



*the Ballad of*  
*John Latouche*

*an American  
Lyricist's  
Life and Work*

**HOWARD POLLACK**

# The Ballad of John Latouche

ALSO BY HOWARD POLLACK

*Walter Piston*

*Harvard Composers: Walter Piston and His Students,  
from Elliott Carter to Frederic Rzewski*

*John Alden Carpenter: A Chicago Composer*

*Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man*

*George Gershwin: His Life and Work*

*Marc Blitzstein: His Life, His Work, His World*

# The Ballad of John Latouche

---

*An American Lyricist's  
Life and Work*

---

HOWARD POLLACK

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Oxford University Press 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Pollack, Howard.

Title: The ballad of John Latouche / by Howard Pollack.

Description: New York, NY : Oxford University Press, [2017]

Identifiers: LCCN 2016051730 | ISBN 9780190458294 (hardcover : alk. paper) |  
ISBN 9780190458317 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Latouche, John, 1914–1956. | Lyricists—United States—Biography. | Librettists—United States—Biography. | LCGFT: Biographies.

Classification: LCC ML423.L2577 P65 2017 | DDC 782.1092 [B]—dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016051730>

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

*for Erik and Joe*



## CONTENTS

*List of Figures* ix

*Acknowledgments* xvii

*Introduction* xix

1. John Latouche and His Family 1
2. The Young Writer 13
3. The Boy Wonder of Broadway 33
4. The Little Friends 53
5. Ballads for Americans 69
6. New Friends 89
7. Radio and Patriotic Work, 1940–1945 105
8. *Cabin in the Sky* 115
9. *Banjo Eyes* 137
10. *The Lady Comes Across* 153
11. To the Congo and into the Navy 171
12. *Rhapsody* 187
13. *Polonaise* 199
14. *Beggar's Holiday* 213
15. Film Work 237
16. *Ballet Ballads* 253
17. More Fables 279

18. *The Golden Apple* 303
  19. Touche's Salon 331
  20. *The Vamp* 357
  21. *Candide* 377
  22. Late Work 413
  23. *The Ballad of Baby Doe* 425
  24. The Death and Legacy of a Renaissance Man 463
- Notes* 473
- Credits* 529
- Index* 531

## LIST OF FIGURES

1. The cast of Richmond's John Marshall High School's award-winning 1931 production of Oscar Wilde's *The Birthday of the Infanta*, as adapted by Stuart Walker, with Latouche, lower right, as the story's misshapen dwarf. *The Marshallite: Year Book of John Marshall High School* (1931). Courtesy of Shelia Demetriadis.
2. Latouche, c. early 1930s. "He was allergic to discipline," recalled a high school friend, "and completely impervious to convention." Margaret Freeman Cabell Papers, Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries.
3. Latouche on Cape Cod, 1934, dressed as a Russian nobleman in the costume that won him an award at the Provincetown Art Association's summer ball. Observed his friend Nora Lourie, "He looked spectacular in a purple bed-cover and a black fur collar and a muff on his head." Courtesy of Nora Lourie Percival.
4. Spivy LeVoe, 1948. Latouche made his early reputation in the mid-1930s partly by writing "naughty songs" for this popular cabaret singer: "Gonna end up in Harlem / With my end up in Harlem." Photofest.
5. Harry Dunham, 1933. With Latouche and Paul Bowles, one of the three "founding fathers" of the group dubbed the "Little Friends" by Virgil Thomson. "Harry was one of the people I loved most," wrote Latouche in his journal after Dunham's death in 1943. *Nassau Herald* (1933), Princeton University Archives.
6. Composer Aaron Copland and Latouche as handymen in Rudy Burckhardt's 1936 film short *145 W. 21*, which also included cameo appearances by Paul Bowles and Virgil Thomson. Aaron Copland Collection, Library of Congress.
7. Latouche, 1937, as the young Tiberius. "He was unique," reminisced Gore Vidal about Latouche, "the best company in the world and a monster of egotism. I do miss him." John Seymour Erwin. Photofest.

8. Several of the Little Friends, 1942: from left, librarian Stefanie Kiesler, composers Paul Bowles and Virgil Thomson, designer Frederick Kiesler, and writer Jane Bowles. Said Paul Bowles of Latouche, "He was wonderful. I was very angry with him for dying, for depriving everybody of his person." Victor Kraft. Courtesy of Phillip Ramey.
9. From left, Jane Bowles, Latouche, and Stefanie Kiesler, at the Kiesler penthouse, New York, c. 1940. According to one biographer of Jane Bowles, she and Latouche "always had a special feeling for each other." Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna.
10. Latouche and Theodora Griffis, about the time of their marriage in 1940. The marriage lasted only a few years. Courtesy of Erik Haagensen.
11. *John Treville Latouche*, c. 1940, by the Russian-American Pavel Tchelitchew, a member of Latouche's social world, as was the painter's lover, writer Charles Henri Ford. Museum of the City of New York.
12. "Leaning on a Shovel" (music by Lee Wainer, lyrics by Latouche), from the Federal Theatre's revue *Sing for Your Supper* (1939). The song mocked congressional criticism of the Works Progress Administration: "At home we always linger / And read Karl Marx / If you don't believe us—ask the Dies Committee." Federal Theatre Project Photograph Collection, George Mason University Libraries.
13. Composer Earl Robinson and Latouche, 1939. Their *Ballad for Americans* for solo voice and mixed chorus, originally written for *Sing for Your Supper*, swept the country during World War II: "Our country's strong, our country's young / And her greatest songs are still unsung." Photofest.
14. Paul Robeson, soloist in the sensational premiere radio broadcast of *Ballad for Americans*, November 5, 1939. The great African-American bass subsequently performed the work numerous times before crowds upwards of twenty thousand, and recorded the piece as well: "Man in white skin can never be free, / While his black brother is in slavery."
15. Latouche, sitting in the bathroom, disguised as a study, of his Greenwich Village apartment, 1940. On the wall behind him, the mural he commissioned from the young German émigré artist Jimmy Ernst, the son of painter Max Ernst. Courtesy of the Estate of Jimmy Ernst.
16. Latouche, c. early 1940s, frolicking on the grounds of his father-in-law Stanton Griffis's New Canaan, Connecticut, estate. John Latouche Papers, Columbia University.
17. Writer Ruth Yorck, c. 1940. The "poet's muse" of Weimar Germany and later Greenwich Village, Yorck became one of the closest of Latouche's many expatriate friends. "Her faith in me when I had none in myself will have me always in her debt," wrote Latouche in 1944 as an accompaniment to this photograph. Kenward Elmslie Papers, University of California, San Diego.

18. Actress Eleonora von Mendelssohn, Christmas, 1945. Another German émigré friend and, according to Leo Lerman, “a symbol of European culture and civilization then fast being trampled.” Inscribed to “Touche from Eleonora,” this photograph bears a quote from Rilke: “Auf welches Instrument sind wir gespannt? Und welcher Spieler hält [*sic*] uns in der Hand?” (“Across what instrument are we stretched? What player holds us in his hand?”) Alfredo Valente. John Latouche Papers, Columbia University.
19. Latouche and the Russian-American composer Vernon Duke, 1941. Duke, who wrote three musicals with Latouche, needled him for having “the appearance of an unmade bed,” to which the lyricist once countered, “At least I look alive. I don’t know how you always achieve that freshly embalmed effect.” Photofest.
20. Ethel Waters (as Petunia) and Arthur (“Dooley”) Wilson (as Little Joe) in Duke and Latouche’s *Cabin in the Sky* (1940), an all-black musical fable that included the hit song “Taking a Chance on Love” (the lyric adapted from an earlier one by Theodore Fetter). Waters was already a big name, but the show’s success helped Wilson land his best-remembered role, that of the pianist Sam in the film *Casablanca* (1942). Courtesy of Tony Root.
21. Katherine Dunham (as Georgia Brown) in the “Egyptian Ballet” from *Cabin in the Sky* (1940). She and George Balanchine collaborated on the show’s choreography, which featured her dance troupe. Photofest.
22. Singer-comedian Eddie Cantor, second from left, as the bullied Erwin Trowbridge in *Banjo Eyes* (1941), a musicalization of John Cecil Holm and George Abbott’s 1935 farce *Three Men on a Horse*, with a score by Duke and Latouche. Cantor seen here with, from left, Lionel Stander (as Patsy), Ray Mayer (as Frankie), and Audrey Christie (as Patsy’s girlfriend Mabel). Lucas-Pritchard. New York Public Library.
23. Latouche, 1941. Mistaken by some during this period for film star John Garfield, Latouche admitted to signing Garfield’s name in autograph books and adding, “Be sure to visit me for a day or two when you’re out in Hollywood.” Photofest.
24. From left, Wynn Murray (as Babs Appleway), Joe E. Lewis (as Otis Kibber), and Ruth Weston (as Mrs. Riverdale) in Duke and Latouche’s last musical together, the romantic spy comedy *The Lady Comes Across* (1942). The show lasted only three performances on Broadway, but Latouche enjoyed a close friendship with one of its bookwriters, novelist Dawn Powell, for the rest of his life. Fred Fehl. Fred Fehl Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.
25. Latouche at a radio script conference, June 1942. From the left of Latouche, baritone Conrad Thibault, and actors William Holden and Jeffrey Lynn in uniform, preparing for a broadcast that included an army tribute to chaplains in the service, *Soldiers of God*, and the premiere of a new choral work

- by Latouche and Earl Robinson, *Forward, America*. U.S. Army Signal Corps. Courtesy of Erik Haagensen.
26. Latouche with a Congolese woman, c. early 1943, during the lyricist's expedition to the Belgian Congo as a researcher and writer for an André Cauvin documentary. "Africa a pippin," he wrote Virgil Thomson. "Nice food, gay people, bright cities, indigenous natives very much so." André Cauvin. André Cauvin Papers, CEGES/SOMA, Brussels.
  27. Latouche in his Seabees uniform, 1944. "I never realized how useless I was before," he told Frederick Kiesler. Carl Van Vechten. Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.
  28. Annamary Dickey (as Empress Maria Theresa) and Eddie Mayehoff (as Casanova) in *Rhapsody* (1944), an operetta loosely based on Fritz Kreisler's *Sissy* (1932), with the Austrian-American composer's music adapted by Robert Russell Bennett, and lyrics by Latouche. Vandamm Studio. New York Public Library.
  29. Marta Eggerth (as the peasant girl Marisha) and her husband, Jan Kiepura (as the Polish freedom fighter Tadeusz Kościuszko), rehearse *Polonaise* (1944), an operetta with Chopin's music adapted by the Polish-American composer Bronislaw Kaper, and lyrics by Latouche. "In the end," wrote drama critic Wolcott Gibbs in his review of the show, "the lovers are reunited happily, though in Philadelphia, and the audience is given its freedom." Eileen Darby. Courtesy of Marjan Kiepura and Jane Knox.
  30. Latouche and composer-bandleader Duke Ellington at the time of their innovative interracial musical *Beggar's Holiday* (1946). Said Ellington about Latouche years later, "It was a great experience writing with a man like him, a man who is so imitated today by other people writing shows. He was truly a great American genius." Eileen Darby. New York Public Library.
  31. From left, Alfred Drake (as Macheath), Rollin Smith (as Chief Lockit), and Zero Mostel (as Hamilton Peachum) in *Beggar's Holiday* (1946), with music by Ellington, and a book and lyrics by Latouche adapted from John Gay's 1728 classic *The Beggar's Opera*. Vandamm Studio. New York Public Library.
  32. Mildred Smith (as Lucy Lockit) in *Beggar's Holiday* (1946). Noted the show's producer, John Houseman, set designer Oliver Smith "delivered designs of such imaginative beauty that he repeated most of them years later (fire escapes and all) in *West Side Story*." Vandamm Studio. New York Public Library.
  33. The ensemble number "The Wrong Side of the Railroad Tracks," from *Beggar's Holiday* (1946): "It's a sweet house that we sing about / Where the plumbing never plumbs, and the children shout / And the food's so bad that the rats eat out / We wonder what the other side is like?" Vandamm Studio. New York Public Library.
  34. Latouche, mid-1940s. Charming and handsome, Latouche had no shortage of male or female admirers. John Latouche Papers, Columbia University.

