Ah, sweet mystery of life, / at last I’ve found thee. Ah, I know at last / The secret of it all.

—*Naughty Marietta*, 19101

Every morning from 8 to 1 in the afternoon I slave at my typewriter. No matter how I feel, no matter whether I have any inspiration or not, I set about my task with absolute regularity and keep at it the allotted time.

—Rida Johnson Young, 1917

RIDA JOHNSON YOUNG CREATED well over thirty plays and musicals, along with numerous popular songs during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Her prodigious output was the result of maintaining a practical writing schedule. “Regularity in work,” explained Young, “is one of the biggest helps to success.” Young, who often played down her own accomplishments in interviews, related that another key factor to her success was “never undertaking anything really big” and writing plays that were popular and within her ability. But Young also excelled at finding venues for her talents as playwright, lyricist, and songwriter, creating popular dramatic works and songs that brought her both celebrity and wealth. What is more, managing her own business affairs, she usually served as her own agent, took an active role in the casting and rehearsing
of productions, and formed professional alliances with the likes of Daniel Frohman, Lee and J. J. Shubert, and Isidore Witmark of Witmark Music Company. When she died in 1926, the dramatist left behind a remarkable body of work, along with a number of unproduced plays.

Rida Louise Johnson was born in Baltimore, Maryland, February 28, 1875, to William A. Johnson and Emma Stuart Johnson, the fifth of six children. Her father owned a lighterage/coal business and provided a respectable, middle-class living for his family. The Johnson home, located at 104 Jackson Place in East Baltimore, was a few blocks south of John Hopkins Hospital and north of Fell’s Point, an area which was “prominent” at the time but not especially wealthy. The same location is mentioned in the 1900 census, with Emma given as head of household, revealing that apparently only four of the Johnson children still lived at that time.

At the age of fifteen, in the fall of 1890, Rida enrolled at Wilson College for Young Women, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, in the School of Music as a special student in piano for one year. There is no evidence to support that she attended elsewhere, although she must have received formal instruction in earlier years. This is demonstrated by the fact that Rida took up writing early, her “poems, articles and stories appearing in small magazines and local newspapers.” When she was eighteen, she completed an ambitious play about Omar Khayyam that “contained almost one-hundred characters” as Young described, and would have taken “about eight or ten hours” to perform. Convincing her reluctant parents to let her go to New York, she determined that if the play did not succeed, she would become an actress. Upon arriving in New York sometime in 1893, she first secured a $4-a-week job marketing furniture polish out of a Harlem apartment and found a room to rent at two dollars a week.

When making the rounds to theatres to show her play to managers, she caught the attention of E. H. Sothern, a well-known actor-manager of the day. While Sothern did not take the Omar Khayyam piece, he must have spotted some nascent ability in Rida’s first efforts, since he outlined another play for himself and asked her to write it. “I could not spare the time from my work,” Young explained, “and in the end secured a place in his company for the express purpose of learning more of the stage and the technique of the drama.” Her first role as a lady-in-waiting in Daniel Frohman’s production of The Three Musketeers paid $25 a week and allowed her to quit selling furniture polish. Despite the theatrical training gained from playing in stock theatre and wanting to be “great,” Rida