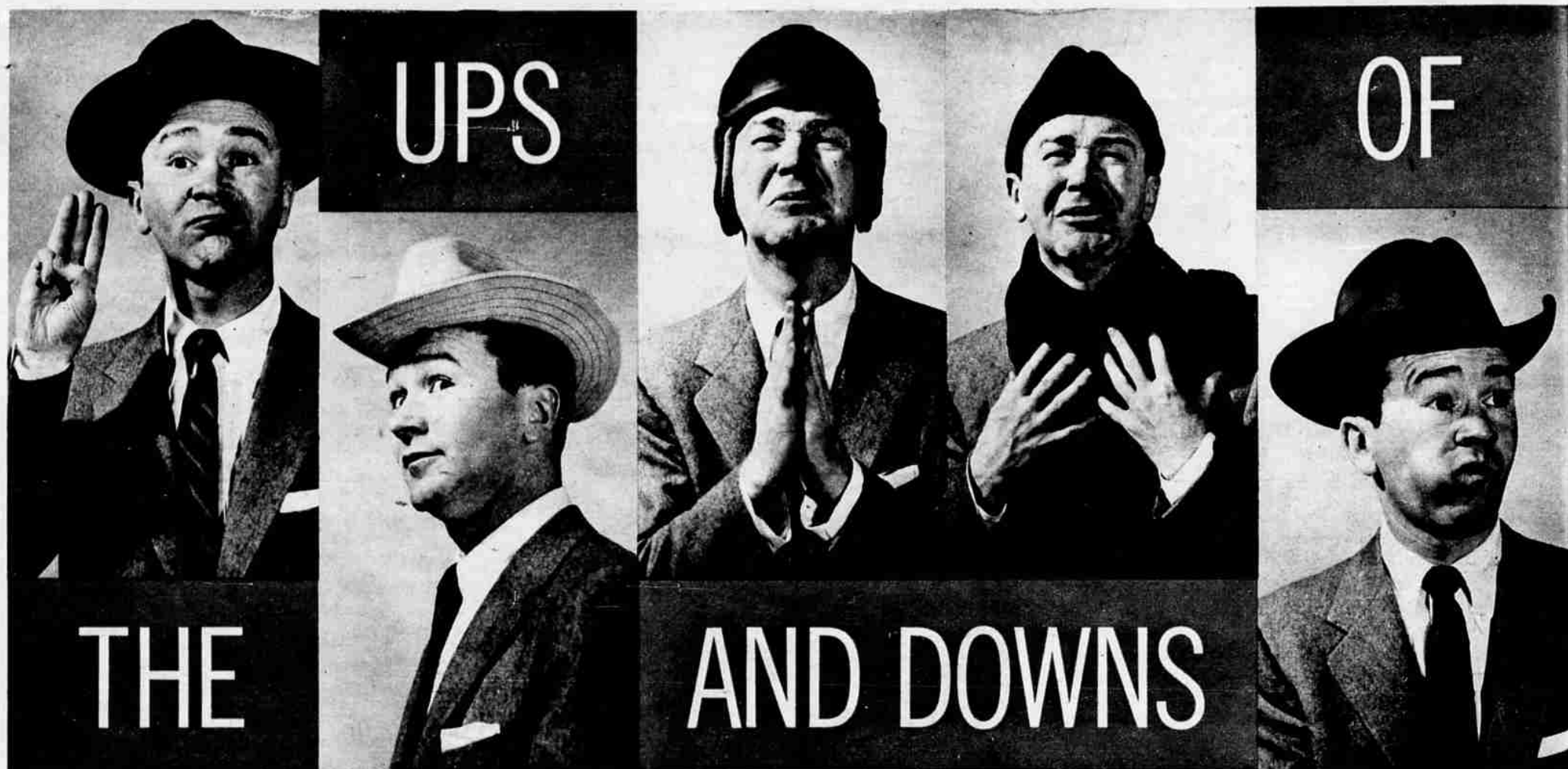




*This versatile comic is riding high today, but should he fall from fame again he'll be ready with one of his patented comebacks.*

by Kevin V. Brown

IN THE ASPHALT JUNGLE of New York's lower East Side, where Europe's huddled masses usually formed their first huddle in America, a skinny little newsboy named Aaron Chwatt began fighting his way out of it by singing the news on street corners in six different languages. And, with a shrewdness born of necessity, if he "layed an egg" on one corner, he changed corners or languages.

