

The House of Ushers

BY CONSTANCE ADLER

With a flashlight and a prayer, the Academy of Music's ushers are the working stiffs of high art.



UPSTAIRS AT ONE end of the Family Circle there stands a critic, Gerald Cassidy—Cassidy the cop. At night he comes to the Academy of Music, puts on his maroon jacket, a black bow tie and shiny shoes, and, as he has done for the past 17 years, begins by ushering the music-lovers to their seats. Then he leans against the wall and listens.

"I love to hear the Orchestra, especially when Mehta is conducting. I like the way he does Mahler—he does it much better than Muti, personally. I think I got used to the smoothness of Ormandy, and Mehta has that same feel. Muti is to me too brash and eccentric. And he's too egotistical. You can tell that by the density of his music. You know, he has his own reception room, different from the one the other conductors use, which I don't understand. He wants to be able to say, 'This is mine. Not passed on to me from Ormandy.' What's wrong with the other reception room? Air conditioned and everything. . . ."

Cassidy stands with his arms folded across his chest throughout the concert. He is a slight, wiry man with watery blue eyes who knows what he likes and doesn't hesitate to offer an opinion. Tonight's program is less than appetizing by his standards—the Philly Pops playing "A Holiday Musical Preview." So he prefers to talk about the night before, when the home team played.

"Muti doesn't make the sound of the Orchestra blend the way Ormandy did—the way an orchestra is supposed to sound, I think. These young guys have a vigor, all right, but they don't have Ormandy's delicateness and tenderness. He could do what they can do, but they can't do what he did. It's like the difference between a young man being in a hurry all the time, and an old man who goes at a slower pace but gets to the same place. . . . Everybody seems to love Muti, though. He has a romantic way about him. Maybe it's his youth. And Ormandy picked Muti after all. Maybe he was like him when he was a young man."

A good usher has to be knowledgeable about whatever is going on at the Academy. But A. Marc Scuncio, the head usher, advises his troops that if a patron asks for an assessment of a performance that cannot honestly be called good, they should say only that it's *interesting*. "You can't tell them it's lousy," Scuncio warns. "You have to be guarded with these people, because they take what we say as gospel."

An usher's life is clearly not all symphonic bliss. Any given evening can bring a crisis of conscience—a choice between telling the harsh truth and following the usher's strict code of courteous conduct. Nightly they juggle the often contradictory duties thrust upon them, for they must be all things to all people: guardians of high culture, on-the-spot arbiters of taste, and obedient servants to the greats, the near-greats and the adoring throngs. Both an honor and a burden, ushering at the Academy of Music is not a job for the weak of spirit.

AT FIVE MINUTES PAST 7 o'clock, only a few of the ushers have arrived. Marc Scuncio's face bears its customary expression of displeasure, regardless of the time. By day he's a mild-mannered Spanish teacher, but by night, this diminutive, meticulous man becomes the backbone of the Academy of Music. For the past

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RENE JACOBS

EXTREMES



Earliest snowfall: 2.1 inches, October 10th, 1979.

Latest snowfall: One-tenth of an inch, April 27th, 1967.

Highest winds: Gusts from the south at 94 mph during Hurricane Hazel, October 15th, 1954.

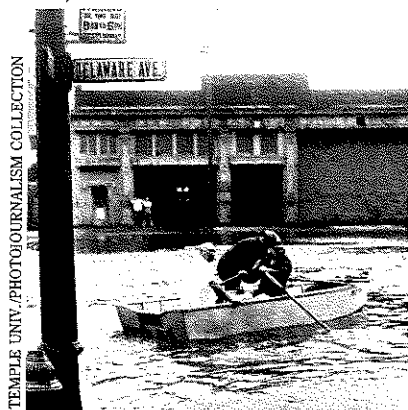


Warmest winter day: Average of 66 degrees, February 25th, 1930.

Coldest summer day: Average of 48 degrees, June 2nd, 1907.

Record high: 106 degrees, August 7th, 1918.

