

Man Who Built Reputation Because He Knew How To Pick Pretty, Shapely Chorus Girls, Takes Rap At Critics

LEONARD HARPER AND TWO OF HIS PRETTY CHORINES

Explains "Hip-Movement" Dance Which Has Aroused Storm of Protest—Has Trained Many Famous Choruses.

By FLOYD CALVIN

NEW YORK, Jan. 13.—"The only people who ever protested against my shows were my enemies," said Leonard Harper, producer of the much-talked-about Connie's Inn Revue. "Connie's is one of the safest places in New York for chorus girls," continued Mr. Harper. "The management allows absolutely nothing to go on that would reflect in the slightest way on the morals of the place. Girls of the revue can't even go out and sit with

relatives at the tables without permission, and I rarely grant such permission, knowing how some people like to criticize. But the management wouldn't think of allowing the girls to entertain the patrons after the show. Of course, we can't follow the girls home, but we do

know they respect and behave themselves in the club. This is more than can be said for many of the downtown white clubs. I have worked in places where, even with white girls, it was part of the game to secretly countenance soliciting. Even here in Harlem some of the colored revues staged by white producers are not as strict as we are. But this idea that every girl that dances on the stage is bad, is bunk. Many of the girls have husbands and sweethearts, and their reputations are just as much at stake as anybody else's."

Leonard Harper's show drew a storm of protest from certain quarters when it was first presented at the Lafayette Theater recently. Of the people who voiced these protests Harper says: "They are soreheads. They have wasted a lifetime of opportunity and as soon as they see somebody else achieving a little success they are ready to try to tear

Plantation Days of Chicago and took them to London for six months. He took cafe girls from the Green Mill Gardens and converted them into a \$2 entertainment and played all the high-class theaters in the Middle West before he finally received his London offer.

Mr. Harper trained the choruses of all the larger colored shows now playing, including "Lucky Sambo," "4-11-44" and Jimmy Cooper's Revue.

When in vaudeville Mr. Harper and his wife played on the same bill with many of the big timers, like Nora Bayes and those in her class. "My success came after I met my wife," he says. Mrs. Harper was noted for the good clothes she wore, and in Indianapolis a critic said: "The grace and fine stage presence of Harper & Blanks, as well as the artistic manner of their production, makes their act one of the best on the bill."

Since Mrs. Harper's retirement Mr. Harper has had under his direction as many as four night club revues at one time—notably the Cotton Club, Connie's Inn, Carlton Terrace, Brooklyn, and the Hollywood (now the Kentucky Club).

Mr. Harper is noted for the beauty of his choruses. "I pick my girls according to general physical features, smooth skin, pretty legs and nice hair," he added. "I don't want anybody to think my selections are based on color. I look for beauty. I will take in brown girls as quickly as in anybody else."

As may be expected, he was asked what he thinks of the now famous expression, "Nudity on the stage." "I think the stage is well regulated," he said. "Some things can strike you in the face, and some can't. Some of the same people who complain of what they see in colored shows will pay much bigger prices to see worse in white shows. As far



LEONARD HARPER

MILLIE COOK

RUTH CHERRY

down. Many people come to see our show, like it, and come again. You'd be surprised at the married women who come to see it. The size of the audience proves how well the show is liked. Every time we play they hang out the S. R. O. sign."

So spoke one of the most promising young directors of our group, who, at 29, has 19 years of theatrical experience behind him, and is now getting ready to crash Broadway with a mammoth production of his own. Harper was once soloist in a Baptist choir back in Birmingham, the town in which he was born. He began dancing when he was four or five years old, and at 11 went into the theatrical game for good. He first tried out around Atlanta and Memphis, then struck north for Chicago. There he met his wife, Arceola Blanks (a Dubuque, Ia., girl who was reared in St. Louis). They became nationally famous as Harper & Blanks. Eastern booking offices heard of their success in the west and sent for them. In order to appear new and command higher salaries they came east under the name of Smith & Tosel and worked successively for Loew, Keith and the Shuberts. Following their vaudeville experience and a trip abroad Mrs. Harper retired and Mr. Harper began training choruses and staging dance numbers for various burlesque revues and night clubs.

Mr. Harper organized the original

as undressing girls is concerned, if a girl is dark and has a pretty shape why can't we look at her the same as at a white girl. Still I don't think we should go quite as strong with our girls as the whites. Of course there is a limit to everything. I don't say where it should stop."

What some of Mr. Harper's critics take exception to in his show is what he calls the "hip movement." His defense is this: "The movement is in the same class with the hula dance. I trained my girls to do it because it is different. I got tired of putting on the hula. White girls can't do the hip movement like the colored. I don't know why, but they can't. I have seen them try. That is one point on which we have them bested. But I don't teach anything I can't do myself."

In parting, Mr. Harper said: "My girls really work. Anybody who sees them in action can see that. We work hard and we expect to succeed. Let some of those who criticize do something themselves and they won't find so much time to knock."