

## **EDISON'S ELEPHANT**

by Chris Van Strander and David Koteles

chrisvanstrander@gmail.com  
davidkoteles@aol.com  
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## CHARACTERS

WHITEY ALF	40s, a former circus man, now temperance speaker
A BEARDED LADY	20s-30s, comely
ALBERT	12, works in his parents' nickelodeon
JOHANSEN	30s, a camera operator for Edison Studios
THOMAS EDISON	59, America's foremost inventor
A PIANIST	
PATSY	A young woman
NAN	An older woman, blind
CHARLES	40s, a low-level businessman for Edison

## SETTING

1903-1906.

A nickelodeon in Manhattan, a lecture hall, an office in Orange, New Jersey, Luna Park and a bar in Coney Island.

February 1906.

*A nickelodeon on Manhattan's Lower East Side—really just a large, bare room with a sheet for a screen hung on the back wall, and some chairs.*

*A piano's to the side of the screen, a PIANIST providing accompaniment as needed.*

**PRESHOW:**

*As the audience take their seats, ALBERT, the nickelodeon owner's son, ushers everyone into the theater. Films are playing: Edison Studios films, sideshow or circus-like in nature: Sandow the Strongman (1894), Caicedo With Pole (a tightrope walker, 1894); Hadj Cheriff (a knife thrower, 1894); Luis Martinetti (a contortionist, 1894); Buffalo Dance (1894); Ella Lola Dancing a Turkish Dance (1899); an Arabian Gun Twirler (1899); Three Acrobats (1899); a Trapeze Disrobing Act (1901); Japanese Acrobats (1904); etc.*

*Between films, various announcement slides display onscreen: "Another picture play shortly. The operator is changing the film." "All ladies over 45 may keep their hats on. Young ladies, kindly remove them." "If you expect to rate as a gentleman you will not expectorate on this floor." "Entire change of pictures Mondays and Thursdays. Bring the children!" "We reserve the right to eject anyone for drunkenness."*

*Towards the end of this, JOHANSEN, an Edison Studios cameraman, enters from the lobby, surveys the space, then sets up a boxy, wooden, hand-crank motion picture camera on a tripod.*

*End preshow.*

*1906. A lecture hall. WHITEY addresses the audience.*

WHITEY

My name is Whitey, and I am a reformed drunkard.

I stand before you tonight a proud representative of the Anti-Saloon League.

If my present vocation finds me atop the platform?, I wasn't born here. I'm a circus man. My habitat's the wagon, the sawdust.

While still a babe I was shipped to these United States—disembarked right here, New York City—to make my fortune. For a glimmer, I built a life: a wife, a trade, a son.

'Til that first bottle of demon rum, Hell's dark beverage, was thrust before me.

Before long I was a confirmed drunk. I lost my wife, my trade, my son. Those streets I once caroused, I now begged on. Then tumbled into whatever gutter.

It was here, all the way down here, that Adam Forepaugh's Circus and Menagerie scraped me. They'd had turnaway crowds all season, on account a' their new baby elephant. They needed men, and were plainly asking any, for they asked me. As I needed a roof, and a means to keep drinking—Oh yes!—I accepted.

*The nickelodeon. An announcement slide—"Another picture play shortly. The operator is changing the film."—is onscreen. ALBERT approaches JOHANSEN and the camera, fascinated.*

ALBERT  
Say mister, can I see your camera?

JOHANSEN  
Don't touch! This's worth more than you.

ALBERT  
Don't worry, I'm a professional. *(looks at the external magazines)* Whatcha got in here, anyhow?

JOHANSEN  
That's where the very special film goes.

ALBERT  
I *mean*, what size magazine you using? Looks like

ALBERT and JOHANSEN  
400 feet.

ALBERT  
See? Toldja I'm a professional. Say, is this the one where the focus change is actuated by an external lever?

JOHANSEN  
Uh... yes, actually.

ALBERT  
Well!, then I approve. Mister—?

JOHANSEN  
Johansen. And just who the hell're you?

ALBERT  
This's my papa's place, he's in the booth. Mama's out front, ballyhooing. *(little beat)*  
Say: is it true? Mr. Edison—he's really here?

JOHANSEN  
Why?

ALBERT  
I got him a present.

JOHANSEN

Well!, give it to me, I'll make sure he gets it.

ALBERT

I'll do it myself.

JOHANSEN

Good luck. Professor Edison's a busy man, I'll only wrangle him a second. (*calling OS*) Professor, we ready?! (*gestures for ALBERT to sit*) Mind?

