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Dramatic Publishing

AMERICAN BEAUTY

A Musical

Music and Lyrics by

MICHAEL RICE

Book by

JACK HEIFNER, ROMULUS LINNEY,

KENT R. BROWN, HANK BATES,

MARY ROHDE SCUDDAY, CLIFF FANNIN BAKER



Dramatic Publishing

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KENT R. BROWN, HANK BATES, MARY ROHDE SCUDDAY,
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Little Rock, Arkansas

AMERICAN BEAUTY

A Musical in Two Acts
For 7 Women (expandable to 20+ women*)
and 1 Man (voice-over)

CHARACTERS

SARAH GENTRY
REBECCA ANN WYNNE
BONNIE BELL MURPHY
BOBBI SUE ETHERIDGE
JANE MARIE BARKER
BETH ANN PUGH
MARY JANE SMITH

TIME: The present.

PLACE: Any Town, America.

*See Production Notes

Running time: Two hours.

The Vignettes and “Musical Numbers”

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Production Notes

American Beauty was intended originally to be performed by seven actors. A suggested cast breakdown appears on page 99. To enlarge the cast, however, it is suggested that seven women play the main contestants' roles, while additional actors play the numerous secondary supporting roles.

In the first song, "I'm in a Pageant!," the two actors assigned the "Mother" and the "Little Girl" lyrics might be the same two who play the Mother and the Little Girl in "Mommy's Little Girl." This would help establish early who those characters are and give more definition in the opening number.

In "Something's Gonna Happen," Jane Pugh (Beth's little sister) should wear a costume that suggests her youth and individuality. The playwright envisioned her as a tomboy, so she might be donning a baseball cap and holding a pitcher's mitt. She needs something to help her visually make the quick transition from a fellow contestant to the little sister of a contestant.

In the talent selection "Twirling for the Red, White & Blue," the optional lyric "Maybe it's a thing I'm born to do" has been added in case the director decides not to assign this number to the same girl playing character Beth Ann Pugh.

For song #25 "Last-Minute Thoughts/Finale," a very successful costume treatment is to have all the girls in a monochromatic white or off-white gown, with each individual gown reflecting the calendar year it represents. This helps underscore the dramatic revelation that the seven women represent different years throughout two or three decades. Also, the slow motion unison waving at the end cannot go slowly enough...the slower...the more haunting and surreal it becomes.

Notes from the Composer...

Composing the score to *American Beauty* was a natural for me, as the songs came literally from my backyard. Growing up in Arkansas, I witnessed my two sisters, Diane and Rhonda, collectively win at least 12 beauty titles, ranging from Desha County Fair Queen to Miss Personality of Arkansas.

The work is not intended to spoof these people, but rather, with the aid of the playwrights, it becomes a mirror of the true inner feelings of not only the contestants, but also of others peculiarly drawn to the pageant industry—mothers, younger sisters, spectators, pageant hosts, and civic leaders—all displaying emotions ranging from hope to fear, from comedy to tragedy.

In the musical sense, I went for a 1970ish jingle quality, as if the girls had something to sell, that “something” being themselves. To me, *American Beauty* is a piece about naiveté in the basic, beautiful, and pure sense. It is both funny and yet strangely haunting as it reflects one of the most mind-boggling rituals ever to thrive in 20th-century America, especially in the South.

Lastly, I wish to express my gratitude to director/choreographer Teri Gibson, whose developmental work greatly influenced this final version of the piece.

Michael Rice

Suggested Casting Breakdown

Fireflies Rebecca Ann, Bobbie Sue
“I’m in a Pageant!” . Little Girl: Bobbie Sue, Mother: Beth Ann
Ya Gotcha. Sarah
Pageant Rules. Bonnie Bell
“Why Don’t You Enter?” Mary Jane (and others)
Elvira. Beth Ann, Jane Marie, Mary Jane, Rebecca Ann
Mommy’s Little Girl Bobbi Sue, Sarah, Beth Ann
Mom Bonnie Bell
“Pageant Mothers and Daughters” . . Bobbi Sue, Sarah, Beth Ann
Backstage Interview Holly Hussman: Jane Marie
“Something’s Gonna Happen” . . Little Sister solo: Bobbie Sue
“Tomorrow Begins Today” (Themselves)
Waving Sarah
Vital Statistics — A Swim Suite Mary Jane
For Those of You Judging at Home Beth Ann,
Rebecca Ann, Bonnie Bell
We Aren’t What You Think We Are Jane Marie
“Talent/Country Song” (Themselves)
My Lilly Beth Ann, Jane Marie
“The Talent Montage” (Themselves)
Why I Married Gulfport’s #1 Ford Salesman . . . Bobbi Sue
Cameos (Assigned as desired)
“Fireflies and Shooting Stars” Rebecca Ann
“Last-Minute Thoughts” (Themselves)