35. German-American filmmaker Hans Richter with a mannequin used for the Fernand Léger–inspired stop-action sequence, “The Girl with the Prefabricated Heart,” with a ballad by Latouche, from Richter’s surrealist feature film *Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1947): “Oh Venus was born out of sea-foam / Oh Venus was born out of brine / But a goddess today / If she is Grade A / Is assembled upon the assembly line.”
36. Sono Osato (as Cocaine Lil) and Paul Godkin (as Dancing Willie) in *Willie the Weeper*, which depicted the stoned fantasies of the eponymous chimney sweeper, from the acclaimed 1948 production of *Ballet Ballads*, music by Jerome Moross, libretto by Latouche. In his review, music critic Miles Kastendieck hailed the work as “a crystallization of something in the making for almost a quarter of a century—a new art form American in creation.” Lucas-Monroe. Jerome Moross Papers, Columbia University.
37. In center with arms spread, Marni Nixon (as Singing Susanna) and, lying in front, Olga Lunick (as Dancing Susanna), in *Susanna and the Elders*, a retelling of the biblical story as a sermon at an American tent revival, here as presented in the 1950 Los Angeles production of *Ballet Ballads*. Jerome Moross Papers, Columbia University.
38. Donald Fuller, c. 1950, signed, “For Touche / With deep affection / Donald.” A close friend, composer-critic Fuller collaborated with Latouche on such sensitive numbers as “The Star Song” (*The Peppermint Tree*) and “A Rainy Day.” T. Siegler. John Latouche Papers, Columbia University.
39. Latouche with actress Carol Channing and animator Willis Pyle at a 1951 recording session for the animated short *The Peppermint Tree*, based on a children’s poem by Latouche: “Be true to your star your whole life through / And your star will be true to you.” Willis Pyle Manuscripts, Lilly Library, Indiana University Bloomington.
40. “Devil-dancer” by Latouche, 1945. One of the lyricist’s, in the words of Ruth Yorck, “sinister doodles” that survive among his papers, although he seemed to draw cherubs even more frequently. John Latouche Papers, Columbia University.
41. “Anxiety Drawing” by Latouche, 1949: “April 3rd / 5:00 A.M. / Anxiety drawing: made while thinking of such envy-points as *Partisan Review*, and T.[ennessee] William’s [*sic*] lucky career; and such enemies as [writers] Irving Drutman, Howard Barnes, Donald Wyndham [*sic*] and his joyboy, etc.” John Latouche Papers, Columbia University.
42. William Friml, 1948. Latouche collaborated with this talented son of famed operetta composer Rudolf Friml on the Faustian musical western *The Happy Dollar*, with a book by comic-strip writer Lee Falk. The show finally opened in Houston in 1954 and made its way to Dallas and Los Angeles, but not New York as hoped. Gordon Parks. Gordon Parks Foundation.
43. Latouche with composer Jerome Moross and the German-American choreographer-director Hanya Holm around the time of the 1954 premiere of

- the opera *The Golden Apple*, a reimagining of the Judgment of Paris story and the Homeric epics as viewed through the prism of early-twentieth-century America. Moross thought Latouche “probably one of the greatest lyric writers that ever lived.” Jerome Moross Papers, Columbia University.
44. The Alvin Theatre marquee, 1954. Although reaping numerous laurels, including the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for the season’s best musical, *The Golden Apple* closed within four months on Broadway; the opera remains nonetheless a favorite among connoisseurs of American musical theater. Jerome Moross Papers, Columbia University.
  45. Stephen Douglass (as Ulysses) and Priscilla Gillette (as Penelope) in *The Golden Apple*, 1954. For their set designs, William and Jean Eckart matched Hanya Holm’s fluid stage conception by creating overlapping panels that could rise and fall, allowing smooth transitions from scene to scene. Jerome Moross Papers, Columbia University.
  46. Alice Bouverie, née Astor, c. early 1950s, on her estate, Marienruh. A member of one of New York’s most patrician families, Bouverie became intimately friendly with Latouche in his later years. “In the city, the two of them would go from one smoky club to another,” remembered their mutual friend Gore Vidal. John Latouche Papers, Columbia University.
  47. From left, poets and friends Kenward Elmslie and Gerrit Lansing flanking Latouche’s mother, Effie, c. early 1950s. Elmslie became Latouche’s lover and protégé in 1952, living with the lyricist until the latter’s death in 1956; he later had his own notable career as a poet, lyricist, and librettist. John Latouche Papers, Columbia University.
  48. From left, painter Harry Martin, poets Gerrit Lansing and Kenward Elmslie, and Latouche, c. early 1950s, at Coney Island. Martin had been Latouche’s lover before Elmslie. Courtesy of Erik Haagensen.
  49. Latouche, early 1950s. The lyricist often seemed to have a cigarette in hand; he preferred English Ovals, with their high nicotine content. Maurice Kessler. New York Public Library.
  50. Poet’s Corner, Calais, Vermont, 1986. Latouche and Elmslie purchased this property, a former dairy farm, in 1953, as a country home; called The Eyrie by Latouche, the place was rechristened Poet’s Corner by Elmslie after Latouche’s death. Karen Radkai. Courtesy of Marton Radkai.
  51. The creative team of the musical comedy *The Vamp*, 1955. From left, composer James Mundy, co-bookwriter Sam Locke, musical director Milton Rosenstock, and actress Carol Channing, with lyricist and co-bookwriter Latouche characteristically absent. Leo Friedman. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
  52. Carol Channing (as farmgirl Flora Weems reinvented as silent screen siren Delilah Modo) and Steve Reeves (as Samson) making a flicker, from *The Vamp*, a 1955 musical farce set against the early days of the film industry.

- The show flopped, but Channing won a Tony nomination for her performance. Courtesy of George Helmer.
53. Candide, in white shirt (Robert Rounseville), and his mentor, Dr. Pangloss, in tattered clothes (Max Adrian), confront the Very, Very Old Inquisitor (Conrad Bain) in the original 1956 staging of *Candide*, after Voltaire. The operetta had a book by Lillian Hellman, music by Leonard Bernstein, and lyrics mostly by Richard Wilbur, but also Latouche, several of whose excised verses surfaced in later productions: “What a day, what a day, / For an auto-da-fé! / What a sunny summer sky!” Friedman-Abeles. New York Public Library.
  54. From right, Latouche, composer-writer Coleman Dowell, Kenward Elmslie, and Janet Tarshis (the granddaughter of Latouche’s Vermont friend and neighbor Louise Kent), at Montpelier Junction, Vermont, 1955, during Latouche and Dowell’s ill-fated collaboration on a musicalization of Eugene O’Neill’s *Ah, Wilderness!* for producer David Merrick. Coleman Dowell Papers, Fales Library, New York University.
  55. From right, Latouche, composer Douglas Moore, and co-directors Hanya Holm and Edwin Levy during preparations for the 1956 debut of the opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, with music by Moore and a libretto by Latouche. “They were an odd couple,” stated composer Jack Beeson about Moore and Latouche, “but odd couples can make good opera!” Louis Melancon. Central City Opera Archives, University of Denver.
  56. Nineteenth-century Colorado silver king Horace Tabor (played by Walter Cassel) facing his current wife, Elizabeth “Baby Doe” Tabor (played by Dolores Wilson), and turning his back on his former wife, Augusta (played by Martha Lipton), in the first production of *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, Central City Opera, Central City, Colorado, 1956. Quipped Latouche about the work, “It’s about love and it’s about money, and there’s no combination an American audience likes more.” Louise Pote. Central City Opera Archives, University of Denver.
  57. Latouche in Colorado around the time of the July 7, 1956, premiere of *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. He died at his country home in Vermont one month later, in the early morning hours of August 7. Louise Pote. Central City Opera Archives, University of Denver.
  58. Latouche’s gravesite, Robinson Cemetery, Calais, Vermont. Frederick Kiesler designed the obelisk marking the lyricist’s grave, as well as the four stone markers (one seen lower left) representing four of his most important accomplishments: *Cabin in the Sky*, *Ballet Ballads*, *The Golden Apple*, and *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. Erik Haagensen. Courtesy of Haagensen.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Researching Latouche's life and work presented some distinct challenges. To date, not much has been published about the lyricist, notwithstanding the many brief discussions in memoirs and biographies, and passing references in music and theater studies. The modest Latouche papers at Columbia University, although housing an important, if incomplete, series of diaries, contain little in the way of manuscripts and correspondence. And by the time research for this book began, most of the lyricist's friends and associates were no longer alive.

Fortunately, the papers of, among others, George Balanchine, Leonard Bernstein, Margaret Freeman Cabell, André Cauvin, Maya Deren, David Diamond, Coleman Dowell, Vernon Duke, Duke Ellington, Kenward Elmslie, Lehman Engel, Peggy Glanville-Hicks, Stanton Griffis, Lillian Hellman, Libby Holman, Frederick Kiesler, Leo Lerman, Sam Locke, Eleonora von Mendelssohn, David Merrick, Marta Mierendorff, Douglas Moore, Jerome Moross, Michael Myerberg, Alois M. Nagler, Ruth Page, Dawn Powell, John Powell, Earl Robinson, Lynn Root, Virgil Thomson, Dale Wasserman, Kurt Weill, Ruth Yorck, and most prodigiously, Latouche's agent, Lucy Kroll, filled in many gaps, as did the general collections of the Library of Congress (including recordings held in its Recorded Sound Research Center), New York Public Library (including an important cache of materials that made their way to the library courtesy of Gore Vidal), the National Archives, the FBI, Karamu House, and other institutions.

