If you look at the new writers, you must note that the woman dramatist is coming into greater prominence than she has ever reached before.

Rida Johnson Young

The turn of the twentieth century brought tremendous social change for American women. Greater opportunities for education and the burgeoning women’s rights movements taking place across Europe and the United States opened their eyes to the possibilities of employment outside the home, participation in public office, and voting rights. Women of the upper and middle classes began to imagine a world beyond motherhood and wifely duty. Shifting attitudes toward a woman’s place in society led to the emergence of what cultural commentators dubbed the “New Woman.” The New Woman was a creature of the new century: ambitious, educated, and eager to fulfill her potential. Women dramatists—musical and non-musical—flooded the professional theater in the early decades of the twentieth century. Like all working women of the time, female playwrights straddled the divide between the nineteenth-century ideal of the “True Woman”—wife, mother, and helpmate—and that twentieth-century harbinger of independence and progress, the “New Woman.” Playwright Martha Morton (sometimes called “the dean of women playwrights”) founded the Society of Dramatic Authors in 1907, having been denied admission to the American Dramatists Club because of her sex. Susan Glaspell was the dominant creative force behind the Provincetown Players, part of the Little Theatre Movement that launched the career of Eugene O’Neill. In 1921, Zona Gale was the first female recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in Drama for her play *Miss Lulu Bett*. Rachel Crothers addressed questions of women’s equality in work and marriage in such critically acclaimed plays as *A Man’s World* (1910) and *He and She* (1911). Sophie Treadwell’s Expressionist masterpiece *Machinal* (1928) critiqued and unsettled societal restrictions on women. Many women also wrote more “popular” dramas: Anne Nichols’s *Abie’s Irish Rose* ran for five years (1922–1927) and grossed more than a million dollars in 1920s figures—a phenomenal success for the time. All these women and many more were
profiled in newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Times, The Theatre, Green Book Album, Good Housekeeping,* and *American Magazine.*

Unfortunately, professional achievement did not manifest gender parity. Interviews with women playwrights at this time reveal a striking trend toward emphasizing feminine domesticity over their theatrical successes. Women were usually introduced in association with their husbands or referred to primarily as “Mrs. [insert husband’s name here].” Theater columnist Ada Patterson’s 1918 feature “Wealth Not a Bar to Playwriting” positioned female artists in the domestic sphere as evidence that a woman could have a successful career and maintain her expected place in society. Here is her introduction to playwright and author Ethel Watts Mumford, whose works included the 1919 farce *Sick-a-Bed:*

Ethel Watts Mumford she is to the reading and play-going world, Mrs. Peter Geddings Grant to the smiling world, that fraction of the American commonwealth with a maximum banking account and a minimum of carking cares.

A high brownstone house near Central Park, a country estate . . . membership in the Colony Club, membership in two Oriental clubs that bespeak her world wanderings . . . all these tokens of riches has Ethel Watts Mumford.²

And it was not only Mumford’s wealth that allowed her to pursue a writing career. “Motherhood supplemented her experiences and enriched her nature,” proclaimed Patterson. “Having fully lived she was ready to freely write.” (As though motherhood endowed playwriting skills.) Patterson treated Anne Caldwell in much the same way. “The Only Woman Librettist in America” presented Caldwell as “Mrs. James O’Dea,” a grieving widow who has carried on writing despite the loss of her husband.³ If a woman was not married, then some other homemaking hobby or quality was highlighted. In Young’s case, columnists made frequent references to her love of gardening. A 1917 feature in the *New York Sun* had this subtitle: “But Rida Johnson Young, Who Is Entirely Unspoiled by Good Fortune, Has Her Mind Turned These Days to the Country and the Kind of Plots that Bear Potatoes, Not Plays.”⁴ That same year, Helen Ten Broeck’s article “Rida Young—Dramatist and Garden Expert,” set entirely in Young’s plant-filled home on her estate, suggested that the garden provided inspiration for her writing. Young often spoke lovingly of her garden and sometimes even admitted she’d rather be planting seeds than writing plays. But in this case, she may have been playing up her hobby with a twinkle in her eye. She fantasized about winning the county fair, leaving Ten Broeck to muse, “we came away wondering whether she really meant it or if she might not have been working at a little bit of comedy at our expense.”⁵

