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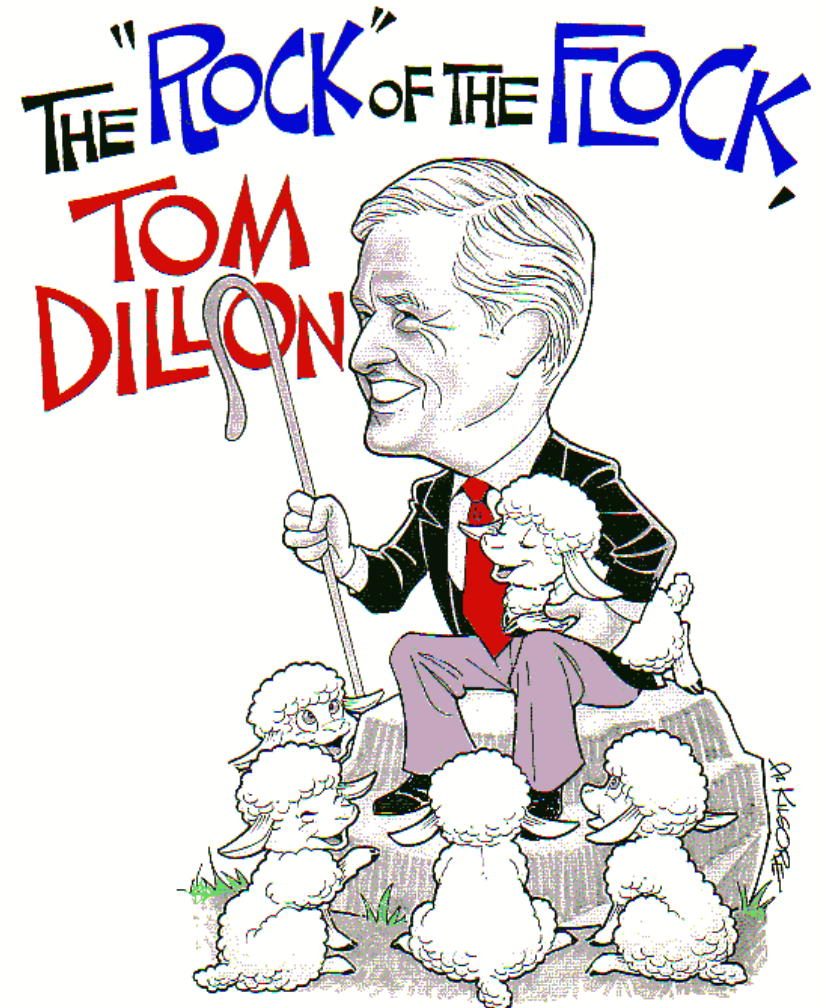
The Lambs' Script



A Publication of The Lambs, Inc.

America's First Professional Theatrical Club. Established 1874.

Spring 2005



Tom Dillon – Immortal Lamb

The Lambs' Script

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In January 1980, I received an invitation from a friend to come see her in a revue at The Lambs. "But The Lambs has folded," I protested. "No. They've just relocated." I saw the show, loved what I saw, and within a short time was a bona fide Lamb.

I was told that the Club at that time was a shadow of what it had been in its glory days, but knowing no better, I found it exciting and wonderful. Where else could you sit down at Victor Herbert's thundering upright grand piano at all hours of the night and play to your heart's content? Where else could you pal around with Ray O'Brien, who had been Al Jolson's accompanist, or old vaudevillian comics like Eddie Mullen, who weekly convulsed us with his twenty-minute monologue? (No matter that his routine never changed and he could no longer learn new lines; we loved it.) Where else could you get to know Joyce "Trixie" Randolph of *The Honeymooners*' fame, or Eddie Bracken, or hear the great announcer/actor Ed Herlihy sing "Old Man River"? In the first six months of my membership, I met more people active in the theatre than in the ten years preceding.

