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Blue Vaudeville:
Sex, Morals, and the Mass-Marketing of Amusement,
1895-1915

by
Andrew L. Erdman

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The City University of New York Graduate Center.

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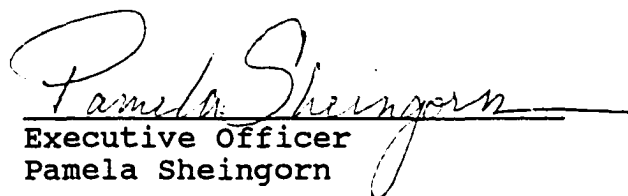
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract**BLUE VAUDEVILLE: SEX, MORALS, AND THE
MASS-MARKETING OF AMUSEMENT, 1895-1915**

by

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Adviser: Professor Daniel Gerould

Vaudeville was the most popular form of entertainment in the United States, from roughly the 1890s through World War I. In fact, it can reasonably be called the first truly *mass* form of entertainment in the United States, and perhaps the world. This dissertation examines how vaudeville grew as the first national, large-scale form of amusement in America. It attempts to locate the rise of this first form of mass entertainment within an era when powerful businessmen in many industries were beginning to market products and services to a national market as well.

Furthermore, this dissertation examines some of the key promotional practices used by the vaudeville industry. Chief among them were consistent claims of purity and wholesomeness with regard to the content of vaudeville acts. It was promised that no act seen in vaudeville would offend a theatregoer. At the same time, however, vaudeville was clearly full of acts that were sexually provocative, titillating, and reminiscent of the burlesque hall stage. Thus, what begins to emerge is a picture of promotional and marketing practices that promised moral purity, while the product that vaudeville offered was often times anything but pure. This work attempts to explain this rift by comparing the marketing practices of vaudeville to those of other large industries at the time. It will be seen that the tactics used by the vaudeville chiefs—promises of purity,

wholesomeness, and sterility—were much like the claims employed by dozens of other early mass-marketers, who claimed their products were, above all else, clean, safe, pure, honest, and free from taint of any kind. In promoting their products as such, it is argued herein, early mass marketers were in fact trying to allay anxieties over the participation in mass-scale commerce and were preparing the American populace as a responsive mass market that had no qualms about buying its goods and services from large, faceless commercial entities headquartered, in many cases, in cities hundreds of miles away. Such tactics not only permitted the vaudeville chiefs to introduce the first form of mass entertainment into the American market, but also allowed them to offer an increasingly ribald and sexually tantalizing array of entertainment to the American public (much of which is detailed in this work), thus liberalizing views of sexuality in general and the female body in particular (even though it also led to the further objectification of the female body). Finally, this dissertation closely examines a number of popular female performers, such as Eva Tanguay and Annette Kellerman, who used their body and their sexuality to craft a successful mass entertainment product.

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Introduction:
**“This Boudoir Business”: Sexuality and
 the Discourse of Purity in Vaudeville**

In 1910, an article called “The Decay of Vaudeville” appeared in American Magazine. The author chose to remain anonymous, but her attitude toward the vastly popular form of entertainment was unmistakable. “Vaudeville,” she wrote, “has done more to corrupt, vitiate and degrade public taste in matters relating to the stage than all other influences put together... a vaudeville show, especially in the ‘first-class’ houses, that does not contain at least one number that is calculated to make a decent woman deeply ashamed of her presence in that theatre, is about as rare as snow in Panama.” The author concluded, “Censorship has an unpleasant sound, but, if it was ever needed, the vaudeville stage stands in need of it today.”¹

The anonymous writer was not the first to raise moral objections about vaudeville. In an article in Cosmopolitan in 1905, British playwright and social activist Israel Zangwill wrote that he had at one point held high hopes for vaudeville and saw the potential for it to be a “purified” and “intellectual” form of entertainment. “Alas, the few glimpses of vaudeville performances I have had did not quite bear out this roseate vision. Vulgarity,” explained Zangwill, “does not reside in verbalisms, but in the whole texture of a song or a scene.” With ribaldry and license run rampant on the vaudeville stage, according to Zangwill, “no censorship on earth will refine the stage.”²

Several years later, the New York Dramatic Mirror criticized vaudeville for “dropping into the evil habits of some of the older and more hardened sins of so-called

¹ In: Charles Stein, ed., American Vaudeville as Seen By Its Contemporaries, (New York: Knopf, 1984), 60-67.

² Israel Zangwill, “The Future of Vaudeville in America,” Cosmopolitan, April 1905, 641.

variety.” The Mirror noted, “In New York recently, for instance, was produced an act that is a reeking offense to the morals of even that hardened community.” The author neglected to describe the act in question, but the point was clear: If it could offend even New Yorkers, then it certainly had no place on the public stage.³

While moral critiques like these are not terribly uncommon to the literature of the period, they are nonetheless surprising. For vaudeville had distinguished itself as a “clean,” “wholesome” entertainment, fit for the entire family. In his book Vaudeville U.S.A., John Dimeglio describes the attitudes of Benjamin Franklin Keith and Edward Franklin Albee who together ran the largest, most successful, and most powerful chain of vaudeville theatres, known as the Keith circuit: “Albee throughout his career was dedicated to the proposition that vaudeville must be suitable for everyone in the family. He once proclaimed, ‘The old variety houses used to be filthy places, but we changed all that. We believed in soap and water, and in a strict censorship of the stage.’ Keith was just as stringent, saying, ‘I made it a rule at the beginning... that I must know exactly what every performer on my stage would say or do. If there was one coarse, vulgar, or suggestive line or piece of stage business in the act, I cut it out.’”⁴ Indeed, the following notice was posted in Keith theatres:

Notice To Performers: Don’t say “slob” or “son of gun” or “Holy Gee” on the stage unless you want to be cancelled peremptorily. Do not address anyone in the audience in any manner. If you have not the ability to entertain Mr. Keith’s audiences without risk of offending them, do the best you can. Lack of talent will be less open to censure than would be an insult to a patron. If you are in doubt as to the character of your act, consult the local manager before you go on the stage, for if you are guilty of uttering anything sacrilegious or even suggestive, you will immediately be closed and will never again be allowed in a theater where Mr. Keith is in authority.⁵

³ “Note and Comment,” New York Dramatic Mirror, 11 December 1909, 19.

⁴ John Dimeglio, Vaudeville U.S.A., (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973), 48.

⁵ Dimeglio, 49.

Eventually, the Keith central office developed a list of some seventy-three specific pieces of content that would supposedly result in censorship or debarment from the stage. Bare legs too were stricken from the stage of Keith's biggest and most famous theatre, the Palace. Notes Dimeglio, "Censorship went so far that orders were given to exclude pictures of fires, train wrecks, and similar disasters in order not to affect pregnant women."⁶ It was attitudes and practices such as these, states Douglas Gilbert in his oft-quoted American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times, that led to the branding of the Keith chain as "the Sunday School Circuit," a nickname which Albee and Keith both embraced.⁷ Writes Robert Snyder in The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York, "In a time when legal restraints and regulations shadowed the stage, the 'Sunday School Circuit' reputation could sooth the anxieties of moral reformers and attract family audiences. Self-censorship meant bigger audiences and bigger profits."⁸

Yet, for all its moral posturing and public promises of purity, the vaudeville stage presented a striking amount of entertainment that was decidedly unwholesome and prurient, presenting many acts that were obviously sexually titillating in nature (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Consider, for example, this description of the popular performer Charmion, "the Parisian Sensation," at Koster & Bial's vaudeville theatre in 1897:

She ... attempted one or two [trapeze] tricks, but seemed to find her clothes a bother, so she began to unhook her waist... Finally, the waist came off. Then she hung by her feet and the skirts, etc., naturally fell down over her head, leaving a view of lace unmentionables, black stockings, purple garters, and a large amount of pink silk fleshings between the garters and her hips... [So] she loosened and removed

⁶ Dimeglio, 49-50.

⁷ Douglas Gilbert, American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times, (New York: Dover Publications, 1940).

⁸ Robert W. Snyder, The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 30.

'skirts,' 'unmentionables,' chemise, shoes, garters, stockings, and hat until clad in the conventional costume of the female acrobat.⁹

Though she would not reveal nude body parts (that would be accomplished by numerous "art," "posing," and "living picture" acts in vaudeville). Charmion based a large part of her appeal on provocative disrobing. A month after her initial appearance, Charmion had worked into her routine the flinging of garters into the audience. She was "the talk of the town" noted the trade paper the New York Dramatic Mirror.¹⁰ Charmion's New York engagement lasted six months—remarkable in an era when vaudeville acts typically played a week or two at most.¹¹

There would seem to have been, then, conflicting efforts at work in the American vaudeville theatre: a contrast between what the promotional mouth was claiming and what the production hand was delivering. On the one hand, the managers and owners who controlled the form publicly proclaimed its moral purity and freedom from sexual, suggestive, or smutty material. Yet on the other hand, vaudeville provided enough off-color, suggestive material to draw the ire of certain reformers and critics: on the one hand, it claimed to be free from sexual suggestion and fit for the entire family, unlike the burlesque hall and concert saloon. Yet on the other hand, women who disrobed or wore tight, revealing, or form-fitting outfits were some of vaudeville's biggest and most successful draws; on the one hand, the refined entertainment presented in vaudeville was supposedly intended to lure in middle-class women and their children; on the other hand, as we will see, men made up the majority of theatregoers and it is clear the vaudeville producers made every effort to cater to patrons used to the "rough and tumble background" of vaudeville's antecedent forms;¹² on the one hand, vaudeville

⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 25 December 1897, 18.

¹⁰ New York Dramatic Mirror, 29 January 1898, 18.

¹¹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 25 June 1898, 16.

¹² Dimeglio, 16-17.

impresario E.F. Albee could claim that at least one of his patrons had written to thank him for presenting an entertainment so pure that she felt “she could attend on the Sabbath and still feel that she was in direct communion with her God”; on the other hand, Albee himself admitted that the only way to be successful in vaudeville was to traffic in female “backsides”¹³ (see below). In fact, it is remarkable that the big vaudeville chains retained a reputation for moral purity when in actual practice, they provided so many scantily clad bodies (usually female), comics whose stock-in-trade was the double entendre, singers whose songs were loaded with suggestive lyrics, and “cooch” dancers who might as well have been appearing on the burlesque stage

Even E.F. Albee, co-ruler of the Keith circuit, appears to have favored acts that were provocative or ribald, despite his putative claims of sterility and moral purity. In Once Upon A Stage: The Merry World of Vaudeville, Charles and Louise Samuels describe a private exchange between Albee and one of his house managers. “When the headline act of Annette Kellerman, the shapely Australian aquatic star, flopped, Albee ordered mirrors set up all around the stage. Miss Kellerman appeared in a daring bathing suit. ‘Don’t you know,’ he demanded of the house manager, ‘that what we are selling here is backsides, and that a hundred backsides are better than one?’”¹⁴ Says Abe Laufé in The Wicked Stage: A History of Theater Censorship and Harassment in the United States, “Mr. Albee, an excellent businessman, had no objections to the raucous pre-Tony Pastor type of entertainment that had kept the old variety shows from catering to the family trade.”¹⁵ Laufé alludes to Pastor, the New York City showman who is credited with having helped turn ribald variety into respectable vaudeville. As vaudeville

¹³ Marian Spitzer, “Morals in the Two-a-Day,” in Stein, ed., 325-26.; Charles Samuels and Louise Samuels, Once Upon a Stage: The Merry World of Vaudeville, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1974), 40.

¹⁴ Samuels and Samuels 40.

performer and chronicler Joe Laurie, Jr. states, “the customer got to longing for a peep at the undraped figure....”¹⁶ As vaudeville gained in popularity, the customer got much more than “a peep at the undraped figure”; rather, he got it reliably, in spades. Indeed, the big vaudeville enterprises played a crucial role in fostering such longings and desires.

Put another way, there would appear to be a rift between the actual practices of vaudeville producers and theatre owners—what they permitted on stage—and the image, public face, and marketing discourse propagated and disseminated by these same individuals. *Variety*’s keen-eyed Rush noted this disparity in 1909 following the appearance of Kid Gabriel and Co. at Keith’s Fifth Avenue Theatre. Kid Gabriel was a “plastic posing” act, which meant that it reproduced well-known works of art in tableaux form. Like many other such acts which populated the vaudeville stage, the performers were either nude, partially so, or covered in a thin film of silk or white dust so as to approximate “classical” statuary. Though presented as a high-brow form of cultural enrichment, the act was appealing to most theatregoers because it presented living female bodies on the stage that were unclad or appeared so. Wrote Rush:

Perhaps... vaudeville easterners are not all capable of quick-appreciation of art, whether in landscape, horseflesh or otherwise, though for the past year, and in the [Keith-controlled] Fifth Avenue, an effort has been made to educate the clientele of “refined vaudeville” to the bare flesh of the living nude... you can safely gamble the vaudeville manager will choose the bare flesh; the barer the better, and at the same time hang up a sign on the stage reading “The use of the word ‘dam’ not permitted in this theatre.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Abe Laufe, *The Wicked Stage: A History of Theater Censorship and Harassment in the United States*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1978), 22.

¹⁶ Joe Laurie, Jr., *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1953), 40.

¹⁷ Rush, “Plastic Posing,” *Variety*, 19 June 1909, 12.

Rush is arguing, in a sense, that all such efforts at making the vaudeville as clean or free of sexual suggestiveness were simply rhetorical or discursive tactics in the service of a larger economic strategy. As John Dimeglio puts it, "Though circumvention of the censorship codes was fairly common, the image of vaudeville as being 'clean' remained intact."¹⁸

In other terms, we might say that the attempt to portray vaudeville in a favorable moral light was really part of a far-reaching marketing, publicity, and advertising effort, one that had as its goal the advancement of a public discourse of moral purity. "It is the constant aim of the management," read the copy on a poster advertising the Chase circuit of vaudeville theatres, "to prevent the use of a single word, expression, or situation that will offend the intelligent, refined and cultured classes."¹⁹

How then can we assimilate and interpret these contrasting and contradictory facts about vaudeville? It is here that my argument begins. For it is my contention that proclamations of purity and promises of censorship by those in control of the vaudeville industry were in fact an essential part of a larger effort aimed at easing anxieties in the minds of prospective patrons. Specifically, it is my contention that in going out of their way to proclaim and publicize vaudeville as "clean," "wholesome," "respectable," and free from sexual suggestiveness, the powers behind vaudeville were in some measure addressing anxieties over the consumption of a mass-market product. For vaudeville was the first form of staged amusement in the United States to emerge as, quite simply, a mass-scale product.²⁰ Unlike earlier entertainments, which involved small groups not

¹⁸ Dimeglio, 196.

¹⁹ Stein, ed., 23.

²⁰ The era that saw the growth of vaudeville as the first form of mass entertainment, also saw the emergence of the American popular music industry, usually referred to as "Tin Pan Alley." Tin Pan Alley refers to the New York-based sheet music publishing industry that from the 1880s onward began selling its wares to a national audience. Though some music publishers commenced business in the 1870s and 1880s, many date the birth of Tin Pan Alley to the publication of the song "After the Ball" by Charles K. Harris in 1892, which was to become the

music industry's first million-seller. Notes Philip Furia, "After the Ball," which eventually sold over five million copies, "galvanized the fledgling industry." [Philip Furia, "Irving Berlin: Troubadour of Tin Pan Alley," in William R. Taylor, ed., Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991), 192.] Like the vaudeville chiefs, those in charge of the Tin Pan Alley publishing houses began aiming at a national audience using streamlined, modern business methods to maximize market share. Writes Nicholas E. Tawa of Tin Pan Alley publisher and songwriter Harry Von Tilzer, "[to Tilzer] songwriting was more like a business demanding business methods... a commodity with a cash value." Tawa adds that Tin Pan Alley songwriters and publishers had as their principal goal the creation of a product that would please the broadest audience. "[T]he demand in the marketplace seems to have determined the types of songs written, most successful popular composers of ability found no conflict between their own taste and that of the public." Tawa states that successful Tin Pan Alley houses "kept a varied selection of new songs in reserve so as not to be found in an unguarded state," should public taste shift suddenly or a new trend emerge. Indeed, Julie Witmark, another Tin Pan Alley luminary, succeeded on the "ability to recognize what would please people in all parts of the United States." No wonder that by 1900, some two billion copies of sheet music were being sold in the U.S. annually. Such sales were helped along by increasingly modern and sophisticated publicity and advertising efforts, such as having professional singers "plug" songs at public locales like department stores, and hiring "stooges" to stand up in theatres and begin "spontaneously" singing along with a musician on stage rendering a Tin Pan Alley tune. "From the nineties on," notes Tawa, "publishers studied their market with a care unknown in earlier decades. [Nicholas E. Tawa, The Way to Tin Pan Alley: American Popular Song, 1866-1910, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), 32, 34, 40, 42, 47-52.] Kenneth Aaron Kanter points out that Tin Pan Alley helped forge a national music market by systematizing the creation of a popular culture product: "The new publishers found that a method could be applied to the madness of songwriting. If songs were stereotyped, it be possible to write, publish, and sell them all the more quickly—by mass production as it were. That is exactly what happened. Various formulae were invented whereby composers, even those who could not read music, could write songs as the mood hit them. Immediately upon publication, the songs were presented to the public and 'plugged.'" Kanter adds that Charles Harris, for one, developed a system of rules and guidelines for the creation of popular mass-market music, such as "Watch your competition. Note their successes and failures; analyze the cause of either and profit thereby. Take note of public demand." And "Avoid slang and vulgarisms: they never succeed." Indeed, notes Kanter, originality was subordinated to the tastes of the mass market place: "[C]reativity was not a strong interest among publishers at the turn of the century. What they wanted was songs that would sell." Thus, advised a Tin Pan Alley publisher, "one should fashion a song around a previous hit; to use the model as a take off. Then the chances would be that you'll finish up with something different enough to be choice, but not avant garde." [Kenneth Aaron Kanter, The Jews on Tin Pan Alley: The Jewish Contribution to American Popular Music, 1830-1940, (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982) 18, 27, 30, 43.] Still, for all of Tin Pan Alley's success, it is not clear that the music publishing industry emerged as a rationalized, modern mass industry before vaudeville did. In the 1880s and 1890s, notes Isaac Goldberg, there were no "vast buildings on foundations of printed sheets. No army of office help... no intricate network of exploiting methods... no syndicates... The head of the firm was a Pooh Bah; all the offices were rolled into his one, under his hat. He accepted the music, he published it; he plugged it; he sold it." [Isaac Goldberg, Tin Pan Alley: A Chronicle of American Popular Music, (New York: Ungar Publishing Co., Inc., 1961), 111.] Adds David Jasen, "Although the output of Tin Pan Alley appears vast to us now, with seemingly hundreds of publishers publishing thousands of composers and lyricists who cranked out millions of songs, the Alley was, in reality, a very small network of men (and a few women) who helped each other get started, either inadvertently or deliberately." Jasen even suggests that the Alley did not reach its peak of national popularity until the ragtime craze of 1911-1918, following upon the heels of the biggest and most famous Tin Pan Alley hit ever, Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (1911), and even then it would not be until the years 1919-1929—well after vaudeville had galvanized a mass national audience—that "the Alley reigns supreme." [David A. Jasen, Tin Pan Alley: The Composers, The Songs, The

acting in concert with one another, vaudeville developed as a hierarchically arranged, centrally controlled, large-scale commercial entity. The New York Dramatic Mirror posited that B.F. Keith, founder of vaudeville's biggest chain, "saw the writing on the wall" as he created the first modern mass amusement back in the 1890s. The Mirror added, "[T]hereafter there were to be syndicates of theatres instead of single ones and combinations of managers where there had been one."²¹ Thus, not only did vaudeville develop as a centrally-managed industry, it grew with a clear eye toward national markets as well.

Critical to vaudeville's mode of production was the fact that acts were booked centrally, content was controlled and overseen by a small group of powerful individuals, routes were planned that spanned not one or two cities but entire swaths of the country, and successful artists became national, and even international, personalities. Notes Robert Snyder in his essay, "Vaudeville and the Transformation of Popular Culture": "[V]audeville's most important contribution to the development of American popular culture was to erode the local orientation of nineteenth century audiences, and knit them, despite their diversity, into a modern audience of national proportions."²² The emergence

Performers, and Their Times (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1988), 2, 67, 112, 192.] Philip Furia argues along similar lines, pointing out that the rise and dominance of Tin Pan Alley can be tied most closely to the career of Irving Berlin. Writes Furia, "[N]obody epitomized the Alley or its music better than Irving Berlin... more successfully than any other songwriter, Irving Berlin, who owned his own publishing firm, filled every channel of this vast network with his songs... built upon formulas so simple and rigid... It was with this formulaic product that Tin Pan Alley—and Irving Berlin—monopolized American music for half a century." Furia points to the rise of the Berlin era as post-1910. Perhaps the most important observation might be that Tin Pan Alley grew in part as an attaché to vaudeville, using vaudeville's performers and singers to plug songs to audiences across an already established national network. Furia writes that Harry Von Tilzer, "recognizes vaudeville, with its vast national network... as the prime target for making a song nationally popular." Furia's comments suggest that indeed vaudeville had found a mass national market even before Tin Pan Alley. [Furia, 191-92.]

²¹ Harvey Alexander Higgins, Jr., "The Origin of Vaudeville," New York Dramatic Mirror, 13 May 1919, 720.

²² Robert W. Snyder, "Vaudeville and the Transformation of Popular Culture," in William R. Taylor, ed., Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991), 133.

of vaudeville, therefore, truly marked the emergence of a translocal or national entertainment market. This market continued to grow in the twentieth century. In this light, we may view “vaudeville” as entertainment’s first national, branded product. Essential to crafting this brand, then, was the implicit promise of cleanliness. By repeatedly advertising a “clean” product, the vaudeville owners were preparing the first national market for an entertainment product; their repeated efforts to paint vaudeville in the pure white hues of cleanliness may be viewed as in fact efforts to allay or mitigate anxieties in the minds of prospective theatregoers over the mass-ness that was a chief characteristic of the form. This may not have been the only reason they did so, but it was, in my estimation, a critically important one.

Susan Strasser, in her book Satisfaction Guaranteed: the Making of the American Mass Market, describes the emergence of a new economic species, the “consumer”—as opposed to the mere “customer”—around the turn of the century. Writes Strasser, “They [the new consumers] bought and used mass-produced goods as participants in a national market composed of masses of people associating with big, centrally organized, national-level companies.”²³ Indeed, Charles McGovern holds that being a “citizen” increasingly meant in fact being a “consumer” within the “democracy of goods.”²⁴ In their continuing efforts to advertise and publicize vaudeville as clean, morally pure, and safe, those who controlled the vaudeville industry were helping to transform the entertainment “customer” of the nineteenth century into the entertainment “consumer” of the twentieth. This was a crucial transformation, and one whose effects are still with us today. It not only prepared Americans for a mass market in

²³ Susan Strasser, Satisfaction Guaranteed: the Making of the American Mass Market, (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1989), 15-16.

²⁴ Charles McGovern, “Consumption and Citizenship in the United States, 1900-1940,” in Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Mathias Jut, eds., Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century, (Washington, D.C.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 42-47.

entertainment, it helped further develop the commercialization of leisure time. Writes Gary Cross in Time and Money: the Making of Consumer Culture, “[O]ut of a multi-layered history of consumer culture emerged the often unacknowledged social decision to direct industrial innovation toward producing unlimited quantities of goods rather than leisure.”²⁵ Thus, vaudeville in particular, and the nascent mass entertainment media more generally, became such “quantities of goods,” provided for working, urban Americans to consume in place of enjoying purely free time.

The vaudeville chiefs—Keith, Albee, Proctor, Martin Beck—were not alone in trying to find a national mass market for a product. For the years that marked vaudeville’s coalescence and rise to widespread popularity were also, to be sure, the same years that saw the emergence of the first national brands and the creation of a demand for mass-market goods and services. Some of the early entrants into the mass-marketing game such as Coca-Cola, Sears, and National Biscuit (Nabisco), are extant at the dawn of the twenty-first century; others are not. In both cases, though, we will see that the efforts used by these firms were similar to the promise of cleanliness that lay at the heart of vaudeville’s mass-marketing strategy. In 1911, for instance, Philip Morris Cigarettes advertised, above all else, that they contained “Pure Turkish tobacco—nothing else.”²⁶ while the makers of Cracker Jack candies told the potential customer that their product came “In Sealed ‘Triple Proof’ Packages”²⁷ to ensure the sterility of the contents. Plexo, a popular brand of face powder, based its entire marketing effort around anxieties over contamination and dirt. “Why use an unsanitary Powder Puff at home and carry the still more unsanitary Powder Rag while shopping, traveling, etc.” read an advertisement from 1909, “when PLEXO Powder, the kind in a box *with the puff*”

²⁵ Gary Cross, Time and Money: the Making of Consumer Culture, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 5.

²⁶ Philip Morris newspaper ad, 1911.

*attached entirely eliminates all this danger, bother and expense?”*²⁸ Historian Jackson Lears points out that Schlitz beer heavily promoted the fact that its bottles were steam cleaned when, in fact, rival companies did the very same thing to their bottles.²⁹ And Michael Schudson, in Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion, states that as early as the 1880s, the Quaker Oats company was stressing the “purity” of its packaging to would-be consumers.³⁰ These examples are few and may seem superficial. However, I hope to demonstrate that they aimed at achieving roughly the same goal as did the vaudeville magnates, and used similar rhetorical and discursive strategies. Thus, what I hope will begin to emerge is an historically located picture of the first national mass-marketing campaign for entertainment in the United States.³¹

Looked at another way, the influential individuals who controlled the vaudeville industry not only created a new kind of product, they also affected the way huge numbers of people *thought* about that product. In so doing, they were acting not merely as captains of industry but as “captains of consciousness” to borrow a term from historian Stuart Ewen. Writes Ewen: “Beyond standing at the helm of the industrial

²⁸ Cracker Jack newspaper ad, 1907.

²⁹ Plexo newspaper ad, 1909.

²⁹ T.J. Jackson Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and Therapeutic Roots of Consumer Culture,” in Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, eds., The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 21.

³⁰ Michael Schudson, Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion, (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), 166.