Character Profiles

In addition to portraying the seven individual contestants, the actresses also play various other characters throughout the script. The following is a breakdown of the individual qualities of the seven contestants and a breakdown of what they might cover when they aren't playing themselves. Obviously, this is subject to change for each individual production.

1. SARAH GENTRY: The ideal Miss America. Obviously groomed for beauty pageants. Mature, confident. In real life she ends up a housewife and president of the Junior League. Talent: Marimba solo.

2. REBECCA ANN WYNNE: The key to her character lies in her "dreaming" qualities in the opening *Fireflies* scene. In real life she ends up as a housewife and heads the local Arts Council. Talent: "Italian Street Song."

3. BONNIE BELL MURPHY: The key to her character lies in "Country Song." Coming from a small town, she has reservations about competing with girls from the larger towns. Sincere, humble, might feel a little inferior to the others. Her clothes are plain, homemade, and simple. She ends up becoming a Mary Kay consultant. "Talent/Country Song."

4. BOBBI SUE ETHERIDGE: Sincere, humble, simple. Her frustration over her not-so-good talent presentation soon turns into an outward expression of anger in "Why I Married Gulport's #1 Ford Salesman." She ends up as a housewife. Talent: Dramatic Monologue.

5. JANE MARIE BARKER: Sophisticated, educated, urbane, intelligent, as reflected in her monologue "We Aren't What You Think We Are." She becomes an actress. Talent: Pop vocal "music."

6. BETH ANN PUGH: Has a comedic character sense about her. Mature. She ends up as a dental assistant. Talent: "Twirling for the Red, White & Blue."

7. MARY JANE SMITH: Urbane, confident, perky, street smart. She ends up as a lawyer. Talent: Song-dance routine "Rollin' Down the Mississippi."

About the Authors...

Cliff Fannin Baker, the founding producing artistic director of Arkansas Repertory Theatre, has overseen the growth and expansion of The Rep since its creation in 1976. He has directed in cities throughout the country and has a particular passion for new plays, and to that end, has produced more than 30 world and regional premieres including the musical adaptation of Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* with Michael Rice, *Peanuts and Crackers* by Jerry Slaff, *Lola Lola* with composer Sharon Douglas, and *Home Fires* and *Comfort and Joy* by Jack Heifner to name only a few. He is the first recipient of the Arkansas Governor's Individual Artist's Achievement Award as well as the Arkansas Arts and Humanities Award of Distinction in 1996. He is a member of the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers and The Dramatists Guild.

Hank Bates is a playwright, novelist and environmental attorney who lives in Little Rock, Arkansas. In addition to *American Beauty*, his plays include *Zeke's Vision*, *Into the Deep* and *Twilight's Last Gleaming*. He has received grants from, among others, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. He is the recipient of a Rotary International Fellowship to study playwriting and drama at Manchester University in Manchester, England, and he was playwright-in-residence at the Arkansas Repertory Theatre, the Ucross Foundation in Ucross, Wyoming, and the Lost Colony Theatre in Manteo, North Carolina.

