

From *Knoxville Lives IV* (Knoxville History Project, 2022)
Image quality reduced

POSTCARD OF
CHARLES COBURN,
CIRCA 1910, AS
DIRECTOR AND LEAD
ACTOR OF THE
COBURN PLAYERS.
(Paul F. Brown
Collection.)



THE COBURN PLAYERS.

MR. COBURN.

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE:
*Actor Charles Coburn on and off Knoxville's
Great White Way*

By Paul F. Brown

YOU MIGHT RECOGNIZE HIM as diamond tycoon “Piggy” Beekman in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, or as Cary Grant’s boss in *Monkey Business*, or as the gruff but loveable old man in numerous films from the 1940s and 50s. Charles Coburn was by the end of World War II an Oscar-winning movie celebrity, even though he’d been acting in films for scarcely a decade.

This somewhat mushy-faced, beady-eyed actor who often smoked a cigar and wore a monocle is easy to spot. He frequently portrayed businessmen, judges, crusty uncles and grandfathers—opinionated and obtrusive characters who were nevertheless dryly humorous, and whose hearts were often as big as their waistlines.

The list of actors with whom Coburn worked includes Marilyn Monroe, James Stewart, Spencer Tracy, Clark Gable, Carole Lombard, David Niven, Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, John Wayne, Barbara Stanwyck, Henry Fonda, Bette Davis, Olivia de Havilland, Joan Fontaine, Lucille Ball, and Gregory Peck, and hundreds more. (Contrary to some claims, Charles was only distantly related to the younger actor James Coburn.)

Charles Coburn started in films midway through the Depression, when he was already close to 60. He quickly became one of the steadiest-working actors in Hollywood. From 1938 on, Coburn appeared in two or more films (and later, television programs) every year up to the last two of his life.

He received three Academy Award nominations during his career, and won once—in 1944, for *The More the Merrier*. Early in that film, which costarred Jean Arthur and Joel McCrea and was set in Washington DC, Coburn’s character pauses near a statue of Admiral David Farragut, reads the inscribed plaque—“Damn the torpedoes! Full steam ahead!”—and adopts the Civil War naval



VINTAGE POSTCARD OF STAUB'S THEATRE, CIRCA 1900.

(Alec Riedl Knoxville Postcard Collection / KHP.)

hero's famous quotation as a mantra, repeating it several times throughout the movie.

The screenwriter of *The More the Merrier* probably didn't know or care that Farragut had been born near Knoxville in the early 1800s. Perhaps Coburn did.

Knoxville audiences had seen Charles Coburn act long before he debuted on movie screens, before he was even a widely known actor on Broadway. Back then he was a young, slim, dark-headed leading man honing his craft and building his repertoire. Knoxville proved to be a training ground for the actor before he formed his own touring company, Coburn Players, and gained national accolades for his Shakespearean roles.

Between 1904 and 1915, Coburn regularly performed in Knoxville, first at the magnificent Staub's Theatre, and later at the University of Tennessee. The town also played a significant role in bringing Coburn together with his first wife and longtime acting partner—a fact not widely acknowledged elsewhere.

This is the story of Charles Coburn and the professional and personal ties he forged in Knoxville, in those years before he found stardom.

Born in Macon, Georgia in 1877, Coburn began his stage career there in the late 1890s, as manager of the Savannah Theatre. He came to know the theater business well, but increasingly sought the limelight, and drew positive reviews whenever he stepped into character roles. Although his later physique obscured the fact, the six-foot-tall actor was in those days quite athletic, and raced bicycles competitively for the local YMCA.

Around the turn of the century, Coburn left Georgia to manage a stock acting troupe in the Midwest, but made his Broadway acting debut in New York by 1902. Within a year, Coburn went to Richmond, Virginia, and cofounded his own ensemble, the Coburn-Santje Company—a move that guaranteed him, for the first time, all the leading male roles. He recruited supporting actors from the region including Frank Wallace Flenniken, a Knoxville native who had recently performed the title role in a touring production of *Faust*.