Record low: 11 below zero, February 9th, 1934.



Most rain: 7.32 inches fell on August 13th, 1873.

Most snow: 21.3 inches fell during a storm that started on February 11th, 1983 and ended on the 12th.



Worst heat wave: 13 straight days of 90 degrees or higher, August 24th to September 5th, 1953.

Worst cold spell: 16 straight days of 32 degrees or lower, in 1885, 1934, 1978 and 1979.

—Robert Marchesani

ages of nearby storms; others will assemble before your eyes an entire old-fashioned weather map with isobars slithering over, say, the northeastern U.S. The pegboard walls are lined with clipboards that are being filled with just-off-the-telecopier maps by skittering messengers. One wall is covered with tags representing each of Accu-Weather's customers, and somebody is responsible in all this confusion for posting the bad news in accordance with the client's needs. The board has plenty of business on this snowy day.

And now the gang at Accu-Weather, which still can't *do* anything about the weather, is going to talk about it.

"Well, the overall position is straight change," says Clark, pointing up at the mass of data posted on the wall behind him. "There's a whole series of storms in the Pacific rolling eastward, and what they're doing is chopping down the high-pressure ridges in between so that the ridges are non-existent. This is going to make forecasting in the West very difficult. The computer models are doing a horrible job. Yesterday, they were 12 hours too fast [in their estimate of when weather systems would hit]."

Now Clark is ranging eastward over the continent, updating the situation since the past few days and issuing an occasional caution to forecasters. "We have high-temperature forecast problems in the Plains. You might not want to say 'colder'; try 'less mild' or 'chillier.' . . . This high will build rapidly east in the next few days. . . . Nice, warm, southerly flow. . . . I think the central and southern Plains will stay dry, but north of there there could be a problem. . . . This cold front will drop innocently southward. . . . Fortunately, in the East we don't have to worry, we have a very strong low near Cincinnati now—should be on the Eastern Shore tomorrow. . . . Cloudiness is starting to bubble up."

Though Myers's main function is administrative these days—it's a family-dominated firm, brother Barry being general counsel and other brother Evan senior vice-president—he likes to attend these strategy sessions; when he does, there is little question, despite the collegial atmosphere, whose brainchild this place is. "The way I see it," Myers begins his machine-gun delivery, "there's a very strong max moving east—it doesn't hit New England, it's south of New England. . . . So the question is, how much snow are Baltimore and Washington going to get? . . . Philadelphia, the most likely amount, if I have to guess, two-and-a-half. Say one to three.

"Further east, there'll be more. I realize these systems haven't behaved so far, but I'd pull the trigger on this—say three to six. The thing I like about it is a lot of cyclonic curvature—you didn't see that on the previous one. New York City,

I'd say two to three, maybe three to four."

In this consensus system, however, Myers's word isn't law. All the eager young forecasters around him have the same first-name relationship with the weather, and they can't wait to jump in.

"I see a good thermal gradient," says a heavily bearded forecaster.

"There should be more in Jersey," interjects another. "The air is so cold that the water will help the snow instead of turning it into rain."

"Who's to say this vorticity doesn't just slide off the coast?"

Essentially, they are all grappling with the same questions: How strong are the pieces of the storm going to get, how much snow is going to fall, and where?

"Well, let's get at it and try to get it out by two," Myers says.

"We have a lot of variables still out there," Abrams cautions. "The next few hours are going to tell the tale. Since drive-time is what's important, why not just give it some time to develop?"

"I disagree," Myers replies. "I want the most accurate forecast every minute."

The meteorologists, half of them former students of Myers's, don't look surprised by this edict. The big session breaks up and they drift off to their work stations. Closer to drive-time, seven of the meteorologists will go off by themselves into soundproof booths and turn into broadcasters.