Kent R. Brown's plays have been produced by theaters and festivals throughout Canada, Australia and the United States including People's Light and Theatre Company, Walnut Street Theatre, BoarsHead Theatre, West Coast Ensemble, Boston Theatre Works, Pulse Ensemble, The Side Project and Moving

Arts. His titles include *Valentines and Killer Chili*, *Lover Boy*, *Larry's Favorite Chocolate Cake*, *A Trick of the Light*, *Ciao, Baby!*, *The Phoenix Dimension*, *Designer Genes*, *Jessica's Will*, *The Volunteer*, *Hope 'n Mercy*, *The Seduction of Chaos*, *We Called Him Joe* *Bottles* and *Two Beers and a Hook Shot*, among others. He is the recipient of McLaren Comedy, Mill Mountain Theatre and George R. Kernodle awards; Denver Center Theatre's US West TheatreFest and Theatre in the Raw (Vancouver, B.C.) citations, and a Drama-Logue award for Excellence in Playwriting. He has twice been a guest director at the Bonderman/IUPUI festival of theatre for youth, and has been a playwright-in-residence at The Writers Center at Chautauqua and the Sewanee Writers' Conference. Brown lives in Fairfield, Conn., with his wife, Gayle. He is a member of The Dramatists Guild.

Jack Heifner is best known for his play *Vanities*, which ran for five years in New York and became one of the longest-running plays in off-Broadway history. He is also the author of *Comfort and Joy*, *Boys' Play*, *Heartbreak*, *Home Fires* (all published by Dramatic Publishing), *Patio/Porch*, *Natural Disasters*, *Running on Empty*, *Bargains*, *Music-Hall Sidelights*, *The Lemon Cookie* and other plays produced in New York, Los Angeles and theatres around the country. Heifner has written the books to six musicals including *Leader of the Pack* on Broadway. He has also written for film and television.

Romulus Linney is the author of three novels and many plays produced on, off-, and off-off-Broadway, and in resident theatres internationally. They include *The Sorrows of Frederick*, *Childe Byron*, *Holy Ghosts*, *The Love Suicide of Schofield Barracks* and *Laughing Stock*, chosen by *Time* magazine as one of the best plays in 1984. He has received NEA, Guggenheim and Rockefeller Fellowships, the Mishima Prize for Fiction, two Obie

Awards and the 1984 Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

Michael Rice graduated from the University of Arkansas in 1977 with an emphasis on classical piano. A resident of New York City, he has written, with Eric Bentley, an adaptation of Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* which received its New York premiere in 1998 (originally produced at the Arkansas Rep in 1985). He provided music for the 1983 Best Documentary film *He Makes Me Feel Like Dancin'* which featured Jacques d'Amboise. He was arranger and original musical director for off-Broadway's *Nunsense*, *Nunsense II*, *Balancing Act* and *Sister Amnesia's Nunsense Jamboree*, all by Dan Goggin, and was musical conductor for the world premieres of *American Vaudeville* and *Marathon Dancing*, both directed by Anne Bogart. In 1996 he made his off-Broadway acting debut in *Radio Gals*. He continues to teach in New York and to conduct and perform in Broadway, off-Broadway, and regional theatres. He was nominated for a Helen Hayes Award for achievement in theatre and is a member of The Dramatists Guild.

Mary Rohde Scudday is an actress and playwright, whose first play, *Ladybug, Ladybug, Fly Away Home*, was nominated by the American Critics' Association as one of the 10 best new plays produced regionally in the late 1970s. *Ladybug* was subsequently published in an anthology, *Texas Plays*, edited by William Martin. Her plays have been produced in numerous theaters and adapted for National Public Radio. She is the recipient of a Rockefeller Playwriting Fellowship and was a playwright-in-residence at the Dallas Theater Center for several years. In the book, *Texas Women Writers*, edited by Sylvia Ann Grider and Lou Halsell Rodenberger, Scudday is featured in the chapter on dramatists.

ACT ONE

Music Cue #1: OVERTURE Segue to #1A

FIREFLIES

AT RISE: A clear summer night. SALLY—played by Bobbi Sue Etheridge—and REBECCA—played by Rebecca Ann Wynne—are out in the backyard catching fireflies in bottles. They are both in high school. SALLY is wearing shorts and a halter-top and is barefoot. She is running about the stage chasing after the fireflies. REBECCA is dressed in shorts and an oversized T-shirt. She is wandering slowly around, not bothering to chase the many fireflies which fly around her. She stops periodically and peers at the ones in her bottle.

Music Cue #1A: STARS

(Summer night sounds (crickets, frogs, etc.) are heard throughout this scene.)