Flenniken, who billed himself as Frank Wallace when acting, appeared with Coburn's company in the spring of 1903. The two actors apparently impressed each other. When Flenniken formed his own “spring stock” acting troupe in Knoxville a year later, Coburn agreed to join the ensemble as lead actor. Announcing the venture in late April 1904, the *Sentinel* touted Coburn's “strong personality coupled with good looks.” Flenniken dubbed his group the Frank Wallace Stock Company. Among the other recruited talent that year was Ivah Wills, a Missouri native most recently seen onstage in Toledo, Ohio. A Baltimore paper from that era described her as “magnetic,” adding “she has what is



THIS HEADSHOT OF COBURN AS THE LEAD IN *THE COWBOY AND THE LADY* ORIGINALLY HUNG NEAR STAUB THEATRE'S ENTRANCE IN MAY 1904, ALONG WITH OTHER PUBLICITY PHOTOS OF THE FRANK WALLACE STOCK COMPANY. (Published in the *Knoxville Journal* in 1945.)



CHARLES G. COBURN.



MISS IVAH WILLS.

(*Knoxville Sentinel*, April 1, 1905.)

much more alluring than prettiness, a lightness of form almost frail, [a] delicacy of face that suggests the spiritual....”

Wills had acted with Coburn two years earlier when both worked in Newport News, Virginia, as members of the Shipman Brothers Stock Company; however, Wills had been confined to smaller supporting characters while Coburn headlined as the male lead. It wasn’t until coming to Knoxville that Wills was cast as the female lead opposite Coburn.

For performances, Flenniken booked Staub’s Theatre, the large, 32-year-old venue on Gay Street that had recently undergone a major expansion and remodeling. Thanks to manager Fritz Staub, the theater had a first-class reputation, and drew some of the world’s finest entertainers to its stage. In February 1904 alone, actors Ethel Barrymore and her uncle, John Drew, and bandmaster Giuseppe “The Great” Creatore had all performed there. The theater’s regular season typically ended in April, before warmer temperatures began to stifle the auditorium and plays were instead presented outdoors at Chilhowee Park.

During its month-long engagement beginning in early May 1904, the Wallace Company presented a variety of plays, from

five-act dramas and comedies to one-act “curtain raisers.” Among them were Broadway shows like *The Cowboy and the Lady*, *Turned Up*, *Our Boys*, and *When We Were Twenty-One*.

Coburn’s Knoxville debut in *Cowboy and the Lady* was well received. “The leading man, Charles D. Coburn, met all expectations,” wrote a reviewer for the *Sentinel*. “He is a handsome fellow with strong personality, and the high praise he received from critics everywhere on his work in ‘The Christian,’ in which he starred last season, was well deserved. As ‘Teddy North’ ... though a comparative stranger to a Knoxville audience, he endeared himself to the people.”

Although the *Sentinel* reviewed only a few of the company’s shows that season, comments about Coburn were consistently positive. In *The Two Orphans*, Coburn’s “interpretation was all that could be desired,” said the reviewer. “He is polished and has a delightful stage presence which makes this part well suited to him.” In *A Night at the Play*, Coburn “added admirers for his cleverness” while “playing a role somewhat different from others he has essayed in Knoxville.” In *When We Were Twenty-One*, “Mr. Coburn gave a magnificent portrayal ... and in the love scene in the last act, both he and Miss Wills were beyond criticism and completely captured the audience.”

A tragedy halted the third week of performances. On May 18, theater founder and former Knoxville mayor Peter Staub had been driving his surrey when, at the intersection of Clinch and Locust, his frightened horse suddenly lurched. The violent jolt threw Staub to the street, breaking both legs. Although doctors attended to Staub, the 77-year-old Swiss native died the following day. Staub’s Theatre, managed by Peter’s son Fritz, remained dark through that weekend.

Despite its schedule being thrown off, the company finished the season strong. The final show, a repeat performance of *The Masque Ball*, was met with an enthusiastic ovation, and the *Sentinel* reported that “the lady members of the company,” and Ivah Wills in particular, “were literally showered with bouquets. ...

Mr. Coburn and other members of the company were forced to aid the ladies in carrying them from before the footlights.”