³¹ Although most of my research—though not all of it—was conducted in New York, using New York-based theatrical trade papers of the turn of the century, such as the New York Dramatic Mirror and the New York Clipper, I believe my argument about the national scope of vaudeville is nonetheless valid. For although acts could be varied locally, they were booked centrally with a national audience in mind. Thus, while a Salome number, for example, might be varied somewhat from Philadelphia to Minneapolis, it is my contention that the basic elements of such an act would have been largely the same—and there is no evidence to suggest otherwise. Still, in digging deeper into this question, and in considering the further research value of the present undertaking, it would probably be necessary and useful to consult the Keith/Albee vaudeville archive at the University of Iowa in Iowa City to discern local variations and local managers’ responses to acts as they traveled about the vast national networks of vaudeville theatres.

machines, businessmen understood the social nature of their hegemony. They looked to move beyond their nineteenth-century characterization as captains of industry toward a position in which they could control the entire social realm. They aspired to become captains of consciousness."³² While some attention has been paid to the emergence of a mass-market for industrially produced goods, less has been paid to the emergence of a mass market for services. Among services, less yet has been paid to entertainment. It is my aim to help fill in this gap by examining how vaudeville's "captains of consciousness" encouraged large numbers of Americans to feel comfortable consuming a new ware—the mass entertainment product. This is not to say that there was necessarily a pernicious "master plan" to force Americans to consume in a particular way. However, it seems quite clear that Keith, Albee, and their peers made a conscious effort to construct a new model of entertainment consumption and did so successfully. One might look at it less as a cosseted cabal and more as rational businessmen exploiting the possibility of growing national market for goods and services

By publicizing and marketing vaudeville as free from the taint of sexuality, and yet, at the same time, offering a plethora of unclad bodies and lewd dance acts, the captains of the vaudeville industry were also urging along another transformation in American culture. They were paving the way for the liberalization of mores and attitudes toward the female body. The more they built up a public face of cleanliness, the more easily they could offer patrons glimpses of disrobing women like Mlle. Charmion or posing ladies such as those of the Kid Gabriel troupe. Thus, as vaudeville developed, Americans not only grew used to the idea of mass entertainment, they also grew used to—one might argue that they grew hungry for—acts whose popularity was based on the

³² Stuart Ewen, Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1976), 19.

sexualized female form. It was a winning formula: assuage anxieties with a rhetoric of purity, then present acts that increasingly departed from an older, Victorian prudishness.

At the time vaudeville was accomplishing this transition, according to Jackson Lears, mass-marketers in general were influencing Americans to think in new ways about pleasure and morality. Writes Lears: "By the early twentieth century that [older, Victorian] outlook had begun to give way to a new set of values sanctioning periodic leisure, compulsive spending, apolitical passivity and an apparently permissive (but subtly coercive) morality of individual fulfillment. The older culture was suited to a production-oriented society of small entrepreneurs; the new culture epitomized a consumption-oriented society dominated by bureaucratic corporations."³³ The changes wrought by vaudeville are a perfect example: a mass market for entertainment was built on the shoulders of a few large, bureaucratic corporations; at the same time, these large corporations learned to traffic in the sexualized female form based on a "permissive (but subtly coercive) morality." In a sense, anxieties over mass-market consumption were outweighed by a discourse of purity and a desire to see the female body on stage in increasing states of undress.

Take for example performers like Mlle. Charmion who disrobed or changed costumes in full view of the audience. It is significant that Charmion was not alone in her stage antics. Rather she was part of a wave of such performers, nearly all female, who remained popular throughout the duration of vaudeville's tenure as the leading form of entertainment in the United States. In May, 1898, for example, the Olympia theatre presented the following bill: "Marguerite Sylvia made her vaudeville debut here last week. There was nothing very novel or startling about her turn, but she managed to score quite a success. She sang a couple of songs in a long dress and then changed into tights.

³³ Lears (1983), 3.

in which her figure showed to very great advantage. The sensational part of the programme was furnished by Adgie, who combines the talents of the lion tamer and disrober. There is no telling where this boudoir business is going to stop.” wrote the Dramatic Mirror.³⁴

Writers, scholars, and historians of popular culture have commented on the issue of sexuality in the vaudeville theatre. In her able biography of Mae West, Marybeth Hamilton, for example, suggests that performers could get away with some measure of sexual suggestiveness if they kept it veiled or coded. “In theory, the vaudevillians who succeeded in big-time were those who toed a universally inoffensive line, whose acts were as free from suggestiveness as in the circuit’s early days. Yet despite B.F. Keith’s assurances to the contrary, the situation was more complex. By the 1910s the Keith Circuit’s biggest stars were injecting more than a hint of innuendo and more than a trace of provocative movement in their performances. These were never overtly, unambiguously sexual, but sexuality was there for the viewer who wanted to find it.” Thus, as Hamilton sees it, theatre owners and managers agreed to look the other way while performers relied increasingly on sexual titillation in order to sell their acts.³⁵

In Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace, Joe Laurie, Jr. sees things somewhat differently. According to Laurie, it was the performers who pushed the envelope, unbeknownst to most of the executives and producers who controlled vaudeville. He writes, “It all started slowly (like a cancer). The heads of vaude were more worried about the stock-market quotations than was going on on their stages... It was when the managers all over the circuits received letters from their patrons complaining that vaude was no longer a ‘family amusement’ that the trade papers,

³⁴ New York Dramatic Mirror, 14 May 1898, 16.

³⁵ Marybeth Hamilton, When I’m Bad, I’m Better: Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 36.

especially Variety, wrote editorials about it and demanded that the managers start censoring their shows. It was only then that the heads of the circuits finally issued orders to cut all blue material and for each manager to send in a copy of the gags he cut.” Eventually, according to Laurie, actors, faced with the threat of losing their routes, began behaving.³⁶

Douglas Gilbert sees vaudeville as having departed radically from its antecedent forms, the variety and burlesque halls, where the clientele was largely male and alcohol and tobacco were present in abundance. Specifically, Gilbert, like others, credits producer and theatre owner Tony Pastor with initiating a new age of entertainment. “The vaudeville we of this generation knew was sired by Tony Pastor who first played to a ‘double audience’ (men and women) when he opened his Fourteenth Street house in Tammany Hall, New York, October 24, 1881. It was the first ‘clean’ vaudeville show in America and to its bill, as [actor] Fred Stone used to say, a child could take its parents.” Thus, out of a rough-edged and densely sexual form which catered to men in smoky rooms where the whisky flowed freely, there emerged, thanks to Pastor, a wholesome new entertainment at which the entire family could pass its leisure hours.³⁷ For Gilbert, Pastor was the first Puritan.

Charles and Louise Samuels, in Once Upon a Stage, add that Pastor maintained a theatre in which audience members were not only safe from smutty material on the stage, but were equally safe from their fellow theatregoers. They write, “Pastor’s achievement was making his variety shows entertainment for the whole family. He publicized a no-drinking, no-smoking policy with no vulgarity or rough talk permitted on the stage. He also promised that mashers who attempted to approach women in the

³⁶ Laurie, 286-87.

³⁷ Gilbert, 10.

audience would be promptly ejected.”³⁸ Gilbert argues, though, that “Pastor’s move was mainly (and frankly) for profit, a definitive and canny bid to double the audience by attracting respectable women—wives, daughters, sweethearts.”³⁹

Charles Stein argues along similar lines in the introduction to his edited work American Vaudeville as Seen By Its Contemporaries. “What, then, was American vaudeville really like?” asks Stein. “First of all, it was clean, wholesome, respectable entertainment, suitable for the whole family.” Like others, Stein credits Tony Pastor with the creation of an amusement free from sexual vulgarity and excessive bodily display. He quotes Lillian Russell to help make his point: “Pastor’s Theatre set a standard that was unique and drew as many women as men. Every act was scrupulously clean and free from any suggestiveness.”⁴⁰

Albert McLean in the well-known work American Vaudeville as Ritual, does not pay much attention to questions of purity and content control on the vaudeville stage. Rather, he describes the way in which vaudeville permitted urban newcomers—immigrants, white-collar workers, etc.—to make sense of the city. Still, he too finds Pastor to have wrested variety from its coarse, all-male roots and turned it into a type of entertainment which put decorum before all else.⁴¹

Similarly, Gunther Barth in City People: the Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America, argues that vaudeville helped city folk make better sense of themselves and their environs. He writes, “In the vaudeville house, a distinctly urban form of popular theatrical entertainment drew the residents of the modern city together and gave them a glimpse of themselves.” Barth sees cleanliness as a necessary

³⁸ Samuels and Samuels, 16.

³⁹ Gilbert, 113-14.

⁴⁰ Stein, xiii, 11.

⁴¹ Albert F. McLean, Jr., American Vaudeville as Ritual, (Frankfort: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 3-5, 31.

precondition for this to have occurred: "The wide appeal of clean variety carried the show from the beer hall to the vaudeville stage. Stripped of their offensive setting and content, the acts of the new variety increased their drawing power when they began illuminating the audience's own urban experiences."⁴²

Stein, Gilbert, Laurie, Barth, the Samuelses, and others like them represent one segment of the writing on American vaudeville theatre. Though their works are filled with useful information and colorful illustrations of the art form, the performers, and the magnates who controlled it, they tend to lack scholarly thoroughness and an objective, detached perspective. They are more nostalgic than strictly historical, more sentimental than analytical. This does not mean they should be discarded outright, for there is much in them of value. Rather, one has to pick and choose and be especially aware of the potential cultural biases in their work.

More recent scholars have begun to examine the vaudeville theatre using newer methodologies and employing greater thoroughness. It is from this group of writers that we begin to get a different perspective on the issue of sexuality and moral purity in vaudeville. Robert W. Snyder, whose book The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York may be the best known work on vaudeville, views the bowdlerizing efforts (alleged or actual) of Keith, Pastor, and others as having been largely economically motivated. Snyder points out, "Money was probably more important to Keith and Albee than morality. But money came only with an expanded audience that accommodated women and families. Keith and Albee lured them by offering shows that were allegedly free from the concert saloon's rough fun. Pastor brought the spirit of the Bowery to Union Square. Keith and Albee tried to bring refined vaudeville to far-flung cities. The Keith theatres were nicknamed 'the Sunday School

⁴² Gunther Barth, City People: the Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 193-96.

Circuit.” According to Snyder, Keith was a master of ethical rhetoric, ever draping himself in a “cloak of morality.” But it was all in the service of increasing the size of the crowd, argues Snyder. “The songs and jokes could be toned down backstage, but out front were rowdy audiences that could make a middle-class woman feel very uncomfortable. If Keith and Albee wanted her patronage, and they certainly did, they had to quiet the crowd.” To that end, the vaudeville magnates tried to censor and control what happened out in the house as much as they did what happened up on the stage. The following was printed on cards in at least one Keith theatre: “Gentlemen will kindly avoid the stamping of the feet and pounding of canes on the floor, and greatly oblige the Management. All applause is best shown by the clapping of hands. Please don’t talk during the acts, as it annoys those about you, and prevents a perfect hearing of the entertainment.”⁴³ Douglas Gilbert points out that Albee also had patrons remove their hats, and refrain from smoking, spitting, whistling, and crunching peanuts.⁴⁴

In Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture, Robert Allen provides perhaps the most sophisticated explanation of vaudeville’s purported attempts to keep sexual content off the stage. “Benjamin Franklin Keith,” he writes, “saw an opportunity to transform variety into a form with middle-class appeal by severing its connections with working-class culture and with working-class sexuality. Variety became incorporated into bourgeois theater as vaudeville at the same time and as a part of the same process that resulted in the excorporation of burlesque. The terminological shift from variety to vaudeville signifies not so much a change in performance structure as changes in the form’s institutional structure, social orientation, and audience.” For Allen,

⁴³ Snyder (1989), 28-32. Still, it would appear that audiences could not always be counted on to behave as managers would wish them. In 1899, a shortened version of the play *Thérèse* went on at Proctor’s vaudeville theatre in New York. A critic for the New York Dramatic Mirror remarked, “the large audience laughed very impolitely at the most serious scene of the play, so it would seem that the time is not yet ripe for the production of one-act tragedies in vaudeville.” 27 May, 1899, 18.

class is the determining factor. Keith, Albee, and others deemed sexual material unfit for vaudeville because it smacked of working-class fare. "In short," he adds, "Keith's problem was not removing the taint of immorality from variety so much as it was severing its connections with working-class leisure in the minds of his perspective middle-class patrons."⁴⁵

Allen is clear about the relation of vaudeville to burlesque. Though the former was in some measure born out of the latter, he argues, it nonetheless strove to be as different as possible. As Allen puts it, "Vaudeville and burlesque were negative reflections of each other. Each defined itself in terms of what the other was not." Thus, if burlesque offered sexually enticing views of the female body in a largely-male atmosphere, vaudeville presented nothing of the sort, in a theatre replete with women and children.⁴⁶ Leigh Woods, in his influential article "Sarah Bernhardt and the Refining of American Vaudeville," makes a similar claim. "'Vaudeville,'" Woods posits, "came to betoken family entertainment, and it thus embarked on a course inalterably divergent from its American cousin and fellow-French derivative, 'burlesque.'" Vaudeville, according to Woods, diverged from variety as well, a form which appealed "to largely masculine audiences through frequent resort to coarseness and vulgarity."⁴⁷ In this assertion, Woods is in agreement with Robert Allen.

Allen's observations about the class connotations of sexual material are valuable and have informed much of the present thinking about the emergence of the vaudeville theatre. Yet it is not clear that vaudeville and burlesque were necessarily negatives of

⁴⁴ Gilben, 205.

⁴⁵ Robert C. Allen, Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture, (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 179, 182

⁴⁶ Allen (1991), 179.

⁴⁷ Leigh Woods, "Sarah Bernhardt and the Refining of American Vaudeville," Theatre Research International 18 (Spring 1993): 16.

one another. In fact, the closer one looks at vaudeville theatre, the more it becomes clear that the form—whether at Pastor’s, Keith’s, Koster & Bial’s, or elsewhere—kept a foot, if not more, planted firmly in the burlesque tradition. We have already seen, for example, that certain female performers in vaudeville made disrobing onstage a key part of their act.

Or consider Alice Eis and Bert French, two of vaudeville’s perpetual favorites. During the last week in July, 1909 the two put on an act called “the Vampire Dance” at the Keith-controlled Fifth Avenue theatre. Of Eis and French, “Rush,” a columnist at Variety, had this to say: “The pair at the Fifth Avenue this week go into a disagreeable number with a degree of vivid detail that is almost medical...” The act featured Eis as “a Parisian woman of the streets” striking “a particularly snakey posture.” At the performance’s climax, Eis removed a “thin red veil” and “reveal[ed] a tight-fitting dress” with “a skirt slashed almost to the waist line and the only underdressing is a covering of fleshings.” Variety’s competitor, the New York Dramatic Mirror said that the Eis/French number was simply the “latest of dips into the world of suggestion and vulgarity, and it is or ought to be to the shame and discredit of those in charge of the [Keith-controlled] United Booking Offices or the Fifth Avenue theatre that this act was given a public showing... To call it a dance is a libel against the name of art.” Nonetheless, the two played to a capacity house the following week and became a solid “drawing card.”⁴⁸ In fact, Eis and French gained such a following for presenting sexually suggestive material in vaudeville that when they appeared at Keith’s famed Palace theatre some six years later in another dance number, called “The Lure of the North.”

⁴⁸ Rush, “New Acts Next Week,” Variety, 31 July 1909, 12. “The Vampire Dance,” New York Dramatic Mirror, 7 August 1909, 19. Variety, 7 August 1909, 17.

Variety's "Sime" joked, "[I]t's funny to see the French-Eis people all dressed upon the stage."⁴⁹

But it may have been Variety's Rush who best captured the position and significance of the sexually provocative female body in vaudeville theatre when he reviewed the singer Lillian Herlein following her appearance at Keith's Fifth Avenue auditorium in January, 1910. In Rush's opinion, Herlein was

bound to make talk. The talk will come from her appearance in full tights during her final song called "Swim, Swim, Swim." Miss Herlein is a tall statuesque brunet with a twenty-two-inch waist, and other proportions which are striking to say the least. She makes a pretty picture in conventional clothes, but when she appears in tights, the effect is—er, well, she will make a talk as has been mentioned. The more display of her "figger," the more talk she will cause—and this the principle aim of her act. It is designed as a drawing card and should fulfill that function.⁵⁰

As Sime noted three years later, "figger goes a long way toward getting salary from the box office."⁵¹ As for Rush's comments, they are significant because they could have been written about literally hundreds of other acts that were seen on the vaudeville stage during the form's rise to massive popularity in the closing years of the nineteenth century and the opening years of the twentieth. Indeed, it is hard to find a review of a female performer in which the (always male) reviewer makes no mention of her "beauty of face and form," "statuesqueness," or fails to point out that she "looks fine in tights." It seems, then, that the sexually provocative female body was part of the vaudeville theatre's stock-in-trade—that it indeed placed the "emphasis on anatomy" which John Dimeglio in Vaudeville U.S.A. ascribes to burlesque and burlesque alone.⁵² In fact, by 1915, burlesque may have been in some ways cleaner than vaudeville. That was the year

⁴⁹ Sime, "New Acts Next Week," Variety, 10 December 1915, 16.

⁵⁰ Rush, "New Acts Next Week," Variety, 29 January, 1910, 17.

⁵¹ Sime, "Hammerstein's," Variety, 10 January 1913, 23.

⁵² Dimeglio, 48.

that the American Circuit of burlesque halls undertook to create "clean burlesque," marking the culmination of "several years of determined efforts by circuit officials." Among the show elements barred were "cooch and Oriental dancers," bare legs," "smutty dialogue," and "vulgar jokes and actions."⁵³ Noted Variety a few years earlier, "The Burlesque Wheels, one at least, can now claim as clean a show as vaudeville. Not perhaps in their entirety, but in spots."⁵⁴ The clear line between burlesque and vaudeville may not have always been all that clear after all.

If vaudeville retained certain key similarities to burlesque, then it begs the question, just how important were women in vaudeville audiences? It is common in the writing of vaudeville to suppose that the presence of women in the audience was one of the key factors that differentiated the form from burlesque and the earlier concert saloon and variety hall amusements. Dimeglio, for example, notes that in vaudeville, the "focus was on the family. Strict censorship was exercised on its stages so that any member of a family could attend a show without risk of being offended." He then quotes actor Edwin Royle who said of vaude houses, "They are the only theatres in New York where I should feel absolutely safe in taking a young girl without making preliminary inquiries."⁵⁵

Like Dimeglio, Douglas Gilbert suggests that the female theatregoer was central to vaudeville's business practices. It all started, of course, with Tony Pastor, who set the paradigm for the Keiths, Albees, and others who followed. He writes, "Pastor's opening bill is significant because it destroyed the notion that variety was a series of unfunny prat falls and vulgar noises. And for the first time, it delivered this important message to a mixed audience. The mothers and wives and sweethearts kept coming. Sometimes Pastor

⁵³ "'Clean Burlesque' Mandatory: American Circuit," Variety, 12 November 1915, 3.

⁵⁴ "'Clean Up In New York First' Says Out of Town Manager," Variety, 24 December 1910, 8.

resorted to tricks to lure them in—gifts of hats, dress patterns, and other feminine gewgaws.”⁵⁶ Joe Laurie, Jr. points out that women patrons were a hallmark of the vaudeville theatre, while the contrasting “variety” form “meant... a stag show.”⁵⁷ Film historian Henry Jenkins notes too that the presence of women in the house were a hallmark of vaudeville. “From its roots in a masculine saloon culture,” he writes in What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic, “vaudeville sought respectability, taming its rawer edges and introducing new elements to attract women, children and more wealthy patrons.”⁵⁸

But there is evidence to suggest that women scarcely attended vaudeville in great numbers, and that, indeed, vaudeville was, like burlesque or the concert saloon, a form of entertainment that relied much more heavily on male ticket-buyers for its success than on female ones. Anna Marble, in her “Women in Variety” column in Variety, observed in December, 1906 that “vaudeville seems to appeal more strongly to men than to women.” According to her informal survey, some 65 percent “of the average audience is made of up the sterner sex”—even at matinees! “Men whose appearance proclaimed them merchants, bookkeepers, and other workers [are] devoting the busiest part of the day to witnessing a variety performance.”⁵⁹ In The Voice of the City, Robert Snyder also argues that men made up the vast majority of theatregoers in vaudeville: “The only statistical survey of the New York vaudeville audience, made in 1911, revealed an audience that was 64 percent male and 36 percent female; 60 percent ‘working’ class, 36 percent ‘clerical’ class, and 4 percent ‘vagrant,’ ‘gamin,’ or

⁵⁵ Dimeglio, 49, 195.

⁵⁶ Gilbert, 120.

⁵⁷ Laurie, 10.

⁵⁸ Henry Jenkins, What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 61.

⁵⁹ Anna Marble, “Women in Variety,” Variety, 22 December 1906, 14.

‘leisured.’”⁶⁰ In Going Out: the Rise and Fall of Public Amusements, David Nasaw points out that even though vaudeville producers often placed their theatres near busy shopping and retail districts in order to attract a female clientele, women made up only a third of the audience in New York in 1910 and less than half the audience in cities like San Francisco and Milwaukee.⁶¹ And even when women were present as vaudeville patrons, they were not necessarily deterred by unwholesome material. In fact, some clearly enjoyed it.⁶²

On occasion, though, the vaudeville stage did succeed in differentiating itself markedly from the burlesque. But this was due to the presence of an undraped *male* body, typically belonging to an athlete or weight-lifter. In March, 1902, the New York Dramatic Mirror, reporting on the show at Keith’s Union Square, joked “[Strongman Eugene] Sandow’s attire, or rather the scarcity of it, suggests that he might do well to give out, besides his dissertations on how to develop the physique, a few friendly tips on how not to develop pneumonia.” The following week, the Mirror observed that the strongman Sandow “is applauded for an exhibition that if attempted by any woman would be promptly suppressed.”⁶³ As we have seen, scantily clad women were common in vaudeville and were rarely dismissed. Robert Snyder even brings up the possibility that from time to time, the vaudeville theatre owners brought in acts like Sandow to appeal to the “sexual interest among some of those females who flocked to refined vaudeville.”⁶⁴ though they were not overtly promoted as such, the way disrobing by a

⁶⁰ Snyder (1989), 105.

⁶¹ David Nasaw, Going Out: the Rise and Fall of Public Amusements, (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 27.

⁶² “During a certain act, in which a young woman sang suggestive songs, at one of our music halls last week, a man in the audience, who had brought his wife to the theatre, compelled her to leave with him... [but] The wife refused to go....” New York Dramatic Mirror, 13 August 1910, 17.

⁶³ New York Dramatic Mirror, 8 March, 1902, 18; 15 March 1902, 18.

⁶⁴ Snyder (1989), 33.

scantily-clad woman was. In any case, such specimens of male musculature were hardly a regular component of American vaudeville. Whereas the scantily clad woman on the vaudeville stage evoked pleasure or, alternatively, moral outrage from male trade paper reporters, scantily clad men like Sandow elicited humor or gentle scorn.⁶⁵

Nor is it clear that Tony Pastor was always so vigilant about what could be seen on the stage of his vaudeville theatre, the one that supposedly led the purgation of sexual license from popular entertainment. In 1897, well after Pastor's alleged conversion to "clean variety," the Washburn Sisters played his Tammany Hall theatre. The theatrical and sporting trade paper the New York Clipper noted, "The Washburn Sisters appeared in very pretty, though brief, frocks... the new member of the firm is an excellent substitute for her predecessor, being of pleasing face and form, but her stock of 'ginger' far exceeds the demands of refined variety audiences." To theatre journalists at the turn of the century, "ginger" denoted the sexually suggestive, off-color, or ribald, and it was often said that a performer who pushed the limits of respectability was rather "gingery." But ginger was not the only spice which symbolized unwholesomeness or sexual titillation. Nor was it the only spice at Pastor's. Maud Nugent, who enjoyed a "long and successful run" at Pastor's, specialized in the performance of "spicy" and "peppery" songs. "She is not likely to be soon forgotten," remarked the Clipper.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ The fact that the owners of popular entertainment concerns in the early part of the century catered only rarely to female tastes does not mean that women did not actively seek such pleasures at vaudeville and motion picture theatres when they could find it. When a film of the prizefight between Corbett and Fitzsimmons played at New York's Academy of Music in 1897, it was "heavily attended" by women. Indeed, one figure puts the audience at 60 percent women. Notes Miriam Hansen. "Unlike live prizefights with their all-male clientele, the cinematic mediation of the event gave women access to a spectacle from which they had traditionally been excluded." When Rudolphe Valentino appeared in The Son of the Sheik in 1926, "half-stripped and suspended from his wrists on the wall of an exotic ruin," Hansen argues that "this spectacle was really staged[]for the spectator in front of the screen, the fan, the female consumer." Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 1.

⁶⁶ New York Clipper, 22 May 1897, 190; 12 June 1897, 238; 21 August 1897, 404; 28 August 1897, 429.

Though not as spicy as Maud Nugent or the Washburn Sisters, impressionist C.W. Littlefield pushed the limits of purity at Pastor's as well by doing an imitation of "the boy smoking his first cigar." The Dramatic Mirror called Littlefield's act "not a thing for a house frequented by refined people." Still, Littlefield was allowed to appear again several months later, the smoking routine completely intact.⁶⁷ Pastor, late in life, even admitted that it was not always so easy to get women to come to his shows, especially in the early days. "I announced distributions of bonbons, dolls, and flowers, and I set apart Fridays as 'Ladies' Nights,' when husbands might bring their wives and young men their sweethearts free of charge. The charm did not allure."⁶⁸ Similarly, as late as 1902, vaudeville magnate Frederick F. Proctor had to offer "dainty souvenirs" to lure women into his matinee shows in New York City and Newark.⁶⁹

In his book The Search for Order: 1877-1920, historian Robert Wiebe states that as business chiefs in the late nineteenth century were busy "superimposing a national market upon a locally oriented business system" there developed a "preoccupation with purity and unity" among individual consumers who had now to turn to faceless national firms for their goods and services. Wiebe suggests that many Americans associated purity and unity with the small-scale communities to which they had been accustomed. As we will see, the national, mass-market firms that came increasingly to control both the consumption habits and livelihoods of a great many Americans, like the vaudeville chains, responded in part by making purity, and even the salutary, a central promise in their promotional discourse. Sears, for example, in order to craft a national market for its catalogue goods (its retail stores came later), had to change the minds of individuals

⁶⁷ New York Dramatic Mirror, 18 December 1897, 18; 12 February 1898, 18.

⁶⁸ Tony Pastor, "Tony Pastor Recounts the Origin of American 'Vaudeville,'" Variety, 15 December 1906, 17.