In addition, I had the good fortune to be able to interview such surviving friends and associates as John Ashbery, Kaye Ballard, Shannon Bolin, Kenward Elmslie, Leyna Gabriele, Ellsworth Kelly, Miles Kreuger, Gerrit Lansing, Norman Lloyd, Robert Miles, Nora Lourie Percival, Willis Pyle, Charlotte Rae, Ned Rorem, Mildred Smith, Harrison Starr, Jerry Stiller, and Susanna Moross Tarjan, as well as some family or family friends, including Libby Green, Burford Latouche Jr., Harold Newman, Vivian Rowsey, and Rose Manning Seigel (with representatives of Latouche's estate kindly permitting me to quote from his unpublished work).

The many librarians and archivists who assisted me on this project included, to name only a few, Richard Boursy and Elizabeth Frengel (Yale University); George

Boziwick, Jeremy Megraw, and Doug Reside (New York Public Library); Anne Causey (University of Virginia); Lynda Claassen (University of California, San Diego); Helen Freeman (Sawyer Free Library); Mark Horowitz and David Sager (Library of Congress); Jennifer Lee (Columbia University); Jill Meissner (Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation); Suzanne Robinson (University of Melbourne); and Ulrich Weber (Swiss National Library). Several of my friends and colleagues provided indispensable aid by researching and photographing archival materials, especially Paul Covey, John Grimmert, Jennifer Kobuskie, and Alex Lawler, but also Grace Edgar, John Gabriel, Johanna Groh, Cory Meals, James Park, Samuel Parler, Anne Searcy, and Alex Winkler. Additional assistance came from, among many others, Edgar Alanis, Dorothy Baker, John Baxindine, Jill Bays-Purtill, Thomas Blubacher, Robert Carsen, Marie Carter, Steven Cassedy, Lucy Dabney, Gordon Davidson, Christina Davis, John Dawson, Shelia Demetriadis, Ellen Donaldson, John Franceschina, Olivia Gay, Hughes Griffis, Eugene Hayworth, Craig Holmes, Michael Holmes, Michael H. Hutchins, David Kanzeg, Nathan Kernan, Marjan Kiepora, Julia Kleinheider, Jane Knox, John Mauceri, Gerald Max, Anne Melville, Catherine Minucci, Darby Moore, Larry Moore, John Moriarty, James O'Leary, Ron Padgett, Tim Page, Rebecca Paller, Maurice Peress, David Perkins, Kenneth Ponche, Kevin Prufer, Phillip Ramey, Tony Root, Max Schmid, Kevin Shannon, Mary Skinner, Stephen Sondheim, Charles Turner, Martha Wasserman, Richard Wilbur, and Gayle Wohlken.

A few debts warrant special acknowledgment. Erik Haagenen, who had conducted enormous research on Latouche in preparation for the 2000 off-Broadway revue about the lyricist, *Taking a Chance on Love*, and his husband, Joseph McConnell, offered extraordinary assistance, including providing me with a wealth of unpublished songs, lyric sheets, scripts, and letters. Furthermore, Haagenen helpfully reviewed this book while still in manuscript, as did Alan Gomberg, Harlan James, Benjamin Sears, and Tony Sessions.

Another windfall came in the form of a rough draft of Andrew Drummond's unpublished monograph on Latouche dating from the 1970s, which the author's widow Maria generously gave me along with accompanying notes and papers. As part of his research, Drummond, a theater professor at New York's Kingsborough Community College, had spoken with numerous people about the lyricist, even traveling abroad to interview writer Paul Bowles, film director André Cauvin, and cabaret singer Spivy LeVoe; his manuscript, as much an omnibus as a biography, not only reported on these conversations but preserved materials, including letters and lyrics, that do not seem to have survived otherwise.

Meanwhile, Alex Lawler, who had assisted me on my previous book, stayed close at hand during this entire project; his extraordinary resourcefulness and unflagging enthusiasm proved a steady boon. And as the book went into production, Thomas Finnegan and Ken Hassman provided the expert copyediting and indexing, respectively.

Finally, a word of thanks to the University of Houston, whose library staff and unstinting support helped make this book possible.

## INTRODUCTION

This book stems from the recognition that several eminent American composers, including Earl Robinson, Vernon Duke, Duke Ellington, Jerome Moross, Douglas Moore, and Leonard Bernstein, created some of their most memorable stage work—Robinson’s *Ballad for Americans* (1939), Duke’s *Cabin in the Sky* (1940), Ellington’s *Beggar’s Holiday* (1946), Moross’s *Ballet Ballads* (1948) and *The Golden Apple* (1954), Moore’s *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (1956), and Bernstein’s *Candide* (1956)—in collaboration with the Virginia-born lyricist-librettist John Latouche (1914–1956), who died tragically young at the age of forty-one; and that this body of work not only encompasses an impressive variety of styles and genres, ranging from musical comedy and operetta to choral cantata and opera, but also displays a rare standard of skill, wit, and inventiveness.

For Latouche, these milestone achievements formed only part of an astonishingly venturesome and diverse although largely forgotten career, including the creation of such other musical theater pieces as *Banjo Eyes* (1941, music by Vernon Duke); *The Lady Comes Across* (1942, music also by Duke); *Rhapsody* (1944, music by Fritz Kreisler, adapted by Robert Russell Bennett); *Polonaise* (1945, music by Frédéric Chopin, adapted by Bronislaw Kaper); *The Happy Dollar* (1954, music by William Friml, the son of operetta composer Rudolf Friml); and *The Vamp* (1955, music by James Mundy). In addition, Latouche wrote dozens of songs for cabaret acts, theatrical revues, and numerous other uses. Moreover, he translated the poetry of Paul Verlaine and Bertolt Brecht, prepared for American presentation plays by Pierre Beaumarchais, Jean Cocteau, Jura Soyfer, and August Strindberg, and adapted for radio Broadway shows by Sidney Howard and the team of George S. Kaufman and Ring Lardner, all the while writing his own poems, stories, and stage and radio plays.

Latouche also pursued a side career in film, including writing the scenario and narration for the Belgian filmmaker André Cauvin’s 1945 documentary *Congo* (and an illustrated travelogue with the same title, also 1945). He further provided songs for two landmark avant-garde feature films by the German-American director Hans

Richter, *Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1947) and *8 x 8: A Chess Sonata in 8 Movements* (1957); authored the script for Herbert Matter's documentary about the sculptor Alexander Calder, *Works of Calder* (1950); and started his own independent film company, Aires Productions, which produced two shorts: the animated *The Peppermint Tree* (1955), based on his poem of the same name, with animation by Willis Pyle, narration by Carol Channing, and music by Donald Fuller; and *The Very Eye of Night* (1956), the last completed film of the notable avant-gardist Maya Deren.

In addition to all this, Latouche undertook numerous aborted and unfinished projects, including some involving composers Kurt Weill, Ernesto Lecuona, Coleman Dowell, and Milton Rosenstock.

In the course of this multifaceted career, Latouche blurred the lines between serious and popular art, and also among different artistic disciplines, as manifested by his varied activities as well as by his interest in creating a lyric theater that would incorporate, in new combinations, music, word, dance, decor, and film. This alone makes his work interesting. Yet at its best, his output further exhibits not only a high level of sophistication, but an enriching humanity, and if only a small portion of his large catalog remains in the repertory, his achievement retains its historical importance as well, especially with respect to cultural life in New York in the mid-twentieth century.

An extraordinary personal life complemented this remarkable professional one. Composer Ned Rorem went so far as to say, paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, that Latouche "put his genius into his life and his talent into his art," although others, including such collaborators as Vernon Duke, Duke Ellington, and Douglas Moore, might have begged to differ, as they considered his work to possess "genius" as well. In any case, he cut a vibrant figure: charismatic, brilliant, querulous, hilariously funny, exuberantly unconventional, extravagantly generous, and to the likes of Rorem and Gore Vidal, surpassingly witty and entertaining company.<sup>1</sup>

Even as a teenager in Richmond, Virginia, the son of a single impoverished mother, herself the daughter of poor Jewish immigrants, Latouche captivated the city's intellectual and artistic elite. Within a short time of his arrival in New York, first to attend Riverdale Country Day School and then Columbia University, he became the admired wunderkind of a circle that included Marc Blitzstein, Paul and Jane Bowles (whom he introduced to each other), Aaron Copland, E. E. Cummings, Edwin Denby, Buffie Johnson, Carson McCullers, Dawn Powell, Virgil Thomson, and Carl Van Vechten. At the same time, he befriended New York's growing refugee artist community, and soon could count among his friends Yul Brynner, Marlene Dietrich, Frederick and Stefanie Kiesler, Erika and Klaus Mann, Eleonora and Francesco von Mendelssohn, Anaïs Nin, and Ruth Yorck. And as a student of psychology and a devotee of the occult and Eastern spirituality, he also developed friendships with such prominent doctors as Max Jacobson, Max Rinkel, and Andrew Salter as well as with the medium Eileen Garrett, ghost hunter Hans Holzer, palmist

Margaret Mamlok, and astrologers Charles Jayne and Natacha Rambova, many of these immigrants as well. Although Latouche never, as he had hoped, made it to Europe, Europe came to him.

By the time of his death, Latouche's Manhattan residence had become one of the city's leading artistic salons, where one could find, in addition to those cited above, such other friends as John Cage, Truman Capote, Ellsworth Kelly, Jack Kerouac, Lena Horne, Frank O'Hara, Sono Osato, Larry Rivers, Orson Welles, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams—a dazzling constellation of diverse artists working in sundry fields, all attracted to Latouche's brilliance and *joie de vivre*, not to mention his support for their work.