After rehearsing and performing together for several weeks in close proximity, exchanging dialogue tinged with romance and enjoying an occasional choreographed embrace onstage, it was perhaps inevitable that the two lead actors would grow closer offstage as well. When the Wallace Company parted ways in June 1904, Coburn and Wills went to New York and appeared that July in a touring production of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, taking the lead roles of Orlando and Rosalind. The play was staged outdoors to highlight the story’s woodland setting, though this was primarily a justification to cut unnecessary expenses. Coburn and Wills would reprise these roles many times in years to come, and tour their own repertoire of low-cost “al fresco” productions.

By December, both Coburn and Wills had committed to rejoin the Wallace Company the following spring. Wills in particular had greatly enjoyed performing in Knoxville, or so she said when interviewed in Baltimore in early 1905. “Perhaps the pleasantest of my engagements was in stock at Knoxville,” Wills said, as reprinted in Knoxville’s *Journal and Tribune*. “The people there are delightful and the town is up in the mountains, where scenery and climate just compel one to enjoy living. My health was excellent and I scarcely felt as if I was working at all. I love the south, anyway; and would rather play there than anywhere else.”

The Wallace Company began its second spring season in April 1905, with a six-week engagement that again tested the actors’ versatility. The plays included *Miss Hobbs*, *Because I Love You*, *Don Caesar de Bazan*, *Moths*, *A Scrap of Paper*, *Camille*, *Whose Baby Is It?*, *Held By the Enemy*, and *Our Regiment*. Coburn later confessed to feeling that he lacked sufficient experience to pull off heftier roles like *Don Caesar de Bazan*. For that part, he based his portrayal and costume on a memory of seeing Alexander Salvini perform the role when Coburn was a teenager.

Coburn's insecurities notwithstanding, his performances again earned critical acclaim locally, with the *Journal and Tribune* reviewing most of the season's plays. The newspaper said that Coburn, in *Miss Hobbs*, had "fine stage presence," and called his performance "the best thing this actor has done here." His characterization in *Because I Love You* was "strong, manly," and "a masterful bit of acting." As the lead in *Don Caesar de Bazan*, Coburn "was splendid," said the paper. "His conception of the happy-go-lucky 'Don Caesar' ... was a true picture and was much enjoyed." In the popular drama *Camille*, "Mr. Coburn was all that could be desired in the part. His conception of the intense, passionate lover was superb, and in his strong emotional scenes showed to better advantage than in anything in which he has before appeared." By contrast, Coburn's comedic turn in *Whose Baby Is It?* "was delicious," demonstrating "his versatility" as an actor.

The final week of performances included reprises of some of the season's most successful shows. Before closing, the Frank Wallace Company made time for a baseball game at Chilhowee Park, with the male actors and Staub's Theatre ushers playing against each other (with theater manager Fritz Staub umpiring). Coburn, dressed in a New York Giants uniform, pitched for the actors, and was said to be one of the few who "played very decent ball." Still, the stronger ushers beat the actors 15 to 8.

One *Journal and Tribune* correspondent who closely observed the Wallace Company throughout the season contributed an insightful assessment of Charles Coburn: "There is ever a noticeable difference in his work this year as compared to last, there being a smoother finish, a greater depth, of sincerity. ... His comedy is clean, fine, but it is in serious work that he shines brightest. His facial expression is one of the strongest factors in his art, and his perfect ease and deliberation give realism and beauty to his performances. So many actors not only overdo the significant in gesticulation, but seem unable to repress the insignificant, and to be most significant, gestures must be rare. Mr. Coburn can stand motionless upon the stage and make his

presence felt throughout the theatre, and when words are spoken, he sends the message unerringly to every person in the audience.”

Of Ivah Wills, the correspondent wrote: “As an actress she ranks among the best we have seen in this city. She has a face that lends itself readily to the expression of varied emotion, and can manifest extremes of happiness and misery. Her voice is rich, sweet and sympathetic, and her art combines physical beauty with fervor, imagination, tender sensibility, capacity for passion and tragic force.”

Although the writer identified herself only as the “Bon-Bon Girl,” it’s likely she was a 30-year-old journalist named Della Yoe, who become more closely connected with Coburn and Wills in years to come.

On an artistic level, the 1905 season had been a great success. Yet as a business venture, the Wallace Company found Knoxville’s patronage lacking, especially considering the talent of Flenniken’s ensemble and the quality of its repertoire. In early May, Flenniken reportedly had been “disgusted with the size of the audience,” saying that he had gone to great lengths to assemble such talent, and that if attendance didn’t improve, he would take his company elsewhere—to one of three other cities supposedly vying to host it.

