

TALK OF THE TOWN:

JAMES THURBER'S YEARS WITH ROSS

15 PAGE EXCERPT FROM A FULL LENGTH PLAY

BY MIKE BENCIVENGA



ADAPTED FROM
THE YEARS WITH ROSS BY JAMES THURBER
(WITH PERMISSION FROM ROSEMARY A. THURBER)

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CAST OF CHARACTERS:

JAMES THURBER (32), a visually challenged, iconic writer and illustrator
HAROLD ROSS (34), an exasperating and eccentric editor-in-chief
E.B. WHITE (28), a dapper writer, editor and confirmed bachelor
KATHARINE ANGELL (31), a literate, New England force of nature
WOLCOTT GIBBS (29), a highly competent, high-strung jack of all trades
ELSIE DICK (27), Ross's unflappable, flapper of a secretary

EUGENE SAXTON (40), a fussy editor at Harper & Brothers publishing
HELEN WISMER (27), a woman of letters and great humor
BARTENDER (30), a cocktail shaker in a speakeasy
PHOEBE (27), a good time girl in the roaring 20s

CASTING NOTES:

Though there are 10 roles in the play it can be performed with as few as 6 actors. The actor cast as ELSIE may double in the roles of PHOEBE and HELEN. Similarly, the actor playing WOLCOTT GIBBS can play both the BARTENDER and EUGENE with no overlap.

TIME:

From 1927 to 1951

SETTING:

The offices of The New Yorker Magazine in Manhattan plus various other locations. The settings will be created with movable flats on wheels along with minimal furnishings. This should mimic the sparse settings seen in most New Yorker cartoons. The other locations include Tim Costello's Bar, a hotel porch in Reno, James Thurber's home in Connecticut, the Whites' farmhouse in Maine and a room inside the Algonquin Hotel.

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS:

Projected above various scenes will be the occasional chapter heading ("A DIME A DOZEN" "EVERY TUESDAY AFTERNOON" etc.) as they might appear in a magazine or a book.

The photos and illustrations used here are to provide reference for the reader and are not part of the text of the play.

Photos of Harold W. Ross in his later years



"If you get him down on paper, nobody will believe it."

Wolcott Gibbs to Thurber about Ross (1952)

SYNOPSIS:

TALK OF THE TOWN is a full-length comedy adapted from James Thurber's classic memoir 'The Years With Ross.' It tells the story of the birth of The New Yorker magazine in the 1920's and paints a portrait of its eccentric creator and editor, Harold Ross. It also chronicles the rise of James Thurber from the small time Ohio newspaperman he was to the world famous humorist and cartoonist he became. Most of all 'TALK' is a loving tribute to the importance of laughter, especially during dark and troubling times.

James Thurber in the 1930's



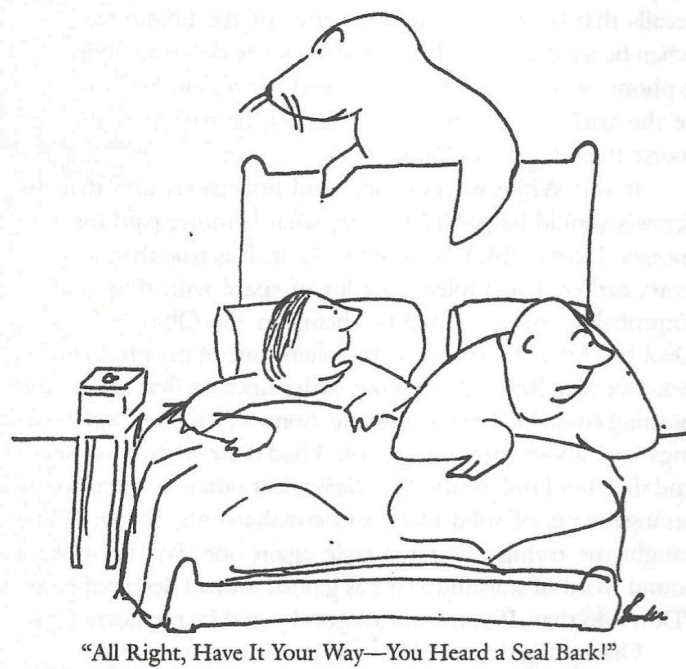
Thurber with his Zeiss Loop headset



First New Yorker cover (1925)



The 'Seal in the Bedroom' cartoon



ACT ONE - SCENE ONE

In the darkness, the sound of a typewriter begins to tentatively 'tick' away. It's joined by another. And another and another until the clatter of keys is almost deafening. The lights FADE UP to reveal an oak-paneled hallway. It's formed by a number of movable flats .

