one is this?" My mother said, "Silly" -- that's what she called him -- "Silly, that's the Steiner's boy." My father said "Oh thank God. I've been gone all day, I thought we had another!"

GEORGE (Continued)

He had a sense of humor, my father. (motions to God) God, I'm sure you must have liked him. He spent his days and nights studying and discussing the Torah. He was very well respected as a Jewish scholar, and there's one thing everybody in my neighborhood knew about Jewish scholars ... they had no money.

GEORGE

My famliy's idea of being rich was the Feingold family. They

lived in the same tenement across from us, but they had lace curtains on their windows. And even their garbage I would see nice things. Then I'd put their garbage in our garbage so people would think we were doing well.

GEORGE (Continued)

Things were tough. But we did have one coal-burning stove which was used for cooking and heating the apartment. Thursday was bath night. My mother would boil up water and that one tub had to take care of us all. It was expensive to heat water. The girls would wash first, oldest to youngest. They'd finish and the boys would wash in the same order. Which was kinda rough on my youngest brother, Willy. He was usually dirtier when he got out of the tub than when he got in. We also had a stray dog who lived with us for a few days, until he found out he'd have to take his bath after Willy, so he left.

GEORGE (Continued)

But my father, my father. I loved my father. I'm sorry to say I have no photographs of my father. He felt that having your picture taken was catering to your ego. That's the kind of man he was. But I do remember a soft gray beard and warm, kindly brown eyes.

GEORGE (Continued)

(E cue light part of SR) One late Saturday afternoon, my father was sitting by the window in the living room, reading one of his religious books. My mother was off in the kitchen, watching the kids dance to an organ grinder down on the street.

(MUSIC: ORGAN GRINDER MUSIC.)

GEORGE (Continued)

My father called out to my mother, "Dassah?" She couldn't hear him because of the music, so I yelled in a louder voice, "Mama ... Papa's calling you." She came in the room and saw that his book had fallen to the floor.

(MUSIC: fades away)

GEORGE (Continued)

He was gone. Gone without warning at forty-seven years of age. I was seven. My mother was alone ... nothing to her name but twelve children.

GEORGE (Continued)

So at the age of seven, I decided to become the bread-winner

for the family. At first I sold newspapers. For every thirty-five I sold, I made seven cents. And I would use that to buy shoe polish and shine shoes. I could only afford one can of black polish, so if a guy had brown shoes ... I'd sell him a newspaper.

GEORGE (Continued)

Then I found I could buy a one hundred pound block of ice for a nickel, drag it back to my neighborhood, break it up into four equal chunks and sell each one of them for a nickel. But every trip from the icehouse I had to go through the toughest part of Little Italy. On the second day, I'm stopped by a gang of older kids and They said "You live around here?". Of course I took that to mean 'Are you Italian?' I said "Yeah sure," then they said "What's your name?" Well, I was a pretty fast thinker. "Enrico Caruso." Then the big kid stuck his face in mine and said, "Are you Catholic?" I said, "Am I Catholic? My father's a priest!!" They never stopped me again.

GEORGE (Continued)

My next job changed my life forever. It was in the basement of Mr. Rosenweig's candy store. There were four of us. Our job was to stir up these four boiling copper vats of chocolate, vanilla, strawberry and lemon syrup. Which was all kinda boring, so we'd find ourselves singing. (E cue light center cyc) The more we stirred, the better we sang.

(MUSIC: three boys singing
barber shop quartet style;
George supplies the fourth
voice.)

PEEWEE TRIO

Sweet Adeline...

GEORGE

Sweet Adeline...

PEEWEE TRIO

My Adeline...

GEORGE & PEEWEE TRIO

*My Adeline... You're the
(slower)
Darling of my heart, Sweet A - De -*

PEEWEE TRIO

Line.....!