Whether for that reason or the general instability of a stage career, Flenniken didn’t resume the Wallace Company the following spring. By then, he had partnered into his brother’s insurance and real estate firm. A few years later, Frank married Ella Coffin, whose second cousin Cornelius Coffin Williams would soon have a new son, Tom—future playwright Tennessee Williams.

Through their shared experiences in Knoxville, Charles Coburn and Ivah Wills had become partners in more than one sense. Wills had become Coburn’s leading lady, and would remain so for the rest of her life. Just after leaving Knoxville in May 1905, the pair inaugurated the Coburn Players in New York. The following January, the couple married in Baltimore—not at Staub’s Theatre, as one apocryphal story claims.



VINTAGE POSTCARD OF THE ORIGINAL CHEROKEE COUNTRY CLUB,
CIRCA 1920s. (Alec Riedl Knoxville Postcard Collection / KHP.)

In the spring of 1908, Coburn returned to Knoxville to tour the grounds of the Cherokee Country Club as a possible site for one of the Coburn Players' outdoor Shakespearean productions.

Plays had been performed outdoors in Knoxville before. An open-air theater had opened at Chilhowee Park several years earlier, and before that, in the early 1890s when the park was still known as Lake Ottosee, plays, concerts, vaudeville shows, and even operas were being performed at its outdoor pavilion.

Coburn's productions were different in that he set up his temporary outdoor stages in spaces not designed for theatrical performances. These so-called "al fresco" productions harkened back to his first tour performing *As You Like It* with Ivah in 1904, before she was his wife. That tour gave Coburn his first lead experience in a full-length Shakespeare play, while also proving that a frugal and portable show could also be very successful.

His new tour likewise sought out pastoral locations, particularly on "the beautiful grounds of the Golf and Country clubs throughout the United States," including those in Schenectady, New York, and Meriden, Connecticut, where his company performed *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* a year earlier.

Considering his penchant for portable drama in natural, non-theatrical spaces, Coburn may be considered the father of outdoor Shakespearean theater in Knoxville—a tradition that the Tennessee Stage Company continues today in locations like Ijams Nature Center.

Coburn's production of *As You Like It* was held on the grounds of Knoxville's Cherokee Country Club on July 8, 1908. Calcium lights that were to have illuminated the performers did not arrive as planned, making facial expressions harder to discern as the light dimmed. But the production and performances were otherwise well received. "Miss Ivah Wills as Rosalind is an actress of exceptional ability and inherent charm," wrote the reviewer for the *Journal and Tribune*. "She caught the true spirit of the part, its sportive gaity [*sic*] and natural tenderness. Her vivacity and inventiveness was [*sic*] radiant with youth and imagination, yet she held no monopoly in this festival of wit. Mr. Charles Douville Coburn played Orlando with great spirit and high artistry. His work was sincere, straight forward and full of humor."

Among the supporting actors touring with the Coburns was Augustine Duncan, whose "drollery and unction" in the role of Touchstone one local reviewer found "irresistible." Duncan's sister was modern dance pioneer Isadora Duncan. Coburn briefly served as the legendary Isadora's manager a couple of years later.

It was the Coburns' only show at the Cherokee Country Club. Fortunately for Knoxville, it wasn't the company's last local performance. The following week, the Coburn Players would be a featured attraction at a major education conference at the University of Tennessee.

Prompted by UT President Charles Dabney, the Summer School of the South had been created in 1902 as a regional training institute for educators. It operated under the premise that low student achievement throughout the region was largely the result of teachers not being properly trained. Courses in numerous subjects aimed to boost participants' content knowledge and instructional expertise.



SUMMER SCHOOL FOR THE SOUTH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, 1903. JEFFERSON HALL IS THE LONG BUILDING AT LEFT. (KHP.)

But the annual six-week conference was much more than a series of professional development courses. It was a cultural event that attracted distinguished speakers and lecturers to campus, including philosopher and theorist John Dewey, reformer Jane Addams, and lawyer and future US Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan. The general public bought tickets to hear such speakers at Jefferson Hall—the plain but adaptable open-air auditorium atop the Hill, just west of South College. Audiences there also heard thrilling firsthand travelogues, presented with accompanying illustrations; lectures on literature, religion, psychology, and the natural sciences; and orations and musical recitals. Annual programming eventually featured a full music festival that drew nationally known musicians to the UT campus, such as the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, violinist Maud Powell, and tenor Reed Miller.