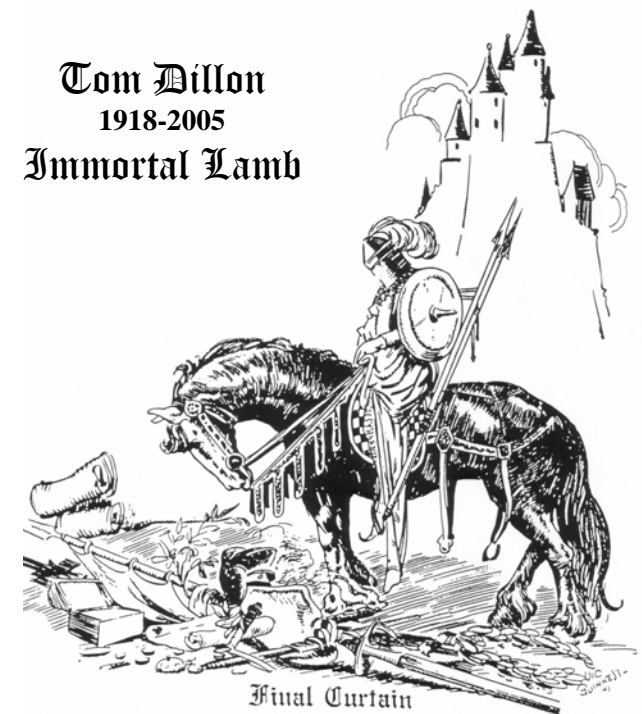
Tom Dillon was my sponsor. It has been a privilege to know him all these years and to record his brief biography that appears in this issue, for he was a great performer, a great humanitarian, and one of the greatest Lambs of all time. ♦

Lambs was a leader in the founding of The Actors' Fund of America; a close association between the Fund and The Lambs continues today.

At The Lambs, institutions and traditions nearly a century and a quarter old continue. The Clubrooms are open daily. Happy Hour is held each Friday, followed by Low Jinx, or informal cabaret style entertainments. A popular event is the annual "Wash," or outing, held at the Lillian Booth Actors' Fund Residence in New Jersey.

A comprehensive history of The Lambs by Club Historian Lewis Hardee, carefully researched and profusely illustrated, is being published by McFarland & Company, to be released later this year.

The Lambs web-site is www.the-lambs.org



About The Lambs...

The Lambs is America's First Professional Theatrical Club. Founded in New York in 1874 and incorporated in 1877, The Lambs was named after a club of the same name which flourished in London, England during 1869-1879. The Club name honors the essayist Charles Lamb and his sister, Mary, who, during the early 1800's played host at their famed literary and theatrical salon in London. The motto of the Club is Floreant Agni—May the Lambs Flourish, which, with many ups and downs, it has done for over one hundred thirty years. Changing times and economics in the 1970's led to the sale of the Lambs' landmark building on 44th Street. Since then the Fold has been pleasantly situated at 3 West 51st Street. Originally restricted to gentlemen only, today's club, attuned to modern sensibilities, has emerged as a society of both sexes.

The roster of over six thousand past and living Lambs reads like a *Who's Who of the American Theatre*, including Fred Astaire, Red Barber, Maurice Barrymore and sons John and Lionel, David Belasco, Ed Begley, Ralph Bellamy, Edgar Bergen, Irving Berlin, Joe E. Brown, Earl Carroll, George M. Cohan, Cecil DeMille, Douglas Fairbanks, Eddie Foy (Jr. & Sr.), Sir Cedric Hardwicke, William S. Hart, Victor Herbert, Bert Lahr, Alan Jay Lerner, Frederick Loewe, Ring Lardner, Alan Mowbray, Conrad Nagel, Elliott Nugent, Pat O'Brien, Will Rogers, Charles Ruggles, Otis Skinner, John Philip Sousa, David Warfield and Bert Wheeler. Current members include distinguished actors, directors and others in the theatrical community such as Joyce Randolph (Trixie of *The Honeymooners* fame), actor Abe Vigoda, Francis Anthony (The Love Chef), and Broadway conductor Don Pippin.

The Lambs has presented countless "Gambols"—the name given to its frolicsome entertainments—plays, musicals and variety shows. Some shows which played at The Lambs went on to national success. *Stalag 17* moved to Broadway and the movies; *Mark Twain Tonight*, starring Hal Holbrook went on to Broadway, TV, and a command performance at the White House.

The Lambs is proud of its continuing contributions to community and charitable causes through The Lambs Foundation and the various funds which it administers. An early Shepherd of The

Immortal Lambs

In 1933 The Lambs designated seven members as Immortal Lambs—those “who by their benevolence or devotion to service, made it possible for the Club to survive.” To be named an Immortal Lamb is the highest honor it can bestow on a departed member.

In April 2005, the Lambs Council proclaimed Tom Dillon an Immortal Lamb, only the twenty-third of the over six thousand members in the one hundred thirty-one year history of the Club.