⁶⁹ "A Pictorial Souvenir of the Proctor Entertainments," 1902. From a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

used to turning to their local small-scale retailer, perhaps a general store, which “constituted the nexus between the wants of farmers and villages and the ‘manufactories.’” according to Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck in their Catalogues and Counters: A History of Sears Roebuck and Company. To that end, Richard Sears, in addition to providing constant reassurances that his watches, bicycles, and cream separators were of the highest quality and could be returned no-questions-asked, had also to craft an image of the Sears, Roebuck company as being comprised of people who were as “honest, dependable, and financially reliable” as a local merchant or store owner. He succeeded. In 1897, Sears, Roebuck and Company sold \$2.8 million worth of mail order goods; ten years later, that figure had leapt to \$40.8 million.⁷⁰

Similarly, Keith, Albee, Beck and others oversaw and controlled what Robert Snyder refers to as “[t]he growth of a centralized vaudeville empire” in which those selling its wares “chose a mass audience over a local audience.”⁷¹ In the field of public entertainment, they were pioneers, and their efforts marked the creation of a national market that is still with us today. At the same time, though, as we will see, the vaudeville powers were very much products of their era. They were businessmen who took advantage of advancements in transportation, communication, and technology to enrich themselves mightily by selling to a burgeoning mass market. “What iron and steel are to the industrial market,” wrote Variety in 1912, “so vaudeville is to the amusement seeking public of the united forty-nine states.”⁷² The writer of those words was Joseph M. Schenk, General Booking Manager of the Loew vaudeville circuit; Schenk would later go on to distinguish himself as a producer at United Artists in Hollywood in the

⁷⁰ Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, Catalogues and Counters: A History of Sears, Roebuck and Company, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 15, 36, 117.

⁷¹ Snyder (1989), 37, 43.

⁷² Joseph M. Schenk, “Inside Vaudeville,” Variety, 20 December 1912, 33.

1920s.⁷³ Schenk captures both the mass scope of vaudeville's economic project while also suggesting that a new community—a national community defined by regularized, widespread consumption patterns—had replaced the old, local, irregular communities of the past. Writes Douglas Gilbert in American Vaudeville: its Life and Times, “Edward Franklin Albee and Benjamin Franklin Keith... were to become vaudeville's most dominant characters. They made of entertainment a specialized, regimented industry: were products of their time—in organization and development for financial gain this pair was to vaudeville what Frick and Carnegie were to steel...”⁷⁴ Keith and his peers deserve credit (or blame) for their mass-market thinking. But like the powers behind Standard Oil, Coca-Cola, and Sear Roebuck, they were historically located individuals—empire builders in an age of rampant empire building; mass-marketers in an age when mass-marketing began to make sense.

Thus, in examining the question of sexuality, wholesomeness, and, where applicable, corporate self-censorship in American vaudeville, I hope to offer valuable insights into the ways in which a small group of powerful individuals helped craft and prepare the first national mass market for public entertainment, not through a kind of pernicious conspiracy, but rather as individuals who, for the first time in history, could apply a national model to the selling of entertainment.. Though scholars and writers have examined, in places, vaudeville's emergence as a form of mass entertainment; and others, as we have seen, have commented on the cleanliness issue, none have linked the two. It will be my goal in the present project to do just that, thereby shedding new light on the rise of popular culture and notions of mass morality at the turn of the century.

⁷³ See: Tino Balio, “Stars in Business: the Founding of United Artists,” in Tino Balio, ed., The American Film Industry, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 153-72.

⁷⁴ Gilbert, 198.

while clarifying and reinterpreting the existing historical discourse on the American vaudeville theatre.

In Vaudeville U.S.A., John Dimeglio goes so far as to suggest that the bowdlerizing practices of the vaudeville industry created a template for all future mass entertainment in the United States. He writes:

The censorship codes that controlled vaudeville morality did not die when vaudeville died. Their code served as the core and example for similar practices in the motion picture, radio, and television industries... Vaudeville reshaped the [existing] patterns so effectively that the American public clung to its moral views long after the medium expired, forcing those views to be accepted by the more powerful and more popular mediums that replaced vaudeville.⁵

While Dimeglio's discourse tends to flatten cultural complexity and diversity by using terms like "the American public," and ignores the fact that censorship codes were rarely put into practice, he is correct in suggesting that for the first time, a policy, an official and public *stance*, on sexuality and censorship on the stage had been developed and, at times, implemented translocally. As Snyder points out in The Voice of the City, such attitudes were "aided by the centralized Keith bureaucracy."⁶ And since vaudeville not only created an effective working paradigm for mass national amusement but also evolved into a key part of the motion picture industry,⁷ it is reasonable to conclude that vaudeville's various practices, policies, and conflicts both foreshadowed and directly influenced those of American popular entertainment forms later on in the century.

⁵ Dimeglio, 196.

⁶ Snyder (1989), 141.

⁷ The obvious example here is RCA's 1928 purchase of what remained of the Keith-Albee and Orpheum vaudeville theatre chains in Radio Corp.'s almost overnight bid to form a major Hollywood studio complete with exhibition arm. The newly-formed studio thus took the name Radio-Keith-Orpheum (while Keith theatres had dominated the East, Martin Beck's Orpheum circuit was the largest "big-time" vaudeville chain West of the Mississippi) or R-K-O for short. See: Tino Balio, "Struggles for Control, 1908-1930," in Balio, ed., (1985), 130; and Allen (1977).

At this point, it might be helpful to raise, and thereby anticipate, a potential objection to my argument. That is, it might be argued that I am taking too facile a view of the rise of a national entertainment culture in the formative years of the twentieth century, and that, in order to get an accurate picture of changes in popular culture, one must look at what was going at the local level, rather than supposing the existence of a national model that worked at all levels. For instance, one might posit that acts which were considered morally acceptable in New York city or Philadelphia had to be tampered with so as not to offend tastes in Topeka or Springfield, Illinois. Indeed, Henry Jenkins argues that vaudeville acts were often reconceived to meet the needs of a specific market (and, in so doing, contradicts what others, notably Dimeglio and Snyder, have written): "Censorship of vaudeville material was not centralized but rather left in the hands of local theater owners who had widely divergent standards about what constituted acceptable stage fare. Consequently, the act had to be constructed in such a way that almost any given gag or bit of business was expandable should a manager insist that it be removed. The performer might also be expected to compress or expand the material to conform to the time constraints of a particular program."⁸

But, my argument need not conflict with the views of Jenkins and others like him. For I am not arguing that there were *no* regional or local variations of material, nor that people in one particular subpocket of American culture felt and responded precisely as their peers in another city or village—peers of perhaps a slightly different ethnic, economic, or sociopolitical makeup—would have. Rather, I am concerned with illustrating the rise of a national economic model. Even if there were variations in what entertainment consumers around the country saw and felt, there is no doubt that the businessmen in charge of distributing entertainment (and, for that matter, every other

⁸ Jenkins, 78-79.

emergent mass-market ware at the turn of the century) were trying quite clearly to impose a national economic paradigm on the American market. That is, even if it constitutes a kind of fiction to suppose that there exists or existed an “American market,” it is precisely this fiction that motivated and mobilized the likes of B.F. Keith, Richard Sears, and others. In short, while it may not be possible to construct culture from the top down, it seems to have been possible to craft and seek after markets in precisely this way.⁷⁹

Big-time vaudeville was a business that relied on a product that fell more or less within certain parameters (even while it could be varied locally) and which could be scheduled to play at a large chain of venues, owned by one or a few interests, around the United States. This was simply how it worked. Certainly, local managers could insist an act conform to different standards than that act faced in the previous city (to support Jenkins’s point), but it also true that such negotiations occurred under the aegis of a mass-scale marketing discourse which allegedly promised purity, content control, and, in the rare instances when it became necessary, censorship. In other words, it is possible to reconcile Jenkins’s views with those of Dimeglio and Snyder, just as it is possible to reconcile the concept of local culture with that of the imposition of a national scheme. Culture may happen in so many ways at so many regional locales, but mass-marketing occurred at the national level for the first time in the history of the U.S. economy. As we have already seen, Susan Strasser and others have cogently argued that Americans, particularly in cities, were indelicately coaxed from local consumption patterns into a universe of “mass-produced goods,” and turned into “participants in a national market

⁷⁹ Of course, since about the 1950s, ambitious businessmen have in some measure been trying to unnationalize markets—that is, to appeal to narrower and narrower demographic slices in an effort to sell more goods and services. The present Internet age seems to suggest the greatest possibility of narrow-marketing, as individual consumers reveal more about themselves with each purchase they make.

composed of masses of people associating with big, centrally organized, national-level companies.”⁸⁰

On the heels of this point, I am suggesting as well, as I have also already argued, that the process of becoming mass-market consumers brought with it anxieties; and it was such anxieties that powerful business interests sought to address with promises of cleanliness, purity, control, and moral or hygienic authority. But how do we know what anxieties individual theatre-goers (or, one might say, entertainment consumers) felt? There were, of course, no systematized marketing surveys of vaudeville audiences, as there might be, say, for movie patrons in the late twentieth century. In a sense, we have very little or no statistical “reception” data for vaudeville patrons some one hundred years ago.

But I would argue that we do have, nonetheless, valuable individual reaction data to vaudeville shows to which we may turn. The best existing “reception” data that we possess are, in my view, the weekly vaudeville review columns in the influential entertainment trade papers of the day, such as Variety and the New York Dramatic Mirror. Such papers employed a cadre of theatre-goers who attended vaudeville shows with weekly (or greater) regularity and reported their findings and reactions with remarkable detail and clarity. Certainly, a vaudeville columnist for Variety or another paper cannot be taken as a stand-in for masses of other people who might have been present in the theatre; his own status within the dynamics of culture would render him biased in particular ways. But that would be true with the reactions of any single individual sitting in Keith’s Fifth Avenue theatre or Protcor’s Pleasure Palace. Additionally, the weekly reviews are highly descriptive, bear some of the earmarks of the dominant culture value system, and comprise an ongoing record of both the acts seen

⁸⁰ Strasser, 16.

in vaudeville, the audience's general response, and the writer's individual emotional and aesthetic reactions. They are a kind of Pepys diary written for public consumption with institutional regularity.

To determine how Americans may have felt about the era's mass-marketing efforts and their preoccupations with cleanliness and purity, I have turned to popular artifacts of the day—newspaper columns, magazine articles, letters to editors, popular songs, even legislation—to get a sense of some of the strains of concern at play in the whirlpool of culture at the turn of the century. For while such texts may be said to reveal only the authors' views and anxieties, it is my view that they shaped, reflected, introduced, and reinforced cultural anxieties on a larger scale. These texts, dozens of which are cited in this work, may serve as a kind of momentary "core sample" of that greater, if ever changing and hard-to-pin-down, entity: American popular culture.

In this chapter, I have tried to outline the contours of the existing historical discourse on vaudeville, paying special attention to ways in which numerous authors have treated the topic of sexuality, suggestiveness, and content control. Supplementing their arguments, I have offered my own—that the ubiquitous rhetoric of purity and wholesomeness which accompanied vaudeville may be seen as a direct function of vaudeville's existence as the first form of nationwide, mass-scale entertainment in the United States. I have argued that assurances of moral purity were aimed at mitigating the "mass" quality of this historically unique, yet explicable, species of entertainment, and at mollifying potential anxieties in the minds of prospective customers.

Furthermore, I have pointed out that vaudeville, through its use of unclad female bodies, helped liberalize American attitudes towards sexuality in mass-market entertainment. By declaring itself clean and pure, vaudeville was paradoxically able to offer a hefty serving of the unclean and impure—and in so doing began to change opinions about what constituted the acceptable.

In order to fully appreciate the moral changes wrought by vaudeville, it is necessary to understand the historical landscape of the time with regard to censorship and related attempts to control, delimit, and confine not only the theatre but other emergent mass media as well. Thus, in the first chapter, I will lay out the arguments of the day about censorship and content control, paying attention to which voices in American culture argued which views and what their respective stakes might have been. I will examine the attitudes of those in favor of and those opposed to censorship: in both cases, we will see anxieties and enthusiasm not so much over the content of entertainment but, more importantly, its mass-market nature. I will go on to look at how those in favor of censorship viewed vaudeville and its kin, the screen and the legitimate stage. Finally, I will describe and analyze some of the prevailing attitudes of the day toward sexuality, nudity, and prurience, looking at points of convergence and disjuncture in these arguments. All of this context is essential, I believe, to understanding the environment in which the vaudeville captains operated and successfully marketed their potentially controversial and often sexually loaded products.

In Chapter Two, I will discuss vaudeville's development as a mass-market product. I will look closely at the people and forces that came together to create vaudeville in this way. We will see, on the one hand, ambitious entrepreneurs like B.F. Keith, E.F. Albee, F.F. Proctor, and Martin Beck who strove for economic reasons to craft a national market for staged entertainment. At the same time, I will place them in their historical context. I will show them to be men who did for entertainment what others did for cars, biscuits, soap, insurance, and railroads, all aided by underlying changes in the social and economic structure of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. We will see how they created a kind of branded product, "vaudeville," and that a chief marketing tool in doing so was the discourse of purity.

Chapter Three will turn to a consideration of ribald, sexually suggestive, and similarly titillating acts on the vaudeville stage. Having seen how the form was advertised and publicized by its creators, we will look at the product in fact being offered. I hope to offer a kind of taxonomy of suggestive acts on the stage at the time, looking closely at the details of various genres and performers, and speculating on how each was permitted, promoted, and positioned within the larger cultural mix of the era. Here we will see disrobing acrobats, “Salome” dancers, and dozens of others show people who were staples of the vaudeville stage and helped make it a key site of public desire. In so doing, I hope to shed light on the kind of acts, deployed in vaudeville, that led to the transformation of attitudes toward sexuality, the female body, and the moral content of popular entertainment. What will emerge, I hope, is a new view of the vaudeville theatre, one that pays attention to the heavily sexual content of many acts and looks at how such acts may have changed public mores about the content of popular entertainment.

Chapter Four will look at the life and work of Eva Tanguay, who was perhaps vaudeville’s biggest star. Between about 1905 and 1920, Tanguay took the vaudeville stage by storm and, at her peak, drew salaries of at least \$3,500 a week. Despite this, Tanguay seems to have had little singing or acting talent, nor could she dance especially well. I focus on Tanguay because in many ways she represented the culmination of the changes wrought by vaudeville. Though unique and an historical agent in her own right, Tanguay succeeded in part because of other performers—such as those detailed in Chapter Three—who pushed and redefined the limits of sexuality in popular stage entertainments. Observers of the day tend to use words like “cyclonic” and “energetic” in describing Tanguay and her appeal. On her energetic body were inscribed new modes of sexual expression, hegemonic desires, and economic imperatives. That is, she

provided a sexual product for a paying public while avoiding censure; in so doing, she further crafted a mass market for sexually titillating entertainment.

At the same time, Tanguay brought her own unique persona to the stage. She constructed her own meanings and, in many ways, left her mark on society as much as society left its mark on her. In any case, she is a fascinating personage who is of direct relevance to this study and about whom too little has been written.

A note about the time-frame of this study. Though vaudeville theatre in the United States in some sense may be said to have begun in the 1880s with the work of producer Tony Pastor and others like him, I will be more immediately concerned with the period from 1895 to 1915. For it is this period, in my estimation, that marks vaudeville's rise to peak popularity, development as an industrially-organized amusement, and evolution into a national preoccupation. It was in 1895 that the New York Dramatic Mirror inaugurated its weekly "Vaudeville Stage" column. Wrote the Mirror, "The vaudeville branch of the profession is an important one, and if present indications count for anything, it will soon demand as much attention as the dramatic profession." This important change in the Mirror's editorial practices reflected key changes underway in the realm of public entertainment.⁸¹

By 1915, however, big-time vaudeville was in decline. B.F. Keith was dead, and his demise was of symbolic, as well as material, importance. Motion pictures, long in the ascendancy, had unquestionably replaced vaudeville—initial host of the movies' own emergence—as a distinct and more popular form of entertainment.⁸² Also, the period of the First World War marked significant changes in both gender relations—a central

⁸¹ "The Vaudeville Stage," New York Dramatic Mirror, 29 June 1895, 12.

⁸² For example, Dimeglio notes that at the time of its peak popularity, ca. 1900, there were some 2,000 vaudeville theatres in the U.S. and Canada (Dimeglio, 11). By sharp contrast, by 1910 there were over 10,000 theatres in the U.S. alone devoted largely or entirely to the exhibition of motion pictures. (See: Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905-1914: Building and Audience for the Movies," in Balio, ed., (1985), 86

concern of this study—and patterns of middle-class amusement-going, having largely to do with socioeconomic upheaval and Prohibition.⁸³ Finally, following the War, but especially after about 1920, we begin to observe the real, imagined, and discursive decline of the American city. To quote David Nasaw:

After 1920, as Kenneth Jackson has argued, “no one could deny that the cities were poor and that the suburbs, relatively speaking, were rich.” In the postwar period, this economic polarization was exacerbated by racial division, as the percentage of African Americans in the central cities increased dramatically.⁸⁴

The vaudeville theatre had been perhaps the exemplary public, urban entertainment of the age. And when the middle classes so desperately sought after by Keith and Albee began withdrawing to the suburbs, their (the vaudeville magnates’) project was in many ways in an inexorable decline. Though the move away from cities, and the subsequent demise of urban recreations (coupled with the rise of “clean, safe” places of amusement such as the multiplex movie theatre⁸⁵ and the sports complex marketed toward those who could *drive* to the games—not to mention the ultimate “safety” of home-based amusements such as radio, during the 1920s, and television in the latter 1940s) did not happen fully until after World War II, its beginnings may be clearly seen after 1918.⁸⁶

⁸³ See: Lewis Erenberg, Steppin’ Out: New York Night Life and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930, (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1981), 233-59

⁸⁴ Nasaw, 249.

⁸⁵ The first multiplexes began to emerge in shopping malls in the 1960s. The first “fourplex” opened in Kansas City in 1966, the first “sixplex” in Omaha, Nebraska in 1969, and the first “eightplex” in Atlanta in 1974. They proliferated from there in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. See: Douglas Gomery, Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 97.

⁸⁶ Nasaw, 241-249. These comments should not be construed to mean that African-American theatrical forms did not take root in the big cities, where “white flight” (to dust off a well-known sociological trope) was beginning to occur. Indeed, black vaudeville flourished during the 1910s and 1920s. For an excellent descriptive history see: Mel Watkins, On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying – the Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to the Civil War (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), see especially Chap. 9: “The Theatre Owners Booking Association and the Apollo Theatre...*changing the joke and slipping the yoke.*”

Finally, I think it will helpful to define what I mean as “vaudeville” as distinct from the earlier variety theatre, concert saloon, contemporaneous burlesque hall, and cabaret venue. While both vaudeville and the variety theatre presented a concatenation of different acts with no narrative through-line, there are key differences. The variety theatre was a decidedly small-time operation. Local owner-managers booked whatever talent happened to be in town, opened their doors, and hoped for the best. Vaudeville, by contrast, grew up as a centrally-managed operation in which the owners managed formidable circuits of theatres and often planned an entire season’s fare at once. Thus, what might be seen at Keith’s Boston theatre was largely the same as that which could be seen at a Keith theatre in another city hundreds of miles away. Increasingly, through the work of powerful booking agencies (owned or controlled by the vaudeville chains), the theatrical product became standardized and served up on a mass scale.

Vaudeville differed from the nineteenth-century concert saloon in that vaudeville theatres were not simply bars with a pianist, dancer, or comic on stage, vying for attention while the crowd immersed itself in chatter, tobacco, and liquor. Rather, the vaudeville theatres that emerged in the 1890s were carefully controlled, corporate-run entertainment environments. As we will see, men like Keith and Albee took great pains to mediate every element of the theatre-going experience, from sightlines to furnishings to the mix of acts on stage. These were places in which one’s attention was directed toward the stage, and where decorous applause or laughter was the only form of noise encouraged by the management. These were not places to unwind for several hours, whiskey or cigar in hand, while talking up one’s fellow theatregoers. Rather, they were places where one paid a modest admission for a carefully-packaged show and then departed after the last act went off stage.

I have already discussed some of the differences—and striking similarities—between vaudeville and the burlesque hall. Robert Allen’s Horrible Prettiness contains

perhaps the best extended argument of the differences between the two forms. For the purposes of the present work, all that need be pointed out is that the burlesque “wheels” (as they were known) never propagated a public discourse of purity and cleanliness as did vaudeville. Rather, they largely and unabashedly appealed to male patrons seeking disrobing acts and lewd humor. And while similar types of acts could be seen on the vaudeville stage, it was burlesque that earned the reputation for being overtly racy and licentious. Vaudeville’s reputation remained largely intact—even when its stage offerings bore a striking resemblance to those of the burlesque hall.

Finally, vaudeville may be distinguished from the cabaret theatre by the latter’s loftier artistic and political aims and greater popularity in Europe than in the United States. “By 1890, variety theatres had become grandiose, elaborate palaces of stereotyped amusement,” writes Laurence Senelick in the foreword to his Cabaret Performance, Europe, 1890-1920: Songs, Sketches, Monologues, Memoirs. “But the innovators of the cabaret intended to distil from the vaudeville, circus, and music halls their vitality, immediacy, and vivacity; to adopt the rapid alternation of attractions; and then, to harness these demotic features in order to convey a rarefied artistic style or a liberal political message or a skewed vision of the world.”⁸⁷ Big-time vaudeville theatres in the U.S. were most certainly “grandiose, elaborate palaces of stereotyped amusement,” as we will see, but rarely was the content ever overtly political (with a few exceptions, such as the occasional suffragist act), nor “artistic” according to the dictates of high culture. In inventing mass entertainment, the business magnates who controlled vaudeville chose clearly to exclude what they felt might alienate the greatest number of paying customers, and include that which would result in the greatest gross receipts.

⁸⁷ Laurence Senelick, Cabaret Performance, Volume I: Europe, 1890-1920: Songs, Sketches, Monologues, Memoirs, (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1989), 8.

Chapter One:

“Dressed in the Form of Art”: Censorship, Content Control, and Curtailment of Popular Entertainments in the Vaudeville Era

In this chapter, I will examine the prevailing atmosphere of censorship, and calls for content control of various mass media, at the time of vaudeville's emergence. Viewing this historical background will help clarify why the vaudeville chiefs felt the need to advertise and publicize their product as clean and pure. For even though vaudeville largely escaped attempts by civic and governmental forces at censorship and curtailment, the threat of such efforts loomed constantly nearby and therefore informed vaudeville's marketing efforts. Let us start by comparing vaudeville to the early motion picture industry, an industry that had gotten its start in the vaudeville theatre¹ and an industry which, unlike vaudeville, fell continually under the shroud of censorship, content control, and even outright curtailment. We will see that, despite the fact that both vaudeville and the movies were both hugely popular forms of early mass entertainment, there were nonetheless critical differences between the two. I will then go on to discuss efforts to censor the legitimate stage and the conflict between religious authorities and popular amusement producers of the day, and conclude with a discussion of attitudes toward sexuality and nudity, particularly on stage, but also in culture at large, around the turn of the century.

One reason why calls for government censorship never dogged vaudeville as they did the motion picture industry may have been that while the emergent motion picture companies were largely controlled by European-born Jewish immigrants, who

¹ See: Robert C. Allen, "The Movies in Vaudeville: Historical Context of the Movies as Popular Entertainment," in Tino Balio, ed., The American Film Industry, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976, 1985), 57-82.

were perceived as unkempt outsiders by the dominant Catholic and Protestant elite,² vaudeville was largely controlled by individuals with whom that elite could more easily identify. B.F. Keith's wife, for example, was well-known for her devout Catholicism and it is argued that she helped her husband devise the Keith chain's putative self-censorship code.³ Noted Boston's Cardinal O'Connell, "The business in which Mr. Keith was engaged was one surrounded by all sorts of temptations and dangers, a business which could be turned to the loss of souls, but Mrs. Keith constantly kept watch over that...."⁴

E.F. Albee, Keith's partner, was not himself a religious man. Nonetheless, he coaxed investment backing from the Catholic church, both because it had some of the deepest pockets in New England and for the air of purity its backing would lend the budding vaudeville chain. He also actively solicited and won the input of Protestant leaders by having them serve as community liaisons and occasional censorship consultants. Again, the public relations value was immeasurable. Jokes Joe Laurie, Jr., "Had Boston boasted a larger Jewish population, it is certain that Albee would have worked a rabbi into the scheme of things."⁵ Indeed, other early mass-marketers at the turn of the century enlisted the endorsement of religious authorities to help legitimate their mass-produced wares. The company that manufactured the shortening Crisco, for example, recruited rabbis to declare that the product was kosher.⁶

Vaudeville did eventually fall afoul of certain religious authorities when its lucrative Sunday shows conflicted with traditional worship time. Nonetheless, it never

² There are many versions of this argument. For a good one see: Gregory Black, Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 33.

³ Gilbert, 201.

⁴ "Cardinal Lauds Mrs. B.F. Keith," Boston Herald, 20 January 1927. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

⁵ Laurie, 343.

⁶ Strasser, 14.

suffered the degree of censure that plagued Hollywood almost from the beginning and which, in some ways, continues up to the present.

It should be noted too that vaudeville, while extremely popular, was never quite as popular, and therefore influential, as the mass-market films put out by Hollywood. Notes film historian Francis Couvares, "Even more than earlier commercial amusements such as vaudeville and burlesque, the penny press, and the dime novel, the movies threatened to gain control over the representation of crime and punishment, of class and ethnicity, and, especially, of familial and sexual relations."⁷

A well-publicized policy, if not actual practice, of self-censorship, though, helped the vaudeville chains keep calls for government censorship at bay during a time when the possibility of censorship, restraint, and control trailed close behind nearly all the emergent modes of mass communication.⁸ Argues Lewis Erenberg in Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930,

"Vaudeville's emphasis on purity and refinement for family audiences made it relatively immune from the controlling hands of the critics...."⁹

Still, those who controlled the form did well to be careful. As early as 1848, the illusion of nudity offered by "living pictures" at Palmo's Opera House in New York drew "vigorous protests" and was eventually banned by the city.¹⁰ Living pictures and tableaux, which sometimes won moral approval and other times suffered moral censure, were consistently the subject of police raids, bench warrants, and crusading efforts. Jack McCullough, in Living Pictures on the New York Stage, points out that the form saw

⁷ Francis Couvares, "Hollywood, Main Street, and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies Before the Production Code," in Francis Couvares, ed., Movie Censorship and American Culture, (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 130.

⁸ Laufe, 21.

⁹ Erenberg, 14.