Latouche had a similarly elaborate love life. He had affairs, sometimes overlapping, with a number of men, including photographer Harry Dunham, composer Donald Fuller, workman Frank Merlo, dancer Walter Stane, painter Harry Martin, and poet Kenward Elmslie, with whom he purchased a country home in Calais, Vermont, in 1953 as a haven from his hectic city life. But he had romantic involvements with women as well, including in the early 1940s a brief marriage to Theodora Griffis, the mainly lesbian daughter of the prominent businessman and diplomat Stanton Griffis; and in the 1950s an ardent relationship with Alice Bouverie, a scion of New York's baronial Astor family. Suffice to say, Latouche lived a very full forty-one years; commented Ned Rorem, "since he had lived three lives in one, wasn't he really 123 years when he disappeared forever?"<sup>2</sup>



# The Ballad of John Latouche



Gallery 1 (captions are on pages ix–xii)



*Figure 1*



*Figure 2*



*Figure 3*



*Figure 4*



*Figure 5*



*Figure 6*



*Figure 7*



*Figure 8*



*Figure 9*



*Figure 10*

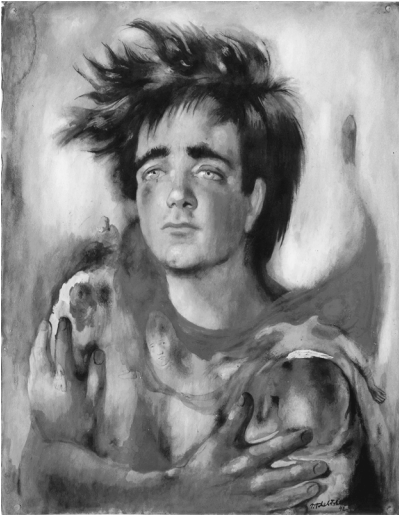


Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

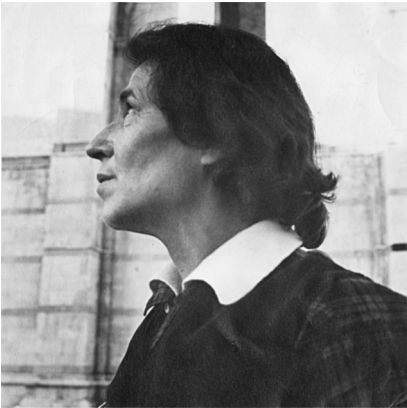


Figure 17



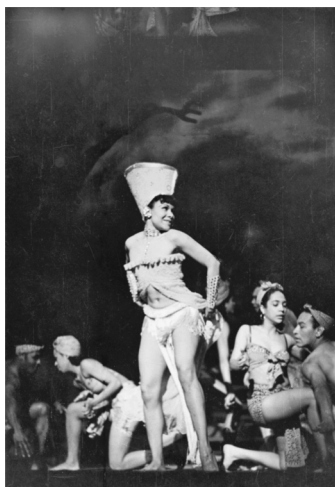
Figure 18



*Figure 19*



*Figure 20*



*Figure 21*



*Figure 22*



*Figure 23*



*Figure 24*



*Figure 25*



*Figure 26*



*Figure 27*



*Figure 28*

Gallery 2 (captions are on pages xii–xv)



*Figure 29*



*Figure 30*



*Figure 31*



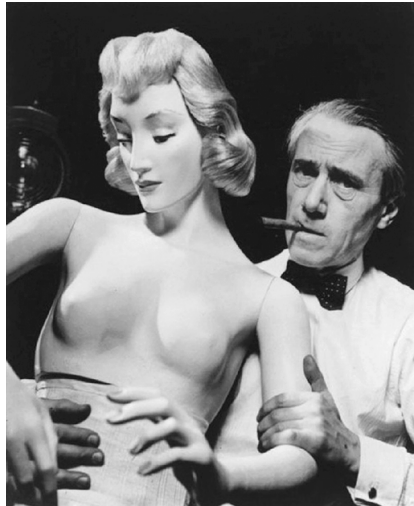
*Figure 32*



*Figure 33*



*Figure 34*



*Figure 35*



*Figure 36*



*Figure 37*



*Figure 38*



Figure 39



Figure 40



Figure 41



Figure 42



Figure 43



Figure 44



Figure 45

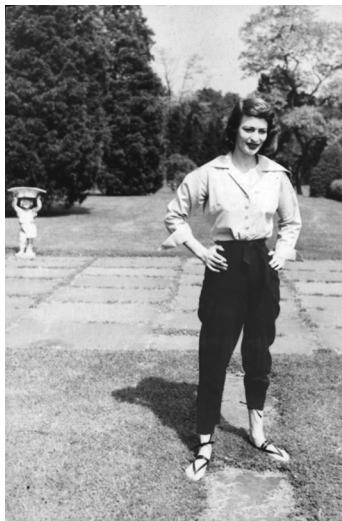


Figure 46



Figure 47



Figure 48



Figure 49



Figure 50



*Figure 51*



*Figure 52*



*Figure 53*



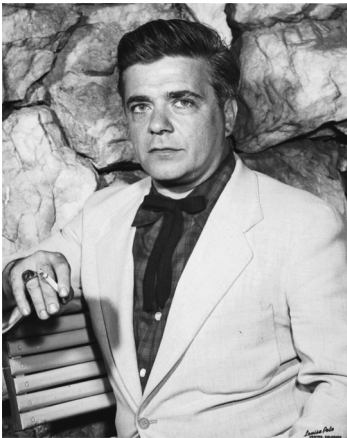
*Figure 54*



*Figure 55*



*Figure 56*



*Figure 57*



*Figure 58*

# John Latouche and His Family

John Treville Latouche was born late in the afternoon of November 13, 1914, at Baltimore's Maryland General Hospital. His parents, Burford and Effie Latouche, only recently had moved to Baltimore from Richmond, Virginia, to which they returned around four months after their son's birth. John—who mostly went by his middle name until about age twenty-one—duly grew up in Richmond, where even to this day, some sixty years after his death, some locals remember him as Treville (pronounced Tre-VILL).

A port city on the James River with a population in the mid-1910s of about 150,000, Richmond had served as Virginia's capital since 1780, when the Commonwealth relocated its government seat there from nearby Williamsburg. Four of the country's first five presidents—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe—had made Richmond their home at one point or another, as did Chief Justice John Marshall. Yet another founding father, Patrick Henry, delivered his legendary “Give me liberty, or give me death!” speech from the pulpit of a Richmond church (as mentioned by Latouche in his popular cantata, *Ballad for Americans*). This rich history helped the Confederate States of America decide to make the city its capital in 1861, and for a few short years Richmond functioned both as the Confederacy's seat under President Jefferson Davis and as its center of military operations under Gen. Robert E. Lee.

However, even before the Civil War, the town had begun to lose prominence compared to other national centers. This relative decline continued after the war, which helped make the city a focal point for the so-called Lost Cause and foster the town's reputation, in historian Virginius Dabney's words, “for stodginess and stuffiness.” After visiting Richmond in 1905, writer Henry James commented, “there was something in my whole sense of the South that projected at moments a vivid and painful image—that of a figure somehow blighted or stricken, uncomfortably, impossibly seated in an invalid-chair, and yet fixing one with strange eyes that were half a defiance and half a depreciation of one's noticing, and much more of one's referring to, any abnormal sign” (although James at least could recommend “the weird chants of the emancipated blacks”). At the same time, Richmond's tobacco and textile industries and its financial and government services provided a cushion

during economic downturns, including the Great Depression (although its segregated black population—who constituted about a third of the city's population during Latouche's boyhood—enjoyed far fewer opportunities than local whites).<sup>1</sup>

Richmond thus developed a dual personality, including close commercial ties with the North even as it sacralized the rural South. "Its head was given to an industrial north," writes Edgar MacDonald, "its heart to an agrarian south. Down the James, it looked eastward to a European homeland; to the west, it felt the lure of the frontier." John Latouche, a man who eventually made New York his home but who retained ties with Richmond, a poet who could pen lyrics of the utmost urbanity alongside verse of folksy charm, would reflect some of these tensions in both his life and work.<sup>2</sup>

Like other provincial capitals of the day, Richmond had its fair share of movie palaces, arts clubs, and nightspots, along with theaters that hosted visiting concert artists and touring companies. And although something of a backwater, early-twentieth-century Richmond could also boast, if no one as exceptional as Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), who had spent his early years there, at least three accomplished artists of national repute: writers Ellen Glasgow (1873–1945) and James Branch Cabell (1879–1958) and composer John Powell (1882–1963). In the early 1920s, Richmond even hosted an adventurous little magazine, the *Reviewer*, that during its short tenure published the work not only of Glasgow and Cabell, but of Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, Carl Van Vechten, and other advanced authors. Cabell would play a particularly decisive role as a mentor to the young Latouche, but the latter also had some casual contact with Powell and surely would have been familiar with Glasgow and her work as well. In any event, their collective achievement provides something of the background against which Latouche's own work emerged and thus warrants some consideration here.<sup>3</sup>

Although Glasgow, the ironic realist, and Cabell, the allegorical fabulist, appear in some ways opposites, both satirized in their many novels the shibboleths common to their time and place, including lofty sentiments that often disguised vulgar strivings for money, power, and sex. "A Virginian," explained Cabell, tongue in cheek, "must write always about the beauty of chivalry and the peerless moral standards and all the yet other outstanding features of Virginia in fiction." Such mockery made him and Glasgow somewhat heretical locally, even as it won them the admiration of critics of American life like H. L. Mencken. All the same, both Glasgow and Cabell disassociated themselves from some of the more progressive trends of the period and assumed, in general, relatively conservative profiles, their novels maintaining a somewhat acquiescent respect for the ways of life that in many respects repulsed them; "neither could quite give up the idealism and romanticism of the nineteenth century," notes Marie Tyler-McGraw.<sup>4</sup>

Composer Powell cut an even more contradictory figure. Born like Glasgow and Cabell into a privileged Richmond family, he returned to his native city from abroad in 1914 after notable success as a concert pianist. As a composer, he came to wide-

spread attention especially for his symphonic poem *Rhapsodie Nègre* (1918), whose title and style evoked French traditions, but whose distinctive use of black folk idioms anticipated the work of the African-American composer William Grant Still, among others. More characteristically, Powell championed—as composer, lecturer, and promoter—Anglo-American folk music of especially Appalachia, including helping to establish the White Top Music Festival in southwestern Virginia in 1931. This advocacy had its notorious side, as Powell simultaneously promulgated white racial purity through sponsorship of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America in 1922 and Virginia's Racial Integrity Law of 1924, although it might be noted that such activities, albeit reviled by many blacks and whites alike, brought Powell and his wife, the playwright and theater director Louise Burleigh (whom he married in 1928), into a cordial alliance with such black Pan-Africanists as Marcus Garvey and his wife, Amy Jacques Garvey.<sup>5</sup>

Latouche's adolescent involvement with community theater in Richmond apparently brought him into some contact with Burleigh, and through her, with Powell; in June 1940, while working for NBC Radio in New York, the twenty-five-year-old Latouche began his only known letter to the composer by saying, "You probably won't remember me—I am the scrubby-kneed boy who used to pop into your house to see your wife every now and then." He now was writing Powell, he explained, to say that through their mutual friend, the folksinger and dulcimer player Andrew Rowan Summers, he had heard about White Top, and to propose that NBC record the festival—which he described to poet Archibald MacLeish as "the most remarkable musical event we have in America"—for national broadcast (a proposal that came to naught, as heavy rains forced White Top to cancel its 1940 and, as it happened, final season). Latouche very likely knew something about Powell's racial politics, which ran counter to his own, but nonetheless recognized some common ground in their interest in American folk balladry, the young writer even assuring Powell that he had been "working in experimental radio and theatre here in New York, basing most of my works on folk sources."<sup>6</sup>

Over time, the titles alone of three of Latouche's most celebrated achievements—*Ballad for Americans*, *Ballet Ballads*, and *The Ballad of Baby Doe*—attested to this shared enthusiasm, as did his general love of traditional ballads. "John was so modest," wrote novelist Carson McCullers in her eulogy for him, "that few people realized he was one of the most profound folk musicians in this country. When he played his little spinit [*sic*] piano I was continually amazed at his repertoire and his astonishing memory. The last time he was in my home in Nyack he was entertaining us all with old English Ballads." Latouche's friend Ruth Yorck similarly recalled him sitting for hours at the piano playing and singing not only American but European folksongs (as well as songs of his own devising, sometimes created on the spot); another friend, Lord Kinross, similarly asserted, "He knew and loved and tried to sing, as he thumped at the piano, all the songs of the English music-hall and the less familiar songs of the English pub." Whether Powell's advocacy and dissemination of

folk music directly or indirectly influenced Latouche, their Richmond backgrounds surely helped frame their understanding and appreciation of African-American and Anglo-American folklore.<sup>7</sup>

