

There's a Sucker Born Every Minute
by Bill Anschell

"Okay, go!" the stage manager would say, giving me a quick shove. A former singer/dancer, she had retained both her lithe figure and a continuing appetite for diet pills. The pills didn't relax her. "Pianist taking the stage!" she'd yell into her walkie-talkie, and I would commence the charade that was my nightly torment. Admittedly, I sometimes felt a small glow of self-importance—my whereabouts in time and space actually mattered to these theater professionals—but it was far outweighed by my sense of the ludicrous.

First, there was my outfit, a voluminous costume bequeathed me by the bloated alcoholic burnouts who were my predecessors. The brightly striped shirt was sized between extra large and circus tent, and the broad-brimmed hat threatened to slide noseward and send me into darkness. My stroll across the stage was pure self-consciousness, one foot in front of the other, as an aspiring jazz pianist, whose one wish was to be heard rather than seen, tried not to stumble in the blinding spotlight.

I would clumsily thread my way through the set's obstacle course, my sights set on the theater's decaying embarrassment to Steinway and Sons. The piano and bench were crowded onto a metal platform immediately abutting the stage. The platform extended up about 14 feet from the orchestra pit, to which it would slowly descend while I played. The back of the platform had a ridge about an inch high—the only barrier preventing the bench from toppling over backward and sending me to a premature *fine*.

Reaching the piano, I'd grab its lid for balance and squeeze myself between the keys and the bench. Then, using the back of my legs, I'd push the bench until it was flush against the ridge. This would afford me just enough room to sit down and prop my feet against the pedals, the piano nearly in my lap.

It was from this position that I would tackle the Barnum Overture, an unpleasant work originally written for *two* pianos to be played by *two* classically trained pianists. Both of these artists would be used to playing written music, and they'd also have certain enviable amenities: a stationary stage, sensible clothing, a minimum of one inch between their elbows and their ribs, and reasonable lighting. I had none of these advantages, and the spotlight still blinded me as I awaited my cue to begin this ragtime nightmare. Taking a deep breath, I'd position my hands for

their initial assault and attempt to ignore mental images of a dangerous and humiliating backflip before 500 witnesses....

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