Some columnists looked to a woman’s past as evidence of her worth as a writer. In 1906, Virginia Frame situated all of the women she featured in “Women Who Have Written Successful Plays” in their childhoods: “Grace Livingstone Furniss . . . has written since she was a small child, being happiest when there was a pen in her hand.” “Charlotte Thomas has written since she could hold a pen in her hand.” Martha Morton had “written from the time she was a child, beginning with poems and short stories, and comes of a writing family.”⁶ The
image of a small girl clutching a pen and clumsily putting words to paper subtly diminishes these women by suggesting that their plays are nothing more than childish scribbling. Young deliberately resisted any such insinuation. In nearly every interview, she would pointedly uncover the myths surrounding her profession. She remarked how often columnists and admirers expressed wonder at her talents or implied that writing was easy and fun, a diversionary pastime. But Young would have none of it, citing her demanding working schedule: “I go to my desk at a certain hour every day and stay there four hours. Regularity in work is one of the biggest helps to success.” When pressed to share where her inspiration came from, she refused to take the bait. “Some lucky writers are able to dash off happy dialogue or work out characterizations whenever the mood happens to be inspiring,” she quipped. “I unfortunately am not that sort. If I waited to capture the mood, I am afraid I should never write a word.” She described the brutality of the play production process: “It is usually a twenty-four-hour day for both librettist and composer, all the way from the first production at Stamford, or Atlantic City, up to the opening night in New York,” she said. “While the actors are calmly sleeping and the manager and stage director are in the nearest café, discussing further tortures for librettist and composer, these two, in a stuffy hotel room, work desperately but valiantly.” Young would not glamorize her profession. The work was hard, and she wanted her public to know it.
Women writers were subject to scrutiny of their physical appearances as well as their achievements. One newspaper clipping identified Young as a “tall, stately brunette, and has the reputation of being the handsomest of the women dramatists of the country.” Isidore Witmark declared, “One of the most beautiful women ever to come from Baltimore—and Baltimore is noted for its beautiful women—was Rida Johnson Young.” A 1917 article assured readers that her beauty could make “even a disgruntled rival . . . lose his grouch if he could see her and talk with her. She is uncommonly ‘easy to look at.’ She wears her beautiful clothes so well that one cannot envy her the riotous royalties which enable her to buy them.” The Baltimore Sun reported: “She takes as much interest in a millinery opening as does a puffy society dowager, and she is as much interested in the fit of a shirtwaist as in a dramatic situation.” Even before her theatrical fame, Young’s wedding announcement praised her “magnificent mass of hair and soulful eyes.” One newspaper rather ridiculously called her “the most beautiful playwright in captivity.” As was often the case, Young’s talents and achievements took a backseat to her public image. Her clothing, hobbies, jewelry, and homes (she owned several homes during her career, including a luxury
estate at Southfield Point in Stamford, Connecticut) confirmed her status as a society dame first, working woman second. However, as with questions about what inspired her, Young would deflect attention away from the superficial and back to the grueling writing process. Young certainly played by conventional rules but adeptly subverted them when necessary. Even when downplaying her talents, she fiercely defended her profession, its standards, and her earnings. She spoke passionately about dramaturgy in the same breath in which she compared playwriting to gardening.