The connection with Cabell would prove much closer, both personally and artistically, as will be shown. But Latouche fundamentally inhabited a different world from these older Richmonders, not only because he was some thirty years their junior and spent his adult life in New York, but because his irrepressible nonconformity set him apart from their more conventional habits and attitudes. He vehemently decried the treatment of blacks in the South and otherwise distanced himself from many Southern traditions, admitting in a 1935 college profile that he “early acquired a dislike for hominy, Civil War veterans, ginger ale without gin, and the word, ‘you-all,’” and telling a journalist in 1940 that he lost a youthful job reviewing books for the *Richmond News Leader* for “panning every book about the South.” That said, he retained many aspects of his Southern heritage in his art and his lifestyle, right down to his melodious Virginian accent and the black-eyed peas served at New Year’s, not to mention his penchant for walking about barefoot even when fully clothed and talking “white Southern trash” when deep into his cups. “One has only to step into his Greenwich Village apartment,” reported the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* in 1949, “to recognize that here is the home of a cosmopolitan artist whose way of life has been tempered by the graciousness and charm of the South.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1940, following the great success of *Ballad for Americans*, the newly founded *Current Biography* published an article on the work’s little-known librettist; this entry subsequently became a seminal source of information on Latouche, making it all the more regrettable that it contained so many erroneous and misleading statements, most if not all apparently originating with the subject himself.<sup>9</sup>

For a start, the article stated that Latouche was born in 1917, not 1914, a fabrication that the lyricist largely maintained for the rest of his life, to the point that when he died in 1956, not only his obituaries but his death certificate gave 1917 as his year of birth (although adding to the confusion, his gravestone put his birth year as 1915, the year he also provided to the military as his date of birth). Latouche had been shaving off a year or two from his age as early as January 1939, when the press alternately reported him to be twenty-two or twenty-three, not twenty-four; he presumably reasoned that such prevarication could only enhance his reputation as “the boy wonder of Broadway.” Along these lines, he told *Current Biography* that while at Columbia he had won the Stephen Vincent Benét Prize for Being Generally Astonishing While Awfully Young—which sounds like a joke at the expense of Benét, but which points nonetheless to some pride in his own precociousness (which in fact needed no exaggeration). More seriously, this preoccupation with youthfulness informed much of his work, including his last major effort, *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, which meaningfully concludes with the words, “ever young.”<sup>10</sup>

*Current Biography* further reported, “Although he looks French (he is dark-complexioned and has light blue eyes) and his name is French, Latouche is actually of Irish descent. The explanation is that at the time of the Edict of Nantes many Frenchmen came to Ireland and settled there; later many came to America. Among those was his great-grandfather, who became a wealthy landowner in Virginia.” Latouche similarly had claimed French-Irish lineage some years earlier in a thumbnail profile for Columbia’s 1935 Varsity Show program book, and asserted elsewhere to have descended from French Huguenots, and to have been christened John Patrick Diggs Treville Latouche, a name that would suggest some Irish ancestry as well. Privately, he also professed to have descended from a medieval French nobleman from the Poitou region of France, a drawing of whose family crest he apparently received from Pierre de La Nux, the son of André Gide’s piano teacher, Max de La Nux. “I dont have to tell you,” Latouche added to a friend with respect to this genealogical claim, “how unimportant I consider such things; God knows, the sorry mess his descendants made of themselves would bleach the most azure of bloodstreams.”<sup>11</sup>

Aside from the fact that French Protestants would not have left France because of the Edict of Nantes but rather because of its revocation a century later, surviving documents, including censuses, tell a different story. Latouche’s great-grandfather John Latouche (1820–1890) was the British-born son of a Frenchman and an Englishwoman, and a possible descendant of the famed late-eighteenth-century French naval commander Louis-René Levasseur de Latouche-Tréville, who fought in the American Revolution (perhaps explaining the lyricist’s comment to his mother, after joining the navy, “I suppose there’s enough seawater left in the Latouches’ blood to get me worked up about it”). An accomplished custom tailor, this great-grandfather—who appears to have been the same John Latouche who, as a lieutenant in the Twenty-fifth Virginia Infantry Battalion of the Confederacy, supervised guards at Richmond’s infamous Libby Prison—had several children with the Maryland-born Fannie Weeks (or Wicks, c. 1830–1899), including not only the lyricist’s grandfather John Santees, but a great-uncle Treville, after whom the lyricist in part would be named, and another great-uncle Louis, after whom his brother would be named. Grandfather John Santees Latouche (c. 1868–1946) in turn married a Virginia native, Neva St. Clair (St. Clare) Duggins (c. 1872–1951), with whom he had six surviving children: the lyricist’s father, Archer Louis Burford (known both as “Archie” and “Burford”), along with John St. Clair, Marie Louise (later, Abbott), Victor Burnett, Leon Lafayette, and Neva St. Clair (later, Niewoehner).<sup>12</sup>

Grandfather John continued the family tailoring business, typically operating out of one or another storefront on Main Street, Richmond’s principal thoroughfare. His son Burford (1894–1947) worked in his late teens as a clerk, but by his twenties had taken up tailoring and laundering as well. Like most of his family, Burford received little formal education, completing only six grades of school, although he could write tolerably well, as an extant letter documents.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the oft-made contention, principally derived from *Current Biography*, that Latouche descended paternally from a wealthy landowner of Franco-Irish lineage appears more fantasy than anything else, for he plainly came, on his father's side, from a family of humble tailors of mostly English origin. Given his difficult and impoverished childhood, the lyricist perhaps compensated by identifying with the cachet of Virginian planter aristocracy and the glamor surrounding, say, the French-Irish-American heroine of Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind* and its popular 1939 movie adaptation (although Latouche thought the film, as he wrote to this mother, "bad beyond belief. . . I am one of the traitors who has a vague idea that the South did lose it [the Civil War]"). No Patricks or Diggses seem to appear in Latouche's family line, although there existed a well-known aristocratic Irish family, Digges Latouche, descended from French Protestants; considering the lyricist's penchant for embellishing the truth, he might have rechristened himself accordingly. At any rate, *Current Biography* compounded its error-riddled account of Latouche by referring to the writer's father as deceased, whereas Burford then was residing, as he had for some time, at a state mental institution.<sup>14</sup>

Latouche further misled *Current Biography* by omitting any mention of his Jewish parentage on his mother's side. Indeed, apart from an early 1932 description of himself, in an anthology of high-school verse, as "the product of a conglomerate ancestry, with Irish, French, and Jewish blood the principal strains," Latouche rarely referred to his Jewish background, about which he felt "conflicted" and "fearful," according to his partner, Kenward Elmslie; he rather presented his ethnicity as Franco-Irish or more simply Irish even to his closest friends. Writer Gore Vidal, for instance, called him "a short chunky Irish wit" (although he knew enough to add, "with the obligatory Jewish mother"), while another friend, the medium Eileen Garrett, wrote in her memoirs, "Although Latouche had not visited Ireland, the land of leprechauns and fairies was in his heritage." Actress Carol Channing described not only Latouche but even his mother, Effie, "with her white Irish lace collar and cuffs," as Irish. Meanwhile, in her memoirs, Ruth Yorck, although herself Jewish, discussed his ancestry exclusively in terms of his French background, even though his bloodline appears to have been only one-sixteenth French.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, both Latouche's maternal grandparents were Jewish immigrants: Morris Seigel (c. 1850–c. 1918) came to America from Germany in 1880, Jennie (c. 1874–1928), from Russia in 1891. Jennie's gravestone identifies her, in Hebrew, as Sheinah Glike, the daughter of Reb Chaim Manush Halevi, that is, Chaim Manush of the tribe of Levi. Family lore holds that this Chaim Manush—Latouche's great-grandfather—was a rabbi (as the honorific "Reb" might suggest), and further contends that Jennie had been a mail-order bride, or that the marriage had been otherwise arranged, a notion supported by the fact that she and Morris married about 1892, shortly after Jennie, still in her teens, arrived in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Morris appears to have been an itinerant peddler dealing in second-hand clothes, trekking through Illinois, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Ohio before settling in Richmond

at the turn of the century. The Virginia capital had a small but vibrant and tightly knit Jewish community, dating back to the eighteenth century, that over the years had established several institutions that addressed its special needs, including the *Jewish South*, a weekly paper founded in 1893—by which year, the town's approximately three thousand Jews made up around 4 percent of the local population. As a whole, the city seemed to take pride that, as the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* stated in 1905, "A Jew born and reared in Virginia is a Virginian, and is treated as a Virginian," which however left unanswered the question of the treatment of Jews like Morris or Jennie born elsewhere; and indeed, the new wave of poor Eastern-European Jewish immigrants, as opposed to older Sephardic and German-Jewish immigrants, often faced increased discrimination with respect to housing, employment, and education, not to mention hotels and clubs. "You do not have to go a thousand miles from Richmond," stated a local rabbi in 1910 in response to such exclusionary practices in New York, "to find these conditions. We have this same sort of snobocracy in our own fair city."<sup>17</sup>

As they moved from state to state, Morris and Jennie Seigel had a number of children, six of whom survived to adulthood: Mary (later, Bottoms), Essie ("Effie," later Latouche), Rosa ("Rose," later Chandler, then Mimms), Abraham ("Abe"), Joseph, and Emanuel ("Manny"). Effie (1895–1964), the lyricist's mother, was born in Chicago. Her given name appears as Etta or Ethel in some early sources, but as Essie Evelyn or, more commonly, Effie in later ones; at some point, although apparently after her divorce from Burford Latouche, she also assumed "Tupper" as her maiden name, often identifying herself as E. E. Tupper Latouche or Effie Tupper Latouche.