ELLIOT ABRAMS, THE city's main weather voice, looks like he was born in his radio booth instead of in Philadelphia in 1947. His comfort is understandable, for Abrams has had only one career goal in his life, and it is to sit behind this microphone and tell all his electronically-connected friends what the old atmosphere is going to be doing in the next day or so. He has wanted to do this at least since he was 5 years old, when his father, a chemist, built him a barometer. Even his father got concerned when little Elliot would sit for hours watching snow fall. "You can see the snow on the ground," Abrams recalls his father saying. "Why watch it in the air?" At Central High School, the Future Meteorologists of America never had a truer believer, and Abrams was off to pursue a bachelor's and master's at Penn State—one of the nation's important meteorology schools—where he fell easily enough under the influence of professor Joel Myers.

A veteran of the same sort of boyhood fascination with the moving air around him, Myers had by then already launched what would become Accu-Weather. The first client, in 1962, was the old Central Pennsylvania Gas Co., which paid \$50 a month for localized predictions that Myers called

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THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE BLAZER: That includes several actual family members, including the three-generation-strong Cassidys, front and center.



Susan Messina takes pause on the main floor.

40 years, Scuncio has walked into the Academy at 6:30 every night of the week and taken command. Only by maintaining a steely eye over his wayward charges can he keep up the Academy's standard of excellence—a standard that was set on January 26th, 1857, when patrons were successfully ushered into their seats in time to hear the first performance at the Academy, *Il Trovatore*. Scuncio's not about to let anyone miss the opening bars of Peter Nero and the Philly Pops' rendition of "Winter Wonderland" tonight. Unflagging vigilance. That's what has made the Academy of Music great.

By 7:15, most of the ushers have congregated in front of Scuncio's office to get their assignments and find out what's on the program tonight. The pay is \$24 a performance for all, veterans and supernumeraries alike. Supernumeraries are the rawest recruits—ushers-in-training—and the lowest of the low. While there are no contracts and no union, there is a clear hierarchy. Seniority counts heavily in the politics of ushering.

More than half the ushers have been there at least ten years, and many have been there 20 or more. There are also a few second- and third-generation ush-

"We can't let a patron in late. We'll bar the door with our bodies first."

ers. In fact, it is extremely difficult to get a job ushering *unless* you inherit the position, or Scuncio knows your mother very well. He doesn't like to hire strangers.

The doors of the Academy open to the public at 7:20 for an 8 p.m. performance. Scuncio dispatches his people with a portentous, "All right, ladies and gentlemen, it's time to get to work." And they're off to greet the patrons.

Jerry Lenard, a basso profundo of an usher, moves to his position. During the day he is an executive for IBM. In the evenings he takes tickets at the front doors, a choice post. He started as an usher when he was 23—"because I was poor, and I loved opera"—and over the past 19 years he has earned the privilege of being the first smiling face that patrons meet.

"It's a great job because you're dealing with the public, and you never know what's going to happen next. Oh, but they can get nasty sometimes. Like when we don't let them take their seats after a performance has started. That is definitely a big no-no."

The duty of the ushers is not as uncomplicated as it may seem. Their job is to make everyone happy, both patrons and performers. At times, this means keeping them away from each other. Academy law has it that no door leading into the auditorium may open once the conductor has assumed the podium and raised his baton. To allow this would disturb the musicians and the patrons who got there early enough to sit down before the music started. So the usher on duty occasionally must force latecomers to wait in the lobby for as long as 40 minutes, until the next break in the program,

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Pat Curran (left) and Caroline Goberman (below): As solicitous as the usher's code demands.



Marc Scuncio grins in his lair (left) and Elizabeth Suppa (below) gets what she deserves.



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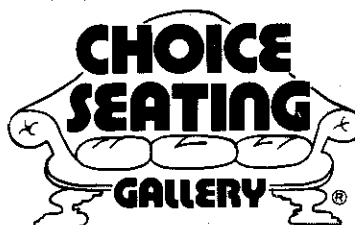
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before he shows them to their \$30 seats. "Oh, do they get mad sometimes," Lenard goes on. "We just can't let them in. We'll bar the door with our bodies first. We'll do whatever we have to . . . short of being physically abused by a patron."