¹⁰ Laufe, 18.

repeated attacks not only in the years leading up to the Civil War but especially in the period from 1875 to 1893.¹¹

But living pictures were not the only target of moral outrage. In 1866, The Black Crook at Niblos's Garden was repeatedly objected to because it featured female performers in flesh-colored tights during its two-year, 474-performance run. In 1900, Clyde Fitch's Sapho was shut down altogether for its sexual content.¹² Notes Francis Couvares, "Since the commercialization of leisure in the late eighteenth century, and certainly since the emergence of the dime novel, the penny press, and the popular theater in the nineteenth century, censors have urged the suppression of 'cheap amusements' precisely because they arouse strong desires and strong antipathies in an untrustworthy public."¹³ One even comes across the occasional police action taken against a vaudeville act, though typically adjudication and punishment was meted out toward the performer or performers in question rather than the producers or chain owners. In 1909, for instance, the popular performer Mlle. De Leon was arrested for presenting a dance considered "indecent."¹⁴ De Leon had made a name for herself as a "coochee-coochee" dancer who appealed to audiences through "the gradual discarding of sundry articles of raiment," according to the New York Dramatic Mirror.¹⁵ In 1910, famed performer Sophie Tucker was enjoined from singing the song "Angle Worm Wiggle" by police and eventually lost her case in court.¹⁶ By 1904, the Committee of Fourteen, a conservative group of professionals and social reformers, began turning a wary eye on vaudeville and the other leisure activities so closely associated with the rise of the American city. Notes

¹¹ Jack McCullough, Living Pictures on the New York Stage, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1981), 46, 81-84, 98.

¹² Laurie, 18-19, 24-25.

¹³ Francis Couvares, "Introduction," in Couvares, ed., 2.

¹⁴ "Mlle. De Leon Censured," New York Dramatic Mirror, 17 July 1909, 18.

¹⁵ New York Dramatic Mirror, 27 July 1901, 16.

Lewis Erenberg, "The committee's primary aim was the abolition of prostitution... but they also attacked the problems presented by the new amusements."¹⁷

If the cloud of genuine outside censorship only occasionally darkened the landscape of the growing vaudeville industry, it was ever hovering above that of vaudeville's close cousin—with whom it shared performers, producers, and dramatic material—the legitimate stage. Social elites, religious leaders, and moral reformers of the era feared the stage as a kind of mass medium which the public at large was neither educated nor ethically sound enough to handle. As early as 1907, an editorial favoring theatre censorship appeared in the New York Times. It read, "The theory of theatrical censorship is admirable. It aims to protect public morality by guarding the mind of the multitude, as far as possible, against contaminating influences. It tries to check irreverence toward religion and to avoid needless public offense to the sensibilities of friendly foreigners." And while the Times found that the actual practice of censorship has often "dismally failed," it argued that "[a] well-directed censorship of plays and novels, too, might be beneficial."¹⁸

Two years later, the Catholic Men's Society passed resolutions condemning "the immorality of the stage now so frequently exhibited in grand opera and in theatres, as well as in the humbler moving-picture shows." The Society declared, "We ask the Catholic and the secular press to aid in this work of protecting the children by denouncing the infamous business now carried on by unscrupulous men seeking to enrich themselves by providing the indecencies which are put upon the stage and in the picture shows, whose sure effect is to corrupt the minds of those who witness them."¹⁹

¹⁶ Dimeglio, 146.

¹⁷ Erenberg, 63.

¹⁸ "Theatrical Censorship," New York Times, 12 June 1907, 8:3.

¹⁹ "Catholics Denounce Stage Immorality," New York Times, 11 February 1909, 16:3.

Evident in the discourse of the Men's Society is a paternalistic attitude toward consumers of public amusements, rather like that of a parent toward a child craving sweets: they don't know what is good for them so it is up to us to "protect" them. Twice that year, the New York City Aldermen proposed bills on play censorship.²⁰ Though they never became law, a play censor was appointed in the nearby town of Plainfield, New Jersey. In that municipality, which had bristled following a local production of Clyde Fitch's The Blue Mouse, the Mayor wrote, "There seems to be a growing tendency on the part of theatrical managers, of moving picture shows, and of vaudeville houses to produce plays and show pictures that are not only not elevating, but are absolutely indecent and demoralizing."²¹ And at least one New York theatre manager said that, in his opinion, "there should be a stage censorship."²²

Three years later, in 1912, prominent New York Catholics again banded together, inaugurating the National Catholic Theatre Movement. The Movement aimed to introduce "a systematic scheme whereby all plays regarded as immoral would be put on the 'black list' in every city of the United States." Said New York's Cardinal Farley, a key member of the Movement, "I hope the time will come when no play can be presented in New York before it has passed a National committee." An Irish-American Cardinal wrote a statement for the cause in which he argued, "The stage at the present day is a powerful engine for the swaying of men's minds for good or evil. Unfortunately, it is seldom used for good, and generally for evil, with fatal effects."²³ In its anti-theatrical discourse, the clergy implicitly acknowledged that a new era had arisen in

²⁰ "For a Play Censorship," New York Times, 24 February 1909, 9:4; "Wants Theatrical Censors," New York Times, 19 October 1909, 6:2.

²¹ "Play Censors in Plainfield," New York Times, 9 February 1909, 1:2; "Theatre Censors Organize," New York Times, 16 February 1909, 1:5.

²² "Foresees a Stage Censor," New York Times, 10 February 1909, 1:2.

²³ "Farley Begins War On Infamy of Stage," New York Times, 19 December 1912, 9:1.

which commercial entertainment, controlled by industrially-organized, financially-motivated businessmen had replaced the church, family, and local community as the primary influence on individual morality.

There is too the persistent comparison of such entertainment to disease, contamination, and infestation. Said another member of the National Catholic Theatre Movement, "In the confessional we can only deal with victims already infected. The source of the plague is the immoral theatres and as long as they, like breeding pest houses, are allowed to spread their infection, the health of the whole community is threatened."²⁴ No wonder that vaudeville producers advertised their amusement as "clean" and "pure," even if it wasn't always so, and no wonder that purveyors of other mass-market goods and services stressed the sterility and purity of their products. Changes in consumption patterns had indirectly provoked a moral crusade.

The real problem, as the clergy saw it, then, was the free market as it applied to public amusement. A new structure of morality, in which the permissible equaled the commercially viable, threatened to replace an older paradigm in which culturally authorized elites, or at very least parents, decided what should and should not be disseminated to the masses. Stated Theatre Movement member Monsignor McGean, "The theatre managers give a supply for a demand, and I understand the theatres are filled night after night. We want people who will say: 'I will not attend any play or let any members of my family attend any play which I have heard is dangerous, which is stained with the vices of the day.' We therefore must educate the demand and that will automatically shut off the supply. We must cause a demand for something better."²⁵

²⁴ "Farley Begins War on Infamy of Stage," New York Times, 19 December 1912, 9:1. One concerned citizen even felt that theatrical posters should be censored. "The immoral plays do not do all the harm," wrote a New York resident in the Times. "There are still posters advertising the worst of them. Some of these representing the latest dances must have done damage to our children." ("Offensive Posters," New York Times, 11 February 1909, 6:5.)

²⁵ "Farley Begins War on Infamy of Stage," 9:1-2.

McGean's invective is as much an indictment of free market economics as it is a condemnation of certain theatrical practices. Protestant leaders, up in arms about the proliferation of plays such as Kismet and The Garden of Allah, which featured "Mohammaden prayers constantly being said," also joined the fray, arguing for a modification of *laissez-faire* practices in the realm of staged entertainment. Said the Rev. Francis Rolt Wheeler, "Critics? On, no, no, no! Indeed, no, nor censors either. We are just experts who will view the various plays to determine which ones are wholesome; that's what ethics are for, you know—specialists...."²⁶ Men like Wheeler hoped to intercede in the process of mass cultural production, positioning themselves near the top, like the guardians of Plato's Republic. The very idea that a consuming public might determine the output of such a system threatened them on so many levels that its existence had to be likened to a pestilence or a plague.

Those who sought to censor—or at least "clean up"—the theatre, both legitimate and vaudeville, while agreeing on the problems of the free-market model, sometimes took divergent views on who was to blame. Some, like the Catholic clergy mentioned above, pinned the onus on producers and managers, whom they saw as unscrupulously feeding the unenlightened masses a diet of filth. An anonymous contributor to Variety wrote in 1913, "Let us look at the situation squarely in the face. Both the United (United Booking Offices) 'Big City' managers, and William Morris, it is quite obvious, countenance the attractions that will draw the money to the box office quickly, regardless of whether the said attraction contains suggestive lines, almost nude women or anything else." The "United Booking Office" which the author referred to was the centralized organization which (for a commission) scheduled vaudeville acts across the country and which was controlled by Keith interests; William Morris, whose name is

²⁶ "Ethical Band Plans Drama Inquisition," New York Times, 21 February 1912, 20:1.

still with us, was one of vaudeville's key talent agents. More importantly, the anonymous author picked up on vaudeville's clever marketing strategy—the means by which it had fashioned itself as a mass-market brand, suitable for consumption in cities and municipalities around the country: through the commercial discourse of purity. Acts relying on “suggestive material,” argued the Variety author, were featured “where the trade mark of any successful vaudeville theatre is most prominently displayed, throughout the city or town. ‘Clean and inoffensive entertainment.’”²⁷

Other elements in society tended to blame audiences for the moral backsliding. This group counted in its numbers reform-minded intellectuals, journalists and writers—individuals more favorably disposed to a free market model of cultural production, but doubtful about the masses' ability to handle it. In discussing the question of stage censorship in Cosmopolitan, Alan Dale tried to defend plays and performances with sexually suggestive material on the grounds that “vulgar and contemptibly stupid though they be, they are not so vulgar and so contemptibly stupid as their audiences.” Dale elaborated:

Certain audiences may flock to see such a show, after its moral obliquities have been duly censored, but—well, just go and analyze those audiences. I did it. I saw a collection of paunch-faced, obese men, each with a huge cigar in the corner of his mouth, and labeled with the tout [sic] and wine agent label. I saw a collection of frowsy, overdressed, and tittering women, very loud, very unattractive, and very unmistakable... Who present was to be contaminated? Could the play, however bad it might be, be worse than its audience? Could anything make that audience worse than it was?²⁸

For Dale, unlike his Catholic contemporaries who targeted the rapacious, unprincipled theatre owner or manager, the problem of mass-market entertainment was the masses. It

²⁷ “‘Clean Up In New York First’ Says Out of Town Manager,” 8.

²⁸ Alan Dale, “Dramatic Censors and Some New Plays,” Cosmopolitan, June 1909, 74-75.

was they, ultimately, who dragged down the moral quotient of the theatre, not the playwrights and producers.

Several years later, an editorial in the New York Clipper pinned the blame for a wave of “suggestive songs” on the audience. “There is a morbid desire on the part of music hall audiences for anything that has a *double entendre*—for anything that is off-color, and they vociferously applaud everything of this kind. This encourages the performer to make his actions accompanying a song as broadly suggestive as possible, knowing that it will bring him the much desired plaudits.”²⁹

If vaudeville faced only indirect threats of public censorship for the content it purveyed, it faced a more palpable attack from individuals who sought to control and circumscribe its spatial and temporal flexibility. Critics, like those who attacked the nickelodeon movie, saw the vaudeville house as a potentially dangerous geographical space, one perhaps where promiscuous men and women could interact away from the prying eyes of family and clergy. In 1909, the New York Dramatic Mirror inveighed against some of the potential perils of this new public urban space. Specifically, it warned of “the ‘continuous’ masher,” which is to say, the “men who have nothing better to do than frequent the vaudeville houses in the afternoon and allow their mashing proclivities full play.” Since many of the New York vaudeville houses featured a continuous cycle of entertainment, men in search of women could wander in at any time and try to find an interested party. According to the Mirror, such a man would “ogle, wink at, nudge or engage in conversation any woman who may be unfortunate enough to sit beside them.” Having found a pleasing target, the masher “begins a system of turning, leering, and nudging, which puts the girl, if she is at all sensitive, into a state bordering on nervous prostration.” Of course, the paper noted, some women went into continuous

²⁹ “Suggestive Songs,” New York Clipper, 9 November 1912, 8.

theatres looking for this very thing, arguing that “there are hundreds of women who visit the vaudeville houses for the purpose of doing a little mashing of their own account, and they are more than pleased at the attention they attract.” To certain concerned parties, the vaudeville house, like the emergent cinema and, later, the dance hall, represented a new urban space physically, culturally, and symbolically distinct from the world of late nineteenth-century social and sexual norms. Its very existence frightened some, while it drew heated calls for regulation from others. The Mirror concluded that “eternal vigilance” was needed to deal with the mashing nuisance.³⁰

If vaudeville houses and other sites of public amusement represented a spatially and geographically threatening locale, they also posed a temporal one in the minds of certain critics and reformers. Beginning around the turn of the century, there was a series of sustained attacks on so-called “Sunday shows,” or the production of certain performances on Sunday. In early 1900, politicians, city officials, and police met to discuss the enforcement of existing laws which prohibited or circumscribed performances on Sunday.³¹ Arrests were made on at least one occasion later that year, but the issue died down until about 1905 when two theatre managers, Mark Leuscher and Louis Werba, were summoned before a New York City magistrate for having violated the Sunday law. The judge, though ended up letting the two go, “as he believed a theatre to be a better place for a man to spend Sunday evening than the back room of a saloon,” according to one trade paper.³²

Not everyone agreed. The “Sabbatarian League” formed shortly thereafter and began putting pressure on the police to enforce the Sunday laws. The League, which also lobbied New York’s Mayor McClellan, saw the vaudeville house as a direct competitor

³⁰ New York Dramatic Mirror, 3 June 1899, 10.

³¹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 6 January 1900, 18.

³² New York Dramatic Mirror, 24 November 1900, 18; 11 February 1905, 18.

to the house of worship. One Protestant minister who visited a Sunday vaudeville show claimed he saw “more of his congregation there than had been in church.”³³ The new sites of amusement offered in the burgeoning city symbolized and directly contributed to the breakdown of an existing social structure with a clearly defined spatio-temporal regimen and rules of control.

For their part, the vaudeville producers tried to seem compliant via an effort to enforce the “Sunday clause” of the New York City charter, not only for fear of losing their licenses but because they wished to seem in favor of producing “clean, amusing entertainment.” *Variety* noted that complying with the law would cost the major vaudeville producers in New York roughly one million dollars a season in lost ticket revenues.³⁴ In any case, the New York Supreme Court had upheld the statute.

The peace was a fragile one, however, and the following year moral crusaders renewed their assaults on Sunday shows, probably because vaudeville managers, hungry for increased ticket sales, reinstated the presentations. Understandably, it was clergymen who led the effort. When New York City Assemblyman Gluck suggested the introduction of a bill explicitly permitting Sunday shows, he was shouted down by both Catholic and Protestant leaders. Archbishop Farley argued that “no proposed legislation has ever threatened to such an extent to operate against every person in this city as this bill does,” while Presbyterian Minister Canon William Sheaf Chase proclaimed, “If we are going to have plays on Sunday, let us have Shakespearean plays. Let us have Julius Caesar rather than Salome. But people who go to Sunday shows want a low-type of play, filled with more or less obscene jokes and allusions.”³⁵ Though the two took slightly different approaches in opposing Sunday shows, their admonitions betray a common

³³ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 15 December 1906, 16; 9 February 1907, 17.

³⁴ “Supreme Court Decides Sunday Shows Illegal,” *Variety*, 7 December 1907, 2.

³⁵ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 23 February 1907, 17.

anxiety. It derived from the thought that religion, long a sacrosanct cultural locale, would soon be subject to the rules of free market competition. That is, to lure people into houses of worship, perhaps they too would have somehow to compete with the amusement fare offered by entertainment industry businessmen. And against professional showmen like B.F. Keith and Willie Hammerstein, they would surely lose.

In the fall of 1907, Chase called on his peers to unite in an effort to quell Sunday vaudeville. His resolve was remarkable considering his life had already been threatened on at least one occasion for his anti-theatrical preaching. "Do you know that you are making a lot of people unhappy and losing money? I warn you you are marked to die." read an anonymous letter Chase received in March, 1907.³⁶ In September of that year, Chase called for the arrest of local theatre managers who violated the Sunday laws; several weeks later, police closed down Sunday shows at Keith & Proctor's Jersey City venue, and made arrests at vaudeville theatres in Brooklyn. By the end of October, one judge, in considering the evidence against Willie Hammerstein, declared that singing acts did not violate the Sunday law, but circus acts did.³⁷

Methodist ministers in Manhattan and Brooklyn, not content with the ruling, came on board as well. The Methodist Reverend Dr. John Wesley Hill harshly criticized the city, stating, "It is discouraging to all good people to see the way some laws are made to look like shams because of the laxity of officials in enforcing them... It is high time that we of the Church should do some telling work against an evil that is undermining the foundations of the Sabbath from one end of the city to the other."³⁸ The religious groups undertook to make that Sunday a day to test the enforcement policies of

³⁶ New York Dramatic Mirror, 16 March 1907, 18.

³⁷ New York Dramatic Mirror, 28 September, 1907; 12 October 1907, 15; 19 October 1907, 16.

³⁸ "War on Sunday Vaudeville," New York Times, 1 December 1908, 9:2; "Sunday Vaudeville Crusade on December 13," New York Times, 3 December 1908, 9:3.

the law. By calling public attention to, and trying to stir outrage over, the Sunday statutes during a time of pronounced paranoia over the new urban amusements—New York's movie theatres were to be ordered shut down several weeks later—the ministers were forcing civic leaders to do something or risk their political lives. Those in favor of Sunday legislation could point to the passage of similar statutes in nearby states, such as Massachusetts, which passed its own law in 1908.³⁹

By the end of the month, those opposing Sunday shows had prevailed, causing police and city leaders to take action, even if they did not fully understand the arcane Sunday code already in existence in New York, and leaving vaudeville managers scrambling over how to handle the problem. Police Commissioner Theodore Bingham called the city's vaudeville producers down to his office to inform them of the change in policy, where the following exchange took place.

Bingham: Gentleman, I've brought you down here to tell you about the law.

Managers: What is the law anyway?

Bingham: I don't know. Go down to the Corporation Counsel's office and find out. But if you violate it I'll arrest you anyway.⁴⁰

Upon reaching the Office of the Corporation Counsel—the attorneys for the city—the vaudeville managers, including Willie Hammerstein and Percy Williams, were read the provisions of Sections 265 and 277 of the Penal Code which pertained to Sunday presentations. Forbidden were:

The performance of any tragedy, comedy, opera, ballet, or farce or any part thereof. Negro minstrelsy. Any dancing... Wrestling, boxing, with or without gloves, sparring contests, trials of strength or any part thereof. Circuses or equestrian performances. Dramatic performances or

³⁹ Variety, 25 April 1908, 6.

⁴⁰ "Diluted Vaudeville To-Day's Show Menu," New York Times, 27 December 1908, 1:1+.

exercises. Any performance or exercise of jugglers. Acrobatic or club performances. Rope dancers. Any theatrical play or sketch or a part thereof, with or without theatrical costume. Any vaudeville show. Any impersonation of any character with or without theatrical costume. Any moving pictures giving a play or part of a play.

What could be presented were "orchestral or other instrumental music or vocal music played or sung but not in connection with any theatrical exhibition, nor in costume; lectures and recitations, forming no part of any theatrical piece; moving pictures of an instructive or educational character."⁴¹

Both theatrical managers and city officials may have been confused about the provisions of the Sunday laws, but the latter nonetheless made every effort to enforce the statute as they understood it. All around the city, performers were arrested and shows were threatened with closure by vigilant police, many of whom disguised themselves in plain clothes and sat in the audience. Performer Cliff Gordon, who delivered "political" speeches in costume omitted the costume during the first Sunday of enforcement. But because he employed a German dialect in his routine, Captain Maher of the West 37th Street station ordered Gordon's arrest "on the ground that he was impersonating a German." Anything that smacked of the mimetic brought instant censure or arrest. When the musical Faust brothers finished their act at the Fourteenth Street Theatre, one singer with an injured leg limped off stage. The limp drew unintentional laughs from the audience. "The police said 'vaudeville' and arrested them, with the manager of the house." During another musical performance, one tenor smacked another tenor with a rolled-up newspaper between numbers. "Cut that out," called a policeman from the house, "that's vaudeville if it isn't acting." One canny performer, who gave lectures while films were being shown, was careful not to adorn his words with anything that might be construed as entertaining rather than "instructive or educational" as per the

⁴¹ "Diluted Vaudeville To-Day's Show Menu." 1:1+.

statute. During the film "Travels in Northern Europe," he would fall silent for long stretches then simply point to the screen and state, "Railroad track. More railroad track. Reindeer." Despite what might be considered the act's ironic humor, he was not bothered by the police.⁴²

Crusading religious leaders were pleased for the time being. The Reverend Dr. John Wesley Hill, who had spearheaded the effort, proclaimed a spiritual victory over those who would permit things such as Sunday performances. Hill, masterful at marshalling the most explosive rhetoric of the day, said that laxity of enforcement was "a step toward anarchy" and that things like Sunday shows threatened "a spread of moral malaria throughout the community."⁴³ Theatrical owners and producers opposed to the Sunday laws tried to fire back with rhetoric that played on fears of totalitarianism and economic loss, which they hoped would readily recruit public sentiment in their favor. "This sort of treatment," said an attorney who represented some of the city's motion picture theatre owners, "can go in Russia, but it can't go in this country. There are 12,000 men employed in the 550 [motion picture theatres]." But it was to no avail. Early 1909 saw another wave of arrests.⁴⁴ Sunday ordinances continued to dog vaudeville and motion picture houses for much of the next ten years, even receiving a shot in the arm in the form of the Stillwell Bill, which more carefully detailed the kinds of acts that were forbidden, in 1913.⁴⁵ And although a court found the Sunday laws in violation of the New York State constitution, that ruling was overturned nine months later.⁴⁶

⁴² "Police Permit Only Tame Vaudeville," New York Times, 28 December 1908, 1:7.

⁴³ "Commends the Mayor," New York Times, 28 December 1908, 3.

⁴⁴ New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 January 1909, 17.

⁴⁵ "Mayor Makes War on Sunday Vaudeville," New York Times, 29 December 1908, 3:1; "The Stillwell Bill," New York Clipper, 15 February 1913, 16D.

⁴⁶ New York Dramatic Mirror, 5 June 1909, 11; 12 February 1910, 21.

The spectre of censorship, public outrage, and governmental control trailed other modes of discourse in the emergent mass media, not just vaudeville and film. In addition to plays and vaudeville, newspapers, books, dime novels, schoolbooks, and other commercially-produced cultural texts were held in suspicion by elites, moral crusaders, and other guardians of culture. In Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America, Nicola Beisel notes that between 1870 and 1890, some 20 literary censorship societies were founded in the United States. Like the Catholic clergy seeking to censor the theatre, Comstock often evoked and relied on images of physical illness and infestation—cholera, cancer, syphilis—in his attacks on vice.⁴⁷ In his moral assault on George Bernard Shaw, for example, Comstock, who admitted that he was not directly familiar with the playwright he called “this Irish smut dealer,” stated, “[T]his fellow Shaw believes the proper method of curing contagious and vile diseases is to parade them in front of the public. He evidently thinks that’s the way to treat obscene literature.”⁴⁸ Comstock also, according to Beisel, “reiterated themes that the city was a dangerous place and that one of its chief dangers was sexual.”⁴⁹ Though Comstock paid much more attention to literary than theatrical vice, he was indirectly indicting vaudeville and other public amusements which grew up as an essential and inseparable part of the nation’s burgeoning urban scene. “Vaudeville,” after all, according to Robert Snyder, means *voix de ville* or “voice of the city.”⁵⁰

As might be guessed, moral reformers and crusaders and cultural guardians were especially concerned about the effects of the new commercial media on children and

⁴⁷ Nicola Beisel, Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3, 71.

⁴⁸ “Who’s Bernard Shaw? Asks Mr. Comstock,” New York Times, 28 September 1905, 9:1.

⁴⁹ Beisel, 44.

⁵⁰ Snyder (1989), 12.

youth (and, to a lesser extent on women). "How the sexual consciousness of a great proportion of our young people is being awakened," wrote Herbert George Wells in Cosmopolitan in 1903, "the curious reader may see for himself if he will expend a few pennies weekly for a month or so, upon the half-penny 'comic' papers which are bought so eagerly by boys." Though primarily concerned with mass market literature, Wells made an aside to single out the theatre: "If the manager of a theater saw fit to produce 'adult' matter without excluding people under the age of eighteen, let us say, he would have to take his chances, and it would be a good one, of a prosecution." Overall, though, Wells felt that it was the more popular brands of entertainment, rather than the loftier arts, that posed the real problem. He noted, "We want to make the pantomime-writer, proprietor of the penny 'comic,' the bill-sticker and the music hall artist extremely careful, punctiliously clean, but we do not want, for example, to pester Mr. Thomas Hardy."⁵¹ Presumably, Wells and others like him felt that certain modes of discourse, especially those likely to be mediated by culture's elite institutions such as universities and literary societies, were of little or no harm particularly to children.

Others did not feel that way. In 1905, the thirty or so free libraries of New York City removed several of the works of George Bernard Shaw from their shelves. Naturally, the concern over their public availability took the form of a concern for the works' potential for harming children. Said Arthur E. Bostwick, chief of circulation for the libraries: "It is all right for people of mature years to read Shaw, but children are better off without him. His attacks on existing social conditions are very radical and are almost certain to be misinterpreted by children. Take 'Man and Superman,' for example. Supposing that play fell into the hands of a little east sider. Do you think it would do him any good to read that the criminal before the bar of justice is no more of a criminal than

⁵¹ George Herbert Wells, "Mankind in the Making," Cosmopolitan, June 1903, 224-28.

the magistrate trying him? Do you think that would tend to lower the statistics of juvenile crime? I believe not, and for that reason have kept 'Man and Superman' off the open shelves."⁵²

A New York Times editorial questioned Bostwick's actions using logic that might as well have come from George Herbert Wells. It was not that Shaw ought not to be censored, but that doing so might lead to the barring of works by recognized cultural icons such as Shakespeare. "Is it possible that Mr. Bostwick puts 'King Lear' on his restricted list?" asked the Times editorialist. In any case, pointed out the writer, if children felt the dire urge to familiarize themselves with Man and Superman, all they had to do was go to a public library in Brooklyn, where Shaw's works were left on the shelves.⁵³

Two years later, Worcester county in Massachusetts removed the "boy books" of Horatio Alger from its library shelves in order to protect children and teenagers from works that civic authorities deemed "not truthful" and "too sensational," according to the New York Times.⁵⁴ And the following year, Confederate veterans in Texas prevailed upon the state legislature to remove "objectionable material" from school history books and replace it with a "number of matters relating to Texas history."⁵⁵ No steps were too extreme, according to certain pro-censorship advocates, when it came to the effects on the hearts and minds of youth.