In Richmond, Latouche's maternal grandparents established a used clothing business at 1908 East Main in Shockoe Bottom, an area long central to the town's Jewish community, and not far either from where Edgar Allan Poe had spent his adolescence, indeed, on the same block as the Old Stone House that today serves as the city's Poe Museum. According to family accounts, Morris, who often traveled out of town, was alcoholic, abusive, and possibly a bigamist; a newspaper item reported in 1909 that during a row in which Jennie had attempted to send Morris away after six months' absence, Morris stabbed her in the legs and stomach with an ice pick. The circumstances surrounding Morris's final years remain unknown—he's thought to have died in the mid-1910s—but his much younger widow continued the clothing business at one or another East Main Street address practically to her death in 1928.<sup>18</sup>

Like children from other poor families, the Seigel siblings cut short their schooling to help support their family. Effie worked as a packer in a tobacco factory before, at age fifteen, she and the seventeen-year-old Burford Latouche, still a clerk living at home, took the so-called Cupid's Express train with ten other couples on April 17, 1911, to get married that day in Washington, D.C. (On their marriage application, they gave their ages as nineteen and twenty-one, respectively.) The three Seigel

boys, for their part, apparently inherited something of their father's unruly ways: in 1918, the police apprehended Abraham for shooting a black chauffeur in the arm after a traffic accident; and in 1930, Joseph and Emanuel received a four-month jail sentence and a \$100 fine for violating Prohibition.<sup>19</sup>

Burford and Effie at first lived with the former's parents, but as mentioned, they moved to Baltimore shortly before John's birth in 1914, and soon after circled back to Richmond, where they attempted to establish themselves as tailors and launderers themselves. In the spring of 1917, they relocated to Penniman, a new ammunition plant town outside Williamsburg, but soon returned again to Richmond, residing mostly at downtown addresses, although in 1919, about the time they had a second boy, Louis Burford, they moved to East Highland Park, a suburban neighborhood north of the city.<sup>20</sup>

Despite growing up in an historic Jewish neighborhood, and Jennie Seigel's lifelong attachment to Jewish traditions, including attendance at Richmond's historic Orthodox synagogue, Keneseth Beth Israel, Effie and her siblings tended to marry outside their religion and reject their Jewish background as socially stigmatic, with Rosa becoming devoutly Catholic. In Effie's case, she essentially raised her sons as Protestant, providing them with a Christian religious education; John even won an elaborately inscribed Bible when he was about ten years old, as his mother later recalled, for memorizing dozens of verses from Scripture. At the same time, John surely inherited certain aspects of his Jewish heritage, and his swarthy "French" looks and ironic "Gallic wit" with reason could be described as Jewish-American as much as anything else.<sup>21</sup>

As an adult, Latouche identified himself as "Protestant by conviction," even as he contributed gifts in the 1950s to the Abbey of Regina Laudis, a community of nuns in Bethlehem, Connecticut. He further maintained an interest in biblical literature, and spoke respectfully of his Christian faith, although within limits: "Christianity and modern thought have finally taught us to be tolerant of the faults of others, but it is extremely difficult to tolerate the pleasures of others, for even the most civilized of us," he wrote in his journal in 1944. In contrast, he generally made little explicit reference to anything Jewish, although in his diary, he occasionally excoriated anti-semitism, even as he indulged in some stereotyping himself, noting while in the navy, for instance, the "caricature Jew in the next bunk" who "turned out to [be] charming, and a great admirer of [Paul] Bowles' music. Someone literate in camp anyway, thank God." In a transcribed conversation with his doctor, Max Jacobson, in 1949, he also showed deep admiration for the new state of Israel and characteristic fascination with something so fanciful as British Israelism, the belief that the British, including the monarchy, descended from the ancient Israelites. (This same conversation, which occurred during Passover, also documented some fluency in Yiddish; asking Jacobson for some matzo and salami, he requested "a bissel of yontif," that is, "a little bit of the holiday.") However, Latouche's sprawling spiritual interests centered not so much on either Christianity or Judaism as on far-Eastern

religions—Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism—and on such occult arts as astrology, tarot, and telepathy.<sup>22</sup>

As it turned out, Effie married a man all too much like her father: not only a poor provider, but a violent alcoholic whose blows allegedly caused her to miscarry a child. She finally brought charges against him and the two divorced in early 1923, when son John was eight years old. After spending some time in Western State Hospital in Staunton, marrying one Fannie Price in 1925, working as a barber in Richmond, and once again moving to Baltimore, Burford wrote Effie in 1927 a contrite letter in which he blamed “whisky and bad company” for his past misconduct, and apologized, as a man “starting to live a Christian life,” for all “the many years of suffering” he had caused her and her mother (both of whom he described as “good, true, and kind to all friends”). He further assured her that he still cared about her and offered to pay three dollars a week in child support (a paltry sum even then). He even proposed that John, now age twelve, come to Baltimore to study at the Peabody Institute, indicating that music had assumed at this point some central importance in the young lad’s life.<sup>23</sup>

The following year, in 1928, Burford and his new wife, Fannie, had a son, Burford Jr., but that family also quickly dissolved; the 1930 census found Fannie at Western State Hospital and Burford living again with his parents in Richmond. Burford Jr. was placed in the care of the boy’s maternal grandparents, who raised him. Subsequently, Fannie divorced Burford and remarried, becoming Fannie Nunnally, while Burford was admitted to another mental health institution, Eastern State Hospital, outside Williamsburg. During these later years, even long before Burford’s death in 1947, Effie commonly referred to herself as a widow, much as her son John described himself as fatherless (which to all practical purposes he was).<sup>24</sup>

As a single mother still in her twenties, Effie eked out a living as a seamstress. “My father faded out of our lives early,” Latouche stated in 1949, “leaving the support and rearing of me and my brother to my mother. As has happened to so many mothers, she had to turn to her needle for our support. I helped when I could and as much as I could, but yet my mother saw to it that I had time for schooling and association with families which made me a part of the culture of the South. She was marvelous.” Such assistance on John’s part included delivering newspapers with his younger brother, Louis, and finding employment in his early teens as a clerk.<sup>25</sup>

During these hard years, Effie continued the seemingly endless peregrinations that had marked her married life, including living for a while in the mid-1920s with her ex-husband’s uncle and aunt, Frederick and Frances (“Fannie”) Latimer, who frightened young John with stories about “bloody bones who lived in the closet under the stairs.” In the early years of the Depression, with John now in high school, the family’s circumstances apparently worsened all the more, forcing them into a series of mostly unpleasant boarding houses. Years later, after chronicling, at John’s request, their many addresses during this period, Effie added, “Perhaps you wonder why so much moving around—Well—that is something I cannot bring myself, to

write about.” But she expressed satisfaction that after he graduated from high school, John was “lucky enough to shake the dust of Richmond, off your shoes.”<sup>26</sup>

As Latouche pursued his later education and career in New York, Effie continued her work as a seamstress, eventually securing a position as a tailor for Berry-Burk, a large and well-regarded clothier in downtown Richmond. During these years, John aided his mother financially, and after he moved into a large top-floor apartment on East 67th Street in 1952, she spent considerable time there herself, in part to help with housekeeping chores and otherwise bring some order to her son’s chaotic life. After John’s death in 1956, Effie stayed in Manhattan until her own death in 1964, living in an apartment on the Upper West Side. Meanwhile, her son Louis, after serving in the army during World War II, remained in the Richmond area with his wife, Ora Lee, he working as a salesman, she, as a seamstress. Louis died in 1962, two years before his mother.<sup>27</sup>

Effie helped nurture John’s talent, encouraging his early education and submitting his juvenilia to magazines for publication. She clearly took great delight in her son’s accomplishments, hiring a charter bus so that Virginian friends could attend a post-Broadway Washington performance of Latouche’s 1954 opera *The Golden Apple*, with the lyricist commenting, after the show won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award, “Effie is having my swelled head for me. She rides up and down in the apartment elevator asking everyone, ‘Did you know we won the Critics Award?’” For his part, Latouche basked in his mother’s pride; on the day of the Central City world premiere of *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, he made of point of standing “outside the Teller House all afternoon talking to people and telling each, in turn, that his mother had flown in for the performance too.”<sup>28</sup>

A good cook, Effie loved to host parties, and after moving to New York, she enjoyed entertaining many of her son’s friends, some of whom she remained close with even after her son’s death; in 1958, for instance, she cared for an ailing Jane Bowles, then convalescing in Tennessee Williams’s apartment. “Mrs. LaTouche is pert and dynamic and her famous son is the image of her,” observed a journalist at the time of the premiere of *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. “Everyone recognizes her without an introduction.” Writer Coleman Dowell, who came to loathe Latouche, remained nevertheless inordinately fond of Effie, whose seeming obliviousness regarding the homosexuality of Latouche and his friends he found charming: “She was small, plump, disingenuous, full of appalling, unfunny Southern stories, and was delightful.” Latouche’s agent, Lucy Kroll, also liked Effie, writing to the latter’s sister in 1964, after both Effie and John had died, “You know that Effie was so dear to me and John was like my brother.” In contrast, several other of Latouche’s friends, such as poets Kenward Elmslie and Gerrit Lansing, thought Effie, whatever “mystical blood understanding” she shared with her son, boorishly provincial and uneducated. “All she ever talked about was food,” remarked Paul Bowles.<sup>29</sup>

Latouche’s relationship with his mother, as with virtually all those close to him, had its share of emotional volatility. Coleman Dowell—although not the most reli-

able witness—claimed that the two “would fight fearsomely; he would back her into a corner threatening mayhem.” All the same, as evidenced by his postcards and letters to her (sometimes addressed “dearest mother” or “dearest one,” but most often “dear Effie,” and alternately signed, “John,” “J,” and “Treville”), Latouche could be an effusively loving and appreciative son, telling Effie in June 1955, for instance,

the past year especially, I do not know how I could have survived the going without you. At the same time, with all the personal and temperamental difficulties that had to be adjusted, I feel that I have gotten to know you better than I ever did—not only as a “mother,” but as a person; and a vital, remarkable person you turn out to be indeed. I become increasingly aware that part of the persistent energy I have, (which offsets my tendency to melancholy and depression) comes from you—an energy which continues plugging away in the face of the most terrible discouragements . . . the feeling of your belief in me helps to smooth the rigors of an unpredictable and sometimes appalling world. . . . You are a bouncing, cheerful angel, and I love you.