Fortunately, Young and her fellow women playwrights did see their hard work lead to growing admiration from the critics. A feature in the *Brooklyn Times* boasted, “Women Writers Now Occupy Important Place on American Stage,” with pictures of Crothers, Edith Ellis (who also directed Young’s 1909 smash hit *The Lottery Man*), Olive Porter, and Young with the caption “Rida Johnson Young—Wealthiest of Women Playwrights.” The brief—and unsentimental—piece positioned female writers in the male-dominated milieu:

> Women are taking a large part of the lion’s share of dramatic honors this season. Theatrical producers are being brought to a realization of the importance of the woman playwright, and recently a few remarkable contracts have been entered into between certain managers and women writers which go to show the tendency. Doubtless the most successful woman dramatist of the present time is Rida Johnson Young, who now has two successful pieces to her credit.16

And women playwrights had at least one champion in columnist Cady Whaley, who wrote a piece about Young in 1906 for *The Billboard*, titled “The Woman Playwright of the Current Season”:

> Verily, the women who can write plays are about the most strenuous, busy pieces of femininity to be found. I have had the pleasure of interviewing quite a number of them within the last ten days, and for the most part each one is possessed of an interesting personality—slender, delicate creatures, but of that never-give-up, nervous, energetic, do-or-die sort of disposition. They are snappy, quick, determined, showing broad culture, wide scholarship, and a well-balanced philosophy of life. They should succeed, for in the name of all that’s just and good they deserve to.17

### A “WOMAN’S TOUCH”

In his volume on Broadway lyricists, Thomas Hischak suggests that the women writing for the theater at the turn of the twentieth century brought a “woman’s touch” to their craft.18 As tempting as it might be to assume that gender influenced lyric writing, women in the business were competing with men for very few opportunities. They would do well to shape their own work to match the styles of the men who wrote regularly for Broadway. When Young began her career, she
would likely have known the works of two prominent men: Harry B. Smith and Henry Blossom, both of whom often wrote with Victor Herbert. Smith was the era’s most prolific lyricist-librettist, credited with writing more than three hundred librettos and approximately six thousand songs. He first collaborated with Herbert in 1895 on *The Wizard of the Nile*; their other works together included *The Fortune Teller* (1898), *Miss Dolly Dollars* (1905), and *Sweethearts* (1913). Blossom teamed with Herbert for *Mlle. Modiste* (1905), *The Red Mill* (1906), and *Eileen* (1917), among others. Both were celebrated by critics and the public, both in demand by producers. I have chosen a sample from each to illustrate their styles and what Young may have aspired to. Here is Smith’s “Gypsy Love Song” from *The Fortune Teller*:

> Slumber on, my little gypsy sweetheart,
> Dream of the field and the grove;
> Can you hear me, hear me in that dreamland
> Where your fancies rove?
> Slumber on, my little gypsy sweetheart,
> Wild little woodland dove,
> Can you hear the song that tells you
> All my heart’s true love?\(^{19}\)

And from Blossom, “Thine Alone” from *Eileen*:

> In thine arms enfold me, my beloved!
> Let thine eyes look fondly into mine!
> For thy love bears a spell all too wondrous to tell,
> ’Tis a rapture that’s all divine!
> So within thy tender arms enfold me,
> For thy loss, the world could not atone!
> Belov’d, I swear that I will e’er be true
> And forever thine alone?\(^{20}\)

Both songs contain content and themes typical for early American operettas: stirring, overly emotive love songs using heightened language, nature imagery, inverted syntax, and an almost operatic fervor. If Hischak’s estimation is correct, a lyric written by a woman would be noticeably more “feminine.” Then compare this lyric by Young, “Kiss Waltz” from the 1916 operetta *Her Soldier Boy*:

> Alas, I know I soon must be
> Far from my home and far from thee.
> Then let us have all happiness and joy today!
> Let us dance the fleeting hours away!
> Dreaming, this is but a dream,
> A dream of joy.
> Come, dear one, so close in my arms,
> Here would I hold you and fold you forever!
> Hold me, hold me in your arms!
Oh, dream of joy!
Oh, dear one, my own, dear one!
For you alone are my own evermore!²¹

The similarities among the three samples are striking, particularly those of Blossom and Young. All three employ the common devices listed above, especially the hyper-romantic idiom of operetta. Young’s lyrics sound no more feminine than Smith’s or Blossom’s. Rather than classifying Young’s writing voice as specific to her gender, I am more interested in the ways in which she drew on popular conventions and developed a style that composers, producers, directors, and audiences wanted to hear.