At the end of the hall, JAMES THURBER (32) exits the elevator. He's dressed in an overcoat and carrying a briefcase. Thurber wears glasses that are much more of a necessity than a literary affectation. He moves downstage toward us.

THURBER

You hear that? I love that sound. The pocketa-pocketa-pocketa of Remingtons and Underwoods cranking out copy. Humorous thoughts and observations insisting to be read. That's the first thing that greeted me when I stepped off the elevator into the offices of The New Yorker on West 45th street.

(looking around, smiling.)

I was writing a column in Paris when I first heard of it. A brand new humor magazine. One that promised to be sophisticated with 'some josh and news value.' I decided this was the place for me. I'd always been told I was funny. I mean, look at me. The only profession I felt suited for was to be some kind of humorist. As I see it, a 'humorist' is a person who doesn't lose sleep if the world is crumbling but who lays awake in terror at a strange sound coming from the pantry. That's me in a nutshell.

During this a dapper but overwrought man, WOOLCOTT GIBBS (29), hurries toward an office upstage. Irritated because he finds it empty, he moves downstage toward Thurber.

GIBBS

Who are you? I mean-- What do you want?

THURBER

I'm looking for Mr. Ross.

GIBBS

So am I.

(calling out)

Miss Dick! Miss Dick. Where is he?

Ross's secretary, ELSIE DICK (27), enters.

ELSIE

Still at lunch. God only knows how long that'll take.

GIBBS

He told me he wanted my 'Talk' piece on his desk immediately.

ELSIE

So leave it on his desk. Immediately. And calm down.

(Gibbs does this as she sees Thurber)

Who are you?

THURBER

I'm looking for Mr. Ross.

ELSIE

Get in line. Name?

THURBER

What's that?

ELSIE

Your name.

THURBER

James Thurber. I have an appointment for 1 pm.

ELSIE

Wait here. He'll be along. You can take a seat over there.

THURBER

No thanks. I'd rather stand here and narrate.

(Elsie walks off as he continues)

Where was I? Oh, right. Paris. While I was there I wrote and submitted dozens of stories to the fledgling publication. And they were all rejected. My wife and I agreed that I'd have a much better chance of getting published by a magazine called 'The New Yorker' if I was actually in New York. Frankly I think she was looking for an excuse to get rid of me. Whatever the case I headed home by boat and, during the journey, I met a woman who said she was the sister-in-law of Andy White. And that he was a copy editor at The New Yorker. So when I arrived I phoned Andy and--

During this E.B. WHITE (28) enters, wearing a winter overcoat. He hears his name mentioned.

WHITE

Jamie, nobody knows me as 'Andy.' They know me as E.B. White.

THURBER

All right. So I called E.B. White and--

WHITE

(prodding him)

Who wrote 'Charlotte's Web.' And 'Stuart Little.' You have to reference that.

THURBER

I will. Anyway--

WHITE

And 'The Elements of Style.' That was a big one.

THURBER

You haven't done any of that yet. I'm telling them about when we first met.

WHITE

Oh. Okay. Get on with it then.

White moves into an office upstage as Thurber tries to collect his thoughts.

THURBER

As I was saying, I'd never met Mr. E.B. White before, but he was good enough to set up a meeting with Harold Ross; the editor-in-chief and mastermind of the enterprise. This was February of 1927. The New Yorker was two years old. It had been the outstanding flop of 1925. But it refused to go away. Mostly due to Ross's tenacity and sheer stubbornness.

During this the elevator doors open and HAROLD ROSS (34) enters. He walks, stooped forward as if trudging up a great hill, with a manuscript bag stuffed with papers slung over his shoulder. His pants are far too short and he wears a truly ugly hat. Seeing Thurber he is startled and becomes uncomfortable.

ROSS

Uh...Hey there.

THURBER
Hello.

ROSS
You the guy I'm supposed to meet?

THURBER
Yes sir. I'm--

ROSS
Let me get settled. Then we can talk. Coffee!

THURBER
No, thank you.

ROSS
Not you. Me! I want coffee.

THURBER
I don't know where they keep it.

ROSS
(calling out)
Elsie, I need coffee!

ELSIE
(rushing in)
Right away. Gibbs left something for you. Where'd you get that hat?

ROSS
(smiling)
My wife gave it to me. Do you like it?

ELSIE
No.