And has that ever happened?

"Oh yeah, ushers have been hit. It happens when you get someone who's really gonna be implacable."

Then you let them in, right?

"Nope. Not even then."

Even if they hit you?

Jerry Lenard pauses a moment to mull over his dedication to the Academy's ideals—to the usher's manifesto of unflinching vigilance. He shakes his head slowly.

"No. Still not even then."

Lenard turns to his work: taking tickets and being jovial. The smile is a must. This

He sees the woman's tickets are for this date, but something's not quite right. Then he realizes that they are for Carnegie Hall, where the Orchestra happens to be performing on this night. "Where should I go?" she asks. "Lady," he says, pointing, "the turnpike's that way."

task is more than just ripping small pieces of paper in half. The ushers are ambassadors from the Academy, the official welcoming committee—often the first and last people the patrons see on this leg of their big night out on the town. So he has to be a gracious host. He also has to know what he's doing. Lenard often reaches nimbly into strange pockets and wallets to help speed things along. If he sees some well-intentioned but confused patron rummaging in the wrong side of her purse in search of a ticket he can plainly see in the other, it's just easier and faster to reach in and take it, smile, say *thankyouverymuchenjoytheperformance*, and send her on.

The thing he likes most about his job is getting to know the regulars—especially the troublesome ones.

"You *know* they have a subscription. . . . You recognize them. . . . You

could even say exactly where their seat is. . . . But they *always* forget their ticket. . . . It's really nice getting to know them. . . . You see them every week. . . . And if you miss one night, the next week they want to know where you were."

Lenard's partner in ticket-taking, Cornell Woods, who stands on the other side of the doors, used to work in the Amphitheater, where the weather and the patrons are noticeably warmer. But after three years there he was promoted downstairs—with mixed emotions.

"Opera nights are hard. They sometimes ask me questions that I don't know the answer to, and then they get mad. So I turn them over to Jerry. He's the opera man. See, I'm more into rock, myself. But I'm getting used to this stuff."

Woods stops talking for a minute and stares at the tickets a woman has just handed him. He sees that they are for this date, but something isn't quite right. Then he realizes that these are tickets for Carnegie Hall, where the Philadelphia Orchestra is performing tonight. He starts to laugh and the woman, bewildered, asks him where she is supposed to go. Cornell Woods points outside and says, "Lady, the turnpike's that way."

Just as the chimes signal the concert is about to begin, a beautiful, white-haired woman hurries in and greets Lenard effusively. They clasp hands warmly and exchange shivery remarks about the weather. Then she and her pink-cheeked escort rush to their seats. Lenard waves cheerily at their backs as they disappear through the closing door. "Connie Pew. Mrs. George Pew," he reports with significant emphasis. "*Sun Oil.*"

NOW THAT THE PATRONS have been safely tucked away without mishap, the ushers can relax until the intermission. During the performance, Marc Scuncio lurks in his cramped office, which is crammed with Academia: overflowing filing cabinets, half a birthday cake, posters, programs—many of them signed by artists. He offers a tray of tiny roast beef sandwiches left over from a party. In the corner of the ceiling is the ubiquitous small brown speaker, which broadcasts the performance into even the most remote reaches of the Academy. Scuncio grades his high school students' papers when he's not making his rounds to see that his ushers aren't asleep on the watch.

"I like this job because it changes constantly. I, of course, speak four languages, so that helps break the ice a little backstage with the artists. I'm inclined to the opera. I'm a buff, and I have among my friends some of the greatest opera stars in the world. Tebaldi, Corelli, Cabrini, Pavarotti, Domingo. And I see to all their



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own special needs." To illustrate, he points to the bottle of mineral water that he keeps on hand for Pavarotti, who favors the stuff when he's in town. Then Scuncio ceremoniously unlocks a closet to reveal the special chair and pile of brown corduroy cushions reserved for the big tenor himself. Nor is Scuncio shy about showing off his autograph collection. He opens a small bound book of blank pages, many of which are filled with the signatures of such greats as Marcel Marceau and Hermione Gingold.