“The Poor Librettist”

Misconceptions about musical theater in the early twentieth century abound, particularly that the writers were virtually invisible. While that may have been true in burlesque, vaudeville, and revues, audiences certainly knew who wrote for Broadway. Theatrical reviews at the time typically listed a show’s writers before the cast, and in fact, the librettist and/or lyricist usually came before the composer. As a reviewer of Young’s musical with Jerome Kern, The Red Petticoat, stated, “It is not often that the composer’s name appears first upon a programme. Generally you read who wrote, produced, made the costumes and did all the other things necessary for the production of a piece, before you find out who is responsible for the music. Quite often that is as it should be.”²² Critics usually devoted at least a paragraph to critiquing the writing, often recalling past works and comparing them to the new one. Composers and lyricists were regularly featured in newspapers and entertainment and society magazines. Newspapers reported new projects in the works, marriages and divorces, even European vacations. As with any other celebrities, theatrical figures’ lives were fodder for gossip and entertainment. For instance, Young received a very sympathetic write-up in the Dramatic News when she had several hundred dollars’ worth of jewelry stolen from her estate: “Now when a hard-working girl puts all her royalties into jewelry, it is more than a shame to have them stolen. It is a downright outrage.”²³ Articles about Young frequently showed her at home, in her garden, or pictured with other celebrities.

Another popular misconception is that writers cared more about music than plot, that plot existed merely to support the songs and audiences did not care about the plot if the music was good. Critic George Jean Nathan accused the American stage of having “the cheapest, trashiest and most incompetent librettos that the civilized theatre has thus far in its career listened to.” He blamed producers for making assumptions about their audiences:

But, argue the producers, the public no longer cares about a libretto one way or the other. Give the public the right kind of syncopations, a lot of pretty legs,
some good-looking costumes, and maybe a joke or two about Congress and Pottstown, Pa., and the public is richly satisfied. Does the public want a logical and witty book? they ask. And they reply to themselves fortissimo with a very convincing no.24

But while many shows from the early era of American musical comedy went for entertainment first and coherence second, the truth is that audiences did care about plot—at least, according to the writers. They demanded that even the silliest musical comedies tell a good story. Lyricist and librettist Otto Harbach, whose many works included The Firefly (1912; music by Rudolf Friml) and Rose-Marie (1924; music by Friml and Herbert Stotthart, book and lyrics co-written with Oscar Hammerstein II) articulated this elusive ideal in 1925:

You are in a world of Make-Believe where anything is accepted as plausible provided it pleases. But it must please—vividly. Mere glitter and tinsel will not suffice. . . However fanciful the story, however fantastic the treatment, there must be an underlying reality closer to the human heart than realism—or the audience will not care.25

Arthur Hornblow praised Young and Romberg’s Her Soldier Boy, exclaiming, “Nevertheless, remember here is a musical comedy—real music and real comedy—with a PLOT!”26 In fact, many contemporary critics considered plot as essential as music in determining a show’s quality. That Hornblow felt the need to shout about this particular plot indicates a perceived failure on the part of some librettists to deliver the goods; nevertheless, musical comedies needed solid plots just as much as music. Young and her contemporaries were dramatists first and foremost. They strove for clarity and dramatic interest, even in the most light-hearted pieces. Young insisted:

I think the songs ought to be written about the action. They ought to belong to it; not be just any old song that could be taken bodily and shoved into any comedy at all. Lugging in a song about icebergs when the action takes place in Panama and singing about parrots and palms when your scene is in Alaska doesn’t appeal to me. I think a musical comedy can and should be made as coherent and logical as a play.27

Producers and critics appreciated her point of view. When the Shuberts signed Young to her first contract in 1907, The Billboard reported that she would “supply them with a musical libretto with entirely novel features. This does not mean any wide departure in musical comedy save that the plot will be visible and yet lend itself to musical setting and splendid costuming. The Shuberts will give the play their usual elaborate scenic investiture, while believing a plot has become a necessary factor in musical comedy.”28