*ALBERT sits. JOHANSEN waits, then strides towards lobby.*

JOHANSEN

PROFESSOR?!

*THOMAS EDISON enters, wearing shabby clothes, chewing on an unlit cigar. He's almost totally deaf, and totally crotchety.*

EDISON

You caterwauling for me?

JOHANSEN

We ready?

EDISON

What?

JOHANSEN

READY?

EDISON

Yes, dammit, get it over with!, I've lost half the day already! What's the name of this tomfoolery again?

JOHANSEN

"Professor Edison Visits the Nickelodeon For His Birthday." How's that sound?

EDISON

Awful.

JOHANSEN

No come on, gonna make a swell picture.

Scene 1: Interior, nickelodeon. An audience of run-of-the-mill New Yorkers—(*sizes up audience*) Perfect.—sit enjoying some Edison Studios films, unaware that—!

Scene 2: The Great Man himself, who helped birth this miraculous technology, walks among them!

EDISON

That's when I drag my bones in?

JOHANSEN

*(nods)* Pianist plays "Happy Birthday", everyone sings...

Scene 3: You watch a film, banter, generate charming droll intertitles—*Finis!* Films itself!

EDISON

People'd like that drivel?

JOHANSEN

You kidding? A motion picture audience watching a motion picture of a motion picture audience watching *you*, who invented motion pictures, watching a motion picture?!

EDISON

It's too goddamned fancypants.

JOHANSEN

It's once a year.

EDISON

*(sighs)* The monkeyshines a man endures on his birthday. Where'm I parkin'?

JOHANSEN

There's fine.

EDISON

*(stands in another spot)* No—here. See?, screen framed behind me. So when the titles roll we see "Thomas A Edison" over my shoulder.

JOHANSEN

You're right, that's better.

EDISON

*(under his breath)* 'Course it is, blind Cyclops could see that...

JOHANSEN

Come again?

EDISON

*(going)* JUST SHOUT MY CUE LOUD!

*EDISON's gone.*

JOHANSEN  
*(to the booth)* 'nother picture please?

*A film, Skyscrapers of New York City (1903), projects.*  
*JOHANSEN swivels the camera towards the audience, turns the hand-crank, starts filming.*

JOHANSEN  
 Right. Rolling.  
 Audience audience... Real life real life...  
 ENTER, PROFESSOR!

*EDISON enters. JOHANSEN pans the space.*

JOHANSEN  
 Picture picture...  
 Wait!, who's this?, could it be?, in this lowly nicklette? The New Jersey Columbus?  
 The Napoleon of Invention? The Wizard of Menlo Park? America's Greatest Citizen:  
 Thomas Alva Edison! *(to PIANIST)* Play!

*PIANIST plays Happy Birthday to You.*

JOHANSEN  
 Everybody!:  
*Happy birthday to you,*  
*Happy birthday to you,*  
*Happy birthday Mr. Edison,*  
*Happy birthday to you!*

JOHANSEN  
 So how d'ya feel, Professor?!

EDISON  
 Never better.

JOHANSEN  
 D'ya have a birthday wish?

EDISON  
 Yeah, be back at my lab.

JOHANSEN  
 Aww, don'tcha wanna take one day off? You *are* getting older, don't mind my saying.

EDISON  
 I sure as hell do!

JOHANSEN

No plans to slow down?

EDISON

Listen sonny: this old man still punches in 9 o'clock every morning—unlike *some* in my employ. There'll be time enough to slow down in the boneyard—Now, are we through?

ALBERT

Mr. Edison!

JOHANSEN

So you've given us moving pictures—how far are we from *talking* ones?

EDISON

Talking?! Public doesn't want talking pictures! That's the whole damn point of pictures—you don't hafta talk!

JOHANSEN

How *do* you come up with all these marvelous inventions, anyhow?

EDISON

Johansen really, this's kiddie book stuff...

JOHANSEN

Professor...

EDISON

I don't know, I just... look around, see what the world needs, then go invent it!

JOHANSEN

Whatcha working on now?

EDISON

My exit from this interview!

ALBERT

Mr. Edison?!

JOHANSEN

(*to ALBERT*) We're filming!

*Seeing a child, EDISON's entire demeanor brightens, enlivens.*

EDISON

Johansen! It's perfectly fine. A man too busy to speak with our young ones?,



somethin''s wrong with him. Don't you dare stop cranking. (to ALBERT) Rekkonize me, do ya?