Charles H. Hoyt
Joseph R. Grismer
William Norris
Augustus Thomas
Frank W. Kitching
Winchell Smith
Clay M. Greene
Robert L. Hague
Martin J. Gillen
William Saxton
Percy Weinrich
Edwin Burke

Percy G. Williams
Ray Peck
David Warfield
William S. Hart
R. H. Burnside
Thoams Meighan
Bert Lytell
John Golden
Bert Wheeler
Richard L. Charles
Tom Dillon



Tom Dillon

With the spring election of 1969, comedian Jack Waldron became Shepherd of The Lambs, with Tom Dillon as the Boy. Less than a year later, on Friday night, November 21, Waldron died of a heart attack. The helm of the ship now passed suddenly to Tom Dillon, the youngest ever to hold the office of Shepherd. But with this great honor came the desperate job of trying to save a club that was about to go under.

Thomas Joseph Dillon was an improbable person to become Shepherd. In a fraternity built around drinking and smoking, he did neither. Asked to name his poison, he would quip, “A Coke—straight up.” In a club where members were routinely reprimanded for rough



had brought tears to many an eye. He concluded with, “May the wind always be at your back, Tommy, down through the years.”

Incumbent Shepherd Bruce Brown ended his homage with, “We know you loved The Lambs, Tom. Know how The Lambs loved you. Floreant Agni—May The Lambs Flourish.” ♦



devoted more time to The Actors' Fund of America, where he had been a Trustee since 1970. In 1989 he was elected its President.

The Actors' Fund, established in 1882, became the most important actors' charity in the country. Its founding president was Lester Wallack, producer and owner of the country's premier theatre, and also a Shepherd of The Lambs. So began the close association of The Lambs and the Actors' Fund.

During his years with the Fund, Tom helped shepherd it through a period of enormous growth and accomplishment, including the expansion of the nursing home in Englewood, NJ, the opening of supportive housing residences in New York City and West Hollywood, and the advancement of essential social service programs like The Aids Initiative and Women's Health Initiative. In the *New York Times* obituary, President of The Fund Brian Stokes Mitchell, and its Executive Director Joseph Benincasa, wrote, "You were our 'true north' and we were proud to set our compasses to you."

Floreat Agni

Tom spent his last days at The Lillian Booth Actors' Fund Residence to which he had devoted so much, and where he died on March 14, 2005. He had been married to Alice Parker for sixty-one years. He was a member of Actors' Equity, Screen Actors' Guild, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, and the American Guild of Variety Artists. He was a member of the Tony Nominating Committee of the Antoinette Perry Awards and recipient of the Founder's Award of the Theatre Hall of Fame. In 2000 he was honored with a Gambol at The Lambs.

At his funeral service on the 18th at St. Malachy's, The Actors' Chapel on 49th Street, Joe Benincasa remarked, "It's said that a man with friends is a rich man. By that standard, Tom Dillon was the richest man in town." Former Shepherd of The Lambs and a Trustee of the Fund, A.J. Pocock, noted, "the association that began in 1882 continues today, due to the leadership and hard by people like Tom Dillon." Brian Stokes Mitchell sang Tom's signature song, written by Lamb Fred Hildebrand and based on an old Irish blessing, with which Tom himself

language, his strongest oath was "Gee." In a club of actors "trying to become gentlemen," Dillon *was* a gentleman. Arrow straight, he had been a Catholic choirboy and married his hometown sweetheart. He had a razor-sharp mind, a letter-perfect memory, and seemed to know everyone in New York on a first name basis. There was about him an unimpeachable integrity. He was one of the boys, but he wore a halo.

He was a man without enemies and a lover of mankind if ever there was one, and totally without prejudice. When Harry Hershfield, a Jew, was Shepherd, someone at The Friars tried to slur The Lambs by asking,

"Oh, you are a member of that 'Gentile club,' aren't you?" Tom replied, "Gee, I can't wait to get back and tell Harry Hershfield."

The Boy from Brooklyn

Tom Dillon was born September 3rd, 1918, in Brooklyn, where, except for a stint in the Air Force and occasional tours, he lived all his life. At a young age he began singing at St. Augustine's Church. An angelic, child-soprano voice placed him in demand around the city. Performing the "Cantique de Noel" at Columbia University, his voice cracked on a high B-flat, ending his soprano career. He took to boxing and considered becoming a physical education instructor, but at seventeen discovered that, unlike most child sopranos, he had developed not a baritone but a dazzling tenor voice, and for the next four years sang in oratorio.