SALLY. There are so many of them tonight. Look at 'em all, Rebecca. Have you ever seen so many in all your life? They're everywhere. *(She runs back and forth, first chasing one and then another.)* Dang it! They're everywhere, but I can't seem to catch one of 'em. *(REBECCA sits on the grass and stares at the sky.)* Got one! I got

one, Rebecca! (*She slides it into the bottle. Notices REBECCA sitting down.*) What are you doing? You can't quit now, it's the first one to a dozen.

REBECCA (*unscrewing the lid and waving her jar in the air*). I just like watching 'em.

SALLY. Rebecca! You let 'em all out! They're all getting away.

REBECCA (*lying on her back, looking up at the stars*). I like watching them fly around, not sitting in some bottle. If you lie on your back and watch 'em twinkling above your head they look just like stars.

SALLY (*plopping down next to REBECCA*). Oh, Rebecca! Why can't you just catch the dang things like we used to? Nowadays all you do is sit around and stare at the sky. It don't look any different than it did last weekend.

REBECCA. It don't have to. It's already so beautiful, it don't have to change. And it is different, there's all kinds of new stars up there, and others have faded away and they're all moving around, going different places. It looks a lot different. You just can't tell from where we are. Nothing changes here. The whole world is whizzing along, all kinds of things are happening, and I'm still running around my backyard chasing fireflies.

SALLY. So, there's nothing else to do. Anyway, I kind of like it.

REBECCA. That's just it. There's never anything to do here. We've got to drive almost an hour just to see the picture show.

Music Cue #1B: SHOOTING STAR

REBECCA. Look!! Did you see that?

SALLY. What?

REBECCA (*jumping to her feet*). A shooting star! Right up there! Right over the barn! Did you see it?

SALLY (*overlapping*). Where? I don't see it. Where'd it go?

REBECCA. It was right up there. It came streaking down till I lost it behind the barn. I saw it! I saw a shooting star! I've been staring up at the sky my entire life, and I've never seen a shooting star. I've never seen anything but the same old thing. I've got to make a wish. (*She bows her head and makes a wish.*)

SALLY. I'm gonna make a wish too.

Music Cue #1C: ECHO

OFFSTAGE VOICES.

**SOME WANT THE SPARKLE AND
SOME WANT THE GLORY AND
SOME NEED APPROVAL AND
SOME TELL A STORY...**

SALLY. Well, what'd you wish?

REBECCA. I can't tell you.

SALLY. You can too tell me. I'm your best friend.

REBECCA. I don't know... OK. Did you read in the paper today about the contest next month?

SALLY. I don't read the paper.

REBECCA. The beauty pageant. It's for the whole county. And then if you win that you go to the State. And if you win that, the whole country.

SALLY. You mean, Miss America?

REBECCA. Well, almost. It's Miss Delta Queen. But if you do good in this, you're bound to do good in the Miss America.

SALLY. You, Miss America?

REBECCA. Why not?

SALLY. It's not that you're not pretty and all. It's just... Miss America. Nobody around her goes on to be Miss America.

REBECCA. Seems to me nobody around here goes on to be anything.

SALLY. It sure would be nice. Wouldn't it? Say you were to make it.

REBECCA (*falls back and stares at the sky*). Walking down that ramp with everyone, I mean everyone—not just the people in the audience, but the whole country—looking at you. And that's just the beginning. You'd meet all kinds of people, celebrities, important people, good-looking movie stars and all. And you could go to a different picture show every night of the week. Better than that, you'd be in the picture shows. Everybody'd be watching you and wishing they were you.

SALLY. You're just dreaming, Rebecca. People like that don't come around here. They wouldn't even stop for a Coke if they were passing through for someplace else.

REBECCA (*jumping to her feet and walking restlessly around*). That's just it! That's why I want to do it. I've been living my whole life out here in the middle of nowhere. And what am I gonna do? I can marry somebody like Jimmy and sit around and watch his farm die, or I can check groceries at the Piggly Wiggly. I'm so bored with that, with this place, with my life. I just want to do something *real*. And this Miss Delta Queen thing might

sound stupid to you, or it might sound like I don't have a chance, but— Here we are in high school chasing fireflies and stuffing 'em in bottles. YOU know girls over in Little Rock aren't chasing fireflies... You know what I did the other night? What me and Jimmy did?

SALLY. No. What?