And in July 1908, a special theatrical attraction was added. At the request of the summer school's director, future US Commissioner of Education Philander Claxton, the Coburns agreed to follow up their country-club appearance with a performance of *Twelfth Night* at UT.

An outdoor “woodland auditorium” was erected on the campus “between the main entrance and Old College,” though the Jefferson Hall pavilion was reserved for use in case of rain and its stage decorated with tree boughs to suggest the outdoors. The Coburns’ production of *Twelfth Night* on July 13, while not reviewed in the local newspapers, was so well received that the Coburns were implored to extend their stay and present *As You Like It* the following night.



The Coburn Players
-in-
"Taming of The Shrew."
Mrs Coburn as Katherine, Mr. Coburn as Petruchio.

Circa 1911. (*Shakespeare and the Players*, Center for Digital
Scholarship, Emory University.)

THE COBURN PLAYERS
 at the
SUMMER SCHOOL OF THE SOUTH
JEFFERSON HALL.

* Monday, July 20, 8:00 P. M. **THE TAMING OF THE SHREW.**
 Tuesday, July 21, Matinee—4:00 P. M. **AS YOU LIKE IT**
 Evening—8:00 p. m. **Hamlet.**

All seats reserved. Tickets on sale at Clark and Jones; Todd and Armistead's; Kuhlman's No. 3; and South College, University, beginning Monday, July 13, at 9:00 a. m. Prices—First five rows: Evening 75c, Matinee 50c, Series \$1.50. In any other row: Evening 50c, Matinee 25c, Series \$1.00.

(Knoxville Journal & Tribune, July 12, 1914.)

Despite rain forcing the latter show indoors, a reviewer from the *Journal and Tribune* praised all aspects of the production—the “beautiful” lighting effects, the stage’s “almost perfect representation of a forest scene,” and the actors themselves. “The characterizations of Mr. Coburn vibrate with intensity and reality, and he holds the careful and approving attention of his audience whenever on the stage,” declared the reviewer. “His voice and bearing is at all times adequate, and he received a large share of the individual applause last evening. Miss Ivah M. Wills, as Rosalind ... has a magnetic stage presence and a speaking voice of unusual beauty ... and she played with a daintiness and buoyancy that was charming to behold.”

When the Coburn Players came to Knoxville in mid-May 1909, the company reprised its outdoor production of *As You Like It* on the UT campus. It also presented a noteworthy new play. Playwright Percy MacKaye had adapted Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* for the actors E. H. Sothorn and Julia Marlowe, but the pair had declined it, saying their roles were too small. Coburn, on the other hand, saw in MacKaye’s dramatization a new work of immense interest to universities, and one that would distinguish Coburn’s troupe from that of Ben Greet, who was already well known on college campuses for staging Shakespeare outdoors. MacKaye revised the play especially for the Coburn Players, and granted Coburn exclusive performance rights.

Both the *Sentinel* and *Journal and Tribune* praised *The Canterbury Pilgrim* as the more exciting of the Coburn Players’ two

productions on May 17. As with the company's prior outdoor performance at UT, the plays were presented on the north side of the Hill, on a stage constructed just above the main entrance, with audience members seated on the grassy slope.

Coburn and company returned to campus that July, for the seventh annual Summer School of the South. Along with three Shakespeare offerings—*As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Merchant of Venice*—the tour included a repeat performance of *Canterbury Pilgrim*, which remained an audience favorite. The *Sentinel* estimated that on July 14 at least 1,500 people sat on the green to watch *Canterbury*. “A unique performance it was, with the blue starlit sky of heaven as the roof and a background of trees and green foliage,” wrote the *Sentinel*. “One could easily imagine that they were witnessing the play as presented back in the days when wandering players presented their dramas to kings and queens and nobles in castle halls or on castle lawns, modern stage setting being then unknown.”