⁵² "Free Libraries Bar Bernard Shaw's Books." New York Times, 21 September 1905, 9:6.

⁵³ "George Bernard Shaw." New York Times, 21 September 1905, 8:3. The libraries in Brooklyn did, however, place Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer on its "restricted list" the following year ("Never too Ill for a Story," New York Times, 27 March 1906, 9:5).

⁵⁴ "Alger's Boy Books Barred." New York Times, 8 August 1907, 1:6. This is especially curious given the fact that many of Alger's stories, such as Ragged Dick, argue for self-discipline, hard work, and modesty as a means of achieving personal betterment and economic success. See Alan Trachtenberg's introduction to the Signet Classic edition of Ragged Rick Or, Street Life in New York with the Boot-blacks. (New York, 1990).

⁵⁵ "Change Texas Text Books." New York Times, 8 August 1908, 2:2.

But books, periodicals, and popular literature were not only a threat to youngsters. As moral reformers, especially the clergy, saw it, the proliferation of a free market-driven mass media threatened codes of decency among all age groups and at all levels of society. In 1908, some of the same elements who would form the National Catholic Theatre Movement formed a committee to purify the press and to “induce newspapers to eliminate from their columns such details of testimony and criminality as would tend merely to gratify prurient curiosity,” wrote the New York Times. Again, not only was a means of discourse—in this case, the press—attacked but so too implicitly was the free market model on which it operated. Stated the reformers in an open letter to the New York Times:

The aim of securing newspapers for our homes which shall at all times be free from lewd or suggestive articles detrimental to morals, offensive to decency, and damaging to self-respect is one which all admit to be desirable. Some might say that it is possible to enjoy it at all times by simply buying only good newspapers. But, unfortunately, there comes periods when overwhelming public interest and unworthy public curiosity provoke the editors of some of the best of our journals to overstep the mark and lay before us and the modest home circle, including the tender children of the schools, libidinous details of criminality which are revolting even to men charged with the punishment of those who prey upon society.

These pro-censorship advocates not only link sexuality to criminality, but argue that it is not in society’s best interest to let a buying public determine what gets published and what does not. “The community—all communities,” they went on to write, “were shocked by the long continued revelations of the Thaw case.”⁵⁶ referring to the murder trial of Harry Thaw, convicted of killing famed architect Sanford White who was alleged to have once had affair with Thaw’s wife, Evelyn Nesbit, but before she was married to Thaw. If readers wouldn’t demand an end to lurid details in their newspapers, they would be assaulted and potentially damaged by them. Though probably aware of this

⁵⁶ “Movement Started for a Clean Press,” New York Times, 14 December 1908, 9:1.

moral opprobrium, the powers behind the vaudeville industry capitalized on the sensational appeal of the Thaw affair. Evelyn Nesbit appeared at Hammerstein's in New York, run by Willie Hammerstein but booked through the Keith-controlled United Booking Office, clearing some \$80,000 in box office revenues. Her popularity at Hammerstein's was initially spurred by Harry Thaw's escape from prison, though she went on to tour around the country to great success. Notes Joe Laurie, Jr., "[E]ven the conservative Keith Circuit played her for many seasons."⁵⁷

In any case, newspapers were fair game for censors and crusaders who believed the public unfit to oversee their own media intake. The same year that reformers wrote their open letter to the Times arguing for a cleaned-up press, steps were taken in nearby Paterson, New Jersey "to suppress the publication" of La Question Sociale, purportedly an "Anarchist paper."⁵⁸ The seeds of censorship and content control were laid effectively enough that by the time of America's entry into the First World War, the Committee on Public Information could engage with impunity in the "suppression of speech or publication inimical to the doctrines for which America was fighting," according to James Mock and Cedric Larson in Words that Won the War: The Story of the Committee on Public Information.⁵⁹

Yet for all the outcry in favor of censorship and content control, there were other voices in American society that saw things differently. These voices were in favor of a free-market model of public discourse. They urged Americans to let the public decide what was fit for presentation and publication rather than leaving it in the hands of an elite few. The Nation attacked just such "suppression" and prior restraint in 1899, arguing:

⁵⁷ Laurie, 390-91.

⁵⁸ "May Stop Anarchist Paper," New York Times, 16 March 1908, 1:4.

There lies under it all the assumption that the ruler who imposes these restrictions is a better judge of what a man ought to read than the man himself. This was perfectly comprehensible in the Old World. All the Old World governments which still retain the censorship, are based on the hypothesis that the Government can decide better than any one lives under it by what rules and regulations his life should be shaped. Our Government, on the contrary, is based on the hypothesis that each man is as good a judge as any other man of what our legislation and administration should be.

Censorship, endemic to “certain despotic countries like Russia and Turkey,” had no place in the free market of ideas (and, implicitly, the growing free market of entertainment and information) found in America.⁵⁹

Many theatre producers seized on a rhetoric of free-market determination in place of censorship or prior restraint. “My associates and I have always believed in the censorship of the public,” theatre magnate Lee Shubert told the New York Times, “and feel that the people can be trusted to select their own stage diet so as to avoid any serious moral dyspepsia... The development of a critical public—which will justly approve or reject—by experience and culture is far more normal and desirable than any attempt at development through schoolmaster methods.” Added producer Henry Harris, “If a play has a distasteful theme and one that is entirely repugnant to the playgoing public, it needs no censor to stop it.” Henry Savage further buttressed the notion that nothing ought to inhibit the free flow of product to the consuming public: “America has the most just and competent censor now. It has enlightened public opinion.”⁶⁰ Theatre director Winthrop Ames stated, “[T]he question of what shall or shall not be said and done on the stage is not to be settled by any one man, and most certainly not by one man merely because he holds a municipal office....”⁶² For their part, vaudeville producers had to

⁵⁹ James Mock and Cedric Larson, Words that Won the War: The Story of the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), 19.

⁶⁰ “Suppression,” The Nation 68, 25 May 1899, 388.

⁶¹ “American Managers on Censorship,” New York Times, 12 September 1909, v, 7.

⁶² “Problem of Stage Censorship,” New York Times, 20 June 1909, v, 7.

promise at least the trappings of self-censorship—even banning the occasional act in the face of public outcry in order to make it an example—while closely following the dictates of free market determinism. They were, after all, crafting the first form of mass entertainment and needed a ready public to consume its wares.

Observers other than self-interested theatre producers also began to put forth the idea that a free market of ideas was ultimately more salutary to society than some form of institutionalized content control. “[W]hen public sentiment condemns a play as subversive of morality, the [theatrical] syndicate has no alternative but to defer to the views of its patrons and masters, that is to say, the people,” wrote “A Veteran Diplomat” in the New York Times in 1909. As he saw it, the syndicate would not hesitate to “blacklist, on the score of impropriety, certain objectionable plays”—but only if a paying public deemed them to be so.⁶³ An editorial, also in the Times, stated simply that while “[t]here have been too many stage exhibitions lately of a low, vulgar character” nonetheless, “art, literature, the drama cannot be uplifted by suppressing pictures, books, and plays which a majority of the public cares for.”⁶⁴ The Times argued that accusations of immorality and calls for suppression typically came from “those purveyors of public entertainment who do not happen to have profitable indecent shows in their theatres.”⁶⁵ Charles Burnham, President of the Association of Theatre Managers, and Marc Klaw, impresario of both the legitimate and vaudeville stages, even suggested that producers were helpless in the face of abundant public demand for salacious productions. “A manager to be successful must cater to the audience,” said Burnham; according to the

⁶³ “Censoring the Stage at Home and Abroad,” New York Times, 21 February 1909, v, 4.

⁶⁴ “A Mayor’s Morality,” New York Times, 8 June 1909, 6:3.

⁶⁵ “Theatrical Morality,” New York Times, 13 February 1909, 8:3.

New York Times, both Burnham and Klaw “declared that the public were more responsible for the plays presented than the managers.”⁶⁶

Others who opposed censorship and content control did so because they felt the best way to address social problems, no matter how unpalatable, was to air them out before the public eye. Following the thinking of Zola, Ibsen, and Shaw, they saw no need for censorship if what was presented on stage could be defended as truthful. When his play The Easiest Way was attacked by clergy on charges of indecency, playwright Eugene Walter said:

I have written a play to show them the terrific influence of a certain element of newly rich or irresponsible rich sons who find pleasure in playing with weak and unfortunate women as others do with their dogs and horses—it is the truth, and what harm can there be in the truth? Those whom the truth hurts in this instance need not see the play, but can look into their own memories, and those whom the truth does not hurt cannot be injured by seeing the play, because it will show them a side of life that sometime, someday, they may be able to alleviate. And if one woman’s soul is saved from the human wolves of the ‘Tenderloin’ then the play has done something. The Easiest Way is true to life.

Walter also pointed out, like others who opposed censorship, that to permit a free market of ideas was peculiarly and proudly American. “If I used the French method in treating this growing evil I would subordinate the wife and justify the mistress,” he pointed out. “If I used the English I would hide everything and pretend it didn’t exist... But in using the American I go directly to the question this way: ‘There’s something wrong here: let’s find out what it is and then fix it.’”⁶⁷ Here, Walters, like others who would contrast America with Russia or Turkey, acknowledges the emergence of a marketplace of ideas coupled inseparably with the emergence of a marketplace of commercial amusements. If the consumers who comprise the market demand a particular kind of play—and are willing to pay for it—it is wrong to refuse them.

⁶⁶ “Blame the Public for Immoral Plays,” New York Times, 12 February 1909, 13:3.

Like Walters, others began arguing that vice was best treated by being brought out into the public sphere and analyzed rather than hushed up. If cool heads could prevail, the benefits would be enormous. Observed The Nation in 1911: "[A] remarkable change has of late years come over the public on this very question of vice. Heretofore only a few persons have dared to discuss it; the literature of the subject has been scanty and often untrustworthy; there were few if any places where questions arising out of it could be discussed so that one man could correct his judgment by the experience of knowledge of another... Now people have come to realize that under proper conditions this question must be debated and studied precisely as people have discussed the scourge of consumption. All this does not mean, of course, that the subject is to be bandied about at all times and places or to become a matter of after-dinner discourse. But it is desired to treat the evil without hysteria or sensationalism, as one menacing our homes."⁶⁸ Writers and thinkers like this took the view that mass public audiences were perfectly capable of seeing vice and license depicted before them, and judging such things with cool reason.

This attitude suited theatre and vaudeville producers just fine, for it permitted them to start putting on acts and plays depicting prostitution, drug use, and the seamy side of life for which the public clamored, all under the guise of truthfulness. For example, in 1912, Hammerstein's produced a sixteen-minute play entitled, A Woman of the Streets. Variety described it this way: "Antoinette is a French woman of the underworld who has become world-wise, cunning and craftily suspicious of those who uphold laws because at one time a certain minion of the law betrayed her mother."

⁶⁷ "Walter Defends 'The Easiest Way'." New York Times, 15 February 1909, 7:1-2.

⁶⁸ "Discussing the Social Evil." The Nation, 5 October 1911, 308-09.

Wrote "Mark," a Variety reporter who reviewed the piece, "[T]he Hammerstein crowd accepted it in silence until the end when it applauded quite heartily."⁶⁹

Still, when it appeared that vaude producers were merely trying to pander with depictions of vice, onlookers were quick to criticize. In 1910, a short play called The Derelict was produced at a New York vaudeville theatre. The work, which featured "three men and three women of loose morals... enjoying a hilarious time at a supper where the bubble water flows freely," came under fire from the New York Clipper. Noted the trade paper, The Derelict "could not fail to leave a bad taste in one's mouth. It is difficult to understand why women of the *demi monde* make such appealing subjects for the dramatists. The coarseness and vulgarity of the scenes in which they must necessarily figure cannot be pleasing to the better class of theatregoers..." The Clipper felt the piece should only appeal to a few, the "lovers of the salacious," though, the hearty applause at the curtain suggests otherwise.⁷⁰ Noted the Nation, "Under the guise of contributions toward the study of the social evil, plays have been thrown on the stage which are abominable in their theme and still more abominable in their intention."⁷¹

Some producers riposted by suggesting that they would not permit such productions in their theatres. Abraham Erlanger of the powerful legitimate and vaudeville producing firm of Klaw & Erlanger issued a public statement declaring, "We are not going to let our theatres deteriorate to the condition from which they were

⁶⁹ Mark, "Eugene O'Rourke and Co.," Variety, 20 April 1912, 15.

⁷⁰ "A Glance at Acts New to the Metropolis," New York Clipper, 11 June 1910, 433. This production of The Derelict was perhaps a shortened iteration of a play called L'Epave (The Derelict), by Guggenheim and Le Faure, which appeared in Paris in 1903. The New York Times described it as "a costume play dealing with a wreck of the 'Grand Armée' who, after Waterloo, had been left for dead on the field of battle. Recovering consciousness, though not reason, he passes four years as a human derelict. Then, sane once more, he plunges into intrigue and conspiracy against King Louis XVIII." A series of duels, betrayals, and revelations follow. The Times reviewer found it "somewhat undecided in action and not convincing." (New York Times, 1 November 1903, III, 25:2.)

⁷¹ "Filth on the Stage," The Nation, 11 September 1913, 246.

rescued.” Nonetheless, the firm booked the play The Queen of the Moulin Rouge even though it had come under “severe criticism” for being “indecent” and “immoral.” Charles Frohman, another powerful theatre producer, tried to recuperate his and his peers’ position by stating, “A play that is primarily fine drama and incidentally represents an unfortunate side of life justifies its production on the score of fine drama.”⁷² Thus, by introducing notions of taste, quality, and distinction, Frohman, like others, tried to elide accusations of moral impropriety.

Though the threat of censorship was to take its fullest form in relation to the motion picture industry, it nonetheless informed the development of vaudeville and tells us much about American culture during vaudeville’s rise to prominence. Notes Francis Couvares: “Censorship battles reveal the bonds and cleavages in society by mobilizing people’s emotions and sometimes their political energies in defense of values and commitments and in opposition to adversaries perceived to be dangerous and alien. In the language of contemporary cultural criticism, it can be said that censorship battles help mark out the terrain of conflict over discursive practices in a culture... Whatever their outcome, those contests reveal what is at stake whenever people at a given time in a given social setting negotiate the boundaries of what may be said and heard, or shown and seen.”⁷³ By promising and sometimes actually practicing self-censorship, while trying to feed the often less-than-wholesome tastes of a mass audience, the powers behind vaudeville effected a balancing act appropriate to the moral climate at the turn of the century.

The greatest danger, and many of the greatest rewards, would come from the presentation of sexually suggestive material—unclad bodies, lewd jokes, “blue” songs—on the vaudeville stage. As we will see in the chapters to come, many acts which

⁷² “Syndicate Books ‘The Moulin Rouge.’” New York Times, 17 February 1909, 9:1.

⁷³ Couvares, “Introduction,” 3.

provided those elements were some of the form's biggest hits, and went a long way towards liberalizing attitudes and limits of acceptability with regard to the female body in popular entertainment. Yet sexuality was a tempestuous issue around the turn of the century. With gender roles, consumption habits, and modes of mass communication all in upheaval, human sexuality became a flashpoint for the discussion of culture at large—much as censorship was, in Couvares's estimation. Sexuality, if provoked and catered to by popular culture, could unleash forces threatening to the fabric and structure of society. Noted the American Journal of Sociology in a long and ponderous article on the subject in 1899: "Every day we hear of assaults and murders provoked by the sexual excitement and the passions which accompany it... Only a few months ago... a mother testified that her son, an excellent young man, amiable, laborious, and helpful to the family, became, after he had been enticed into relations with a woman of evil life, lazy, thievish, and violent, going so far as to beat his own mother." Not only could untrammelled sexuality lead to criminality, it could, implied the author, transform humans into animals. Stated the article, "At the period of oestrus these animals are all more pugnacious and more ready for violent reaction. Even the dog becomes less obedient to his master." Finally, uncontrolled eros could simply lead to one's demise: "There are numerous cases of amorous couples who drown the transports of their embraces in a violent death."⁷⁴ One wonders if the writer of this article was thinking more of fictive and literary couples than real-life unions.

Sexuality was therefore viewed as a potentially dangerous force, one that was not to be treated lightly. Noted Herbert George Wells in Cosmopolitan, "This flow of sex comes like a great river athwart the plain [sic] of our person and egoistic schemes, a great river with its rapids, with its deep and silent places, a river of uncertain droughts, a

⁷⁴ Antonio Marro, "Influence of the Puberal Development on the Moral Character of Children of Both Sexes," American Journal of Sociology 5 (September, 1899): 195-98.

river of overwhelming floods, a river no one who would escape drowning may afford to ignore.” Thus, sex and the sexual, while natural, were closer to natural disasters than natural bodily and emotional functions. That which appealed to and provoked sexual urges was to be monitored very closely for the uncontrollable ramifications it might have.⁷⁵

Some even implied that sex outside of procreation was a deleterious act. “[P]arents are deliberately wasting substances which should go to the increase of their own bone, muscle, blood and brain, and to the like endowment of their children,” when they had sex for purely recreational purposes, argued an article in the New Republic.⁷⁶ In Steppin’ Out, Lewis Erenberg suggests a psychological explanation—though one implicitly linked to economics—for the suspicion surrounding sexuality around the turn of the century: “Passion was one element that could distract men from success, weaken their resolve, and ultimately destroy their will,” he observes.⁷⁷

Certain social thinkers and critics of the period felt that discussions and representations of sexuality and the sexual in popular discourse could be either helpful or were, at the very least, inevitable. But this depended on their treatment. A contributor to the Nation felt that if “the sex motive in fiction” could be handled “cleverly,” as French writers were inclined to do, or “gracefully” as were the English, then such elements would not pose so great a problem. In any case, there was no fighting it. “Heaven knows, they give us enough of it! Sex—sex—SEX!,” he wrote.⁷⁸

Others called for a more open discussion of sex and sexuality in the organs of public discourse, not necessarily for prurient appeal but to educate people and thereby

⁷⁵ Herbert George Wells, “Mankind in the Making,” Cosmopolitan, May 1903, 79.

⁷⁶ John Lowry Simpson, “Continence vs. Contraception,” New Republic, 31 July 1915, 335.

⁷⁷ Erenberg, 7.

⁷⁸ “Sex in Fiction,” The Nation, 16 December 1915, 716.

place sexuality under the dictates of reason. In an article in the Arena in 1894, Edward Chamberlain argued in support of Moses Harman, a Kansas editor who had been arrested for disseminating information on human reproduction through the mail and was subsequently convicted on federal “obscenity” charges. Without proper knowledge of human sexuality, argued Chamberlain, mankind was bound to reproduce its worst and weakest elements, rather like a horse breeder lacking “information on the reproductive organs and functions of the horse.” He went on to point out:

So it is that man propagates recklessly, with no regard to racial development, and as a result humanity is cursed with all sorts of abnormalities and perversions. Hospitals flourish, insane asylums are swarming, prisons are overcrowded, suicides shock us daily, prostitutes throng the streets and greed saps national integrity. The deformed, the weak, the vicious confront us at every turn. Society is one vast conglomeration of vain-glory and misery, cant and vice, debauchery and scandal...⁹

Chamberlain takes a bleak view of humanity, to be sure. But he feels that by opening up, rather than furthering censoring, discussions of sexuality and the sexual, perhaps humanity can be saved.

If discussions of sexuality might prove salutary in the long run, then perhaps there was also little or no sin in observing the unclad human figure. As we have seen, the naked or near-naked (female) figure was one of the popular elements of the vaudeville stage. On the one hand, if mores surrounding sexuality and nudity were relaxed, vaudeville producers who trafficked in naked bodies were less open to moral criticism. On the other hand, if representations of nudity became too common or unexciting, patrons might not be willing to seek them out in the theatre by buying a ticket. Noted Arthur Schukai in Harper's Weekly: “For some reason or other it has become the general impression that nakedness is wickedness. Now, every man, woman and child in the world *is* naked and why it should be considered wicked is hard to understand. The

human body is the wonder of creation and that in addition to its wonderful endurance and efficiency is [sic] should also be often beautiful to look upon is only another wonder added. Yet people crowd the theatre to see a few pitiful girls dance in scant attire—it is a mockery of wickedness—but first-class idiocy [sic].”⁸⁰ As long as nakedness had at least a touch of wickedness associated with it, people were much more likely to “crowd” the theatre—and this is how the vaudeville producers wanted it.

But to avoid charges of impurity, vaudeville producers often presented nudity—female nudity—in the guise of “art,” either as living pictures or classical statuary. In 1912, a performer named Miss Robbie Gordone executed a “series of reproductions of famous statues” in which she “show[ed] her beautiful form” at Keith’s Fifth Avenue theatre. Gordone’s poses, which appeared at a Monday matinee, included “Persecution of a Virgin,” “The Awakening of Galatea,” “The Lion’s Bride,” and “The Death of a Dancing Girl.”⁸¹ In this package, the nude body could allegedly be offered for its pure aesthetic or artistic beauty, rather than for the sexual curiosity it might arouse. Scribner’s Magazine argued that one of the chief reasons why “artists devote themselves to the nude is their pure delight in the beauty of the human figure. With the Greeks and the Florentines, it was a delight in the beauty of form, in which the human figure exceeds all other beautiful things.” Somehow, the unclad human figure, if posed as an object of artistic distinction had little to do with sexuality. Of course, the implicit assumption at work here is that cultural elites—scholars, curators, critics—would be the ones to make the determination about what was art and what was not, and where its proper place in society, physically and temporally, was. The Scribner’s authors, who felt that artists “have a right to paint the nude” and that doing so did not necessarily mean a painter was

⁷⁹ Edward W. Chamberlain, “In the Midst of Wolves,” Arena, November 1894, 835.

⁸⁰ Arthur Schuckai, “Nudity and Idiocy,” Harper’s Weekly, 30 January 1915, 116.

⁸¹ New York Clipper, 25 May 1912, 14.

“influenced by the commercial value of his product, that he purveys for those of evil mind,” nonetheless added an important caveat: “[T]he exhibition outside of a school of an avowed study from the nude is a mistake.”⁸² To use the nude figure in a mass market entertainment was thus seen as an abuse.

In a piqued argument over the nude in motion pictures, in 1915, the New York Clipper wrote:

Assuming that nude models are used by artists and sculptors to create masterpieces, can we, by any stretch of the imagination, allow these same women the freedom of the public on the motion picture screen? [In the artist's studio] it is dressed in the form of art and not in the guise of amusement. Its sole purpose is to educate and not to amuse. The studio of the artist offers no open door to the curious throng, and his finished painting, though it be a reproduction of the original model in form and color, is still and motionless, and is gazed upon and admired by mature minds, principally in the art gallery or home of wealth.

By contrast, in a movie theatre or vaudeville house, nudes “appear before the eyes of a mixed and motley audience.”⁸³ The implication is clear. If displayed in a locale where there was no hindrance of access, where simple mass market motives afforded a glimpse to anyone who could pay the modest price of admission, the nude body became sexualized and was therefore dangerous. The vaudeville house, which, unlike the “art gallery or home of wealth” was indeed open to “the curious throng,” the “mixed and motley audience,” had to suggest its nudes were artistic or polite—the sort of thing elites would approve of. It was a simple matter of economics.

The debate over nudity and sexuality onstage reflected, too, anxieties over the changing roles of women in marriage, in family, and in culture at large. On the one hand, reformers, feminists, and social thinkers called for greater parity between men and women. Noted Ellen Key, described as “probably the most distinguished feminist in the

⁸² Will H. Low and Kenyon Cox, “The Nude in Art,” Scribner's Magazine, December 1892, 741–49.

⁸³ “The Nude in Pictures,” New York Clipper, 15 December 1915, 29.

world” by Harper’s Weekly, in a series of articles on gender roles for that magazine: “[O]nly woman’s perfect equality with man in education for work, opportunity to work, wages for work and duty to work is a fundamental condition for the final victory over sexual morality, legal or illegal.” Still, Key acknowledged that this transition had to be handled carefully to avoid more of “the confusion and error which the new sex morals have brought in their train.” While women deserved economic equality and marriages bred on “inner necessity and not [on] outward pressure,” the overt display of female sexuality had to be handled carefully, if not discouraged altogether. She especially assailed women who sought, in sex, pure “sensual gratification.” Key argued: “The most flagrant example of woman’s immorality in the present is the countless women among the rich, who, released from all work, are parasites upon the father or husband, satisfying their craving for pleasure or luxury, without accomplishing anything to pay back what they received from society. Because of their parasitic state, sex has become the whole content of life to these women. In many women erotic life is over-developed because of the centuries of their sex slavery and we still possess a class of women whose love-life is only a desire for sensual gratification.” The new possibility of leisure time, coupled with the rise of titillating urban amusements, threatened to undo woman’s delicate, yet critically important, moral nature. “Through her motherhood,” argued Key, “woman’s sexual nature becomes gradually purer than man’s.”⁸⁴

Yet the vaudeville stage and other popular, urban, mass-market amusements offered images of unfettered female sexuality in the form of entertainers like Sophie Tucker, Mae West, and, as we will see in the following chapters, Eva Tanguay. These women both shaped and reflected important changes in attitude toward sexuality and the female body; they represented a marked departure from the Victorian conception of

⁸⁴ Ellen Key, “Woman in a New World,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 24 January 1914, 7-9; 31 January 1914, 9-11.

womanly purity and morality. Paradoxically, they were permitted to perform as they did by male theatre magnates who marketed them to a mass audience, on a scale never before seen, by deploying a discourse of moral and sexual purity. Though wildly popular, these actresses also stirred anxiety over the involvement of women in urban entertainment. Notes Lary May in Screening Out the Past, a look at the history of film censorship. "The fervor [ca. 1908] over the movies was part of a larger movement of crusading against vice that was stirring up the nation's cities. In the numerous sex scandals and 'white slavery' panics of the era, a widespread fear resurfaced that 'good' women coming into the city for work were being seduced into prostitution."⁸⁵ The burgeoning sites of urban public amusement had to handle sexuality carefully, therefore, for it was supposed that their very existence furthered the scourge of sexual vices. No wonder, according to Lewis Erenberg, theatre, dance hall, and cinema owners tried at times to emphasize "[t]he careful segregation of passion from respectable amusements" beginning around 1900. Only with the rise of the cabaret later on would sexual expressiveness find a more open climate, according to Erenberg.⁸⁶

The age of vaudeville, then, in relation to human sexuality, was an age of contest and change. Between the restraints of Victorian moral codes, and the rise of new mores, practices, and market-driven norms lay a period of upheaval. Vaudeville was perhaps the key public entertainment during this period. Though women, according to Celia Haddon in her examination of sex customs since the late nineteenth century, The Sensuous Lie, were beginning to enjoy new sexual freedoms and pleasures, they were still in subordinate positions. Women, Haddon remarks, "were the violins; men were the players." Still, the work of thinkers like Havelock Ellis and, after him, Freud, suggested the emergence of new ideas on sexuality, "an optimistic attitude toward human beings

⁸⁵ Lary May, Screening Out the Past. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 44.