GEORGE

*Sweet Adeline, sweet Adeline, sweet Adeline, sweet Adeline,
sweet Adeline... (I loved to sing. -- sings)*

GEORGE (Continued)

We heard applause and looked up and there was a bunch of people watching us from the basement window. They started to throw coins down at us, so we kept singing. (sings) By the end of the day, we had made forty-two cents, which was twice what Rosenweig was paying us. I went upstairs and said, "Mr. Rosenweig, we quit, we're going into show business."

(**IMAGE:** Photo of The Pee Wee Quartet.)

GEORGE (Continued)

(E cue slightly lit proc) We called ourselves The Pee Wee Quartet. That's me on the left, (points to image) right next to John, Paul and Ringo.

(beat)

That's me, Moishe, Morty and his brother Heshy.

(**IMAGE:** Photo of The Pee Wee Quartet fades.)

GEORGE (Continued)

(E cue SR and Center cyc) There was an amateur contest for all the churches in New York, and one small Presbyterian church had nobody in their parish to enter into it, so they asked us to represent them. We said "Yea, Sure." There we were, four Jewish kids singing "Rock of Ages." We came in first. Each one of us won a brand-new Ingersoll watch. I went home to my mother, she was hanging up laundry and said, "Mama, I want to be a Presbyterian." She asked me why. I said, "Because I've been a Jew for eight years and never got anything, I was Presbyterian for three minutes I got a brand new watch." She said, "Help me with the laundry, then you can be a Presbyterian." I helped with the wet laundry, some water got in the watch and it stopped, so I went back to being Jewish.

GEORGE (Continued)

The Quartet broke up, but I kept on singing. (sings) I loved to sing. And I knew right then that I had to be in show business. So the first thing to do was to change my name. All the young stage struck kids were doing that. Around the corner on Henry Street, this boy shared a basement apartment with his aunt. His name was Israel Iskowitz. He'd soon become Eddie Cantor. A couple of doors from him a girl named Fanny Borach has changed her name to Fanny Brice. In the same neighborhood, three brothers: Arthur, Leonard and Julius, otherwise known as Harpo, Chico and Groucho. And a young fellow, Jimmy Durante -- a nosy kid - Jimmy Durante

changed his name to ... Jimmy Durante.

GEORGE (Continued)

So, Birnbaum I shortened to Burns. And "George"? My favorite brother was Izzy. He hated his name so he changed it to "George", I loved Izzy and I figured if George was good enough for him, it was good enough for me. "George Burns"

GEORGE (Continued)

All of us stagestruck kids from the lower East Side, were all hungry for the same thing. Food. The big question was: how can you eat in New York City for under a nickel a day?

(George moves to table and sits)

GEORGE (Continued)

(E cue move cyc SP light) I found I could go to the Automat, pour myself a cup of boiling water... put that water on a table, pour ketchup into it, stir it up with a spoon. And I would have myself tomato soup.

(Drinks water from a mug)

GEORGE (Continued)

But my greatest hunger was to be in Vaudeville. I've would have done anything, and I did. I'd put makeup around my shirt collar so people would think I had just come from a performance. At fourteen I'd smoke a cigar so an agent would see me and think, 'That fourteen year old kid must be going places.' That's how I started with cigars. Back then, I had to make a cigar last three days. I would sing out loud on the streets and people would give me money... to stop.

GEORGE (Continued)

I was so eager to get into show business I'd find myself talking to somebody who might know somebody who someday might become somebody. And whenever I was stopped in the middle of an audition, I always made it a point to say, "Thank you, Thank you for the opportunity." And I always meant it. There were these two fellows I knew down on the Lower East Side: Maxie Reingold and Sidney Solomon. They went into vaudeville and Reingold and Solomon became Ryan and Sullivan. They didn't get along too well, so when they split up, Ryan said to me, "You want to be Sullivan?" I said, "Sure, I'm Sullivan" so I went to work with Ryan. Meanwhile, the *real* Sullivan, the one named Solomon, he got himself a new partner, and called him Ryan. Now you've got two of us out there doing the same act, you've got a Ryan and Sullivan and a Sullivan and Ryan. We split up again and we all get new partners. Then those partners split up. Before long you've had Ryan and Sullivan, Sullivan and Ryan, Ryan and Ryan, Sullivan and Sullivan, the Ryan boys and the Sullivan Brothers. Pretty soon everybody on the lower East Side was

named Ryan or Sullivan. Except this one kid, Hymie Goldberg. He moved. He said he was afraid to live in an Irish neighborhood.