A few months later, after the two had decided on a state of “interdependence” rather than “dependence” or “independence,” he wrote to her from Vermont, “at a distance, I realize how fortunate I am in having such a dear and loving mother, who at the same time is still young enough to be a companion and friend—and still young enough to grow in depth of understanding.” Effie described such correspondence to Coleman Dowell as “love lettahs—jest exactly like a lettah from a lovah.”<sup>30</sup>

Latouche maintained only distant relations with other family members. He seems to have been somewhat close to his uncle Leon Latouche, a hospital corpsman “ideally located in the Navy,” of whom the lyricist further wrote in 1951, “he still has an emotional quotient of roughly (the adverb is ill-chosen) ten years. A real old fashioned Miss Priss; rather touching, for all that.” Regarding his mother’s family, he had most contact with Effie’s sister Rosa and her large family, but an intriguing connection also emerges with respect to his uncles Abraham and Emanuel: for many years, the former entertained children and adults dressed as Santa Claus, while the latter appeared at Shriner events as a clown—a striking concurrence given Latouche’s own reputation as a jester and clown.<sup>31</sup>

As for brother Louis, their relationship deteriorated over the years. Louis apparently became jealous and resentful of his famous older brother, whose middle name, Treville, he seems to have adopted as his own. On his side, John increasingly distanced himself from Louis, whose drunken and violent behavior painfully reminded him of his father, and perhaps of himself as well. Indeed, with an alcoholic and abusive grandfather, father, and brother, Latouche must have been all too aware of this dark legacy on both sides of his family, and, as his diaries make abundantly clear, he worked hard if fitfully—through diet, exercise, yoga, and psychoanalysis—to avoid a similar fate.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, Latouche had some remote contact with his half-brother, Burford Jr., who became a Virginia businessman, and who had only casual relations with the Latouches. Burford Jr.'s two boys—Burford III and Thomas, neither of whom had sons—would appear the last descendants of the lyricist's paternal grandparents to bear the Latouche name.<sup>33</sup>

## The Young Writer

Latouche had what seems to have been in many ways an unhappy, anxious childhood—hardly surprising given the poverty, rootlessness, abuse, alcoholism, and psychosis that plagued his family. “Last night I lay in bed, awake, petrified with fear that there was someone coming in the unlocked door . . .,” he wrote in his journal in 1938. “I was completely awake, but reality took on the form of a nightmare. When I was a child afraid of the dark I was possessed by such terrors, but I am now a man, and still those doors may be opened, letting out old terrors retained as long, flooding my brain with fears.” Such “terrors” haunted Latouche his entire life, including his dread of sleeping in the dark.<sup>1</sup>

The young Treville, as he was then known, at least found that the arts provided some solace. Near the end of his life, he said of his childhood,

When life became unbearable I would retire to the Bluebird and Isis Theaters [two Richmond movie theaters on Broad Street]. At seven I saw [Alla] Nazimova in “Salome,” which was so extraordinary that I wanted to get through the archway surrounding the screen to that glamorous world it framed. The next day I climbed the telegraph pole behind the theater and through a window so that I was behind the screen, with the images reversed. I touched it but couldn’t get into that one-dimensional magic.

This little escapade—which had him thrown out of the theater—gave evidence of not only early artistic sensibilities, but also an innate adventurous streak; meanwhile, the specific allure of Nazimova’s *Salome* anticipated the presence of various vamps and sirens in his theatrical work, including an apparently lost revue sketch entitled “How It Feels to Be Mae West.”<sup>2</sup>

Latouche showed his emerging artistic proclivities in other ways. According to one of his aunts, during his family’s time in Penniman, Virginia, which would put him at about age five, he danced and passed the hat for sailors at the local YMCA. Back in Richmond, he started staging garage theatricals, including one in which he played Dracula, and his friend Jean Clarke Wood, his principal victim. Latouche

must have had these early shows in mind, perhaps this very one, when he spoke about his first play at age eleven, *The Gypsy Legend*, or *The Lover from the Grave*:

It was a smash hit with the neighborhood children, and netted \$.53. . . .

Next followed *Things That Walk in Darkness*, which frightened so many children into hysterics that further productions were banned. The play, though an artistic failure, was a financial success—it brought in \$1.84, clear profit, since the scenery and costumes were shamelessly stolen from unfinished houses and unsuspecting mothers. The author has never grown away from this theory.

And at age fourteen, on Halloween night, presumably in 1929, he presented in the basement of a friend's home another show, *Walpurgis Eve*, which so frightened his kiddie audience that they left in "convulsions," according to Jack Woodford (pen name for Josiah Pitts Woodfolk, 1894–1971), the Chicagoan writer who made Richmond his occasional home during these years. "It was a honey," wrote Woodford. "It expressed the Halloween spirit perfectly: sadism." In a similar vein, Latouche arranged a mock funeral for a friend's doll, complete with a burial in the girl's backyard, confirming a youthful taste for what might be called, given his background, Southern Gothic.<sup>3</sup>

However he came by his musical abilities, Latouche also learned enough piano while still in his teens—if Woodford can be believed—to perform Claude Debussy's *Trois Chansons de Bilitis* for voice and piano (from Pierre Louÿs's sapphic collection of poems). Indeed, as mentioned, music became for Latouche something of a focus at about age twelve, to judge from his father's suggestion that he come to Baltimore to study at the Peabody Institute.<sup>4</sup>

Books became another great love. He read widely and voraciously throughout his life, early devouring the Tom Swift and Tarzan adventure novels of Edward Stratemeyer and Edgar Rice Burroughs as well as, soon enough, the writings of Freud and the Swiss Renaissance scientist Paracelsus. In his autobiography, Woodford—who remembered meeting the hungry and tattered Treville at about age thirteen, and whose petite blond daughter, Louella Woolfolk, became the lad's close friend—claimed that by the time Latouche reached his midteens, "he had read all of the world's literature, some of it in French, and he had picked up a smattering of other languages from [James Branch] Cabell and his own study." Discovering that Latouche could absorb books with lightning speed—a trait substantiated by later observers such as filmmaker André Cauvin, who marveled at the lyricist's astonishing memory—Woodford even had writer and editor Edward Aswell, on a visit to Richmond, put the young man to the test by having him quickly read a book "on some esoteric subject" and exhaustively questioning him afterward about its contents: "Aswell agreed then with all the local illuminati that Virginia had another Poe to snub on its hands, except that this one appeared to be a thousand times more brilliant." Woodford further

mentioned that Latouche, who reminded him of a modern François Villon, would neglect to return certain books checked out from the public library on the grounds that local Richmonders would have no interest in them. “This sort of thing was constantly leading to explosive situations involving the police and everybody who knew him [Latouche],” recalled Woodford. “But he knew so many influential people that somebody always squared the beef somehow.”<sup>5</sup>

Latouche’s digesting of books assumed a weirdly literal dimension, as revealed years later in one of his diary entries. Allegedly, as early as six years old he became fascinated with certain words, among them, the word “fatigued.” On one occasion, eager to use the word, he told his nursery school teacher, “Oh, Miss Rhine, I’m just so fatigooed,” which elicited laughter from a visiting adult and in turn the children in the class, and which prompted his teacher to admonish, “Little boys shouldn’t try to swallow the dictionary.” Recalled Latouche, “The boy who swallowed the dictionary—for months this terrible phrase haunted my dreams, and I could see it happening in a literal sense. Even today, I still absently tear off the corners of books and chew them, partly due to a habit arising out of a vitamin deficiency, no doubt, but also due to some animistic motivation that somewhat by eating the books, I would absorb the wisdom in them.”<sup>6</sup>

Latouche made his first real mark as a writer while at Richmond’s John Marshall High School, which he attended from the fall of 1928 through the spring of 1932. Named for the famous chief justice on whose former property it then stood, John Marshall functioned as one of the region’s leading educational institutions, from its opening in 1909 until its demolition in 1961. A large, three-story stone building, with an imposing neoclassical façade, the school aimed to further secondary education among white Richmonders as a whole, hence its reputation as “the people’s university.” By the time Latouche enrolled, the school had so fulfilled such ambitions that its population of more than three thousand students required imposition of two shifts, an overcrowding finally relieved in 1930 with the opening of Thomas Jefferson High School northwest of downtown.<sup>7</sup>

Several former teachers and schoolmates remembered Latouche as an ill-kempt “slum child” who resented his poverty. He also developed a reputation for eccentricity, telling fellow students that he had been born at the stroke of midnight during a thunderstorm on Friday the thirteenth, arriving at a costume ball dressed in a monk’s garb and sandals as St. Simeon Stylites, reportedly drinking nearly a gallon of cocoa at a school reception, and coming to class with no shirt under his overcoat. (He would continue to dress unconventionally, with a college profile, for instance, describing his “favorite exercise” as “not putting on a shirt.”) One English teacher, Walter Beverly, recalled further that he drew pictures to describe grammatical concepts, while his history teacher Sadie Engleberg remembered how he refused to interrupt his reading Radclyffe Hall’s groundbreaking 1928 lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* for an exam (“This book is far too important to stop reading for a test,” he protested), until she informed him that she too had read the controversial novel, at

which point he relented. In early 1931, his peers voted him “most original boy,” and when questioned about this honor by his school paper, he responded, “I was greatly surprised as I didn’t expect it,” before breaking into a British folksong that had the “agonized reporter” scurrying away. As in later years, many felt the force of his unorthodox personality, and by his junior year he had acquired a “coterie.” “We regarded him as a genius . . .,” recalled one high school friend in 1939. “He was allergic to discipline, and completely impervious to convention.”<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, Latouche became involved in all sorts of high school clubs and activities, joining the Writers’ Club, Dramatic Club (also called the Scarlet Maskers), French Society, and Harwood Literary Society (a public-speaking group), and contributing regularly to the school’s weekly, the *Monocle*, which began publication during his freshman year, and which, under the formidable supervision of his female English teacher Charles Anthony, quickly won acclaim as one of the best high-school papers in the region. Under the byline Treville La Touche (or alternately, Trevil La Touche), he started a column of his own—initially entitled “The Snoop,” but later “Fragments”—that itself received statewide recognition, as did his contributions to the school’s literary magazine, the *Record*.

The “Fragments” columns typically included a brief prose poem, some editorial reflections, chatty one-liners about various students and teachers, and a short poem or two. The prose poems suggest some absorption of recent aesthetic currents, as any number of opening lines illustrate: “The sun is a golden bowl that God has hammered out of the laughter of a woman dressed in a silver robe”; “The wan light of these deserted moons, Atrea, throws the whiteness of your hand into a faint memory of rose-petals”; “We will garner roses in newer granaries of dreams: that shall be the accomplishment of newer skies, after noon has gone”; and so on. Latouche’s little commentaries, meanwhile, display a certain preoccupation and ambivalence with respect to questions of tradition and modernity; he mocks Victorian prudery and sentimentality (alluding to Joyce Kilmer’s “Trees” he writes, “Poems are made by anyone / But only I can make a pun”) and rejects the concept of “an All-seeing Providence,” but he also parodies dadaist esotericism and at one point writes, “In casting aside old conventions and old fashions, we have cast aside, too, something of the consideration and companionship of the older generation.” Such tensions seem to echo the attitudes of some of Richmond’s established intelligentsia, including his friends Marie and T. Todd Dabney and his eventual mentor James Branch Cabell, whose influence can be discerned in the young writer’s baroque style and arch tone.<sup>9</sup>

These “Fragments” rarely allude to larger world affairs; as an exception, Latouche derides those “boosters” antagonistic to President Herbert Hoover’s attempts to provide Europe with some war debt relief. Nor does he discuss specific artists very much, although he has cause to refer to Gershwin’s *An American in Paris* as a “blaring, symphonic, tearing, sychophantic, antiphonal cry of Modern Existence,” and to share his enthusiasm for the then obscure Emily Dickinson, whose “exquisite” poetry is “full of

delicate mysticism and slender beauty that quivers in the reader's mind long after the book has been laid aside" (as an example, reproducing the whole of "I had no time to hate, because"). As for his own verse published here, it tends to be terse and evocative in the style of the Imagists and the early Ezra Pound, as in the tellingly titled "Image" ("This much is known: the wet boughs / Of lilac trees are black in the dawn"); or wittily aphoristic after the fashion of Dorothy Parker or Ogden Nash, as in "Nursery Rhyme" ("No matter what your talents are / If you but own a motor-car / You're certain to be popy-lar"), with one ditty, written in his senior year, even taking note of Nash: "Some people have a pash / For writing like Ogden Guash [*sic*]."<sup>10</sup>