⁸⁶ Erenberg, 14, 132-45..

and useful sexual lives.”⁸⁷ (It is debatable whether all of Freud’s views of human sexuality, over the course of his career, may be termed “optimistic.” Nonetheless, his discourse served to open it up as a field of authorized inquiry, thus laying the groundwork for treating sexual and emotional dysfunction.)

As the purveyors of sexually stimulating mass market material and those who called for censorship and control both knew, the emergence of the new sexual norms were directly tied to similarly emergent notions of mass market determinism. Points out historian Thomas Laqueur, in the period following the Industrial Revolution, “Passion and desire were integral to the new order, and there was no clear conceptual boundary between its sexual and economic manifestations... In principal nothing distinguished... the marketplace in goods and services from the marketplace of sex.”⁸⁸ There was perhaps no place where the link between economics and sexuality was more manifest—bringing about struggles, new modes of discourse, and numerous other changes—than on the vaudeville stage.

⁸⁷ Celia Haddon, The Sensuous Lie, New York: Stein and Day, 1983), 26, 35.

⁸⁸ Thomas Laqueur, “Sexual Desire and the Market Economy During the Industrial Revolution,” in Donna Stanton, ed., Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 186.

Chapter Two:

“Clean, Great, and National”: The Mass-Marketing of Amusement

In order to fully understand the role of sexuality and suggestiveness on the vaudeville stage, and to comprehend how it related to questions of censorship and the promise of cleanliness, it is necessary first to understand vaudeville's rise as the pioneering form of mass entertainment in the United States. In readying an audience for a formulaic,¹ mass entertainment, the vaudeville magnates advertised the cleanliness and moral purity of their form as a way of symbolically demonstrating that there was a strong, patriarchal authority running things, even as the product was disseminated far and wide to diverse audiences in cities hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles apart.

Of all the vaudeville patriarchs, none was more important than Benjamin Franklin Keith. “To him, more than to any other individual, is due the extreme popularity of vaudeville in this country,” wrote the New York Dramatic Mirror in 1901.² And noted the New York Star at the time of his death, “Mr. Keith left his impress on the contemporaneous theatre to a larger degree than any other man of his period.”³

There is little in Keith's immediate background to suggest that he would one day head one of the world's great theatrical empires. Joe Laurie, Jr. writes, “Keith was a little man, both in stature and mentality. He had a curiously cold and colorless personality.”⁴ Keith was born in Hillsboro Bridge, New Hampshire on January 26, 1846, one of eight children of Samuel C. and Rhoda S. (Gerould) Keith, who were of Scotch

¹ For more on the standardized, formulaic quality of vaudeville see: Frederick Snyder, “Theater in a Package—the Origins of Mass Entertainment,” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1970).

² New York Dramatic Mirror, 26 January 1901, 16.

³ “B.F. Keith: the Man Who Dared and Won,” New York Star, 24 October 1903, no page number given, from a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁴ Laurie, 340.

and French ancestry. Apparently, the Keiths had few resources at their disposal and young Benjamin was sent away at age seven to work on a farm in Western Massachusetts, where he remained until the age of eighteen. The details of his education are sketchy, but an article on Keith in the Philadelphia Telegraph states that he attended “the little red schoolhouse and the village academy.” During this time, Keith showed little inclination toward the theatre, though at age seventeen, he saw a circus produced by Van Amburgh’s travelling show. “For several years after that he met life in a number of its phases but was intensely attracted to the amusement business” notes the Telegraph.⁵ Still, Keith would not set foot into a theatre until the age of twenty-one.⁶

After his years working on a farm, Keith went to New York where he secured employment with Bunnell’s Museum in the 1870s. Unlike the museums that were to arise in later decades and which provided a home for culture’s rarified treasures, Bunnell’s was “a dime museum, one of the first to charge so small a fee for admission to its stage show and collection of curiosities,” according to Robert Allen in Horrible Prettiness. “Bunnell’s exhibition of wax figures, two-headed chickens, and bearded ladies—standard fare at American dime museums by the late 1870s—was a far cry from what the founders of the American museum movement had envisioned in the 1790s.”⁷ After his stint at Bunnell’s, Keith furthered his education in the realm of popular amusements by working for Barnum and then Doris & Forepaugh. According to Joe Laurie, Jr., one of Keith’s jobs was running a candy concession for the circuses.⁸ He also tried on at least three occasions to take travelling variety shows on the road but in each

⁵ “Vaudeville Founded by Keith Thirty Years Ago This Week,” Philadelphia Telegraph, 1 December 1913, no page number given, from a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Also, “B.F. Keith Dead,” New York Clipper, 4 April 1914, 1.

⁶ “B.F. Keith: the Man Who Dared and Won,” New York Star, 24 October 1903, no page number given, from a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁷ Allen (1991), 180.

⁸ Laurie, 342.

case, noted the New York Clipper, Keith returned home “with his finances completely exhausted.”⁹

By 1883, believing he had enough experience to make a go of it more or less on his own, Keith and a partner, Colonel William Austin, rented a vacant storefront at 565 Washington Street in Boston and converted it into a rudimentary show-hall. The Washington Street location was significant, for, rather than being in a neighborhood of “cheap amusements and cheaper saloons” it was situated near Boston’s business district, near respectable hotels, restaurants, and retail establishments.¹⁰ It was a bid to attract the respectable mainstream, rather than the margins, of society in order to fill his seats: an early attempt to find a place in the burgeoning world of the urban mass market dictated by the tastes of the growing clerical and white-collar classes.

Still, Keith’s operation, initially known as the Hub Museum,¹¹ was far from highbrow. For ten cents, patrons could glimpse whatever freak or curio Keith managed to book. At the beginning, the offerings were slim. “My only attraction,” Keith once said, “was Baby Alice, a midget that at the age of three months weighed but one and a half pounds.”¹² Soon, Keith added a small stage and began featuring more conventional variety performers—singers, dancers, comics—in addition to the often bizarre dime museum fare. Notes Robert Allen: “The combination of variety acts with human and inanimate curiosities helped to solve a nagging structural problem with the dime museum. Even Barnum found that a Feejee Mermaid or a General Tom Thumb could not be located or manufactured on a frequent, regular basis. Inanimate curiosities—stuffed animals, wax figures, religious relics—usually remained attractions for only a

⁹ “B.F. Keith Dead.”

¹⁰ Nasaw, 20.

¹¹ Anthony Slide, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*. (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1994), 278.

¹² “B.F. Keith Dead.”

brief time. The use of itinerant and local performers gave museum managers a base on which to build a regular clientele. The half man/half dog might be transparently bogus, the collection of African death masks dusty and familiar, but there was sure to be something to entertain museum patrons on the variety bill.”¹³ Thus, unlike Tony Pastor and others who came to vaudeville from a theatrical background, Keith came from a grounding in broad-based popular amusements, acutely aware of what would sell to a large audience, without being heavily identified with the performers on stage. Groucho Marx, who cut his teeth on the vaudeville stage, once remarked that Keith, along with partner E.F. Albee, “was the owner of a large cotton plantation and the actors were his slaves.”¹⁴

In any case, Keith was beginning to learn that marketing to a mass audience would mean offering a wide variety of entertainments. Albee later claimed that Keith, even at this early date, though possessed of a small operation, dreamed of a large-scale theatrical empire that would transcend local boundaries. “I was associated with B.F. Keith when, nearly thirty years ago, he began to dream of making variety of good repute and building it into something clean, great, and national,” said Albee in 1912.¹⁵ These words may be laden with sentiment and nostalgia, however, it is likely that Keith looked at businessmen in other fields such as retailing, mail order, banking, and manufacturing, who were beginning to have success with a national marketing approach, and speculated that such a scheme might be brought to the field of staged entertainment as well.

Keith must also have seen that a mass entertainment needed not only to be affordable but diverse as well. Vaudeville’s multitude of offerings eventually proved one

¹³ Allen (1991), 181.

¹⁴ In: Dimeglio, 25.

¹⁵ “Albee on Vaudeville in 1912-13,” New York Clipper, 5 October 1912, 10.

of the pillars of its marketing strategy. Writes David Nasaw in Going Out: the Rise and Fall of Public Amusements:

In providing "something for everybody," vaudeville borrowed from every nineteenth-century popular entertainment form: blackface sketches, sentimental ballads, soft-shoe dances, and banjo players from the minstrel show; acrobats and animal acts from the circus; skits, satires, and full-costume "flash" acts from musical comedy; one-act playlets from the legitimate theater; magicians, mind-readers and curio freaks from the dime museums; monologists from the medicine show; classical musicians from the symphony hall; opera singers from the opera hall; sports stars from the boxing ring and baseball stadia. In rapid succession, female impersonators, song and dance men, operatic sopranos, jugglers, dancing bears, storytellers, pantomimists, masters of prestidigitation, strongmen, whistlers, puppeteers, banjo players, acrobats, and comedy teams tumbled on and off the stage.¹⁶

In the early days, demand for the curios and variety acts was modest, but Keith was nonetheless encouraged to rent out a room upstairs from his storefront where he installed a more traditional theatre space that featured variety performances on the hour. He now called his operation the Gaiety and Bijou—the former name denoting the museum downstairs and the latter the variety theater upstairs. In all, the Keith enterprise was able to seat in excess of 400 people, though it seems clear that the house was rarely full, despite bills that included zither-playing midgets, fat ladies, puppet shows, comedians, sketches, and "the biggest frog in the world."¹⁷

To lure in patrons in greater numbers, Keith experimented with a format he called "continuous." Rather than bringing down the curtain and darkening the house between shows, Keith simply brought the first performer on the bill back on stage and started all over again. Remarks David Nasaw in Going Out, "As Keith knew from his days with the circus, nothing attracted a crowd like a crowd."¹⁸ The advent of continuous performance was a significant development in the history of vaudeville, not because it

¹⁶ Nasaw, 24.

¹⁷ Allen (1991), 182; "B.F. Keith Dead"; Nasaw, 20.

¹⁸ Nasaw, 20.

was an unqualified success—indeed, Keith still struggled to make ends meet—but because it shows Keith searching to find a formula that would appeal to the urban masses he hoped to attract. He had realized, even at this early stage, that some sort of innovation would be necessary to win the business of patrons who had a number of options when it came to spending their entertainment dollar. Indeed, Keith later abandoned continuous (after others, notably F.F. Prector, had copied it) in 1906.¹⁹ but he never stopped searching for the next big thing that would win him more customers. To that end he eventually built palatial, luxurious theatres, featured performers who were established successes on the legitimate stage, and mastered the relatively new practices of advertising, marketing, and public relations. For example, he built “B.F. Keith’s Electrically Illuminated Advertising Wagon,” a gaudy, horse-drawn coach with the names of his theatres and the words “popular prices” and “continuous performance” painted in bold letters on the outside.²⁰ Similarly, the promise of “clean” and “wholesome” entertainment was yet another, if vastly important, stratagem in the effort to locate a mass audience.

Perhaps the most important development in Keith’s professional life, though, occurred in the mid-1880s, when he first came into contact with Edward Franklin Albee. Like Keith, Albee was an empire-builder, a man who sought after a mass product and grew adept at marketing it. Noted The Billboard in 1914, shortly after Albee took the reins of the Keith vaudeville interests following B.F. Keith’s death, “[I]t is [Albee’s] hands that fashioned the monster vaudeville machine, systematized and regulated it so

¹⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 8 December 1906, 16.

²⁰ Brochure for B.F. Keith’s New Theatre Boston. From a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

that it became the most efficient and powerful organization known in the amusement field.”²¹ Systematization and regulation were indeed central to Albee’s project.

Edward Franklin Albee, “of stern Puritan ancestry,” was born in Machias, Maine, near the Canadian border, on October 8, 1857. Unlike Keith, Albee spent little time in rural New England as a youth. His parents took him, “when he was a child in pinafores,” to Boston where he attended primary school and sold newspapers. Albee appears to have had little formal education beyond this and as a boy took a job doing errands for a Boston department store. About this time, he was selected, along with three other children, to play a foundling in a melodrama called No Thoroughfare starring Charles Fechter. The run lasted three weeks and Albee was paid some fifteen dollars for his troubles.²²

In 1873, Barnum’s “Greatest Show on Earth” played in nearby Lowell, Massachusetts. After obtaining his parents’ permission, the sixteen-year-old Albee went to see it. “He saw it and joined out, as the expression ran in those days, in the capacity of a ‘tent boy.’” wrote the New York Times many years later. Though, like Keith, he never performed, he did a variety of tasks for the circus including “the care and feeding of the hippopotamus, the furnishing of peanuts and popcorn and the manufacture of lemonade—pink, white, and dark red.” Also like Keith, Albee was undoubtedly familiarizing himself with the possibilities for mass entertainment, noticing what

²¹ Photo caption accompanying: E.F. Albee, “The Future of Show Business,” The Billboard, 19 December 1914, 38.

²² “E.F. Albee, Co-Founder of Vaudeville,” New York Times, 23 March 1930, ix, 4:6. Odell notes that No Thoroughfare played in New York at the Broadway Theatre, opening September 28, 1868. Though he does not supply an author, Odell says that it was “the French version of a story by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins” and that it appeared in Paris under the title L’Abîme. Furthermore, he describes it as a “tense melodrama... with its gruesome Swiss scenes.” See: George C.D. Odell, Annals of the New York Stage, VIII, 1865-1870. (New York: AMS Press, 1937), 446-47. The New York Times reviewed a version of L’Abîme in December, 1875, at the Lyceum. In that production, Fechter played a scheming lover named Reichenbach who tries to murder his rival and ends up dead. The Times found it “by no means one of Mr. Fechter’s best pieces.” (“L’ABÎME,” New York Times, 3 December 1875, 4:6.)

appealed to diverse audiences, what succeeded in a multiplicity of venues, and what marketing techniques were necessary to repeatedly fill the seats and earn a handsome return on one's investment. He eventually traveled with nearly all the major circuses of the day, including the Great London, Van Amburgh's, Sells Brothers, and Burr Robbins. "In my opinion," he later stated, "the advantages gained which fit a man for later years in business cannot be found in any other calling: the diverse experiences which one encounters in traveling with a circus—the novelty, the contact with all classes, the knowledge of the condition of the country, its finances, its industries, its farming."²³ In a sense, Albee was engaged in a kind of crude market research which would not only supplement Keith's, but hinted at the efforts of the entertainment industries years later.

Working for some of the same organizations in the same industry, it is possible, likely even, that Albee and Keith crossed paths during the 1870s. What is certain, however, is that in 1883, Albee approached Keith at the latter's "museum" on Washington Street in Boston. According to Charles and Louise Samuels in Once Upon a Stage, "Ed was 26 when he first saw Keith's pitiful little museum and walked in. Without asking for a job, he went to work, moving things around and performing other chores with Keith's three employees. When someone asked Keith who the new man was, Keith said, 'I dunno.' Albee, of course, was hired and proved to be such a brilliant showman that he was shortly afterwards made manager."²⁴

Albee's first major marketing coup significantly altered Keith's career. A legitimate theater on the same street was putting on a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's The Mikado "at \$1.50 top and turning hundreds away." Albee figured that he and Keith could produce an abridged version—short-form derivations of full-length plays being common in the nineteenth century—and draw in some of those who could

²³ "E.F. Albee, Co-Founder of Vaudeville."

²⁴ Samuels and Samuels, 38.

not gain admittance to the legitimate Mikado. They had little to go on. Pirating and pasting together a script, they took what capital they had between them—some \$300—bought costumes from a local department store, hired a cast and recruited an orchestra consisting of a mere pianist. Given their limited resources, the abbreviated Mikado could not have been terribly spectacular. But the price was attractive. For their entertainment, Keith and Albee charged ten to twenty-five cents—a mere fraction of what their competition demanded for the full musical. They paid their actors little. Star Raymond Hitchcock received a salary of \$25 per week. The two would-be impresarios opened the doors at 11:00 in the morning “and ran continuously until midnight or even later.” It was a huge success. The crowds were so big it was necessary to enlist the help of the Boston police to keep order and, more importantly, keep the lines headed for the box office coursing smoothly along.²⁵ To add an exotic touch, they dressed up their theater like a Japanese garden, complete with women in Geisha costumes at the door, and advertised with the following slogan: “Why pay \$1.50 when you can see our show for 25c?”²⁶ Already, at this early stage in their careers, Keith and Albee were showing signs of being masterful businessmen, entrepreneurs, and marketers.

Thus established, Keith and Albee began what would become a lifelong project of expansion, consolidation, reinvestment, and further expansion. In 1886 they leased a regular theater, the Bijou, which had a seating capacity of 900. Like other Keith theatres, the Bijou was located near busy shopping and retail establishments and in the same general vicinity of well-attended legitimate theatres. In 1887, they opened the Gaiety Museum in Providence, in 1889 the Bijou in Philadelphia, and in 1893 they struck into

²⁵ “E.F. Albee, Co-Founder of Vaudeville.”

²⁶ Nasaw, 20.

the New York market with the Union Square theatre, near Tony Pastor's already established, popular, and "respectable" venue.²⁷

The Keith/Albee expansion, though, consisted of more than real estate and investment capital. It was as much a brilliant and calculated advertising and publicity campaign aimed at soothing anxieties over participating in a new phenomenon: mass-marketed, centrally-planned, industrially-organized entertainment. Keith never let prospective patrons forget that, behind the glamour and the players, the sets and auditoriums, was a strong, patriarchal figure of the highest moral caliber. Notes Robert Snyder in The Voice of the City, "Keith mastered and exploited a rhetoric of cultural refinement and moral elevation to legitimate a new kind of theatre."²⁸ His approach worked. In 1903, looking back on Keith's remarkable career (which had yet to reach its apex), the New York Star wrote, "The public began to trust him a little; then much, and finally, until the day came when, with beautiful theatres in Boston, Providence, New York, Philadelphia, and other cities, the name of Keith stood for worth and value, and honest theatrical menus."²⁹

The theatres *were* beautiful too. Keith and Albee made sure of that. Robert Allen argues that the two men sought to create "theater environments that realized bourgeois dreams of European upper-class splendor."³⁰ An elegant, embossed, illustrated brochure they put out described every detail, every furnishing, every convenience that was available to patrons of Keith's New Theatre in Boston. Its description of the foyer alone let patrons know that though theirs was a widely popular amusement, careful planning went into each element of the sumptuous décor:

²⁷ "A Brilliant Career Ended," New York Dramatic News, 4 April 1914, no page number given, from a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

²⁸ Snyder (1989), 30.

²⁹ "B.F. Keith: the Man Who Dared and Won."

³⁰ Allen (1991), 185.

[The main foyer] is unquestionably the most magnificent apartment connected with any amusement establishment in the world. The walls are treated in rich old rose, the surfaces of which are broken alternately at regular intervals by mirrors and superb panel paintings by the eminent artist Tojetti. The floor is of white marble tiling... There are over three hundred incandescent lamps... the fixtures of which are brass, with richly burnished gold finish, all manufactured for the theatre from special designs of the Louis XV order... Elegant vases and jardinières, filled with beautiful and rare plants and flowers, are scattered about in lavish and graceful profusion. A magnificent hall clock of unique design marks the passage of time, beautiful antique cabinets hold superb collections of bric-a-brac and Dresden china...³¹

But the appearance of luxury and wealth was not the only allure. Keith made sure to advertise the fact that not only would the on-stage offerings be pure and clean but so too, literally, was the physical plant itself. In fact, one detects in their words a marked preoccupation with cleanliness and spotlessness:

The absolute cleanliness which pervades every nook and corner of the building is a matter of comment, and although thousands of people cross the threshold daily the same bright, fresh and wholesome appearance, so noticeable at the opening, is still apparent. As may well be imagined, this condition of affairs is only maintained by the exercise of the utmost vigilance, and the carrying out of a carefully arranged system of routine work. There are one hundred and fifteen attaches connected with the theatre, and as fully one-half the number are employed for the express purpose of keeping up the high standard of neatness, it will be seen that the impossibility of the accumulation of dirt is apparent. Indeed it may be said literally, that the cleaning never stops here but is continued uninterruptedly day and night, and the system, while expensive, is undoubtedly one of the principal factors which has contributed to the unexampled success of all of Mr. Keith's enterprises. This large working force (the largest perhaps connected with any play-house in the world) is divided into different departments, each in charge of a superintendent who is directly responsible to General Manager Albee for the condition of affairs and the conduct of those under his supervision.³²

A similar piece in the Dramatic Mirror, penned by Albee, informed readers that two dozen char women attended to matters of cleanliness at one Keith venue and that "every

³¹ Brochure for Keith's New Theatre Boston. From a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

portion of the floor space not covered with carpet... [is] scrubbed every morning.”³³

Putting things more succinctly, Scribner's Magazine wrote, “[T]he proprietor of ‘The Sunday School Circuit’ is the inventor of vaudeville as we know it. This which makes for righteousness, as is usual, makes also for great and abiding cleanliness—physical as well as moral.”³⁴ In Keith and Albee's marketing approach, physical and moral cleanliness were inextricably bound, the former standing as a material symbol of the latter, even while the latter was rarely, in fact, observed. “Not content with a careful supervision of the songs, words and gestures used by players in his employ, he spends many thousands of dollars each year in soap, scrubbing brushes, brooms and white paint, so that every portion of each theatre under his direction is always without the shadow of a blemish.” wrote the New York Dramatic Mirror.³⁵

In addition, while Keith and Albee's words (in their brochure) convey the cleanliness and purity of the environs, they also link such efforts inherently to a rational, almost scientifically-planned system of management. They let prospective customers know that though they may “cross the threshold daily” along with “thousands of people,” a scrupulous system was in place which assured that nothing untoward or unpleasant would be included in the experience. The discourse of cleanliness and purity, whether applied to the content of staged entertainments or the physical plant itself of Keith theatres, proved the perfect means of illustrating that an amusement could be massive in scope and yet altogether in the careful, caring control of competent professionals. As his career wore on, Albee in particular took great pains to demonstrate

³² Brochure for Keith's New Theatre Boston. From a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. From a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

³³ E.F. Albee, “Some Interesting Details,” New York Dramatic Mirror, from 1906. No date or page number given.

³⁴ In: Anthony Slide, Selected Vaudeville Criticism, (Metuchen & London: Scarecrow Press, 1988), 206.

that while his theatres reached diverse audiences in numerous urban settings, nothing was left to chance. He wrote in Theatre Magazine:

In building a vaudeville theatre today, we go into every detail scientifically, artistically, and psychologically. The color scheme is selected upon scientific, as well as artistic grounds, for it must be suave, cheerful and restful as well as beautiful. The acoustics must be of mathematical certainty and the lighting must be according to the laws of optics... as regards lines of sight, the concealment of all lamps in coves, and the control of color effects. According to the necessities of the human eye, we avoid strain, cross rays, glaring footlights and borders and any effects that tire the vision. The question of finding the most comfortable seats, the pitch of the aisles, the height and angle of stairs, the most satisfactory arrangement of the balcony, the comfort of the retiring rooms, the vital questions of ventilation and heating—these and a hundred other points are gone into and precisely checked and planned when a new Keith vaudeville theatre is underway.³⁶

Not only were the physical elements of Keith theatres carefully attended to, but audiences were kept carefully in check as well. In American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times, Douglas Gilbert points out that as early as the 1890s, Albee and Keith ordered patrons to remove their hats, forbade smoking, and banned whistling, stamping, spitting, and the crunching of peanuts.³⁷ And on at least one occasion, two men were refused admittance to Keith's Union Square for failing to wear jackets, despite the fact that it was August.³⁸ For Albee, scientific planning, careful management, and aesthetic beauty were part and parcel of the same overarching project. His words above presage the efforts of other widely successful corporate mass marketers in twentieth century America, such as Disney and McDonald's, who leave nothing to chance in the creation of mercantile milieus.

Even the programs at one of Keith's theatres were the "most elaborate, artistic, tasteful and expensive" ever printed. "Each page is framed in a delicate border of

³⁵ New York Dramatic Mirror, 26 January 1901, 16.

³⁶ E.F. Albee, "Twenty Years of Vaudeville," Theatre Magazine, May 1920, 408.

³⁷ Gilbert, 205.

lavender and gold, filled in with artistic sketching of a superior order... The most attractive style of type and the finest quality of ink are used, and the paper is of a superior quality," wrote the New York Dramatic Mirror.³⁹ For Keith and Albee, the artifice of elegance, refinement, and cleanliness was central to the creation of a brand that would ultimately have mass appeal.

The Keith brand thus came to signal not only comfort and beauty but healthfulness and precise planning. To complement such tactics, Keith wasted no effort in publicizing his admittedly large-scale operation as morally above reproach—even if the acts on the stages he controlled were at times close relatives of burlesque hall fare. A master of public relations and what today's business experts might call "brand management," Keith wrote, or had members of his press corps such as Harvey Alexander Higgins⁴⁰ write, numerous articles advancing his image of clean vaudeville. In 1900, Keith wrote in The Criterion: "In many instances, indeed, they [variety theatres] were offensive to the essentially wholesome and clean-minded American majority. I have endeavored to reform the abuses at which I hint, by eliminating from my bills everything savoring of vulgarity or salaciousness."⁴¹ The following year, no doubt reflecting the hard work of his press agents, the New York Dramatic Mirror proclaimed Keith vaudeville "clean" above all else: "To [Keith], more than any other individual, is due the extreme popularity of vaudeville in this country... he has trained the performers into giving an entertainment that pleases without offending the most fastidious. Cleanliness, in every sense of which that word may be used, has always been Mr.

³⁸ New York Dramatic Mirror, 25 August 1900, 8.

³⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 20 February 1904, 18.

⁴⁰ See for example: Harvey Alexander Higgins, "The Reconstruction of Vaudeville," National Magazine, May 1919, 173.

⁴¹ B.F. Keith, "What Pleases in Vaudeville," The Criterion, September 1900, 24.