ALBERT  
You kidding? You're the greatest inventor in history!

EDISON  
Hafta speak up, lad, I'm deaf as a tooth.

ALBERT  
I said YOU'RE THE GREATEST INVENTOR IN HISTORY!

EDISON  
Aww shucks. Well maybe since Ben Franklin.

ALBERT  
Happy birthday, sir.

*ALBERT hands EDISON a box of cigars.*

EDISON  
Cigars!, my favorite! Thank you, son. I'd offer ya one, but you must never take these up! Whadda they call you?

ALBERT  
Albert.

EDISON  
Ah, you're the—! [owner's son] So Albert, tell me—this your first time meetin' a highfalutin personage such as myself?

ALBERT  
Yes—I wanted to talk to you 'cause... I wanna do what you do. Invent.

EDISON  
Ahhh.

ALBERT  
Can you give me advice?

EDISON  
How old're you?

ALBERT  
12.

EDISON

My advice? Stop growing! Stay this age forever! *(little beat)* You in school?

ALBERT

Yessir.

EDISON

Quit! All they teach is lies! *(to audience)* Am I wrong? *(to ALBERT)* Lookit me: 3 months of school my whole life. Here's whatcha do: go to the library, start at one end, read the whole thing. Then start working—hard. Know what genius is? One percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration. (Hey, that's snappy.) Albert, I expect to read about you any day now. Thanks again for the stogies. *(to JOHANSEN, giving the cut sign)* That's it.

*JOHANSEN stops filming, starts packing up.*

ALBERT

Say Mr. Edison... *(beat; summoning courage)* ...Why'd you kill that elephant?

*Luna Park.*

*A younger woman, PATSY, and an older woman, NAN, enter the fair grounds. NAN is blind and gently holds on to Patsy's arm.*

PATSY

It's very crowded.

NAN

I told you.

PATSY

You did. Why are we here?

NAN

To see the elephant.

PATSY

Well, one of us.

NAN

Fine, I admit I wanted to see the elephant. It sounds like a lot of people did.

PATSY

Hundreds, Nan, hundreds. Look, there are people selling things.

NAN

I smell chestnuts.

PATSY

Yes. Three cents.

NAN

Three cents? Price gouging. I think I smell popcorn, too!

*CHARLES enters and meets up with them.*

CHARLES

This was a dreadful idea.

PATSY

Well, too late, we're here. Let's make the best of this.

CHARLES

Who are all these people? It's so crowded.

PATSY

The beach is always crowded, Charles.

CHARLES

It's January. It snowed two days ago.

PATSY

But it's nice today. Please, don't spoil this for her.

CHARLES

Shall we try a frankfurter today, Mother?

PATSY

With mustard and onions?

NAN

What makes you think I've never had a frankfurter? I used to come to Coney Island every summer when I was younger.

PATSY

Tell him it was this busy.

NAN

Oh, it was. No, it was, I promise you. The same vendors selling the same goods. But for a lot less.

CHARLES

I still feel uneasy about this.

*PATSY rolls her eyes.*

PATSY

Then WHAT are we doing here?

CHARLES

I honestly don't know. Bad judgment, I imagine.

NAN

Let's get popcorn! My treat!

*The three exit.*

*The lecture.*

WHITEY

*(reads an old circus bill:)*

“The World Will Not Permit Two Suns! There Is But One—

GREAT FOREPAUGH SHOW!

4 Rings!

25 Trained Elephants!

300 Performers!

Indian Battles!

Enough Beasts To Overflow 100 Cages!

After having witnessed this brilliant spectacle, there will be no desire left to see more,

BECAUSE THERE IS ACTUALLY AND TRUTHFULLY NOTHING LEFT TO SEE!”

*(puts bill away)*

Glamorous, right? Well sorry to disabuse ya, but I wan't exactly ringmaster. I handled the elephants. Why elephants? Boss said “You can come on for 20 a week or 25. 20's any animals 'cept the elephants. 25's the elephants.” (That's how scared they were.)

Extra 5 buys a lotta cider.

*(beat)*

The bits our pachyderms did, my god: pyramiding, tightroping—“Everything but talk!”, like the bills said.

I just kept 'em though, I didn't teach 'em. That... was Junior.

**To read the rest of this play, please contact me at:  
[chrisvanstrander@gmail.com](mailto:chrisvanstrander@gmail.com).**