Enlisting in the Air Force during World War II, he was chosen from among seven thousand candidates for the cast of *Winged Victory*, the big Air Force relief show. At the first rehearsal, director Moss Hart surveyed the cast and said,

"I need someone..." and pointing to the redheaded, freckled-faced kid with Irish good looks said, "*You*. You look like the All-American Boy. There is a scene here, a very serious scene, and you walk in and are told that your buddy's been killed in an air crash." Tom was instructed to reply, "I know, Joe."

Tom joked that he carried the show with that one line: "I know, Joe."

Winged Victory played the Shubert Theatre in Boston for a month, and the 44th Street Theatre in New York for seven. On October

17, 1943, during the Broadway run, Dillon got permission from Moss Hart for a night off and married his girl, Alice Parker. Thereafter when he ran into Kitty Carlyle, Hart's wife, he would exclaim, "See what you did to me!"



(Mr. & Mrs. Tom Dillon,
October 17, 1943)

20th Century-Fox made the Hollywood film version with many of the original cast of three-hundred remarkable actors such as Karl Malden, John Forsythe, Red Buttons, Gary Merrill, Mario Lanza, and Eugene Connelly. Stars Jeanne Craine and Judy Holiday were also in the cast.

When *Winged Victory* closed after a lengthy tour, Tom was dispatched on an 11,000-mile tour of the Pacific, entertaining troops with a pocket-sized variety show.

After the war, he took advantage of the GI Bill to enroll in the Professional Training Program of the American Theatre Wing, studying voice and piano for four years. "I will never forget the first day. Karl Malden was in line, and John Forsythe. It was a wonderful opportunity for free."

He entered The Lambs in 1949 as a Junior Member, a category introduced that year to encourage new, younger members.

"Some of the fellows went out and borrowed the \$35, which was a lot of money in those days, especially if you were just out of service," said Tom. "There were thirty or forty of us. We were dying to get into the Club. People like Hal Prince and Don Murray came in at that time. They accepted us kids cordially, but told us that we were on trial and had better prove ourselves worthy of being Lambs. They gave us a night to put on a show all by ourselves. We produced and directed it and acted in it. It was a very successful night and really set us up solid with all the older Lambs. Anyone who had talent got up and performed. We were all gung-ho."

help. We didn't know what we were doing. We just didn't know. We couldn't imagine. And things just went from bad to worse." No one person had lost the clubhouse. The Club had lost the clubhouse.

Not long after the auction concluded, the Shepherd who had valiantly worked to save the beloved home of The Lambs, gathered up the last of his papers and memorabilia, and passed from its silent, haunted rooms, through its fabled doors onto the heat and confusion of 44th Street.

Said Tom Dillon, "I never set foot in it again.

The Rock of The Flock

After a brief stay at the Lotos Club in 1976, The Lambs relocated within the splendid clubhouse facility at 3 West 51st Street. The Club had survived. In April 1980, Tom Dillon was honored with a black-tie gala at the Biltmore Hotel.

For the occasion, Al Kilgore drew a large caricature of the Shepherd with the bold inscription, "The Rock of The Flock." The drawing, featured on the cover of this issue, is encircled with the signatures of many loyal, celebrated Lambs. It was recently cleaned and re-framed, and is among the treasures of the Club.



(Tom with Lucille Lortel)

Tom Dillon and The Actors' Fund of America

In 1986, having served seventeen years, longer than any other Shepherd, Tom retired as head of The Lambs. For his unusual service, he was bestowed the special title of Shepherd Emeritus. He then

Alice Dillon remembers the day he came home and to her dismay said,

“Women are picketing all the clubs. I think we should allow women.” Alice felt that men should have their private clubs and disagreed. “I finally came around,” she said. “So Tom is the one who brought women in.”

But economic conditions during the early 1970’s, and the changing cultural climate played havoc with club life. The Lambs was in serious trouble. Proposals of every description to save the Club were considered, every conceivable strategy was debated. Tom’s efforts were heroic. A Lamb remarked,

“Tommy Dillon worked his heart out. I thought he’d have a heart attack.”

With its back to the wall, in 1973 the Club was forced to declare bankruptcy. Always positive, Tom wrote to the membership,

“Chapter XI should be viewed with optimism, since this gives us breathing time. Under Chapter XI, all our liabilities are frozen and we are allowed to continue normal operations.... We have many things going for us if we continue, including our Centennial Year, 1974, the revitalization of the midtown area, and plans to increase the utilization of the building. So please stay with us and give us your confidence and your active, positive support.”