Keith's watchword."⁴² Several weeks later, however, Keith's Union Square scored a big hit with "Art Studies," sixteen living picture tableaux rife with nudity, yet cloaked in the packaging of artistic refinement.⁴³ A few months later, a sketch called "The Bridegroom's Reverie," a kind of sexual fantasy, also at the Union Square, depicted "a succession of comely girls" in provocative attire emerging from a picture frame while a young man sat back and enjoyed "his last cigar as a bachelor."⁴⁴ At very least, sketches like this must have held little appeal to wives and other presumed proponents of the institution of marriage.

But Keith's high-minded moral rhetoric stood him in good stead with reformers, critics, and anti-vice crusaders who often targeted popular amusement fare as symbols of cultural decadence, especially the Catholic church whose leaders, we have seen, were often on the vanguard of criticism. Commenting in the 1920s on the Keith enterprises, Cardinal O'Connell of Boston remarked, "The business in which Mr. Keith was engaged was one surrounded by all sorts of temptations and dangers, a business which could be turned to the loss of souls, but Mrs. Keith constantly kept watch over that." Unlike the movie moguls, who never fully escaped the moral attacks of clergy and reform-minded elites, vaudeville came to symbolize the coalescence of wholesomeness and hard work. Argued O'Connell, "By industry and perseverance, and one may well say by the blessing of God, the Keith family accumulated a large fortune. We all know the story of large fortunes, created and gathered by industry and perseverance and then scattered to the four winds of heaven. Such, and thanks to the excellent Christian training which Mrs. Keith gave her son [Paul, who took over for his father following B.F. Keith's death

⁴² "Keith's Seventeenth Anniversary," New York Dramatic Mirror, 26 January 1901, 16.

⁴³ New York Dramatic Mirror, 23 February 1901, 18.

⁴⁴ New York Dramatic Mirror, 22 June 1901, 16.

in 1914], was not to be the case with the inheritance which came to him from his father and mother.”⁴⁵

Keith made sure that as his enterprise grew it secured the imprimatur of recognized moral authorities. For example, he hired a superintendent of a religious school in Boston to observe his shows and write down any infractions.⁴⁶ While the movie moguls—largely Jewish and foreign born—were to be portrayed in the discourse of the day as vicious and unprincipled panderers, the vaudeville moguls were depicted as devout Christians and shining examples of the American work ethic. It helped, of course, that the Keith family had donated small chapels here and funds to the church there.⁴⁷ By 1904, Keith’s shrewd publicity ploys were already earning him moral plaudits. “The people who have been his patrons appreciate Mr. Keith’s efforts, because they know that their morals and their clothes are perfectly safe when they buy their tickets,” wrote a trade paper.⁴⁸ As already noted, the moral cleanliness promised, if not always delivered, in Keith theatres, was heralded by the cleanliness of the physical environs. In effect, Keith’s real promise was that popular mass amusements would come in a “safe” and predictable package. Accordingly, E.F. Albee himself from time to time publicized the fact that he would personally have to approve all acts booked at his theatres, though he rarely cut or censored them.⁴⁹

The cloak of moral and religious conviction, dubious though it may have been, was, as I have been arguing, essential to the vaudeville magnates’ primary project: the building of a massive entertainment empire, a goal they began pursuing from the 1880s

⁴⁵ “Cardinal Lauds Mrs. B.F. Keith,” Boston Herald, 20 January 1927, no page number given, from a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁴⁶ Laurie, 339.

⁴⁷ “Cardinal Lauds Mrs. B.F. Keith.”

⁴⁸ New York Dramatic Mirror, 16 January 1904, 18.

⁴⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 16 May 1908, 17.

onward. It was this effort that would forever alter the workings of the amusement market in the United States. Argues Robert Snyder in his essay "Vaudeville and the Transformation of Popular Culture" in Inventing Times Square: "[V]audeville's most important contribution to the development of American popular culture was to erode the local orientation of nineteenth century audiences, and knit them, despite their diversity, into a modern audience of national proportions."⁵⁰ In this, some viewed Keith as a visionary—after the fact. In 1919, the New York Dramatic Mirror said that B.F. Keith "in his shrewd mind saw the writing on the wall" in the 1890s. "Hereafter there were to be syndicates of theatres instead of single ones and combinations where there had been one."⁵¹ And in 1906, the Mirror stated that the Keith company "is given most of the credit for the organization and successful carrying out of the plan to amalgamate the interests of many vaudeville houses."⁵²

Keith and his retinue may not have been visionaries so much as wise businessmen in an era of an emergent national market. But their efforts certainly changed the way entertainment worked. Writes Albert McLean in American Vaudeville as Ritual. "Beginning in the nineties, comprehensive networks of booking offices and established theatres took on the important tasks of promotion, ticket vending, production, and plant maintenance. The impulsive and peripatetic player became a specialized agent within an industry... in this more complex scheme of organization the new managerial class assumed an important role."⁵³

E.F. Albee was perhaps the chief figure of the new managerial class that came to control American entertainment. Wrote Albee in the New York Clipper. "Big salaries.

⁵⁰ Snyder (1991), 133.

⁵¹ Harvey Alexander Higgins, Jr., "The Origin of Vaudeville," New York Dramatic Mirror, 13 May 1919, 720.

⁵² New York Dramatic Mirror, 13 June 1906, 2.

⁵³ McLean, 16-17.

big business, and scientific control make everybody happy.”⁵⁴ He delighted in having built a large-scale corporate entity with a rationalized division of labor, and he delighted in promoting this fact. “Diversity, speed, entertainment, and wholesomeness are the qualities sought by Mr. Keith and his lieutenants in vaudeville... Originality, personality, legitimate sensation is the demand which vaudeville must supply,” wrote Albee.⁵⁵ Never at a loss to craft polemical promotional verbiage, Albee was entertainment’s first spin doctor.

By the turn of the century, Keith and Albee owned a chain of theatres in New England and the Northeast. But they hungered for more (see Figure 3) and, like other industrialists of their era, they began to form alliances with other powerful businessmen in their field. What emerged was a syndicate that would further standardize the product, formalize procedures and regulations, create a recognizable national brand that purported to be “clean” and “pure,” and, most importantly, develop another income stream for Keith interests in the form of booking fees. Noted Joseph M. Schenk, general manager for a rival vaudeville chain, “What iron and steel are to the industrial market, so vaudeville is to the amusement seeking public of the united forty-nine states... The vaudeville business is being standardized, and the performer must realize that an act is now bought and sold for what it is worth, the same as merchandise, steel rails, wheat or grain. The vaudeville artist is a commodity.”⁵⁶ It was of course business professionals like Schenk, Albee, and Keith who determined “what it is worth” and who ultimately viewed not just the performer but every fungible element of their industry as an economic commodity.

⁵⁴ E.F. Albee, “Keith Vaudeville,” New York Clipper, 15 February 1913, viii.

⁵⁵ “Albee on Vaudeville in 1912-13.”

⁵⁶ Joseph M. Schenk, “Inside Vaudeville,” Variety, 20 December 1912, 33.

The centerpiece of the Keith-Albee conceit was the United Booking Office.

Writes Robert Snyder, "The Keith vaudeville empire was based on booking. Although it owned its own circuit of theaters, it controlled many more by becoming the middlemen who charged a fee for bringing together performers and theater managers... The U.B.O. was a switching house that linked managers and performers and directed acts around the circuits."⁵⁷ Like any properly run industrial outfit, the U.B.O. developed various formulae for its products. Though vaudeville bills varied in size and content, they typically followed certain guidelines aimed at pleasing the greatest number of patrons. A U.B.O. vaudeville bill may have looked as follows:

First: a "dumb act," possibly dancers or trick animals, to make a good impression that "will not be spoiled by the late arrivals seeking their seats."

Second: anything more interesting than the first act; perhaps a man and woman singing, to "settle" the audience and prepare it for the show.

Third: something to wake up the audience, perhaps a comic dramatic sketch that builds to a "laughter-climax," or any act distinct from the preceding turn, to keep the audience "wondering what is to come next."

Fourth: an act to "strike home," ideally a name performer who will rouse the audience to expect better things from the show.

Fifth: another big name, something the audience will talk about during intermission.

Sixth: the first act after intermission and a difficult slot to fill, because it had to sustain audience interest without overshadowing the remaining acts. A famous mime comedian to get the audience seated with few interruptions of stage action might work well...

Seventh: an act stronger than the sixth to set up the eighth act. Usually a full-stage number like a short comic play, or, if the performers were good enough to warrant it, a serious dramatic piece.

⁵⁷ Snyder (1991), 137.

Eighth: the star that the crowd was waiting for, typically a solitary man or woman.

Ninth: the closing act, preferably a visual number—trick animals or trapeze artists—that sent the audience home pleased.⁵⁸

The United Booking Offices grew out of a Keith-controlled syndicate, the Association of Vaudeville Managers of the United States, at the turn of the century. By early 1906, the Keith Vaudeville Booking Circuit consisted of eight Keith-owned theatres and thirteen other venues, largely in the Northeast. That figure grew to twenty-six houses by spring and forty-five by summer. Shortly thereafter, the booking entity took the name "United Booking Agency," and claimed it had "57 good weeks at its command." Less than a year later, other well-known theatres such as Hammerstein's, Shea's, and Poli's, joined the organization. In 1907, the Keith outfit extended westward, signing an agreement with the Western Vaudeville Managers Association. Now it counted some 180 vaudeville theatres to its ranks.⁵⁹ Percy Williams, owner of a successful New York-based vaudeville chain, also linked his fortunes with Keith.⁶⁰ By April of that same year, having forged agreements with potential rivals and peers in other markets, the United circuit, in alliance with the Western Vaudeville Managers Association, were "booking together for 200 theatres from Portland, Me. To Portland, Ore.," in the words of a U.B.O. advertisement from the New York Clipper.⁶¹ Notes Snyder, "From the manager's point of view, the Keith system provided an element of stability in a volatile industry."⁶²

⁵⁸ Snyder (1991), 137-38.

⁵⁹ New York Clipper, 24 February 1906, 11; New York Dramatic Mirror, 5 May 1906, 17; New York Dramatic Mirror, 2 June 1906, 17; Variety, 23 June 1906, 2; New York Clipper, 23 February 1907, 30; New York Dramatic Mirror, 2 March 1907, 19.

⁶⁰ "Williams Goes With Keith," Variety, 16 February 1907, 2.

⁶¹ New York Clipper, 2 February 1907, 1328; New York Clipper, 13 April 1907, 227.

⁶² Snyder (1991), 141.

In its rapid and aggressive expansion, the U.B.O. was sure to run up against resistance from local managers who did not want to fall under Keith hegemony. Accordingly, “vaudeville wars” broke out in certain markets, such as the one in Rochester in 1907.⁶³ But, like a powerful organized crime mob—or, more to the point, like the Rockefeller oil combine, which consolidated in 1899—the United Booking Office usually got its way. In 1912, it threatened to black-list all performers who played dates outside the Keith network. “It Should Be Understood That Acts Booked to Play the High Class Theatres [in rival circuits] Lose Their Commercial Value by Appearing in Other Theatres,” read a threatening U.B.O. ad in the New York Clipper.⁶⁴ On another occasion, the United office announced a ban on songs written by music publishers who advertised in Variety owing to the trade paper’s unfavorable coverage of the Keith organization.⁶⁵ (Variety was founded to champion vaudeville performers and their causes, in distinction to the more conservative trade papers the New York Clipper and the New York Dramatic Mirror, which tended to side with management.)

The U.B.O. faced other obstacles and challenges. But under Keith’s and Albee’s direction, the syndicate either absorbed, defeated, or otherwise dismantled threats to its hegemony. One of the early challenges came from performers (see Figure 4). This was understandable. Even before the U.B.O. was formalized, actors were hurting from the fees extracted of them by the Keith booking syndicate. Though the law would eventually set a limit of five percent that could be taken by the U.B.O.,⁶⁶ the Keith machine found other ways to siphon money from the hapless artist, such as the Vaudeville Collection Agency, another Keith outfit, that charged an additional two-and-a-half percent for

⁶³ New York Dramatic Mirror, 18 May 1907, 16-17.

⁶⁴ New York Clipper, 1 June 1912, 9.

⁶⁵ Variety, 7 March 1913, 3.

⁶⁶ See: New York Clipper, 8 May 1909, 319.

processing agents' fees.⁶⁷ The U.B.O., according to the New York Dramatic Mirror, had once again "drawn the net closer."⁶⁸

Sensing that their autonomy and economic well-being were in jeopardy, a number of performers banded together in 1901 to form a union. Under the leadership of George Fuller Golden, "a curly haired actor who had worked his way up through the theatrical ranks,"⁶⁹ the performers took the name of the "White Rats of America," describing themselves as "a social order founded on the same principles of brotherly love as 'The Water Rats' of London," according to a banner advertisement they took out in the New York Clipper. Though they formed primarily to safeguard their financial interests, the Rats, like Keith and his peers, advanced a rhetoric of moral purity as another justification for their existence. Read their charter-like public statement which they published in 1900:

[W]e "The White Rats" feel that many coarse and objectionable elements for now exist in our field of work and play which must be eliminated ere we can hope to be appreciated, respected and held in esteem for our services and for our real worth. Therefore, it shall be our honest endeavor to eradicate all barriers that stand in the way of our progression. We maintain that the better members of our profession are entitled to more respect and serious consideration than has as yet been accorded them. We believe that there is now a high order of intelligence pervading the vaudeville profession, and, as the spirit of manhood and morality exists in the hearts of many of the members of said profession, it is possible, by unceasing and earnest effort, to make our calling a dignified one... Those mental unfortunates vulgarly known to the public as "knockers" and "grafters" will not be tolerated by "White Rats" in any way... The services of the order will always be available for noble charities and worthy causes outside Ratland.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Snyder (1991), 139.

⁶⁸ "Against the Irresponsible," New York Dramatic Mirror, 26 December 1908, 17.

⁶⁹ Snyder (1989), 38.

⁷⁰ "White Rats of America," New York Clipper, 4 August 1900, 516.

For all their elevated rhetoric, the Rats were really an economic self-protection group. They even tried to form their own booking syndicate in 1901.⁷¹ When they began to feel the pinch of the Keith commission system, they inaugurated a wildcat strike, on February 21, 1901. Noted the Clipper: “The White Rats took vigorous action in the matter of their differences with Association of Vaudeville Managers last week. On Thursday afternoon, Feb. 21, all members of the order then playing the Keith circuit, the Proctor circuit, Hyde & Behman’s, Percy Williams’, M. Shea’s, Buffalo and Toronto, P.F. Shea’s Springfield and Worcester, and other houses, were suddenly attacked by a variety of ailments and announced that they were unable to continue working – for the present at least.”⁷² The tactic worked, if temporarily. Keith announced that he would do away with the commission system. But, as Robert Snyder points, out, “What little success the White Rats enjoyed was short-lived.”⁷³ Before they could consolidate and capitalize on their gains, members of the union began to undercut each other. Also, the tide of public opinion turned against the Rats. Noted the New York Clipper in 1911, when talk of another walk-out was in the air, “The last strike of vaudeville performers resulted so disastrously to its promoters that it should be a lasting object lesson to them. Immediately after the former strike was started a prominent vaudeville manager said to the writer: *‘They (meaning the strikers) have done more in one day than we managers could have done in ten years.’*” There was never a second strike.

Another specter, that of an anti-trust action, eventually loomed, predictably, over the United Booking Offices. This too was initiated by a group of performers. Specifically, they asked the Attorney General of the State of New York to dissolve the U.B.O.’s Vaudeville Collection Agency, noting that the U.B.O. controlled “a majority of

⁷¹ New York Clipper, 2 February 1901, 1100.

⁷² “Vaudeville and Minstrel,” New York Clipper, 2 March 1901, 7.

⁷³ Snyder (1989), 40.

the first-class theatres throughout the east as far as and including Chicago.”⁷⁴ But the Keith interests’ clever lawyering and legal posturing managed to dodge the threat. Albee, in an article in the Cleveland Leader, argued first of all, that the U.B.O. controlled only a quarter of the vaudeville houses in the United States. Moreover, he tried to paint the vaudeville industry as a highly competitive one in which agents, producers, and performers were all free entities subject only to the laws of economic contest and free enterprise. Said Albee:

Let us say that John Jones, vaudeville performer, is in Cleveland this week, as shown by the records of the United Booking Offices, and Harry Smith, manager, wishes Jones’ services in Buffalo next week, while Frank Brown, manager, wants Jones in Pittsburg at the same time. They bid for his services. The manager bidding first—according to a slip dropped into a sealed receptacle, and which is stamped on a time clock which indicates the date and time slip is deposited—gets his service and completes his vaudeville program. Jones, the actor, receives another week’s time and Smith, the manager, looks for another act that will attract persons to his theater during the week he is then booking. So much for “restraint of trade” as concerns the effects of our system on the vaudeville players.”⁷⁵

Yet Albee’s words obscured the fact that it was virtually impossible for an artist to make a regular living without the “assistance” of the U.B.O. Since artists had to travel the circuits in order to work, and since only the U.B.O and other syndicates, which by this time were operating in unison, could provide an uninterrupted work schedule, the performer was ultimately led back to the U.B.O., usually hat in hand, for his bookings. After further legal wrangling, a United States District Court judge eventually ruled that the U.B.O. was not subject to Sherman Anti-Trust regulation because, in his view, the

⁷⁴ “Attorney General Asked to Dissolve the U.B.O.,” Variety, 11 October 1912, 1.

⁷⁵ William E. Sage, “Albee Talks on Vaudeville,” Cleveland Leader, 24 December 1912. No page number given, from a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

booking syndicate did not engage in “inter-state trade and commerce” according to the definition provided in the statute.⁷⁶

More than strikes or threats of anti-trust activity, Keith and Albee saw their fellow vaudeville magnates and producers as the biggest problem. Sometimes the turf wars grew heated, as Keith and Albee sparred for territory with other titans of the vaudeville industry. “There were fights over territories among the vaudeville empires of those days, in miniature the unjust wielding of power, plotting, betraying and raiding that characterized the major world around them... Miniature as they were, these vaudeville wars were titanic to the participants and for a time it looked as though the vaudeville world would be plunged into a holocaust...” noted the New York Times after vaudeville had faded from the American scene.⁷⁷

Though sometimes there were heated disputes, Keith and Albee typically avoided such contests by absorbing or signing non-aggression pacts with their chief competitors. An early instance of such tactics occurred when Frederick Proctor began to gain dominance in the New York area vaudeville market. Like Albee, Proctor hailed from Maine. He was the son of a country physician, born in 1851. As a young man, he moved to Boston and obtained work doing errands for the R.H. White Dry Goods Store. Proctor had a fondness for athletics and joined the local Y.M.C.A., becoming especially adept at gymnastics. By day he continued to work for R.H. White. But during the evenings, he and a partner began to perfect a tumbling and juggling act which they hoped to take on the road. Proctor and his partner, calling themselves the “Levantine Brothers,” soon realized that goal and were hired at the Theater Comique in Boston for ten dollars a week. Soon the Levantines joined the circus, “becoming sensational successes in the manipulating of gayley ornamented barrels and tables and crosses with

⁷⁶ New York Clipper, 24 January 1914, 1.

⁷⁷ “From the Drama Mailbag,” New York Times, 24 November 1940, ix, 2:5.

their feet to the music of the band,” according to the New York Star. His remarkable success from touring with his gymnastic act permitted Proctor to make the leap from performer to theater owner and producer. He took his capital and bought his first venue, the Green Street Theatre, in Albany, in 1880. Several years later, Proctor opened the Twenty-third Street Theatre in New York City, and from there continued to open vaudeville houses, including the Fifty-Eighth Street, the Eighty-Sixth Street, and the 125th Street theatres in Manhattan, plus additional theatres in the City’s suburbs, and ones in Troy, Albany, and other points upstate.⁷⁸

Though a performer at heart—when he died he left over \$100,000 to a charity called the Actor’s Fund⁷⁹—Proctor was also a shrewd businessman and a force to be reckoned with. For example, he saw the success that Keith had had with “continuous” vaudeville in Boston and initiated it at his Twenty-Third Street House in New York before Keith ever arrived. He soon became famous for his advertising slogan: “After Breakfast Go To Proctor’s. After Proctor’s Go To Bed.”⁸⁰ Like Keith and Albee, Proctor mastered the rhetoric of moral and physical cleanliness and made it central to his mass-market efforts. A Pictorial Souvenir of the Proctor Entertainments, a sumptuous promotional brochure his company published and distributed in 1902, stated: “The stage is in charge [sic] of competent managers, and the entertainments are carefully supervised and censored. Nothing is permitted upon the stage which will give offense to the most fastidious. The high moral character of the Proctor plays and vaudeville is universally conceded and commended.” In the same publication, the Proctor organization claimed to

⁷⁸ “F.F. Proctor Dead: Dean of Vaudeville,” New York Times, 5 September 1929, 29; Laurie, 365-69; New York Star, 21 November 1908, no page number given, from a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁷⁹ Laurie, 370.

⁸⁰ Barth, 204.

be “the largest chain under the sole control and individual ownership of one person in the world.”⁸¹

According to Joe Laurie, Jr., Proctor eventually controlled some fifty theatres, though this figure is probably inflated.⁸² Like Albee, Proctor linked growth in size to a fundamental purity ensured by a class of professional managers manipulating all aspects of the theatrical experience from behind the scenes. But also like Keith and Albee, the promise of purity was largely discursive, a marketing ploy, aimed at creating a commercial brand that, despite its size and scope, was nonetheless to be viewed as safe, even predictable. In 1904, the New York Dramatic Mirror criticized Proctor for permitting a sketch rife with “lines in the dialogue which, to say the least, were in shockingly bad taste” to appear.⁸³ And although Proctor banned smoking from his Pleasure Palace theatre in 1898, patrons were still permitted to “sip the insidious absinthe or swallow the foaming beer while watching the merry vaudevillians do their turns.”⁸⁴ For Proctor, the appearance of wholesomeness was valuable, but not as valuable as the revenues from alcoholic beverages.

Realizing that complete dominance of Eastern vaudeville would be impossible without Proctor’s properties, Keith and Albee were faced with two choices. They could either fight the onetime gymnast head-on, or they could form a partnership. Needless to say, they chose the latter, forging a merger of interests in 1906. With Proctor on their side, Keith and Albee were in a substantially better position to make their United Booking Offices, soon to be born, a reality. The merged chains only remained so until 1911, at which time they separated. But Proctor continued to book his theatres through

⁸¹ A Pictorial Souvenir of the Proctor Entertainments, 1902, from a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁸² Laurie, 370.

⁸³ New York Dramatic Mirror, 6 August 1904, 15.

⁸⁴ New York Dramatic Mirror, 1 January 1898, 16.

the U.B.O.⁸⁵ In essence, Keith and Albee had gotten what they wanted—the enthusiastic cooperation of a potential rival.

Another major potential for war was posed by vaudeville magnate Martin Beck. Unlike the other major figures in vaudeville, Beck was Jewish and foreign born. He came originally from Czechoslovakia and was educated in Vienna. He performed Shakespeare as a boy in Germany and, at the age of 15, traveled to the United States with a small troupe of actors. After a short tour, Beck found himself in Chicago, without a job. “I needed something to do and up to that time had never been idle. Noticing an advertisement of the Royal Music Hall on North Clark Street...for a manager, I presented myself, told the owner of the place that I was the only real concert hall manager out of a job and secured the position.” Beck received twelve dollars a week, though this was soon raised to twenty. “To earn this I did everything, manager, stage manager, cashier, auditor, barman and even waited upon the patrons who might be in want of liquid refreshments when they were conveniently near me.” Beck soon switched to nearby Engel’s, acquired a part ownership position and, with a partner, opened another music hall on Chicago’s South Side. But an economic downturn ruined the budding enterprise, and Beck eventually had to take a position as a booking manager for the small Orpheum circuit of vaudeville houses based in San Francisco. By 1900, Beck owned several theatres and from there began to expand rapidly, opening up a chain of theatres that spanned the country westward from Illinois to California.⁸⁶

Albee and Keith soon realized that they would have to cooperate with Beck and his powerful Orpheum circuit, since popular performers would want to book a schedule that ranged throughout the entire country. This, naturally, included a good swath of Beck

⁸⁵ See: “Keith & Proctor to Dissolve,” New York Clipper, 5 August 1911, 1.

⁸⁶ “How Martin Beck Became Vaudeville’s Chief Mogul,” Variety, 11 December 1909, 27; “Martin Beck Dies: Theatre Veteran,” New York Times, 17 November 1940, 49:1; “From the Drama Mailbag”; Laurie, 360.

territory. By 1909, Beck, whose venues operated jointly with the hundred or so theatres of the Western Vaudeville Managers' Association, also agreed to function "harmoniously" with the U.B.O.⁸⁷ by only booking acts who also booked through the Keith syndicate in the East. Wrote the New York Star, "Mr. Beck believes that any artist or act that appears in the Western territory in any vaudeville house other than an Orpheum is so deteriorating his value as a high-class attraction that he can never be a desirable offering in his theaters, and therefore heartily concurred with the officials of the United Booking Offices."⁸⁸ Noted Variety, "The agreement made between the eastern and western vaudeville managers provides that the Orpheum Circuit shall skip right out west, stick around between Milwaukee and San Francisco, and not come further east under a penalty of another slap on the wrist."⁸⁹ Beck also signed up other western chains, such as the Kohl circuit, to work with him and the U.B.O..⁹⁰

But Martin Beck, a "bald and fat little man" with "his finger in many a theatrical pie,"⁹¹ was not the type to be hemmed in by gentlemen's agreements, and in 1913 he demonstrated his hubris by building the Palace Theater in the middle of New York City's Broadway theater district. "This precipitated a war with the dominant Keith-Albee interests," wrote the New York Times.⁹² But the war was soon ended when Beck agreed to book the Palace through the U.B.O. Eventually, ownership of the Palace passed to Keith and Albee, where it became the most sought-after venue for the vaudeville artist to

⁸⁷ New York Dramatic Mirror, 23 July 1910, 17.

⁸⁸ "Martin Beck Clearly Defines His Attitude," New York Star, 18 September 1909, no page number given, from a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁸⁹ "United Booking Offices Cleans Up All 'Big Time,'" Variety, 4 May 1912, 5.

⁹⁰ Variety, 26 May 1906, 5.

⁹¹ "Martin Beck Dies: Theatre Veteran."

⁹² "Martin Beck Dies: Theatre Veteran."

play. In 1932, the Palace became the last vaudeville theatre to convert to motion pictures, thus officially ending the vaudeville era in the United States.⁹³

With the inclusion of rival circuits in its vast purview, Keith and Albee had succeeded in creating the first amusement that was truly national in scope. Increasingly, artists came to understand their place in the bigger picture that was vaudeville.