REBECCA. I don't know if I should— Heck, who cares. We snuck into the swimming pool and went swimming. Climbed over the fence.

SALLY. You didn't!

REBECCA. And you know what we were wearing? Nothing. We went skinny-dipping in the public pool right across the street from the county courthouse.

SALLY. Rebecca! Oh my God, I can't believe I'm hearing this. You don't sound like Miss America material to me.

REBECCA. Oh, Sally, you don't know anything. That's nothing. It's just something in this stupid little town. It was fun, though. And it was so dark you couldn't see anything. At least I couldn't. *(They laugh and lie back, looking at the stars.)*

SALLY. I bet you could tonight with all these stars out.

REBECCA. And a full moon too. I don't know. Maybe it was stupid.

SALLY. Rebecca?

REBECCA. Hm?

SALLY. Next time will you take me?

Music Cue #1D: STARS

REBECCA. Look, another shooting star! *(She quickly sits up.)*

SALLY. Where?

REBECCA (*pointing*). Over there. Do you see it? Two shooting stars in one night! I can't believe it.

SALLY. Rebecca. That's not a real star. That's a plane or a satellite or something.

REBECCA. Well it looks like one, it's good enough to make a wish on.

SALLY. I guess it can't hurt. (*They bow their heads and close their eyes and make their wishes. Lights fade. Then out of the darkness:*)

REBECCA. What'd you wish?

Segue to Music Cue #2: I'M IN A PAGEANT

(Lights crossfade to the CONTESTANTS at their dressing areas, obviously arriving for the first day of the Big Week. They are nervous and anxious and are holding everything from handbags and garment bags to batons. They might be dressed casually, or in smart "interview"-type suits.)

Music Cue #2: I'M IN A PAGEANT

ALL.

**SOME WANT THE SPARKLE
AND SOME WANT THE GLORY
AND SOME NEED APPROVAL
AND SOME TELL A STORY**

**SOME WANT THE SPARKLE
AND SOME WANT THE GLORY
AND SOME NEED APPROVAL
AND SOME TELL A STORY**

(Gradually building.)

**SOME WANT THE SPARKLE
AND SOME WANT THE GLORY
AND SOME NEED APPROVAL
AND HERE IS OUR STORY!**

**I'M IN A PAGEANT
I'M IN A PAGEANT
ANOTHER PAGEANT
HERE WE GO AGAIN.**

**ANOTHER PAGEANT
JUST ONE MORE CONTEST
JUST ONE MORE PAGEANT
ONE MORE CHANCE TO DARE TO TRY
FOR A PIECE OF SKY,
I'M NOT SURE JUST WHY I HAD TO ENTER,**

SOLO.

**BECAUSE THEY HAVE THEM
AND THAT'S A GOOD ENOUGH REASON WHY!**

SOLO.

I'D LIKE TO WIN ONE

SOLO.

I'VE NOT BEEN IN ONE

SOLO.

WHY DO WE WORRY?

SOLO.

SHHH! GIRLS, LET'S HURRY!

ALL.

**SOME PEOPLE WIN 'EM AND
SOME PEOPLE LOSE 'EM
THEY LIVE TO BE IN 'EM
THEY LIVE THOUGH THEY LOSE THEM.**

MOTHER (*played by Beth Ann Pugh*).

**ANOTHER PAGEANT
THIS IS THE LAST TIME
WE CAN'T AFFORD IT
HERE WE GO AGAIN**

**TOO MANY STRESSES
TOO MANY DRESSES
WHY I SAID "YESES"
TO THE LAST THREE STILL GETS ME,
BUT SHE TRIES TO BE
SOMETHING SHE'S NOT, AND NEVER WILL BE!**

CONTESTANTS.

PLEASE GOD, LET ME WIN IT, JUST ONCE!

MOTHER.

**I JUST CAN'T SAY "NO"
PAGEANTS ARE HER LIFE!**

ALL.

**SOME PEOPLE WIN 'EM AND
SOME PEOPLE LOSE 'EM**

SOLO (*speaking with urgency*).

**SOME LOOK TO THE JUDGES
AND HOPE THAT THEY'LL
CHOOSE ME**

**AND HOPE THAT THEY'LL
CHOOSE ME**

LITTLE GIRL (*Bobbi Sue Etheridge, as her mother is brushing her hair, singing*).