But no matter how the librettist tried, he or she often had to relinquish artistic control, sometimes to the detriment of the plot. Young recounted a painful experience writing a musical—one that she discreetly left unnamed—in a 1917 feature for the New York Tribune titled “Lo! The Poor Librettist.” The process had started
well enough. The entire creative team, including the scenic designer, had been delighted with her script and ideas, so much so that “everybody was patting me on the back.” The show, concerning two sisters in South America, had been written for a female star (also unnamed), who decided that her “sister” should be cut out of the plot. Young obligingly made her an only child, and an orphan at that. When the comic-relief actor schemed to insert his own jokes, she tried in vain to remove them, only to find the jokes “seasoned and hardy. They couldn’t be killed.” The ingénue, a friend of the producer’s, insisted on more stage time, prompting the leading lady to throw tantrums until her own part was lengthened. After being forced to change the location of the show from South America to Hungary for a particular actor, and suffering through all the stylistic revisions required, Young realized that no amount of money compensated for her headaches: “One night after weeks of this agony I had a private little brainstorm of my own. I arose from my typewriter, packed my grip and silently stole away. I quit—cold.”29 Young did not identify the musical in question, nor have I been able to ascertain which one it might have been. But Young’s experience, although somewhat extreme, was hardly singular. She would find out that these woes came with the territory. Producers added or dropped songs from shows regularly, depending on sales of sheet music or cast changes; one star wouldn’t sing another one’s songs, so interpolated his or her own; and no matter how the writers tried to maintain dramatic coherence, star performers could wield inordinate power. Writers often had to defer to other artistic temperaments in the process of creating a musical, no matter how high their ideals. One interviewer asked her, “How much does the author count for anyway when it comes to putting a musical comedy on the stage?”

“Precious little,” she laughed. “Everybody barks at the humble author if he ventures a suggestion. It’s a good deal like being a dressmaker, I suppose. You can make a costume, but you’re not supposed to dictate to the purchaser how, when and where she is to wear it. The only thing you are supposed to do is to make any alterations demanded of you. Everybody, from the star down to the least of the chorus girls has no hesitation in stating what he or she means to do.”30

Young had a good sense of humor about her lowly status on the creative team. However, her scripts and correspondence demonstrate that she made every effort to abide by her writing philosophy throughout her career.

“A MATTER OF BUSINESS”

Rida Johnson Young prided herself on her shrewd business acumen. Much of her surviving correspondence with New York producers Lee and J. J. Shubert concerns her contracts and royalties. Young negotiated meticulously for every cent owed her, rigorously defending the time and energy required to produce good work. She paid close attention to box office receipts, attendance records,
and grosses and always knew where her plays were being produced. When a production of her play *Glorious Betsy* opened in Nebraska without her consent, Young promptly contacted her lawyer to ensure that her royalties were duly delivered. If more than a week went by that she did not receive a check for a show running in New York or elsewhere, she would write J. J. Shubert a reminder, sometimes with the exact amount owed her:

Mr. Schirmer told me some months ago that he had sent you over five thousand dollars on “Maytime” royalties, and he must have sent more since. The Victor people sold 189,000 records of “Sweetheart” during the first quarter. Will you kindly look into the matter and have Mr. Schirmer’s statements sent me, together with a check for 25 percent of all amounts received.31

(In this instance, the very annoyed Shubert replied, “I think the air in Stamford [Connecticut] is inflating your ideas as to royalties.”)32 Young could also inject a little cheeky humor into her business dealings:

I notice that the printing for “The Lottery Man” which you said you would have stripped with my name, is still guarding the dark secret of the author’s identity. Also, in all the papers yesterday, while every other author’s name was mentioned mine was carefully forgotten. I cannot understand why. It is in my contract, as you know, that my name should be on all the printing and advertisements. This is simply a matter of business with me, as you know it is important to have one’s name appear as often as possible.33