ROSS
(growling, he hands her the hat)
(to Thurber)
You want coffee?

THURBER
No. I--

ROSS

Suit yourself.

Handing Elsie his coat, Ross moves upstage to his office. Elsie hurries off to get the coffee.

THURBER

(indicating Ross)

You'd never pick him out of a police line-up as the editor of an urbane publication like *The New Yorker*. But that's him. Harold Wallace Ross. He was younger than I expected. Only 34. Ross was meticulous to the point of obsession about the appearance of his magazine but he gave no thought to himself. In all the years I knew him I don't think I ever saw his pants touch the top of his shoes.

ROSS

(poking his head out the door)

Gibbs! Gibbs! Where the hell are you?

GIBBS

(darts out in the hall)

Right here, sir.

ROSS

(holding a paper)

Did you put this on my desk?

GIBBS

(cowering)

Yes.

ROSS

(smiling)

It's good. Very solid.

(yelling)

Coffee! C'mon! I need coffee, God damn it!

Ross goes back in. Gibbs, exhales relief and vanishes.

THURBER

He developed those sparkling manners as a boy in Colorado. It's a big place so they have to yell to be heard. Ross held the editorial controls firmly in his grip. Nothing went into the magazine without his okay. And no one was hired without meeting him first.

Andy White returns, without his overcoat, and approaches Thurber. They shake hands.

WHITE

You must be Mr. Thurber. I'm White. E.B. White.

THURBER

We've established that.

WHITE

You can call me Andy. And be sure to tell Ross we're old friends.

THURBER

Why?

WHITE

Because I told him we're old friends. And if you don't tell him the same thing he'll become nervous and anxious. And you don't want that.

THURBER

No. I guess not. He already seems pretty anxious.

Elsie runs by them with a cup and saucer of coffee and brings it into Ross.

WHITE

Actually he's pretty relaxed right now. You'll know when he's getting nervous and anxious because he'll start jingling.

THURBER

Jingling?

WHITE

Coins. In his pocket. If he gets up and starts jingling coins, change the subject. He gets bored easily. And don't try to be funny.

THURBER

Isn't that what you're supposed to do at a humor magazine?

WHITE

Yes. But at a typewriter. Not with Ross. If you try to be funny he might think you're making fun of him.

THURBER

And that makes him nervous and anxious?

WHITE

No. Angry. Very, very angry.

THURBER

So, he's the sensitive type?

WHITE

Not that any of us have ever noticed. He gets mad because he doesn't want silly people here. He wants people who take their humor seriously. Like he does.

Elsie comes out and jerks her head at the door.

ELSIE

He's all yours. Good luck.

White leads a very rattled Thurber to the door.

WHITE

Show him your clippings. And remember, we're good friends. Best friends.

(opening the door)

What's your name again?

As Thurber mutters an answer White leads him in and the lights FADE OUT.

SCENE TWO

The oak-paneled flats reform to create Harold Ross's office. A title appears, like a chapter heading, above the scene; 'A DIME A DOZEN'

Thurber nervously sits opposite Ross at his desk. He's smoking a cigarette while studying the book of clippings. Ross is silent for a while, grimacing as he turns the pages.

ROSS

So you're a reporter?

THURBER

Yes. Most recently at The Post. I got my start in my hometown paper in Columbus.

ROSS

Not much happens in Ohio. Good thing you got out. I started as a 'tramp' reporter, up and down the west coast. Great training. Teaches you discipline. How to meet deadlines.

THURBER

Yes. But I was actually hoping to be doing something more creative--

ROSS

(looking at the book)

Who's John Manley?

THURBER

That's me, sir. I sent piece after piece to Collier's with no luck. I got to thinking that they were in the habit of rejecting anything with the name 'Thurber' on it. So I sent the next one in as 'John Manley' and, sure enough, they bought it.

ROSS

Huh. Well we don't go for that kind of deception around here. If we like something we print it. And we give you credit. Except for the 'Talk of the Town' column. Nobody's name goes on that because we all put our two cents in.

(his phone RINGS. Ross grabs it)

Ross. Hey! Where were you at lunch? Uh huh. Oh boy. How late? You crazy bastard.

(to Thurber)

It's Alec. Alexander Woolcott. He wants to tell me about some party he went to. The big blowhard stayed out all night. No wonder his copy's always late.

(into phone)

Uh huh. Okay. Sure. What happened then?