(Tom’s caricature by Senator Ford)

In January 1975, the clubhouse went on the auction block. With the loss of its home came plenty of finger pointing. Some blamed Hershfield for sitting on things until the slide was irreversible. Ed Herlihy, Boy of the Club during these critical years, said emphatically,

“The blame goes to the rest of us who were know-it-alls. There were loud mouths on the Council. We should have been hollering for professional



He began making rounds, forging a career in vocal quartets and choral work, finding plenty of work in radio and the emerging television business. He was a regular on *The Firestone Hour*, *The Milton Berle Show*, *The Martha Raye Show*, Phil Silvers’ *Sgt. Bilko* and others. He worked with Smith & Dale when they played *The Avon Comedy Hour* and he appeared in a sketch with Bert Lahr on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. With Bert Wheeler he formed the classic act, “Wheeler and Son,” in which he played Wheeler’s wise-cracking son, that lasted for thirteen years on the night club circuit and TV gigs, and even played the White House. (The two are pictured here.) Besides *Winged Victory*, his film credits included *Slaughterhouse Five*, *The Two Mrs. Grenvilles*, *Anastasia*, and *Family Business*. Tom’s singing career also included performances at the Miss America Pageant and at Carnegie Hall. But his most unlikely role was in a burlesque show:



In 1959, the famous stripper, Ann Corio, put together a show based on her recollections. *This Was Burlesque*, a fumigated version of the raunchy strip shows of the past, played in a large theatre on lower Second Avenue for over 1,500 performances. Corio attempted to convince Public Works Czar and impresario Robert Moses to present her at the 1964-65 World’s Fair.

“You know, we’re really quite mild compared to what children are exposed to on television—topless bathing suits and all. It’s comedy, pretty girls, bubble gum, stepping on toes, the kind of stuff you can leave your brains home for. We do nothing you wouldn’t write home about, to your aunt in East Cupcake, Ohio.” Moses was unconvinced.

Neither was Tom Dillon when, in the 1970’s, she tried to rope him into playing straight man for her show. The shrewd burlesque queen knew that Dillon’s wholesome persona was the antidote to the overripe material in her show, so she telephoned his wife:

“I am sick of trying to talk Tommy into this,” she complained to Alice, “so you tell him. I think he has this idea that this is a dirty show that I do. But especially the one I’m going out with now, you could bring kids to.” Dillon went into show.



(L-r; Tom Dillon, Mike Kelly, Joe Smith and Charles Dale, c. 1955)

“The eight weeks turned into thirty-six weeks,” he said. “We ended up in the Henry Hudson Theatre on West 57th Street. It was a great experience.” The Robert Moses World’s Fair folded at the end of summer 1965; *This Was Burlesque* ran for another twenty-six years.

During his burlesque career, Dillon was asked to sing the national anthem at a big event at the Americana Hotel on Seventh Avenue (later the Sheraton New York). With him on the dais were Harry Hershfield, and the Monsignor O’Brien, who inquired,

“What show are you in?” Dillon replied,

“I don’t want to tell you. I’m afraid you’ll excommunicate me.” The devilish Harry Hershfield leaned over and whispered to the priest, “He’s with the Corio Show.” The Monsignor lit up and said,

“Yeah?! Can you get me a couple of tickets?”

“You’re my kind of guy,” replied Dillon. Come and have lunch with me at The Lambs tomorrow.” Monsignor O’Brien became a much loved member.

In the wee hours one bitter cold winter evening as a Lambs’ event was breaking up, someone accidentally walked off with the Monsignor’s coat. The newscaster Tom Dunn offered to drop him off at the Rectory. No one could be roused to let him in, so they went to Dunn’s apartment up near Lincoln Center to put him up on the living room sofa. The two tiptoed in so as not to awaken Dunn’s wife, but as Dunn went to fetch a blanket, an angry Mrs. Dunn appeared.

“What’s going on in there?!” she demanded.

“I have someone in here. You’ll never guess who.”

“Je-sus Christ!” she exclaimed.

“No. But you’re close.”

In 1960 Dillon was given a Lambaste, a sure sign of affection. Admission was \$5.00. Harry Hershfield “atom-bombed” the clubhouse with his opening line:

“Sure, I’ll come pay tribute to a Gentile—but \$5 worth?!!!!”

Shepherd Dillon

Tom Dillon was an enormously popular and caring Shepherd who would personally deliver rent checks from the Club’s charitable Foundation to indigent Lambs, and saw to it that they had groceries on the table, even if it meant doing the shopping himself. Nowhere in the records of the Club is there mention of this quiet, selfless service.



(Governor Nelson T. Rockefeller, Tom Dillon and Pat O’Brien)