"This is the real fascination of my job," he murmurs, as he skims through the book.

Scuncio, like most veteran ushers, has a protective attitude toward the artists, whom he views as rather fragile.

"My primary interest is to make sure there are no disruptions in their lives while they are here in *my* theater."

Not to be outdone, Lenard confesses modestly, "I have run interference for Mr. Pavarotti. You know, when these patrons hound an artist, they just form a circle around him. And once Mr. P. had to get through the house by walking behind me with his hands on my shoulders. No words were exchanged. He just grabbed me. I knew what to do, and we plowed right through."

Ushers are not only there to be battering rams, or the walls of a fortress to protect the artists from their public. They see themselves more as hosts who enjoy a cordial acquaintance with some of the greatest musical geniuses in the world.

*An usher's memories:
"I believe the
gentleman she was with
was the other woman's
husband. Words went.
Then she kicked her in
the shin and called her
a lot of dirty, bad
names."*

"The artists we get to know here are pretty regular," Lenard lets on. "The unsociable ones I will not mention for obvious reasons. Pavarotti is *very* sociable. Muti . . . now, there's a man who hates to be fawned on. Some of the conductors like it. You know, the big stars. But not him. Hates it."

Discussion of the artists is a favorite pastime for the ushers, and comparisons among them are inevitable—especially when it comes to the question of the Philadelphia Sound. Scuncio has lived through the reign of Ormandy, and now views Muti with a mixture of respect and circumspection. One the old master, the other the young brash student taking over where the elder left off—hand-picked but altogether different.

"I probably shouldn't say this," Scuncio opines, "but Mr. Muti is more severe in his style of working. Mr. Ormandy did it by cajoling and friendship, and Mr. Muti simply says, 'This is the way it's going to be, gentlemen. Let me show you.' And then he may go ahead and hum, tap or whistle the music. Or play it on one of several instruments.

"I watched him conduct *Rigoletto* once. He knew every word, every turn, every syllable, every note. That's how he gets you to understand what he's doing. After being here forty years, I have come to appreciate what Mr. Ormandy did, which was build the orchestra to the status of being number one. And now, Mr. Muti keeps it there."

WHEN CASSIDY the cop isn't losing him-

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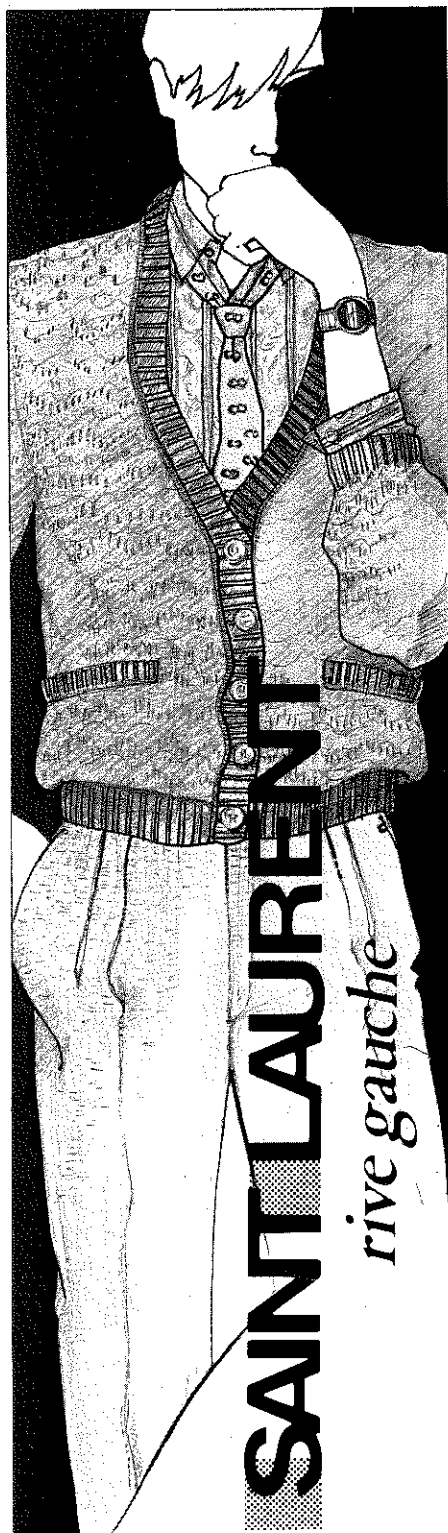
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self in the music, he's observing life in the Family Circle, which is decidedly more exciting than on the floors below. Other ushers rarely witness anything as exciting as, say, the time one woman attacked another at Cassidy's feet, right on the cabbage rose-carpeted floor.