She could cajole:

Also, if I am your favorite playwright, will you please not forget me and make some inquiry as to why I have not received the check for advanced royalty.34

And when necessary, she would put her foot down:

I cannot understand why it is impossible for me to get the contract for “One of the Boys” and the royalty which is owing me. It has been in your office now for four weeks and I think it is time it was attended to. I have stopped in the office time and time again about it and I am entirely too busy to take up my time that way.35

Lee and J. J. Shubert were notoriously hard-nosed businessmen. J. J. in particular was prone to fits of ego that could render him hostile. He and Young clashed on more than one occasion, sometimes almost dissolving their working relationship. In one especially terse letter from November 1919, J. J. chastised her for turning down a proposed project, fuming, “It must give you quite a bit of satisfaction to feel as independent as you do, but do not forget that we had a lot to do towards making you so. However, I will not bother you any more about writing any plays for us.”36 Young cleverly responded with restraint and intelligence. She managed to apologize for any misunderstanding without compromising her professional status:
You always have theaters and you always stick to plays loyally and I am more than grateful for the success I have had under your management. You must not blame me if I want to get a more satisfactory contract than I have had before. I think that it is only natural when one has served his apprenticeship in any profession.\textsuperscript{37}

Rather than give in to Shubert’s emotional outburst, she smoothly brought the topic back to terms he could understand: this was a business deal, and she was entitled to a fair share. She ended the letter with one last carefully worded stroke to his ego: “I should be very sorry to feel that you think me ungrateful and I hope you will let me prove that I am not by letting me do something for you later on.”\textsuperscript{38}

It evidently worked, because Young continued to write for the Shuberts for the remainder of her career.

Her correspondence also reveals that Young—and presumably other writers—had some input regarding how shows were cast. Many letters discuss possible stars as well as character actors and even bit parts. If she wasn’t writing for a particular star, she might make several requests or recommendations for various roles, as in this 1918 letter:

Here are some suggestions for the cast of “Miss I Don’t Know.” The dancing waiter and the dancing girl could be played by Fred and Adele Astaire. Georgia O’Ramey should be engaged for the part of “Lulu”; Roy Atwell for that of the Professor (and then he can also supply some topical songs of his own), and Harry Fonder for the young American artist.\textsuperscript{39}

Young had few qualms about turning down a project if she believed it unlikely to succeed for any reason. Her following letter from 1917 to the Shuberts demonstrates some of the dramaturgical principles that guided much of her work:

I returned the play “Who’s Looney Now” to your office yesterday. I think it would be a mistake to try to make a musical play of this. Even a farce needs some foundation in probability, and that insanity germ idea is too far-fetched. Besides it is such an old-fashioned idea to try to get fun out of supposed insanity. Then too it would be hard to get any sentiment into it and I can work best with material that offers some sentimental interest.\textsuperscript{40}

As she so frequently stated elsewhere, the play must be believable and appeal to an audience. Young saw little value in simply turning in script after script and collecting a check; if she was going to expend precious time and energy on a show, it must meet her dramatic standards. She was also keenly aware of her abilities and would not agree to a project for which she felt herself unsuited. When asked to adapt the German play \textit{Alt Heidelberg}, which eventually became the Sigmund Romberg/Dorothy Donnelly operetta \textit{The Student Prince}, Young begged off:

I have very carefully studied “Heidelberg” and I do not think I could make a successful musical play of it. In the first place there is no University life of that kind except in Germany. I do not see any way to make a happy ending. Then there is no opportunity to put in up-to-date American numbers without

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spoiling the atmosphere. I would love to do it for you but do not think I could make a success of it.\(^{41}\)

By the time of this letter, Young had already successfully “Americanized” two German plays by removing them from their original settings and using on-trend American character types. *Her Soldier Boy* and *Maytime*, both adapted from German sources, contain distinctly American characters, language, musical rhythms, and patriotic overtones. This was likely because she wrote them during the First World War, when Germany was an enemy and, therefore, unpopular with American audiences. Young needed to divorce her versions from their source material. By the time Romberg and Donnelly received the property, anti-German sentiment had waned somewhat, allowing them to dive deeply into a nostalgic German past. Young did not have this luxury, nor was she inclined to tackle its unhappy ending (which Romberg and Donnelly vigorously defended). Her words to the Shuberts indicate that she felt this was the best approach to these scripts given the political climate that still hung over the country in the immediate aftermath of the war.