Ecue lights out except proc light (IMAGE & MUSIC: We see images of various theatres. George sits at table and lites His cigar.)

GEORGE (Continued)

It was the height of vaudeville and every town in America had its own theater ...

(IMAGE & MUSIC: Fade away)

GEORGE (Continued)

That meant there was a constant need for talent and new names. So I gave them that. Not the talent. The new names. **(Showbiz type of gobo E cue Center cyc and low intensity footlights)** Because whether I was singing or dancing, doing a single, doing a double, whatever I did, just wasn't clicking -- all I could do was to keep changing my name. So, for awhile I was Brown of Brown and Williams. Then I was Williams of Brown and Williams. Jed Jackson of Jackson and Malone, Tom Harris of Harris and Kelly, Jack Baxter of Baxter and Bates and Pedro Lopez of Lopez and Conchita; one night I was Conchita. I knew this one fellow, Willie Delite. He decided to quit the business. He still had nine hundred business cards left over, he sold them to me for two bucks. As long as they lasted, I was Willie Delite. When I ran out of them, I went back to my real name: Harry O'Connor.

GEORGE (Continued)

For a while I was half of a trained seal act called Flipper and Friend. I had to feed Flipper twenty or thirty fish at every performance, four or five times a day, and I had to keep the fish in my jacket pocket. It was my only jacket. At the end of the day I couldn't get a single girl to go out with me. Except for this one gal, Trixie Jones. She had a trained cat named Whiskers. We went out together and had a terrific time. She was all over me. Not Trixie, Whiskers.

GEORGE (Continued)

I sang, I danced, I did impressions. It never occurred to me to try comedy. My friends would always tell me that I was very funny off-stage, but the things that made me laugh I just couldn't seem to translate into something you could perform. Like this character I knew named Manny Sperber. He

owned a restaurant called Wenig and Sperber's on Forty-Sixth Street. One busy lunch time, a customer asked him where the men's room was. He said, *"Please I've only got two hands."*

GEORGE (Continued)

Let me run that by you one more time. During a busy lunch time, a customer asked him where the men's room was. He said, *"Please I've only got two hands."*

GEORGE (Continued)

My kind of humor ... Apparently not your kind of humor ... "illogical logic" I called it. Like the grocer who told me the eggs he sold were so big it only took eight of them to make a dozen. I loved that way of looking at things, but -- what to do with it? What to do with it?

GEORGE (Continued)

So for fifteen years, I was a third-rate song and dance man working in second-rate vaudeville theatres. It's nineteen twenty-three and I'm doing a pretty lousy act with a pretty decent fellow named Billy Lorraine. We decided to split up -- no hard feelings, it just wasn't working out. Not for him, not for me, not for us.

GEORGE (Continued)

By now I'm thirty and running out of things to flop at. So, I'm thinking if I could get laughs singing and dancing, why not try to get laughs intentionally. So I write a piece of material. A boy-girl routine, in those days it was called a "flirtation act," and in this routine I incorporated some of this "illogical logic." I figured I'd pick up a partner somewhere.

GEORGE (Continued)

Well, at the time there was an act called Rena Arnold And Company. They did a cornball comedy routine... hokey stuff, real slapstick. Rena Arnold, just like Billy Lorraine and myself, was working in a small-time vaudeville theater in Union City, New Jersey. She had two young Irish girls working as her stooges. It seems that one of the gals was having a tough time with the physical comedy -- she was only seventeen, she weighed a hundred pounds, she was five feet tall - Well, this little slip of a thing let it be known that she was hoping to find a partner to team up with. Well, Rena Arnold knew that Billy Lorraine and I were splitting up, so she told the girl, she said, "Try to team up with Billy Lorraine. He's the real talent of the two."