"I believe the gentleman she was with was the other one's husband. Words went. Then she kicked her in the shin and called her a lot of dirty, bad names. I just stood and watched. I knew better than to get mixed up in something like that. It broke up pretty quick."

It's hard to tell if the most unusual things actually happen in the Family Circle, or if the ushers there just tell the best stories—everything from rampaging Moonies to the nosebleeds they get mostly up in the Amphitheatre, from rushing up the stairs too fast. In either case, no one like the Friday Afternoon Phantom shows up

The Friday Afternoon Phantom is an elderly woman who often stands during a concert to help the conductor lead the Orchestra. As she leaves, she takes out her teeth and kisses everyone in her row. "Oh, she's a pip all right," says an usher.

anywhere else but the Family Circle. Mike Messina has just finished herding an unruly band of high school kids back into the concert they have been forced to attend. Finally having shut them into their seats, he sinks onto a red velvet chair, his clip-on bow tie dangling from one lapel, and launches into the saga of the Phantom, an elderly woman who has a subscription to the Friday afternoon concert series. She sits in the middle of the center row, wears scarlet gloves and an enormous brimmed hat, and often stands to help the conductor lead the orchestra. Then, when she decides to leave in the middle of the concert, she takes out her teeth and kisses everyone in her row as she goes out. "Oh, she's a pip all right," Messina says.

"We've done it all, I imagine. Above and beyond, as they say. Once the Orchestra was playing a polka, and this lady comes out and wants to dance. So she grabs me. Now, I don't know how to polka, but I did it anyway."

USHERS MOVE through the ranks slowly and painstakingly. They begin at the most lowly grade, Temporary Usher Class I. From there they move through Temporary Usher Class II to Responsible Usher to Permanent Usher Class I. Finally, "after ten years of satisfactory service and good attendance," they reach Permanent Usher status, where they are practically guaranteed life membership in the halls of the Academy. The plum floor assignments naturally go to the lifers—mainly because you don't have to climb a lot of stairs to get to them.

All the ushers agree that the floors of the Academy reflect not only the differing grades of usher, but also different ways of life. Plainly speaking, everything is more down to earth up in the Ampie, as the Amphitheatre is called. Coincidentally (or not), it seems to be fitted out exclusively with ushers from South Philly.

"Goombas, you know," Cassidy explains. "I'm from southwest Philly, myself."

Up in the Ampie, where the decor is plainer (no cabbage-rose carpet here), Stephanie Loschiavo confirms it. "Oh, yeah, it's great. We all ride home together."

She is one of six women ushers out of a staff of 60 (the first was hired in 1974). She became an usher six years ago, while in high school, and studied during performances. Before that she had danced with the Pennsylvania Ballet. She debuted at age 8, playing Drosselmeyer's assistant in the *Nutcracker Suite*, and retired at age 12. Loschiavo prefers to work in the Ampie because Scuncio doesn't like to climb all those stairs to check out what's going on up there.

"And you're not, like, having a heart attack if someone slips in late. It's really heaven up here. They always call the first floor the snob floor. Maybe it's because that's where you find all the money. As you go higher from floor to floor, it starts getting more middle class."

