

# Getting Out

## 'Lost Laughs: The Slapstick Tragedy of Fatty Arbuckle' a candid glimpse into Hollywood's Silent Film Gilded Era

By Sheila Barth

When I was young, I loved listening to my mother's stories about movies in the olden days - the silent films, the advent of talkies, and the stories about glamorous stars, heart throb Rudolph Valentino, headliners Clara Bow, Theda Bara, Marion Davies, and funny guys, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin.

Mom carefully sidestepped the sordid side of these celluloid icons' lives and careers, that were emblazoned by outrageous yellow journalism and sensational headlines, making and breaking them.

In Andy Bayiates and Aaron Munoz's fast-paced theatrical biography of movie trailblazer Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, the playwright duo punctuates the overweight star's life and career without embellishment.

Incidentally, Bayiates was born in Lowell and educated in Fitchburg, so this world premiere, is an exciting homecoming-showcase for him.

At the meteoric pinnacle of Arbuckle's career as a writer,



Aaron Munoz and Kristen Mengelkoch.

entertainer, film innovator and director, he was victimized by a scandal involving the death of Virginia Rappe, 25-year-old, notorious, former model, movie star, and party girl. Arbuckle was accused of killing Rappe in early September, 1925, during a debauched,

three-day party in St. Francis Hotel, San Francisco. Liquor was flowing freely that night, despite the Prohibition Era.

Although several celebrities' testimony claimed Arbuckle's innocence, Hearst and his expansive publications printed searing stories,

claiming Arbuckle's sordid lifestyle.

Arbuckle's sole accuser, Maude Delmont, California blackmailer and madam, claimed Arbuckle had sex with Rappe, and crushed her under his 266-lb. weight, rupturing her bladder. It was proven later Rappe's bladder ruptured from longtime illness.

Even though Arbuckle repeatedly claimed his innocence, he was charged with manslaughter and underwent three trials, exhausting his fortune and extinguishing his fame. He was eventually found innocent and exonerated. But the damage was done. Arbuckle's career tanked in the court of public opinion.

"Lost Laughs" resonates powerfully today, as more movie celebrities, high-ranking politicians, multi-millionaires, educators and philanthropists are accused of sexual harassment and unacceptable behavior.

While Munoz marvelously portrays Arbuckle, from his humble beginnings as a vaudeville child and versatile adult performer, to his me-

teoric rise as a beloved, successful stage and film headliner, multi-talented Kristen Mengelkoch portrays several characters, including Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Arbuckle's three wives, Rappe, Delmont, prosecutors, etc.

Adeptly performing juggling, sleight of hand, pratfalls, acrobatic stunts and more, Munoz recreates several of Arbuckle's signature stunts and moves, despite his girth.

Garbed in Alison Siple's historically-accurate, vintage costumes, Mengelkoch switches from one character to another, regardless of age or gender, swiftly changing a hat, jacket, dress and accessories, while maintaining Munoz's frenetic pace. Their comedic timing is impeccable.

### BOX OFFICE

World premiere of one-act, 90-minute, two person play, written by Andy Bayiates and Aaron Munoz, directed by Nathan Keepers. Presented by Merrimack Repertory Theatre through March 11, at the Nancy L. Donahue Theatre, 50 East Merrimack St., Lowell. \$26-\$73, [www.mrt.org](http://www.mrt.org) or 978-654-4678. Senior, student, group discounts.

Meredith Ries' set is terrific, too, from a stark backstage, to lavish San Francisco hotel room, a vaudeville stage, movie set, court of law, etc. D.M.Wood's lighting, Stowe Nelson's barrage of sounds, and Sidney Hoang's projection graphics of original Fatty Arbuckle footage, aid Munoz's uncanny recreation of the overweight performer-movie mogul, who died of a heart attack, in his sleep, June 29, 1933, at age 46.

Besides this must-see production, Merrimack Rep is hosting a panel discussion on the historical context of Lost Laughs, entitled "Women's Rights, Prohibition, and the Fall of Fatty," Thursday, March 1, immediately following the 7:30 p.m. performance.