**ANOTHER PAGEANT
I DIDN'T WANT TO
MY MOTHER MADE ME.**

GIRL'S MOTHER.
HERE WE GO AGAIN.

LITTLE GIRL (*a young contestant playing a 13-year-old*).

**I GUESS I'LL DO IT
FOR HER GO THROUGH IT...**

GIRL'S MOTHER (*brushing her hair a little harder now*).
Last year you blew it!

LITTLE GIRL.
**NEARLY DIED WHEN
MOTHER CRIED
SAID I SHOULD HAVE
TRIED,
SAID I WOULD HAVE
WON...**

GIRL'S MOTHER.

You wouldn't listen to me.
You didn't do a thing I said.
If I told you once, I told you
a thousand times...keep your
head up. Don't drag your
feet and, for God's sake,
smile, baby, smile!

LITTLE GIRL (*stepping into spotlight*).

I'LL TRY HARDER!

I believe that America is the greatest country on the earth, blessed by God. When people ask me, "What's right about America?" I say... "Everything!"

ANOTHER CONTESTANT. And honestly, I feel that in this pageant, each one of us is a winner!

ALL.
**EACH ONE OF US IS A
WINNER
EACH ONE OF US IS A
WINNER.**

ONE CONTESTANT.
After spending this week
with this bunch of girls, I
feel like we're all sisters.

SOLO.
I'VE NOT BEEN IN ONE.

SOLO.
I'D LIKE TO WIN ONE.

ALL.
**ANOTHER CONTEST
HERE WE GO AGAIN.**

SOLO.
WHAT IF I FALL DOWN?

BONNIE BELL MURPHY.
**I'M FROM A SMALL TOWN
I'LL HAVE TO FAKE IT.**

ALL.
**THIS TIME MAKE IT WORTH THE TRY
REACHING FOR THAT SKY
NOW MORE SURE JUST WHY WE HAD TO
ENTER
PLEASE, GOD, LET ME WIN IT, WIN IT, WIN IT,
THIS TIME...**

SOLO.
**BECAUSE I HAVE TO
AND THAT'S A GOOD ENOUGH REASON**

ALL.

**SOME WANT THE SPARKLE AND
SOME WANT THE GLORY AND
SOME NEED APPROVAL AND**

**ONE MORE CHANCE TO DARE TO TRY
FOR THAT PIECE OF SKY
ALWAYS WOND’RING WHY...**

(As they promenade down the runway.)

**WHY DO WE DO IT?
WHY DO WE DO IT?
WHY DO WE DO IT?
WHY DO WE DO IT?**

(Now they are filing into a “top 7” formation.)

SOLO.
TO BE A WINNER

ALL.
THAT’S THE REASON

SARAH GENTRY.
I need a scholarship to finish
college.

REBECCA WYNNE.
I just can’t believe I’m really
here!

THAT’S THE REASON

JANE MARIE BARKER.
I want to show the rest of the
country just how great Little
Rock is.

THAT’S THE REASON

THAT’S THE REASON

BETH ANN PUGH.

It would mean a lot to my
boyfriend.

THAT'S THE REASON

BOBBIE SUE ETHERIDGE.

I'm gonna remember this
night as long as I can!

THAT'S THE REASON!

THAT'S THE REASON!

THAT'S THE REASON!

THAT'S THE REASON....

MARY JANE. ...“And as I go for the gold, I just wanna
say, `I LOVE YOU TULSA, OKLAHOMA!’” (*Music stops
and action stops to focus on BONNIE.*)

BONNIE (*spoken with much excitement*). Hi, My name's
Bonnie Bell Murphy. My favorite color's blue and I love
pizza! (*Resuming action.*)

ALL.

**SOME WANT THE SPARKLE AND
SOME WANT THE GLORY AND
SOME NEED APPROVAL AND
SOME TELL A STORY...**

**SOME WANT THE SPARKLE AND
SOME WANT THE GLORY AND...
I'M IN A PAGEANT.
ANOTHER PAGEANT.
ANOTHER PAGEANT
HERE WE GO AGAIN.—
I'M IN A PAGEANT! (*Blackout.*)**