The *Journal and Tribune* said that “in the hands of Charles Douville Coburn ... ‘Chaucer’ comes to life anew. Now grave, now gay, he walks and talks with the other characters of the Prologue, drinks with the lowest, bandies jests with the highest and makes love to the gentlest, the pale Prioress ... Mr. Coburn has never had a part which so admirably fitted him in point of splendid physique, and bearing, as well as suitable to his dramatic talents.”

In July 1910, a month after performing for the President and First Lady Taft on the White House lawn, the Coburn Players presented three plays at UT's Jefferson Hall: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and a newer translation of the Euripides drama *Electra*. A year later, attendees of the summer school saw Coburn and his troupe perform *Electra*, *Macbeth*, and *Taming of the Shrew*.

The Coburn Players bypassed Knoxville on its tours of 1912 and 1913, but returned to UT in 1914 to present *Taming of the Shrew*, the old standard *As You Like It*, and *Hamlet*. In the latter play, Coburn chose a modern rather than traditional conception of the title character. “The Coburn interpretation of ‘Hamlet’ makes the

Danish prince a heroic figure, not a weakling,” said the *Journal and Tribune*. “It is a version that besides being the one accepted now by most students of Shakespeare, is well fitted to Mr. Coburn’s physique and method. ... He played ‘Hamlet’ as a stern, masterful, intellectual man, determined to avenge the death of his father.”

Although the Coburn Players continued touring university campuses for two more summers, the company’s engagement at the Summer School of the South in July 1915 proved to be its last. The plays included *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Macbeth*, and *The Imaginary Invalid*—a translation of Moliere’s comedy *Le Malade Imaginaire*, which Coburn claimed had never before been performed in English in America.

Since appearing in Knoxville with the Wallace Stock Company a decade earlier, Charles and Ivah had met hundreds of local citizens and formed friendships with a select few. Luncheons and other social gatherings were held in their honor each time they returned. A *Sentinel* columnist wrote in 1940, “One Knoxvillean recalled today what fun they used to have when Mr. Coburn and Frank Nelson [local pianist and church organist] would entertain at their parties. Mr. Nelson played the accompaniments and Mr. Coburn would sing.” The article also revealed that while performing in Knoxville, the Coburns sometimes kept a room at the extravagant Vendome Apartments on Clinch Avenue.

Among the Knoxvilleans who maintained relationships with the Coburns was Della Yoe, whose sister and brother-in-law, Alice and Harry Ijams, owned the riverside property that later developed into Ijams Nature Center. As a budding journalist, Della had once interviewed Coburn for the *Journal and Tribune*, and evidently made a good impression. Coburn hired her as the Coburn Players’ “advance publicity agent” in 1916, and Yoe joined the summer tour. Newspaper society pages followed her visits and long association with the Coburns. According to a 1945 *Journal* account, the Coburns sometimes cast Yoe in character roles “whenever they were [performing] near this vicinity,” though specific examples of this are scarce.

After the Coburn Players' last stint in Knoxville, Charles and Ivah enjoyed a string of successes on and off Broadway, as both performers and producers, starting with *The Yellow Jacket* in 1916—which novelist Booth Tarkington praised as “the most delightful thing on our stage today.” The Coburns were seen together on Broadway every year or two through the early 1930s, in shows such as *The Imaginary Invalid*, *The Farmer's Wife*, *Falstaff*, and *The Plutocrat*. For two years, 1935 and 1936, the couple led the Mohawk Drama Festival at New York's Union College, and would have continued had illness not overpowered Ivah at age 58.

She died in April 1937, after 31 years of marriage to Charles, and 33 years as his acting partner. Charles would remain active in the theater for a time, but Ivah's death hastened the 60-year-old actor into a new phase of his career. He steamed into Hollywood with a determination fitting of Farragut's battle cry.

Coburn had already tried his hand at film acting, having appeared in the low-budget 1935 feature *People's Enemy*. His first major motion picture came in 1938, when he appeared opposite James Stewart and Walter Huston in *Of Human Hearts*.

Besides launching Coburn's film career, the movie was notable for its connections to Knoxville. At least two costars, Huston and Charley Grapewin had performed at Staub's.