“Vaudevillians chose a mass audience over a local audience,” points out Snyder ⁹⁴

Equally important, a small handful of writers, located mostly in New York, began supplying material to a great majority of the artists touring the circuits.⁹⁵ Detailed, almost scientific reports were kept on each act, its performance, reception, length, and filed with the central booking syndicates. One such report, describing the bill at the Grand theatre in Minneapolis on the afternoon of January 18, 1909, listed nine acts and broke each down according to eight separate categories including “style of act,” audience reception, and length of play. The report noted that the show began with Bertha Pertina, “toe danseuse,” at 2:25, lasted seven minutes, rated “good” with the crowd, and made use of the full stage. Pertina was followed by Fiddler & Shelton, a musical act that ran twenty-four minutes and scored “big” with the customers. Other acts, such as ventriloquists, gymnasts, and a satirical sketch, followed and were duly recorded.⁹⁶

The concentration of Keith and Albee’s power also permitted a putative system of self-censorship—or at least the appearance of such a system—to be installed. “The enforcement of nationwide censorship regulation was aided by the centralized Keith bureaucracy,” notes Robert Snyder.⁹⁷ However, censorship was far from strict. Rather, a reporting process was put in place to remind performers that they were being watched.

⁹³ Laurie, 481-98.

⁹⁴ Snyder (1989), 43.

⁹⁵ Marian Spitzer in Stein, 231.

⁹⁶ In: Variety, 10 April 1909, 10.

though rarely was an act cut or debarred from the stage, especially if it was popular. In U.B.O. theatres, if a local manager noticed that the crowd found something objectionable, he would have the option of filing a “blue envelope” with the U.B.O. head offices in New York. Only after a number of blue envelopes accrued to an artist’s file, though, did the threat of action become real.⁹⁸ However, since most decisions on what was permissible and what was not were up to diverse local managers,⁹⁹ it was unlikely that a single act would reach its allotted limit of infractions.

Every once in a while, the U.B.O. would send a directive regarding content control or censorship out to local managers. In 1915, for example, the Booking Offices instructed managers of their theatres to report any “blue” or “mushy” song lyrics to the main office, preferably during an act’s rehearsal period.¹⁰⁰ But such actions were rare. By about 1910, the Keith offices were permitting a wide array of sexually suggestive material on the boards, such as exotic dancers Alice Eis and Bert French, not to mention the vastly popular Eva Tanguay. I will describe these acts and others like them in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Keith and Albee from time to time faced challenges from other comers, such as Percy Williams, who sold his successful chain of theatres to Keith in 1912,¹⁰¹ and Klaw & Erlanger, powerful producers in the world of legitimate theatre, who launched their “Advanced Vaudeville” venture with much fanfare in spring of 1907. With William Morris as their agent, Klaw & Erlanger boasted that they planned to outspend the Keith chain in production costs per show. “It is the first time that so much money has been

⁹⁷ Snyder (1989), 141.

⁹⁸ Hamilton, 35-36.

⁹⁹ Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 78.

¹⁰⁰ “‘Watch Your Lyric’ Slogan Emanates from the U.B.O.” *Variety*, 10 December 1915, 5.

¹⁰¹ “Williams Sells Theatres,” *New York Clipper*, 4 May 1912, 10.

spent on a vaudeville show, without a 'feature' securing the major position," wrote Variety.¹⁰² Klaw & Erlanger, who had toyed with the names "Refined Vaudeville" and "All-Star Polite Vode-e-vil" before settling on "Advanced Vaudeville," promised to bring in top European attractions that one could not see in U.B.O. theatres.¹⁰³ In so doing, the Klaw people were grappling with a basic problem in mass market economics that had arisen for the first time in the field of staged entertainment: making one's product different enough from that of the competition to be commercially viable, while making it similar enough to dig into the competition's customer base. For Klaw & Erlanger, the answer to this problem lay in offering a product that was supposedly more alluring than Keith fare but recognizable nonetheless.

At first, with the help of the ever ambitious William Morris, things went well for "Advanced Vaudeville," as Klaw & Erlanger managed to open at least 17 theatres "without a hitch."¹⁰⁴ But it soon became clear that competing with Keith and the U.B.O. was perhaps an unrealistic goal, even for seasoned theatre veterans like Klaw & Erlanger. In October, 1907, the Advanced organization cut ticket prices and announced that yet more money would be spent—up to \$4,500—on weekly programs. The strategy failed, and the following month, Klaw & Erlanger announced that they would retire from vaudeville entirely within ninety days. In return, they received a one-time payment of \$2,000,000 from Keith and the U.B.O., who took over their theatres and routes. The deal further stipulated that Keith interests would not enter the legitimate theatre field.¹⁰⁵

Keith continued to buy out potential competitors, such as Chase of Washington, D.C., who not only sold his vaudeville chain to Keith and Albee but saw his twenty-six-

¹⁰² Variety, 27 April 1907, 4.

¹⁰³ Variety, 4 May 1907, 13.

¹⁰⁴ Variety, 7 September 1907, 2.

¹⁰⁵ Variety, 26 October 1907, 2; 6 November 1907, 2; New York Dramatic Mirror, 16 November 1907, 14.

year-old daughter marry the aged widower B.F. Keith.¹⁰⁶ Keith and Albee even dealt with the perpetual nuisance of William Morris, the talent agent, who throughout his adult life hatched various schemes aimed at challenging Keith vaudeville. For example, around 1910, Morris came up with the idea of “bargain vaudeville,” or some eighteen to twenty acts on a single bill. When this failed, he threatened to “increase the show to 30 acts and run the program until 1 o’clock in the morning.”¹⁰⁷ Morris’s ambitions were ever ahead of his abilities as a vaudeville producer, however. Nonetheless, like Keith and Albee, Morris was thinking in the emergent mass-market terms of the era. He once unveiled “a plan to circle the globe with a chain of vaudeville theatres.”¹⁰⁸ At his peak, Morris owned or booked far fewer theatres than Keith-Albee and the U.B.O., whom he never did vanquish. It would have been impossible, for by the first decade of the twentieth century, Benjamin Franklin Keith and Edward Franklin Albee presided over a new phenomenon—the entertainment *industry*. They had helped create a centrally-run, scientifically-managed, commodity-producing entity that would forever alter the field of American leisure consumption (see Figure 5). “It is probably the greatest consolidation of money and power in the entertainment world, and ranks with the most important of America’s industrial combinations,” wrote the New York Dramatic News of the Keith interests in 1906.¹⁰⁹ Where staged entertainment had once been an ad-hoc assemblage of localized theatres and short-term contracts, there was now a large, bureaucratic entity that delineated and controlled nearly every aspect of production and marketing.

Keith and especially Albee relished their new cultural status. They were no longer unlettered showmen running a small-time oddity museum. They were powerful

¹⁰⁶ “Another Big Keith Deal,” New York Clipper, 6 September 1913, 1.

¹⁰⁷ “Vaudeville of the Year,” Variety, 10 December 1910, 20.

¹⁰⁸ New York Clipper, 3 July 1909, 536.

¹⁰⁹ “A Brilliant Career Ended,” New York Dramatic News, 4 April 1914, no page number given, from a clipping file in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

national businessmen, and they built a veritable corporate palace to reflect and galvanize their power. A 1913 article in the New York Clipper describes the chambers of the Putnam Building, home of the United Booking Offices:

The top floor of the Putnam Building contains a huge room filled with... walnut desks ranged in close formation, each desk is allotted to the local or visiting representative of each "big time" house in the United States and Canada... All around the big rooms for buyers and sellers are the executive rooms of the United Booking Offices. Here are huge ledgers that tell the past movements and the future bookings of every artist deemed worthy of "big time." There are wonderful card indexes that enable the workers to run down the records of everyone in the business. East [sic] week every house manager in America forwards to the United a detailed analysis of each act on his current bill. These reports are classified, and the buyer of the acts who doubts an agent's estimate of a turn that he is selling, turns to the reports upon past performances and finds out just how Bruin's Bears, Nolan and Sweeney, or Millicent Marigold impressed the good people of Providence, Omaha, and every other city they ever played. Telegraph instruments tick madly... The United maintains its own elaborate legal department and a law library of over 10,000 volumes. Maurice Goodman, a young lawyer of the highest standing, is general counsel with a staff of assistants. He receives a princely salary and is pointed out in the profession as a shining example of the possibilities of law in New York.¹¹⁰

Wrote a journalist who visited the United Booking Offices in 1912, "I could not believe they were situated in such a magnificent building as the Putnam Building... I thought for the moment that I was at 26 Broadway, going to interview Mr. Pierpont Morgan or Mr. John D. Rockefeller."¹¹¹ In other words, the Keith interests were a major economic and business force. Not only had Keith vaudeville achieved critical mass and cultural legitimacy like banking or oil, but, following logically, so too had the field of entertainment. Along with the United, some twenty-two other circuits and syndicates firmly controlled what happened in the several thousand vaudeville theatres in North America.¹¹² Some, like Pantages in the Northwest quadrant of the country, differentiated

¹¹⁰ "Vaudeville's Clearing House," New York Clipper, 29 November 1913, 1.

¹¹¹ Gimlet, "Imaginary Interview No. 2," The Standard and Vanity Fair, 13 January 1912, 12.

¹¹² Snyder (1989), 37.

their product on the basis of price.¹¹³ Others sought hegemony through mergers, acquisitions, and U.B.O.-like deals with rivals, such as the Sun circuit located in Ohio, Indiana, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York.¹¹⁴ Still others, like the Interstate Circuit of Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana, operated on a more modest scale.¹¹⁵ But all looked to the Keith-Albee operation as the model, the chief legitimator of the field. It is significant that the honorary pallbearers at E.F. Albee's funeral included Secretary of Labor James J. Davis, Supreme Court Justice Victor Dowling, RCA chieftain David Sarnoff, and Paramount Pictures founder Adolph Zukor.¹¹⁶ Remarkable for a man who had started off hawking wax figures at a dime museum in Boston.

As entertainment magnates who crafted the first national mass amusement, Keith and Albee were pioneers. But as businessmen seeking to build powerful national brands, they were very much products of their era. From the pastiche of small, relatively isolated, localized enterprises that characterized American trade in the mid-nineteenth century there emerged large companies that began to successfully market their wares to the entire country or vast segments of it, rather remaining strictly local or regional. This was perhaps the primary transformation of the United States economy in the late nineteenth century. Notes economic historian Alfred Chandler, "[T]he major innovation in the American economy between the 1880's and the turn of the century was the creation of the great corporations in American industry." Increasingly, these "great corporations" absorbed the role, and business, of small companies that had served the consumer throughout most of the century. "The large, integrated industrial corporation appeared suddenly and dramatically on the American scene during the last two decades

¹¹³ "Evolution of Cheap Vaudeville," Variety, 14 December 1907, 10.

¹¹⁴ New York Clipper, 7 August 1909, 653.

¹¹⁵ New York Clipper, 19 August 1905, 655.

¹¹⁶ "Pallbearers for Albee," New York Times, 14 March 1930, 21:1

of the nineteenth century. Before that time, decisions affecting the flow of goods through the economy and allocations of its resources were extremely decentralized. They were made in hundreds of thousands of small family firms."¹¹⁷ In addition to industrial firms, service companies—insurers, banks, utilities, and theatre chains—took on large national projects as well.

There were a number of important reasons why this occurred. Although the U.S. economy suffered through at least three severe and two mild depressions between 1839 and 1885, by the early 1890s, the country was well on its way toward fiscal health. During this time, a slew of technological advances aided the aims of businessmen who sought to control large bureaucratic firms and sell to a national or translocal market. They included the invention of the typewriter in the 1870s; the cash register in 1879; telegraphy and telephony in the 1870s and 1880s; modern credit-rating techniques from about 1850 to 1890; modern accounting methods in the 1870s and 1880s; and the proliferation of advertising from the 1880s onward. The government contributed to this phenomenon as well, building a vast number of post offices to serve the growth of national trade. By 1901, there were some 77,000 post offices in the United States, the peak number of the era. Adding to this, standard postal rates for first-class mailings were lowered to two cents in 1883 where they remained until World War I.¹¹⁸

Thus, by the time of vaudeville's rise to national popularity in the 1890s, it was possible to conceive of "America," rather than a specific city, state, or region, as a potential market. Writes economic historian Thomas C. Cochran in 200 Years of American Business, after "around 1850, the United States as far west as the Great Plains

¹¹⁷ Alfred Chandler, "The Beginnings of 'Big Business' in American Industry," and "Development, Diversification, and Decentralization," in Thomas K. McCaw, ed., The Essential Alfred Chandler: Essays Toward a Historical Theory of Big Business, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1988), 73, 227.

¹¹⁸ Chester W. Wright, Economic History of the United States, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1949), 496.

became a national business system knit together by rail and water with a rapidly growing population spurred by a high domestic birth rate and heavy immigration.”¹¹⁹ Thus, the infrastructure was in place to accommodate the nationally-oriented salesman, or recalling Robert Snyder, one who sought to “erode the local orientation of nineteenth century audiences, and knit them ...into a modern audience of mass proportions.”¹²⁰

The national and super-regional vaudeville chains, while unique among entertainment concerns,¹²¹ arose amid a flurry of national chain development at the retail level as well. By 1900, there were some 60 national chain stores with over 2,500 outlets, including 200 Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company (A&P) stores, 59 Woolworth’s, and 36 Kroger’s. The total number of national chain stores and outlets was to grow ten- and sixty-fold, respectively, over the next quarter-century, with names like J.C. Penney leading the pack.¹²² The vaudeville circuits may be seen as the entertainment industry’s first retail chains.

The emergence of the “brand,” as an historically unique phenomenon, both shaped and reflected the growth of business on a national scope and scale, and pertains directly to the development of vaudeville. Aided by advertising and publicity (not just the respective “science” of each, but the ready availability of vehicles for both thanks to

¹¹⁹ Thomas C. Cochran, 200 Years of American Business (New York: BasicBooks, 1977), 51. Also see: Chester Wright, Economic History of the United States (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1949), 478-498. Interestingly (to some), Wright notes that the peak number of post offices—77,000—appeared in the U.S. in 1901 and began to decline thereafter; meanwhile, postal rates had been lowered to two cents for a standard letter in 1883.

¹²⁰ Snyder (1991), 133.

¹²¹ Though the battle between the Charles Frohman-led theatrical “Syndicate” and the Shuberts suggests that leaders in the field of “legitimate” theatre were also beginning to think nationally, there were some significant differences from vaudeville. Most importantly, the Shuberts, who won the “war,” gained a *monopoly* rather than dominance within an oligopoly such as movie studios during the 1930s or broadcast TV concerns during the 1960s. Moreover, they did not achieve even that until *after* 1907. For further clarification see: Peter A. Davis in William R. Taylor, ed., Inventing Times Square (1991), 147-57.

¹²² Cochran, 117-120; Strasser, 222.

the surging growth of magazines and newspapers¹²³), the historical emergence of the brand permitted corporations to offer unique products, and thus differentiate themselves from their competitors. At the same time, the practice of branding permitted mass marketers to craft a recognizable universe of consumer goods into which buyers might be lured. Michael Schudson, in Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion, states that brand-name goods first appeared in large numbers around the turn of the century. For the consumer, argues Schudson, selecting a brand meant “minimizing risk.”¹²⁴

In New and Improved: the Story of Mass Marketing in America, economic historian Richard Tedlow posits that the growth of brands occurred during the period of business “unification,” which he says began around the 1880s and lasted until the 1950s. In “unification,” business leaders, aided by advances in technology and relative political stability, sought to move high volumes of goods and services, often at a low profit margin per item. Using this approach, they succeeded in the “[i]ncorporation of the whole nation in a mass market.” Central to this effort was the creation of national brands. “Finally,” notes Tedlow, “by about 1880, American consumer products burst their formerly regional bounds.”¹²⁵

On the forefront of branding was the National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) with its successful “Uneeda” line of the 1890s.¹²⁶ Likewise, each vaudeville chain attempted to “brand” itself, in a sense, by presenting star performers on exclusive contracts or by searching “for their attractions in every part of the world,” as a New York Times article

¹²³ By the mid-1890s there were some 20,000 regularly published newspapers and magazines in the United States. Wright, 497.

¹²⁴ Schudson, 159.

¹²⁵ Richard Tedlow, New and Improved: the Story of Mass Marketing in America. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), xxi-xxii.

¹²⁶ Cochran, 124; Alfred D. Chandler, “The Rise of Big Business,” in Harry N. Schreiber, ed., United States Economic History: Selected Readings (New York: Knopf, 1964), 345-46; for a superb (if brief) account of the rise of branding and Nabisco’s “Uneeda” line.

put it, in order to find something truly unique.¹²⁷ The owners of the vaude chains were ever anxious to have their stages filled with acts one would not see at a competitor's theatre down the street. At the same time, the turns they presented could not consistently exceed the conventions of aesthetics or acceptability, for doing so could alienate paying customers. Thus, words like "polite," "pure," "wholesome," and "clean" became closely associated with vaudeville's marketing discourse, even if such promises were discursive rather than actual.

By the turn of the century, the landscape of the American economy had been forever transformed. Carefully conceived brands, national markets, and large bureaucratic companies dominated the scene. The age of the large corporation had dawned. "Such organizations hardly existed, outside of the railroads, before the 1880s. By 1900 they had become the basic business unit of American industry," notes Alfred Chandler.¹²⁸ Ambitious vaudeville impresarios like B.F. Keith, E.F. Albee, Martin Beck, and F.F. Proctor had brought the field of entertainment into the age of big business—or perhaps, vice-versa

particularly as it relates to early advertising strategies, see: Bryan Burrough and John Helyar, Barbarians at the Gate: the Fall of RJR Nabisco (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 29-30.

¹²⁷ "What Greater Vaudeville Promises This Winter," New York Times, 1 September 1907, part VI, p. 2:1. This too indicates the degree of talent flow between European music halls and American vaudeville theatres. Keith, Beck, and others sought out European acts to give their chains a product that would seem refined, unique, and, to some extent, exotic. In certain cases, the large vaudeville chains presented performers whose only appeal was their high-class European extraction. When a German woman named Olga Regina Von Hatzfeldt toured in 1903, promotional circulars made little mention of her performing talents. Rather, they publicized the fact that she was "a real countess," one whose father had fought a duel in Germany" and whose mother was "a German actress of aristocratic family," and whose heritage "dates back to as ancient a line of ancestry as the Hohenzollerns or Bismarcks." (Harrison Graves, Chase's Herald: Devoted to Polite Vaudeville, 26 January 1903, 1.) Where actual Europeans could not be supplied, American imitators and simulators filled in. In 1905, Everybody's magazine noted that one of the most popular acts in vaudeville was "Heloise Titcomb, an American girl... who out-Frenches the Parisians." (Hartley Davis, "In Vaudeville," Everybody's Magazine, August 1905, 240.)

¹²⁸ Alfred Chandler, "The Rise of Big Business," in Harry N. Schreiber, ed., United States Economic History: Selected Readings, (New York: Knopf, 1964), 358.

Yet there was a price to be paid for this dramatic transfiguration of trade and commerce. Whereas individuals had once engaged in economic transactions on a human scale, often being intimately familiar with the shopkeepers and local merchants and businessmen who supplied them their goods, they now had to contend with faceless entities who operated from afar. Whether one was a middleman, an employee, or an end customer, the entire process of transacting business took on a shocking new anonymity. According to economic historian Lawrence Glickman in A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society, the “mysteries of the market” now replaced “an earlier era of face-to-face economic transactions.”¹²⁹ No longer did individuals have at least the illusion of dealing with their merchants on a one-to-one basis. Instead, much of the power to determine choices of consumption lay out of their hands. People were subjected to what Stuart Ewen has called “the industrialization of daily life.” They were recipients in a vast system lorded over by strangers in cities far away. As Ewen observes of the period from about 1890 until 1920, “Increasingly, resources of survival were being produced by modern systems of mass manufacture.”¹³⁰

In The Search for Order, 1877-1920, historian Robert Wiebe describes some of the key changes in the way business came to be transacted during this time. Writes Wiebe:

Jobbers who had carried their random assortments from town to town, bargaining at each stop, simply could not manage a sufficient range of territory or goods, and by the early eighties the trend was running quickly toward integrated wholesale houses that supplied a basic line of groceries and dry goods through standard contracts. The old procedure—expensive, uncertain, and inefficient—had at the same time been a human one. A glass of whiskey, a few stories, some haggling and promises, and the local merchant had returned to work certain he was

¹²⁹ Lawrence Glickman, A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society, (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 125.

¹³⁰ Stuart Ewen, All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture, (Basic Books, 1988), 41.

master of his kingdom. Now he transacted most of his business from a price list.¹³¹

Americans, whether middlemen, retailers, consumers, or employees had to adjust. No longer were they able to believe that they were masters of their own domain. Writes Chester Wright in the Economic History of the United States, "The relatively close human relationship of former days was replaced by a hard, impersonal relationship such as was typical of the 'soulless corporation.'"¹³² Even earning a wage meant recognizing one's place in a large and increasingly complex economy dictated by outside forces. "An individual's security," writes Steven Diner in A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era, "depended increasingly on the activities of the corporation and the decisions of a few senior executives. Their own efforts and abilities seemed less important."¹³³ To participate, either as a consumer or a producer, meant to understand how one fit into a large, sometimes arcane scheme of contracts, systems, and hierarchies.

For their part, those increasingly in control of consumption and economics—the Keiths, the Albees, the Nabiscos, and the Searses—did not expect Americans to necessarily make this transition automatically or easily. "A population accustomed to homemade products and unbranded merchandise," writes Susan Strasser, "had to be converted into a national market for standardized, brand-named goods in general."¹³⁴ The mass-marketers understood that what was needed was more than a simple change in the way business was done. National-level advertisers, argues historian Roland Marchand, set about "assuaging anxieties of consumers about losses of community and

¹³¹ Wiebe, 48.

¹³² Wright, 607.

¹³³ Steven Diner, A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 4.

¹³⁴ Strasser, 7.

individual control”; their promotional discourse “lubricated an impersonal marketplace of vast scale” and permitted consumers “to comprehend the product on a personal scale.”¹³⁵ To support their enterprises, large-scale businessmen increasingly marshaled a rhetoric of cleanliness, purity, healthfulness, and honesty to further their economic aims. “National advertisers strove successfully to surround their products with a halo of uniformity and purity,” writes Jackson Lears in Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising.¹³⁶ Presciently, almost brilliantly, they appear to have understood how to counteract concerns about buying mass-marketed products from large, faceless corporations, often located in distant cities.

Take the case of Sears, Roebuck, the catalogue (and later, retail) business that dramatically altered purchasing habits in the United States. Richard Sears, who built the company in the late nineteenth century, had a tough job on his hands. Not only did he have to invent a process for advertising, selling, and shipping goods to diverse locations around the country, he had to convince the consumer that he was their ally in the same way that local stores and merchants had long been. According to Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck in their superb Catalogues and Counters: A History of Sears, Roebuck and Company, the consumer whom Sears sought to enlist was accustomed to filling his needs at the general store. The store, according to Emmet and Jeuck, constituted the “nexus between the wants of farms and villages and the ‘manufactories’... [the] store was the rendezvous, the oasis, the mecca...” and the storekeeper “was, in short, all things to all men.”¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Roland Marchand, Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), xxi, 9, 12.

¹³⁶ Jackson Lears, Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America, (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 171.

¹³⁷ Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, Catalogues: A History of Sears, Roebuck and Company, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 15-16.

Richard Sears, who started out selling watches as a railroad clerk, was not the first in the mail order business. Montgomery Ward started up operations in 1872, to be followed by Macy's in 1874, and Spiegel, May, and Stern in the early 1880s. But it was his persistent efforts at winning the trust of the prospective customer, his continual "assurance that the merchant with whom one dealt was honest, dependable, and financially reliable," that permitted him and his company to rise to a position of unparalleled success in the industry. For, just as much as he searched for a wide assortment of items to sell at modest prices, Sears made it his project to convince middle-class American consumers that purchasing goods from him was as safe and wholesome as purchasing goods from local merchants whose names, faces, and possibly families they knew and trusted. He recognized that many consumers were inherently suspicious about buying from mass marketers. But "Richard Sears set about to break this wall of suspicion," point out Emmet and Jeuck.¹³⁸

To that end, Sears developed a number of clever techniques and tactics. From his early days, he provided copious reminders that his goods were guaranteed to be authentic and fully refundable, no questions asked. For example, in 1892, the diamonds sold through his catalogue carried a "Guarantee and Refund Certificate," which stated: "We guarantee the diamond to be a genuine one and absolutely perfect stone, free from any imperfection whatsoever." Similar claims attended just about every product available through the Sears catalogue, be it crockery, bicycles, guns, fishing tackle, sporting goods, baby carriages, furniture, agricultural implements, buggies, harness saddles, sewing machines, boots, shoes, clothing, pianos, organs, musical instruments, watches, jewelry, diamonds, silverware, clocks, and the numerous other items he sold by the mid-1890s. It actually did not matter. In a sense, Sears was selling the promise of

¹³⁸ Emmet and Jeuck, 43.

authenticity and the integrity of his business practices every bit as much as he was selling gems or cream separators. It was this discursive entity as much as any material one that he wished the potential consumer to take note of and internalize, such that he or she might shift his or her patterns of consumption and permit himself or herself to become the target of mass-market merchandisers like Sears.

Sears also came up with the process of "Iowaization," whereby he shipped a number of Sears catalogues to one individual and then had that individual distribute them to members of his or her community. For obvious reasons, this built up trust in his concern more readily than receiving the Sears book directly from the company in the mail. Shrewd methods like Iowaization helped transfer the illusion of "a community attitude that would be quite appropriate when dealing with a local country storekeeper to the context of a mass-selling situation in which the merchant neither knew the purchaser nor cared about him as an individual."¹³⁹ Sears also included what appeared to be endorsements by outside journalists in his catalogues, signed "Editor." The "editor," of course, was himself, editor of the catalogue. Finally, Sears fetishized the notion of cash-on-delivery. "Others sold C.O.D.," argues Richard Tedlow, "but none were as proud of it as Sears. And none understood what an important gesture it was to the consumer. Sears knew that he had to trust the customer before he could ask for trust in return."¹⁴⁰

Through tactics such as these, designed to win the confidence and desires, no less than the pocketbooks, of prospective patrons, Richard Sears installed himself as a towering figure in the shift to a mass-market economy in the late 1890s. Sears, