

The First Wave of Greek Vaudevillians

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Part 1 The commanding presence of Greek immigrants during the very formation of Modern American Entertainment is well documented. As promoters Greek immigrants were among the most influential individuals in an incredibly wide array of entertainment arenas such as dance halls, nickelodeons, music halls, carnivals, and certainly vaudeville and movie theaters. Leaving the promoters aside, for the moment, we need to begin re-locating and re-assessing the careers of Greek immigrant performers. The impact Greek immigrant performers had on American entertainment, again while documented, is for the moment hopelessly scattered. Part of the problem is that entertainment genres in the late 1800s and early 1900s were not defined as they are today. The blurring of various genres allowed for performers to move across and among various performative settings we would today see as totally separate. All this back and forth traffic makes locating and comparing documents on specific individuals all the more challenging. Take the Greek Strongmen, who began appearing all across North America immediately after the American Civil War, they were especially prone to crossing entertainment boundaries. Strongmen such as George Costaky, Demetrios Tofalos, Nicholas Protopapas, Antoni Pierre, the Combis Brothers and a host of others were a common feature of circuses, carnivals, vaudeville houses, music halls and sporting clubs around the nation. These strongmen would wrestle in sports clubs, music halls and other venues, then without a moment's pause, these same individuals became the starring figures of the circus, carnival and midway. Next, these very same men would also appear on the stages of music halls and large theatres to not only wrestle but also perform in vaudeville acts involving strength and/or acrobatics. Various accounts even report that on one notable occasion Demetrios Tofalos sang and was heartily applauded. Part of this effortless movement between what we see today as distinctly separate genres had to do with the times. Greek immigrants as promoters and performers were right there as American entertainment evolved into their present forms. As a case in point North American vaudeville: "was a genre of variety entertainment prevalent on the stage in the United States and Canada, from the early 1880s until the early 1930s. Developing from many sources, including the concert saloon, minstrelsy, freak shows, dime museums, and literary burlesque, vaudeville became one of the most popular types of entertainment in North America. Each evening's bill of performance was made up of a series of separate, unrelated acts. Types of acts included (among others) musicians (both classical and popular), dancers, comedians, trained animals, magicians, female and male impersonators, acrobats, one-act plays or scenes from plays, athletes, lecturing celebrities, minstrels, and short movies (wikipedia.com)." A caveat. I am arbitrarily dividing Greek immigrant performers from the first generation of Greek-American vaudevillians. Internationally recognized performers such as the Andrews Sisters, the Condos Brothers, Hermes Pan, Betty George and numerous others make up what might be called the second or even third wave of Greek entertainers in North America. Demarcating the chronological gradations of Greek performers (and promoters) in American entertainment forms is an extended project for future researchers to delineate. Our survey, here, can begin with a most unusual clown at Ringling Brother's Circus (and many other venues) that is always identified as only "Monsieur Natalie, the Greek clown." From 1883 to some time after 1895 Natalie toured the country with his trained Arkansas razorback pigs. In 1895, Natalie's troupe of hogs included "Domino,