GEORGE (Continued)

So I'm hanging around backstage after our last show and I'm approached by this petite Irish girl. She had long lustrous hair, with natural curls that spun down over her shoulders. Her skin was that Irish peach-bloom, hardly any makeup, no

lipstick. I looked down at her and I'm thinking I wanna say something smart, something clever, something sophisticated. So I came up with: "Hello." She looked up at me and said, "I understand you're looking for a new partner."

GEORGE (Continued)

Her voice, her voice was unforgettable. Unforgettable. Like a little bird's. The kind of voice that would carry all the way to the last row of a crowded theater without ever having to be raised. I remember looking down into her eyes: one was green, the other blue. I thought, what a lovely girl this is. (EC out with all lights but proc)

(MUSIC & IMAGE: soft, tender version of LOVE NEST. Images of the young Gracie.)

GEORGE (Continued)

Her name was Grace Ethel Cecile Rosalie Allen. Born and raised in San Francisco. She was youngest of five Irish-Catholic children. Their father was a clog dancer in Vaudeville and they were all part of the act. (E cue restore center cyc) Gracie made her debut on the stage when she was just three years old doing an Irish jig and hadn't been off the stage ever since.

(MUSIC & IMAGE: Fade away)

GEORGE (Continued)

I said that yes, indeed, it was true that the team of Billy Lorraine and George Burns was splitting up. And as far as the future goes, we could talk about it over lunch the next day at Manny Sperber's restaurant, right next to the Palace Theater.

GEORGE

She agreed, and as she turned to leave, she said: "It was very nice to have met you, Mister Lorraine."

GEORGE (Continued)

It was winter. I put on a snappy scarf and my best coat ... which also happened to be my only coat, and a very dapper-looking fedora ... (E Cue SR gobo of restaurant window horizontal SR cyc) and I sat in the restaurant and I waited for her.

(He sits at a table, sips a glass of water, looks up and rises in gentlemanly fashion.)

GEORGE (Continued)

Good Afternoon, Miss Allen. You look very nice. That is, if you'd call the Mona Lisa a very nice painting. I'd offer to take your coat but you might want to keep it on. You see, Mr. Sperber, the owner -- that's him over there -- he doesn't turn the heat up until the third of February. You see that ice in my glass of water? It wasn't there when he put it on the table. Oh you have a nice laugh. Won't you sit down please. There we are.

(Mimes: pulling out a chair for Gracie opposite where he's sitting, then resumes his seat himself.)

GEORGE (Continued)

This man Sperber is quite a character, that's one of the reasons I like to come here. He only remembers his last conversation, so if you ask him something, he gives you the answer to his last customer's question. Like when I came in, I asked him if Miss Allen had shown up yet. He said, "*Look under the table, maybe it fell down.*" Now if someone asks him what today's soup is, he'll say, "*No lady here by that name.*"

GEORGE (Continued)

I'm glad you find that funny. Maybe you'll find my material funny. I left it out for you to look at.

(Mimes: from his inner coat pocket, he produces a folded page and places it in front of "her.")

GEORGE (Continued)

Uh -- I'm afraid my handwriting isn't very good. Actually, I was very smart in school though. I was so smart my teacher stayed with me in the same class for five years.

(beat)

I love your laugh.

GEORGE

Now, in this routine we're out on a date and I play this dizzy character. And You say to me, "*Why do you brush your teeth with gunpowder?*" And I say "Because I like to shoot my mouth off." Are all the jokes like that? No, they're probably not all that good. You take it home and look it over.

GEORGE (Continued)

In the meantime I've got a booking for us if we want next