More significant was the fact that *Of Human Hearts* director Clarence Brown lived in Knoxville from about 1901 to 1910, overlapping several years of Coburn's theater experiences in the city. Brown had attended UT from 1905-1910, and was interested in theater. Though most of Coburn's performances there occurred during university students' summer breaks, Brown may well have attended one or more of the Coburn Players' earliest performances on campus.

Brown was familiar with Staub's Theatre, having graduated there in June 1905 as a young high school senior and presented a humorous recitation from the stage during the

ceremony. Brown also acted in multiple plays and productions there as a member of Knoxville High School's Dramatic Club, the local YMCA, Broadway Baptist Church, and as a UT student.

Coburn and Brown, who reportedly hadn't met before *Of Human Hearts*, went on to make two more films together, *Idiots Delight* and *Edison, the Man*.

Huston, Grapewin, and Brown weren't the only veterans of the Staub's/Lyric stage to work with Coburn in Hollywood.

Long before appearing with Coburn in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Paradine Case*, Ethel Barrymore acted at Staub's Theatre in early 1904, two months before Coburn debuted there with the Frank Wallace Company. David Torrence, one of Coburn's costars in *Stanley and Livingstone*, performed at Staub's Theatre with W. C. Fields in 1906; Richard Carle, a costar from *The Devil and Miss Jones*, acted there the same year. Edward Earle, a costar in *The Gal Who Took the West*, performed at Staub's in 1908, as did Billie Burke—who appeared with Coburn in *The Captain Is a Lady* and *In This Our Life*, but is best known as Glinda the Witch of the North in *The Wizard of Oz*. Orchestra leader Paul Whiteman, who appeared with Coburn in the George Gershwin biopic *Rhapsody in Blue*, brought his orchestra to the renamed Lyric Theatre (formerly Staub's) in 1925. And *King's Row* costar Judith Anderson performed at the Lyric in 1936—some 46 years before returning to Knoxville to perform at Clarence Brown Theatre.

This non-exhaustive list confirms Coburn's wide success in film, but also Knoxville's importance as a theater town at the time Coburn acted there.

Coburn's stock and repertory theater experiences in Knoxville also overlapped the childhoods of two Knoxville natives who later

became respected critics in New York—one for theater, one for film.

Joseph Wood Krutch was 10 years old when Coburn first performed in Knoxville. Later writing for *The Nation*, Krutch reviewed what was purported to be, in 1932, the first-ever production of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* in New York. Krutch named Coburn as one of only two performers in the play

who did not disappoint: “[O]nly Eugene Powers as Pandarus and Charles Coburn as Ajax were as good as one had hoped to find them.”

James Rufus Agee was several years younger than Krutch, having been born the fall after Coburn performed *The Canterbury Pilgrim* at UT in 1909. But Agee was old enough to have possibly seen the Coburn Players' final shows there in 1914 and 1915. His family lived on Highland Avenue, just a few blocks north of the university. (In 1904, Agee's mother, Laura, had acted at UT's Jefferson Hall with Ella Coffin and others, in the University Dramatic Club's production of *Trelawny of the Wells*—a comedy that Charles Coburn would revive on Broadway in 1925.)



CLARENCE BROWN
(1890-1987.)
(Wikipedia.)

Coburn was already a big Hollywood name in 1942, when Agee began reviewing movies for *Time* and *The Nation* magazines. Agee reviewed at least half a dozen of Coburn's films between 1943 and 1948.

Agee wrote in 1943 that he saw “nothing but good” in the cast of *Heaven Can Wait*. “That does not surprise me in people like Charles Coburn,” he said. The following year, in his review of *Wilson*, a biopic of the 28th president, Agee said, “Charles Coburn, as a composite of the Princeton professors whose friendship

Wilson cherished all his life, contributes a rich, wise, valuable performance.” Agee wasn’t as impressed with *The Impatient Years*, also from 1944, but said that the film’s second half still elicited “laughs, thanks to Jean Arthur, Charles Coburn, Lee Bowman, [and] Charley Grapewin.” Agee called Coburn “dependable” in the 1944 movie *Together Again*. Coburn was one of several supporting players in Hitchcock’s 1948 film *The Paradine Case* that “acted with solid skill,” but Agee thought the characters seemed like “lifeless participants in a rigid, theatrical dance.” Later that year, the critic condemned *Green Grass of Wyoming* for its “relatively dull human beings,” and called the “growling, boozy grandfather” character “a deadly conventional role all but redeemed by Charles Coburn’s restraint.”