Frisco, Cinch, Pedro, and Keno (Hayward Review May 3, 1895).” Bowing to the audience on bent forelegs when they all first entered the ring was only the beginning. A comedic exchange between Monsieur Natalie and the porkers was accompanied by singing, kisses, and answering questions from the audience. Taking turns nudging the good Monsieur in his derriere with their long snouts ended this part of the act. After some more slap-stick doings the act closed with an amazing synchronized bedlam of jumps and dashing all-out-runs over an elaborate series of hoops, sticks and drums. A persistent rumor among Greek Americans centers on Hadjiatis Yannaco. Known as “Long Tom,” this Greek was one of the group of Hellenes the US Army brought to the American southwest in the 1850s as part of the military’s experiment with camels as dray-animals. As this story goes Long Tom took some of the camels, in lue of pay, and then joined the Ringling Brothers circus. Furthermore, as this tale continues Long Tom and his string of camels are credited as being ‘the first camel act’ in an American circus. While I have heard this story over and over and seen it printed dozens of time I have never seen or heard this act described. At least three Greek magicians annually toured the nation and there certainly may be many more. Costa Economou performed as a magician under the stage name of “LaVier.” Both the late Professor Theodore Saloutos as well as the late Steven G. Economou, M.D. (nephew of this magician) have written about this performer. Yet another Greek immigrant, George Canaris performed magic under both the titles ‘Canaris the Great’ and ‘Canaris and Cleo’ from the early 1900s well into the late 1920s. By all accounts comedy, in the form of “clever burlesque magic” was the act’s keynote theme. Canaris’ billing suggests that when he first arrived from Europe and touted itself as offering “Parisian Magic” (Colorado Springs Gazette January 16, 1915). Canaris toured the country appearing in vaudeville houses in towns such as Fitchburg and Lowell, Massachusetts, Portsmouth, Ohio and many others. In New York City, Canaris and Cleo appeared at Proctor’s East 125th Street Theatre (New York Times March 1, 1914). Available reviews are consistently good: “Canaris, a Greek magician, and Cleo are uncommonly good;” “Canaris, the Greek magician is easily one of the foremost of magicians...his act closes with...some of the best legerdemain ever seen in a local theatre” and so on. From 1915 through 1934, news accounts from across the United States proclaim Professor Avdalas as the Famous Greek Magician. Never a small act Avdalas appeared with a minimum of ten assistants, known as his “Original Hindu Company.” Playing on the early 1900s, preoccupation with Oriental themes (which was a confusion of Egyptian, Arabic and India tales and popular culture stereotypes) Avdalas’ individual tricks, within his overall act, included The Cremation, The French Spy, The Human Suspension Bridge, The Rajahs Enchanted Chest “and fifty other new and baffling effects (Iowa City Citizen September 30, 1919).” Professor Avdalas always closed his performance with his most renowned illusion the fabled Talking Tea Kettle (Sheboygan Journal April 12, 1919). Referred to as the Eight Wonder of the World, news reports on the Talking Tea Kettle were unanimous: “Among the many and new mysterious features of the Great Avdalas world magic show is his “Talking Tea Kettle,” which is pronounced the most mystifying and sensational mental telepathy act before the public. “The Kettle” answers without hesitation and with absolute accuracy any and all proper questions submitted by the audience. Reads your thoughts, gives advice and offers many valuable suggestions. The most puzzling and astounding feat ever presented successfully by any magician at any time (Iowa Citizen September 30, 1919).” Now long-forgotten the Talking Tea Kettle was a national sensation. Along with other mystifying tricks of the era the Kettle was cited by Spiritualists as proof that the Spirit World Could Contact Us at Will! None other than Harry Houdini (1874-1926), arguably among the greatest American magicians of all time, wrote an article reporting that the Kettle worked by an early

form of radio. Unfortunately this very controversy has obscured the life and career of the 'Famous Greek Magician' known as Professor Avdalas. David Phelps Abbott (1836-1934) is credited as the inventor of this trick. As any of you that have seen the recent movie on magicians of the 1880s to 1890s, *The Prestige*, will recall, the very intimate back-and-forth exchange between inventors and magicians was quite common. It is perhaps difficult, from this point in history, to comprehend exactly how astounding Professor Avdalas' Talking Tea Kettle was for American audiences. Always a top-billed act Avdalas The Great can be seen in advertisement-after-advertisement oppose such performers then appearing at other local venues such as stage actor John Barrymore and film actors as Claudette Colbert, Frederick March, Laurel and Hardy and others of similar stature. From the very beginning of his performances in North America it was common for the arrival of Professor Avdalas "and His Wonderful Talking Tea Kettle" to replace or interrupt ongoing performances. To cite but one advertisement it reports the good Professor's arrival replaced a popular movie serial episode: "Owing to the engagement of Professor Avdalas, the kind of illusionists, we have postponed the 7th episode of "The Diamond from the Sky" to next Tuesday (Racine Journal-News June 29, 1915)." Clearly, more specific details need to be teased out of the historical record on Greek immigrant performers.