The boy didn't know it then, but the pattern was set for one of the most unusual careers in show business. Because, ever since, Aaron Chwatt (Red Buttons), a realist in a world of fantasy, has been changing his act to fit the audience or changing the audience to fit his act.

When Red stumbled off the stage of Hollywood's Pantages Theater last year, with a lump in his throat and an Oscar in his hands (for his performance in "Sayonara"), it marked one of the greatest comebacks in the history of show business. Two years before, Red had dropped out of sight after the ratings of his television show had done the same.

When he accepted the Academy Award, Red admitted publicly, "I'm a very lucky guy," but later conceded privately, "I've been making comebacks all my life."

It's true. When he first exploded into national prominence with his sensational TV debut in 1953, Red was hailed as an overnight sensation. Actually, he had years of show-business ups and downs behind him.

His hit-and-miss career had sputtered from the sidewalks of New York through the Borscht Circuit, club dates, burlesque, Broadway, night clubs, and both television and

Hollywood without gaining anything but sporadic recognition.

But through it all, the resilient comic with the practical mind, the rubber face, and even more rubbery legs, always rolled with the punch, landed on his feet, and bounced back—usually with a new act or a new audience.

The select few who helped Red along the way included a Polish immigrant, a burlesque impresario, a Shakespearean actor, an Air Force general, and a piano player.

The immigrant, of course, was Red's father. A hat blocker in New York's tough garment district, he not only didn't object to show business but actively encouraged Red's early career, soliciting some of his first jobs. "When you're poor," Red recalls with logic, "almost any way out is a way out."

One of his early jobs as a hired entertainer came at 16 as a singing bellboy in a New York roadhouse. Besides experience, it gave him his name. His hair (now black, turning gray) was then very red, and all bellhops were called "Buttons." Hence, Red Buttons.

With his new name and a still-young voice, Red migrated to the Catskills' Summer resorts—the famed "Borscht Circuit," spawning ground for many great careers. In the mountains, appropriately enough, Red's real ups and downs began.

The first crisis came when his voice changed. Fired as a singer, he switched to comedy. "Pie in the face, seltzer in the hair. Not good, but I got paid."

THE FIRST MAN to catch Red on the bounce was Harold Minsky, czar of New York burlesque. He hired the brash young man as a "third banana" (stooge) for comedy routines, but within a year Red was "top banana." During the next three years he built a respectable reputation in a medium that produced such top-notch stars as Phil Silvers and Abbott and Costello.

Red's burlesque days ended in 1941 when

Mayor Fiorello La Guardia closed down burlesque in New York. Once again on the sidewalks, Red changed audiences.

Jose Ferrer was then casting a comedy for Broadway. Remembering Red's act from burlesque, Ferrer sent for him. The play, a satire about Navy brass at Pearl Harbor, was scheduled to open Monday, Dec. 8, 1941, but, as Red says, "You know about Dec. 7."

Out of work again but still on his feet, Red got a part in another play, "Vickie." A farce about wartime suburbia, the play was universally panned by the critics, but one of them was observant enough to comment: "... the only member of the cast really at home in the midst of its slapstick and horseplay was Red Buttons, once of the burlesque circuit and still able to convey its kind of raucous comic verve..."

It was no use. The play folded.

Red changed corners. In Hollywood, he maneuvered a film contract and was just starting work when he was drafted.

He bounced back this time with an assist from Gen. "Hap" Arnold, Army Air Forces chief of staff. In one of the shrewdest boosts for air power, General Arnold commissioned playwright Moss Hart to write one about the Air Force. The result was "Winged Victory," an instantaneous hit.

Red, one of 7,000 ex-entertainers in service who were ordered to apply for parts in the show, was one of only 300 accepted. Private Buttons was good as usual, but in a small part in a big cast he was all but lost.

One critic found him, though, with this left-handed compliment: "...I should like particularly to mention the small, hilarious, unidentifiable private on the balcony in the barracks street scene..."

It was Red, a hit at last in a hit play, but now he was "unidentifiable."

Red stayed with "Winged Victory" throughout its two-year Broadway flight and also made the movie version. After the war he

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