Latouche pursued more serious literary ambitions with his stories and poems for the *Record*, John Marshall's prize-winning monthly literary journal founded in 1909, which during these years operated under the guidance of the English department's Walter Beverly and for which Latouche served as assistant and eventually associate editor. Descended from a literary Virginian family, Beverly (1890–1971), a writer himself, had progressive ideas, as might be inferred from his approving mention of socialist J. B. Priestley in a December 1930 talk bemoaning the state of the union. He and Latouche formed a close bond, and for a December 1931 issue of the *Monocle* that featured faculty contributions, Beverly jumped at the chance to pen a "Fragments" parody in the style of the "petite, inimitable Treville." On his part, Latouche praised Beverly for "fanning the flames of genius in the heads of his staff."<sup>11</sup>

Latouche wrote at least fifteen poems, eleven stories, and two occasional pieces for the *Record*. The earliest of these, an amusing piece about "My First Day at High School" in which the author's anxieties (including hearing his teacher call out his name so as to sound like "Trevilla Touche") overwhelm him, dates from the first semester of his freshman year. However, whereas the "Fragments" columns tend along this line, that is, toward the droll (although not exclusively so: nearing graduation, he writes in his column, "I see that my life is like unto a succession of dark rooms, through which I wander with outstretched arms"), a number of these *Record* publications concern rather unrequited love, youthful disenchantment and alienation, and sadness over the transience and futility of life. Even in the jaunty "Folk Song" for a March 1932 humor issue, the minstrel poet, his heart "sore a-sighing," concludes, "It's devil a bit that I'll be caring."<sup>12</sup>

Some of these poems and stories involve uncanny fantasies of death and time past, with Latouche's peers themselves referring to his work as "Gothic (and rather morbid)." Indeed, with their gloomy shadows and strange music, these writings can be so overwrought as to be faintly ridiculous, perhaps purposefully so. In "Return," a young student tells his high-school girlfriend, "My heart is like brushwood, Jeanne. It is autumn and the great fingers of my soul are beating out the flames of my heart." At the same time, his work exhibits greater restraint over time, as seen in the poem "Two Nocturnes" published at the end of his senior year.

A few tales also reveal an interest in the occult and Eastern spirituality that would survive into Latouche's adult years, as would the racial concerns that surface in

several of the stories, including “Black Laughter: A Fragment Torn from the Life of a Negress.” This particular story involves a black washerwoman, Cally, who becomes a celebrated dancer, Bama, on Broadway. Her light-skinned boyfriend, Willie, “tired of being called a dinge, a black,” resolves to “pass” as a white man, and after taking her money, leaves her. That night, while performing, Cally sees her white audience as wanting to gaze on “a Black making a fool of herself on the stage. A Black contorting herself for the money.” The next day, a theatrical notice appears recommending Bama “to all admirers of the bizarre. All through the dance one could see the light-heartedness of her race, the freedom from care. Miss Bama is a striking example of how White Rule is benefiting the Race.” Reading this, Cally laughs and shoots herself. Its melodramatic excess notwithstanding, the story reveals an uncommon sensitivity to the destructive effects of racial stereotyping and prejudice.

These *Record* publications further show Latouche steeped in classic literature, from the Bible and the Elizabethans to the Romantic poets and the erstwhile Richmonder, Edgar Allan Poe (whom Latouche apparently admired). William Blake serves as an inspiration for the nature poem “Variations on a Theme by Blake,” and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Christabel* provides an epigraph for the melancholy story “No Green on the Oak.” But Latouche shows some awareness of more contemporary trends as well. In “Return,” for instance, the hero, a pianist, plays “a music of banging thuds and shrill staccatos” that the author associates, as the story unfolds, with composers Leo Ornstein and George Antheil, while the story’s heroine finds some soothing consolation in the “incoherences” of T. S. Eliot. Plainly, by age sixteen, Latouche had developed some familiarity with some of the day’s more advanced artists (although Ornstein’s heyday already had passed by some ten years).<sup>13</sup>

The strong autobiographical strain behind these writings—many of the poems use the first person—naturally shed light on the artist as a young man. The three fables that constitute “Three Tales” seem especially revealing in this respect. In the first, “The Sand-boy,” a young prince, desirous of both the beauty of a boy and the wealth of a woman, loses both; in the second, “The House,” a girl attempts to escape from the grip of her mother and her home; and in the third, “The Cat,” the feline protagonist, disgusted with a society tea, resigns herself to a “cat-song of loneliness and despair.” These tales can be read in terms of the author’s uneasy response to his homosexuality, his family, and his social world, respectively. The objects of thwarted or latent desire in these stories, when specified, tend to be male, and the writing occasionally waxes homoerotic; in one of the “Two Nocturnes,” in reference to some boys swimming at night, Latouche writes, “the lake / rushed up to meet their brown bodies with its moist lips”; and in the story “Paul and the Dragon,” Latouche says of the protagonist, “His body was a glorious paean of youth! He stretched his young body until the muscles vibrated with tautness.” Meanwhile, “Black Laughter,” as discussed above, arguably bespoke Latouche’s own sense of otherness—a correlation that would help explain his vehement rejection of Southern racism.<sup>14</sup>

Latouche further revealed some social consciousness in correspondence with his schoolmate John Kellogg, who wrote a serial about high-school life, "Dixie Doodle," for the *Record*. At the turn of 1931, Latouche presented Kellogg with a copy of J. C. Grant's 1930 novel depicting the brutal conditions of a British pit village, *The Back-To-Backs*, with a note that read, in part, "Perhaps this will jar you from the saccharine niceties of *Dixie Doodle* and its coterie of brain-offspring. But you are such an illimitable jazz-hound this book will perhaps bore you." Kellogg replied that given the "traditions" of John Marshall High School, a "thoroughly realistic" story would "offend our dear elders, those smug, narrow-minded, intolerant people who refuse [sic] to acknowledge that such conditions as I should like to have describe [sic] exist in our town, at our own high school." Latouche in turn defended to Kellogg the "outrageous mendacities" that surfaced in his own columns: "My life has consisted of a series of disillusionments calculated to embitter me towards anything existent outside of my own pitiful trauma-existence."<sup>15</sup>

Latouche's success as a writer quickly spread beyond the confines of John Marshall. As early as 1929, he published a poem in the pulp serial *Love Story Magazine* for which he received twenty dollars; and in 1930, *The Black Swan: The Magazine of Virginia*, a short-lived local journal "of literary and human interest," reportedly accepted for publication two poetic snapshots of Richmond street life: "Market Scene," which had appeared in the *Monocle* the previous November, and "Evening Comes to Seventeenth Street." In the end, the magazine published only the latter, a gloomy view of the city's Jewish ghetto.<sup>16</sup>

Latouche made even more of a splash in April 1931 by taking first honors for his story "Strange Dusk" in the First Tournament of Arts and Crafts, sponsored by the newly constituted Richmond Academy of Arts, in the course of which he earned the praise of no less than James Branch Cabell, who served as contest judge and who befriended the young writer. (Latouche subsequently submitted this story, yet another tale of adolescent loneliness, and perhaps his most explicitly homoerotic venture to date, to the little journal *Pagany*, in whose archives the manuscript survives.) That same semester, in addition to winning a Gorgas Medallion from the John Marshall faculty for the best paper on "The Gorgas Program of Personal Health," Latouche received second honorable mention from the Virginia High School Literary and Athletic League for an essay, "Lamp of Beauty," about Lincoln's early love Ann Rutledge. And three of Latouche's early poems appeared in a large published compendium, *Younger Poets: An Anthology of American Secondary School Verse* (1932).<sup>17</sup>

However mannered and overstrung, Latouche's high-school writings evidence a born, even compulsive writer with a sharp mind and a vivid imagination. Moreover, premonitions of his mature work appear throughout. Something of their alternately comical and melancholy tone made their way into a number of later efforts, as did their penchant for lush nature painting, culminating in "Lazy Afternoon" (*The Golden Apple*) and the "Silver Song" (*The Ballad of Baby Doe*). More specifically,

Latouche recycled the images of “wild berries” and a “dragon” for “Windflowers” (*The Golden Apple*), reinvented “pink-fat butterflies” as “fat pink cloud” for “Lazy Afternoon” (*The Golden Apple*), and reformulated the line, “One smile I can’t forget,” as “I can’t forget his smile” for the song “A Rainy Day,” while the recitation of nationalities in his portrait of a metropolis, “Traffic Lights,” foretold *Ballad for Americans* and other works. Even more explicitly, he reprised his *Monocle* bon mot “Beauty is only skin deep, but Heaven known [*sic*], that’s deep enough” in *Ballet Ballads* as “And beauty is only skin deep / For the Elders that was deep enough.” In a memorial tribute to Latouche, composer Vernon Duke quoted, as “already indicative” of the lyricist’s “manner,” the final seven lines of the high school sonnet “Death and the Poet”:

With steady hand and lip I shall depart  
 For that dim residence of mossy stone  
 Where I might lay aside these vain ideals  
 And, rid of this encumbering flesh and bone,  
 Be free to lie alone. I shall not feel  
 The lack of any love, nor feel again  
 Any emotion save lying in the rain.<sup>18</sup>

During his time at John Marshall, Latouche also joined the Dramatic Club and participated in a number of school productions, most under the direction of drama teacher Charlotte Wheeler. He seems to have made his high-school debut in a May 1929 performance of Dan Totheroh’s *Pearls*, a turn thought “very humorous” by the school paper. Small in stature, with a handsome profile, a mass of black hair, and sparkling blue eyes, he consolidated his reputation as one of the school’s leading comedians in productions of a farce by Adam Appelbud (pseudonym of Carl Pierce), *Oh, Kay!*; a comedy by Zellah Covington and Jules Simonson, *Second Childhood*; and a parody of Simon Gray’s melodrama *Little Nell*, in which he played the title role in drag “with charm and grace. When he peered through his maze of golden curls in his wistful little way and bowed with a resounding whack it moved all the audience to tears and hysterics.” Particularly active in the French department, he also performed in scenes from Molière’s *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (playing Monsieur Jourdan), the same playwright’s *Le malade imaginaire* (playing Monsieur de Bonnefoi), and Jules Moinaux’s farce *Les deux sourds* (playing Boniface)—all apparently in the original French. His high-school stage career climaxed with his “somewhat grotesque” performance as the humpbacked dwarf in Stuart Walker’s adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *The Birthday of the Infanta*, a production that took top honors in April 1931 at the Tidewater High School Tournament in Williamsburg (see Figure 1). The previous spring, Latouche similarly had been cast as Puck for a production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a seemingly perfect role for this saucy elf, although, probably due to conflicts, another student ultimately took the part. In