(puts the phone down on the desk)

Listen to that. The glib son of a bitch thinks he's holding me spellbound. But he's all right. He got me into this racket. Made me the editor of 'Stars and Stripes' during the war. And introduced me to my wife. So I can't hang up on him. Were you in the war?

THURBER

No. I couldn't enlist. Because of my eye.

ROSS

What happened to your eye?

THURBER

My brother shot me with an arrow.

ROSS

Why the hell'd he do that?

THURBER

There was an apple on my head and he had terrible aim. We were just kids.

(Ross gets up from his seat)

As far as the war goes, I signed up to be a code clerk. In Washington and then in Paris. Decoding enemy dispatches for the army. After the war I stayed in France to do some reporting for papers back in the states. About the general goings on. And then I-- I---

During this Ross grows antsy. He jingles change in his pocket, moves to the window and stares out. Panicking, Thurber blurts something out.

THURBER

I interviewed Valentino once.

ROSS

How's that?

THURBER

I interviewed Valentino. In Paris.

ROSS

(brightening)

Rudolph Valentino? The movie actor?

THURBER

Yes. He was there to premiere a picture and I interviewed him for the Chicago Tribune. I did a society column for them. And they wanted me to--

(Ross goes to a closet and rummages)

I'm sorry but-- Did you lose something?

Ross pulls out a shiny high hat and holds it up.

ROSS

Look at that! You know what that is?

THURBER

A top hat?

ROSS

It's not just a top hat. It's like no other top hat in the world.

THURBER

Is it made of licorice?

ROSS

It's Valentino's! I was walking down Broadway and saw him collapse. Me and some other folks rushed over to help him. Poor bastard had his appendix bust open. Doctors took him away but I kept the hat. People think it belongs to Alec but the truth is-- Wait!

(picking up the phone)

Sorry Alec. I had to run to the can. Now what were you saying?

(Woollcott curses and hangs up)

Ha! I love getting that bastard's goat. But he'll get me back. He always does.

THURBER

Anyway, I--uh--sold a few pieces to The New Yorker in the past. So I was hoping--

ROSS

You're a good man, Thurber. I can tell. What with your background and being such good friends with White and all. How would you like to run the whole show?

THURBER

What 'whole show?'

ROSS

The magazine. I have a managing editor now, fella named Ingersoll. And he's botched the whole thing up. His heart isn't in it. He wants to be a writer. And that's a big problem.

THURBER

Why's that?

ROSS

Because he stinks. Anyway I don't need any writers. I've got plenty of writers.

THURBER

Actually I was hoping to be hired to write.

ROSS

Writers are a dime a dozen, Thurber. I can throw my ashtray out the door and hit ten of'em. You've got something much more valuable.

THURBER

My devilish charm?

ROSS

Don't be cute. This place is filled with hopeless children. I never know where they are. And, when they are here, they sit at their desks doing God knows what. Wasting time! How the hell am I supposed to explain that to Fleischmann?

THURBER

Fleischmann?

ROSS

The yeast guy. He's our 'publisher.' He keeps pumping money into the coffers so we can stay afloat. But he's threatening to pull the plug. This God damn rag has yet to turn a profit. Every quarter we end up in the red. Deep in the red. Do you have any idea how hard it is make a thing like this work?

THURBER

Um...No. I don't.

ROSS

God how I pity me! What I need is an editor. A managing editor. Somebody to sit at a central desk and run this place like a business. Somebody with a sense of order and discipline. Like you. You're a newspaper man. And you served in the army.

THURBER

No. I couldn't. The arrow, remember?

ROSS

Don't change the subject. I believe you're just the sort of genius we need. A guy who can keep all these 'babies' on schedule. Get'em to turn in their copy on time.

THURBER

That's not really something I envision doing.

ROSS

Nonsense! With your experience in the military you'll have this crew marching in step, like a well-trained regiment.

THURBER

I sat at a desk and cracked code, sir.

ROSS

You're being modest. And foolish. That's two things I have no use for around here. Modesty and foolishness.

THURBER

And deception. You said you don't like deception.

ROSS

And sex. By God I'm going to keep sex out of this magazine. And out of this office. How much are they paying you at the Post?

THURBER

\$40 a week.

ROSS

I'll give you \$50.

THURBER

That's very nice of you, sir. But I can't--

ROSS

No no. You're right. With all the hours you'll be working that isn't fair. A man of your talents and ability should be getting at least \$60. How's that?

THURBER

That's very nice, but all I want to do--

ROSS

Are you married, Thurber?

THURBER

Yes, I am sir.

ROSS

Fine. I'll make it \$70.