While he praised few of those movies, Agee clearly respected Coburn, and often implied that the actor was better than the material.

Agee didn’t review *The Gal Who Took the West*, the film that brought Coburn back to Knoxville in September 1949 on a promotional tour. The 72-year-old actor attended a luncheon in his honor at the Hotel Andrew Johnson. Before leaving town, Coburn walked to the old Lyric Theatre (formerly Staub’s), which in recent years had become primarily a wrestling and country-music venue. Reportedly, Coburn “was a bit shocked at its present run-down condition.”

A *Journal and Tribune* article quoted Coburn as stating, “I played ‘Hamlet’ here in 1914. ... My last appearance at Staub’s was in ‘So This Is London,’ in 1924.” The quote is partly misleading: Coburn did bring *Hamlet* to Knoxville in 1914, but he performed it at UT’s Jefferson Hall, not at Staub’s.

His reference to *So This Is London* is downright puzzling. Although the hit play (originally produced by George M. Cohan) was indeed staged at the Lyric Theatre in early September 1924, the performers were members of Petruchi Players, then the venue’s

resident acting company. Neither advertisements nor reviews of the production mention Coburn at all. In remembering the play, which his own company toured across the United States from September 1923 to April 1924, Coburn may have assumed he'd brought it to Knoxville. Evidence that he did is elusive.



COBURN IN THE FILM
NOIR FILM, *IMPACT*, 1949.

When the Lyric was torn down in 1956, newspapers published nostalgic tales of the theater's glory days, when actors like Coburn, Sarah Bernhardt, Maude Adams, Ethel Barrymore, and E. H. Sothorn graced the stage. Leo Fanz, a retired Knoxville lawyer, later claimed that Coburn had actually been in town to witness the Lyric being demolished, and that the portly actor had "stood there with tears rolling down his cheeks, and said, 'That's where I began my career.'"

If Coburn came to town in 1956, he slipped in under the radar because the press didn't mention it.

Regardless, the razing of the Lyric (current site of the First Tennessee Plaza Building) meant that all the buildings with known connections to Coburn's history here as a stock and touring performer were now gone. Jefferson Hall, which stood on UT's Hill on what's now a grassy courtyard behind Ayres Hall, burned in 1934. The Vendome Apartments, where Charles and Ivah Coburn supposedly kept a room (directly across Clinch Avenue from the YWCA), was demolished in 1942.

Only the historic Andrew Johnson Building—where Della Yoe, Ella Coffin Flenniken, Frank Nelson, and a handful of other local friends treated Coburn to a formal lunch in the hotel's Hunt Room in 1949—stands today.

Knoxvillians learned in 1961 that Charles Coburn had died of a heart attack on August 30, at age 84. The following day's Associated Press obituary ran in newspapers across the nation. Recapping the actor's illustrious career, the obit stated that Coburn had met his future wife in 1905, while playing the leads in *As You Like It*. Not surprisingly, it said nothing of Knoxville—the city where Coburn and Wills had first starred opposite each other in 1904, and where, in all likelihood, the acting partners fell in love.

Yet Knoxville hadn't forgotten Coburn, and local newspaper editors reminded obituary readers that the actor had been a member of the Frank Wallace Stock Company almost six decades earlier. The *News-Sentinel* published a short article stating that Coburn "began his theatrical career at old Staub Theater." The claim wasn't strictly accurate. But considering what Coburn accomplished not long after his last performance at Staub's, the statement doesn't seem far from the truth.

The constructed stages Charles Coburn knew in Knoxville are long gone, though the natural ones remain. For a taste of the actor's "al fresco" shows here, watch the Tennessee Stage Company perform Shakespeare at Ijams Nature Center in the summer or early fall. Or grab a copy of *As You Like It*, stroll to UT's main entrance at Circle Drive, and walk up the grassy hillside. Ignoring the sounds of Cumberland Avenue traffic, stand among the trees and turn in the play to Act 2, Scene 7. Point your chin toward the parapets of Ayres Hall, and recite the famous speech that Coburn's Orlando, awaiting his cue, heard many times from behind the scenery:

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. ...*