The only disadvantage to working in the Ampie is that, during the rare rock concerts held at the Academy, it gets especially raucous up there. The worst part is helping someone to find a seat after it's started. An usher has to venture into that chaotic mass of humanity with nothing but a bow tie and a flashlight to protect himself, wondering when the patron behind him is going to trip and fall and take them both over the balcony.

They still talk about the Don McLean concert when one enthusiast became so transported by the music that she kicked off her shoes and began climbing one of the statues that flank the stage—and, to everyone's disgust, left greasy black footprints all over it.

"That statue has been painted twice and

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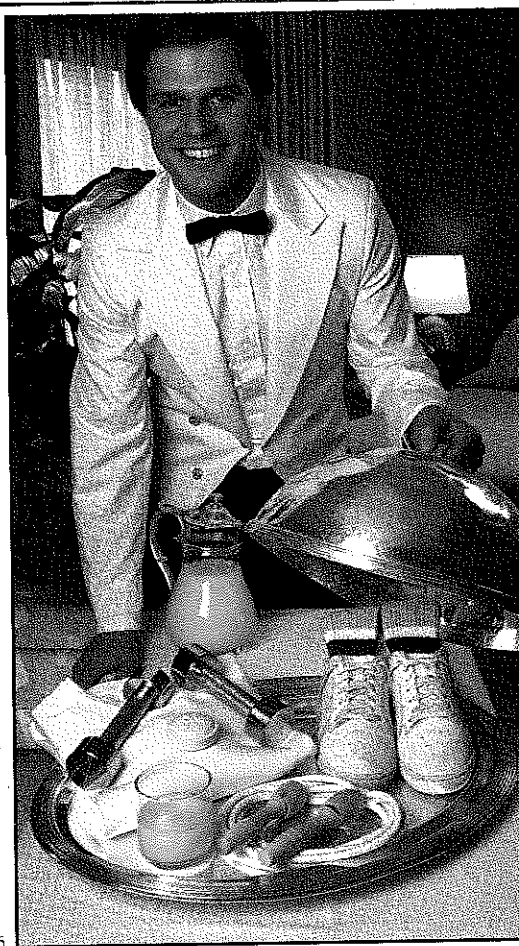
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those prints still show up!" one irate usher in the Ampie remembers.

The ushers' consensus is that Most Temperamental Artist Award goes to Yul Brynner, for creating a great nuisance about the spotlights on him during his performance. The lights are shot from the Family Circle, behind the seats. He asked that no one sit where they might cast a shadow on him while he was onstage. Honorable Mention goes to Barry Manilow for his paranoid reaction to crowds. He requested that all able-bodied ushers patrol the aisles during his concert to be on the lookout for pistol-packing patrons.

They have more stories to tell, but the Pops are laboring over their last victim, "White Christmas." The doors are opening and the patrons are being released into the hallway, which fills quickly. The crowd surges to the stairs, which take a long, labyrinthine path through the Academy,


Barry Manilow is remembered less than fondly: It was his request that all able-bodied ushers patrol the aisles as he performed, to be on the lookout for possible assassins. The Most Temperamental Artist Award went to Yul Brynner.

past piles of tarpaulin, buckets of paint, ladders—the various debris of the ongoing patch job being done on this gracefully aging house.

The ushers don't really have much to do now that the concert is over. For the most part, the patrons know their own way out, and the ushers just have to hang around long enough to see that no one tries to stay behind.

It's late—about 10 o'clock. And everyone is tired, hosts and guests alike. The ushers would like to change and go home, but like gracious hosts, they must first see their guests to the door and say good-night. So they stand at each descending level of the Academy, watching the fur-coated women and the men in their mufflers trundle by, pulling on gloves, stuffing programs into pockets.

One usher loosens his tie and smiles at the passing crowd. He observes aloud, and with a little relief, "Man, you never seen old people move so fast as when it's time to go home." ■


*The
London
Workout*
with Laura Keeler

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