THURBER

\$70?!

ROSS

Done and done. What time is it? Dammit I have to meet with Fleischmann again. God, I hate begging for dough. It makes me feel like a whore. Or a nephew.

(he moves to the door and shouts out)

Elsie! I'm heading out!

(to Thurber)

I'm very glad you stopped by, Thurber. I want you to start right away. This place has to be gotten under control. Before it goes under. There's too much inefficiency. And I need you to find the source of all the waste and foolishness.

(Elsie rushes in with Ross's coat)

Where's my hat?

ELSIE

I tossed it out.

ROSS

Why?

ELSIE

It was horrible.

ROSS

All right, all right. Gosh darn it. Good-bye, Thurber. And God bless you.

As Ross rushes off Thurber addresses us.

THURBER

Later that afternoon he phoned my apartment and said--

Standing at the elevator, Ross calls out.

ROSS

I've decided to make it \$90. I can't take advantage of a newspaperman.

He disappears into the elevator.

THURBER

When my first check came it was for \$100. It wasn't hard to figure out what the source of waste and foolishness was. Even a semi-blind, would-be writer could see it.

SCENE THREE

The flats transform into a the hallway again and a desk appears. It's littered with papers, a typewriter and a phone. Thurber moves there.

THURBER

Thus began my career as the resident 'genius' at the 'Central Desk.' I spent long days editing copy, harassing writers and trying to figure out how to make the office run like an office. And I wrote. Sometimes after hours, long into the night. Not much point in going home. My wife, Althea, didn't like me much. And she didn't mind telling me why. At great length. You know what the most dangerous food on earth is? Wedding cake.

(sitting, he begins to type)

So instead of going home I'd peck away at new pieces. Or 'casuals' as Ross called them. He wanted the magazine to be offhand and informal. Not stuffy or pretentious.

Andy comes out of his office moves to get coffee.

WHITE

How's it going, Jamie?

THURBER

Slow and steady, Andy.

(to the audience)

If there was anyone who embodied the easy, chatty style Ross wanted it was Andy White. His work was so graceful and spare. I did my best to copy him. Still, it was hard to get my pieces accepted. So many hurdles to overcome. Fortunately, I had a lot of allies.

*The elevator opens and KATHARINE ANGELL
(31) elegantly steps out and walks downstage.*

THURBER

Chief among those allies was the woman who just glided off the elevator, Mrs. Katharine Angell. She was here from the start. She got bored with her life as a housewife and decided to put her Bryn Mawr degree to use. Ross hired her as a reader but he quickly saw what he had and made her the chief literary editor.

KATHARINE

Mr. Thurber. Good Morning.

THURBER

Too early to tell. It's only 9:15.

Katharine laughs. White bows as he passes.

WHITE

Lady Katharine.

She smiles. Andy goes into his office.

KATHARINE

(to Thurber)

I liked the re-write you did on this week's 'Talk' column. I especially liked the use of the 'royal we.' 'We happened upon a lady.' That's very good. Ross liked it too.

THURBER

I wish he liked my casuals as much. He keeps rejecting everything I submit.

KATHARINE

(moving to get coffee)

Don't take it personally. The man's a great editor but his taste is dubious at best. His mind is totally uncluttered by culture. You know what he asked me the other day?

As she pours her coffee Ross appears nearby.

ROSS

Katharine, was 'Moby Dick' the name of the whale or the man?

KATHARINE

(sighing, to Thurber)

This is what I'm up against. I keep telling him I want to add more fiction. To make the magazine more like The Saturday Evening Post. And he says--

ROSS

No! We are not doing a magazine for some old lady in Dubuque. I want a little bit of news, some prose and a whole lot of humor. Nobody's going to make this thing 'arty.'

Ross moves off. Katharine turns to Thurber.

KATHARINE

Anyway, keep at it. He'll come around. How's the rest of it going?

THURBER

Not too good. Ross wants me to hold the writers' hands and get them to turn in work. But I never see them. Where's Dorothy Parker? And Benchley? I thought they worked here.

KATHARINE

They're in the bar at the Algonquin, where he first met them. They only write for Ross as a favor. He pays less per word than any magazine in town.

THURBER

Really?

KATHARINE

Oh yes. It was worse in the beginning. He couldn't pay them at all. We had no money. For anything. He once asked Dorothy Parker why she hadn't written a piece for him and she said, "Somebody else was using the pencil." The pressure to keep this place going is what drove Ross to the bughouse.

THURBER

'The bughouse?'