Young, like many in her profession, often downplayed the artistic merits of her work. Given that they were writing “popular” entertainment, lyricists and librettists (and some playwrights) saw themselves as workers rather than artists. Harry B. Smith made no secret of the fact that he wrote to make money, not art. He admitted that “it is possible to write comic opera that shall be at the same time artistic and popular. I don’t do it often myself, for I am merely in the business of filling orders, but it can be done.”\(^{42}\) Virginia Frame claimed that Young “calls herself a ‘manufacturer of entertainment’ rather than a playwright.”\(^{43}\) When prodded, Young would modestly admit to a few “really great successes,” but insisted that she simply gave audiences what they wanted: “The secret of success is merely to know what a million or so people would want in a song, or a play.”\(^{44}\) This should in no way imply that the work was easy or did not require dramaturgical skill; quite the contrary. Otto Harbach insisted that the musical librettist must be equal to or better than the playwright, pointing out that “the success or failure of a musical comedy depends less on the cleverness of the author than on his craftsmanship, is less a matter of brilliancy than of building. . . . No one is equipped to write a musical comedy who is not already a proficient playwright.”\(^{45}\)

Rida Johnson Young was more than proficient. Her early plays, written between 1900 and 1910, honed her dramaturgical process, voice, and sense of theatricality. Her time as a staff lyricist at the music publisher M. Witmark & Sons taught her how to fit words to music. By the time she wrote *Naughty Marietta*, she was well prepared to take on the task of fitting songs to libretto. Her artistry (although she may have scoffed at the word) developed throughout her career to make her even more valuable to her theater colleagues and to the early development of American musical theater. Besides her own significant contributions, she offers us a way into an underappreciated era by representing what was typical for her time. Young wrote in a world that required flexibility, speed, the ability
to collaborate (sometimes with many writers), and a thick skin. Columnist R. B. Sheridan remarked on Young’s emotional equanimity:

One of Mrs. Young’s characteristics is her extreme diffidence about her work—a quality not often encountered in stage folk, and it has gained her great popularity. Most dramatists regard the success of their own play as an epoch-marking event, and the failure of one of their bad plays as a national calamity fully as disastrous as the San Francisco earthquake or the Johnstown flood. Not so Mrs. Young, who, being not unduly elated by success, has not so far to fall should she meet with an occasional failure.46

Despite identifying herself as a “manufacturer of entertainment,” Young sought out projects that would satisfy and sell. Like many writers in the theater, she disliked sacrificing quality for speed but also knew that producers wanted to put up shows as quickly as theaters became available. Young was never sentimental about her plays, but she did want them to succeed dramaturgically as well as financially. Her work ethic and self-imposed daily writing schedule enabled her to produce work as quickly as her producers requested it. And if quantity alone equaled success, she would have had a fine career. But Young took great pride in her work, thoughtfully crafting plays and musicals with clever wit, interesting characters, and theatrical savvy. She began writing plays long before she understood dramaturgical techniques or the theater business and continued tirelessly even after a play flopped or was panned by the critics. Her sex could have put her at a disadvantage, but her output and financial success did not appear to suffer for it. If anything, she played the game as well as any of her male counterparts and had the earnings and name recognition to show for it.

Some of the women writing plays at the turn of the twentieth century did so as a hobby, in addition to their societal roles as wives and mothers. Rida Johnson Young wrote plays, musicals, songs, and novellas as her vocation. The theater was her life and livelihood, from almost the beginning of her life to the end of it.