



Johnny Puleo Reflects on the Eternal Fate of the Little Fellow

It's a world fit for normal-sized people. A world made-to-measure for middling man. A world where even the microphones seem to raise their heads high as the unattainable stars. A hard world for a dwarf.

THE LITTLE MAN WHO'S LEFT OUT

Photographed by Bert Hardy

Johnny Puleo is clown of Borrah Minevitch's Harmonica Rascals at the London Palladium. His act is a pantomime of the little man who takes nothing lying down, who turns the world inside out to gain his rights.



Dwarf's-eye View of Things

To them, as they play, the world turns its shining face. Not so to Puleo.

Johnny Puleo is one of the world's very great clowns. If you need to ask: who is Johnny Puleo? you are no serious amateur of the art of clowning, for Puleo has been a top-ranker in his line of the best part of 20 years. He is a dwarf with a huge Jewish face wearing, on the stage, an expression thousands of years old, infinity wise and infinity sad. On his head he wears a battered little blue hat. On his short legs he wears cowboy's hairy chaps, which give him a capering and goatish look. Indeed, he resembles vividly a little satyr who has outlived his time, but not his mad and hilarious vitality. There is no pathos in his clowning, as there is in Chaplin's, no tears-behind-the-smile. On the stage he is constantly faced with the evidences of man's inhumanity to man, but he meets each situation with a sly wariness, a cunning cajolery, and every now and then with a burst of panic rage, that leaves the boards strewn with the bodies of men three times his size. There is something heroic about the clowning of Johnny Puleo, something that impresses you with the sense that however much the world of normal-sized men may gang up on the dwarf, nevertheless he will come out on top; that however impossible the odds, Johnny Puleo, by his sharp wits, his demoniac slyness, his super human courage, will be master of the situation.

Puleo is the mainspring of a vaudeville act called Borrah Minevitch's Harmonica Rascals. The act has been going for 22 years, and Puleo has been with it almost from the start. Minevitch, who had been a newsboy in Boston, was impressed by the number of mouth-organ players to be found among the ragged ranks of his ex-colleagues.

He formed a little group of musical newsboys, and toured with them. Here and there he held harmonica contests, offering 50-dollar prizes to the best newsboy players in the locality. Johnny Puleo, then a newsboy in Washington, D.C., won a contest, chose a two week's trial on tour instead of the 50 dollars—and the future of the Harmonica Rascals was determined.

Till then they had been concerned only with playing music. But now they found people were beginning to laugh. Gradually they developed the idiotic capers that young boys will get up to, into something approaching high art. In a few years they had a hilarious clowning act that was capable of playing brilliant and sometimes genuinely moving music all the time the fooling was going on.

Now, of the old hands, only Puleo remains. The present group consists of three Swiss youngsters, a French boy, an American as 'conductor' and Johnny Puleo. Minevitch, who still owns the act, has an office in Paris, from which he directs his many business interests, including a harmonica factory. Puleo always refers to his boss with something like bated breath, and says, "He's a kinda—kinda Svengali, if you see what I mean."

There are some who told that, however brilliant the clowning, the playing of the Harmonica Rascals is more splendid still. And it is true that the group is capable of producing beautiful music from an instrument whose artistic value, according to sober-sided Grove's *Dictionary of Music*, is nil.



The Flare-up Revolt

Puleo decides that plenty is enough. The rage of the old goat-footed gods is upon him. It's time to strike for all the little men.



When a Dwarf Goes Berserk

Not for Puleo the patient sadness. Not for him the laughter masking the tears. When his blood's up he asserts himself, the thunder trembles.



When His Blood's Up, Even the Audience Isn't Safe
 He's scattered his colleagues like ninepins. Desperately they re-form, continue playing.
 Now his angry red eyes search the auditorium for a sign of fresh injustice.



The Descent of Reason
 Rage is gone. Now is the time for conciliation. Now the clown is all sweet reasonableness. But the 'conductor' is not convinced.



The Penitence of the Put-upon
 No lot sadder than the littlest pig of the litter. No humility more touching than that of the dwarf who has just played havoc.



The Elucidation in Dumb-show
 It seems it was the fault of normal-sized man. It seems all will be harmony if only the dwarf has a place in The sun.



The Victory That is the Reward of Wariness, the Ferocity of Indignation,
and the Exercise of a Wily Wit.

At last a foot in the door, a place at the mike, a staked-out claim in the ordinary sized universe.
Triumphantly, Johnny Puleo, the clown, expresses in mouth-organ music all the guileful, witty
cajoling and hilarious things he has been hinting at in his exquisite dumb show.

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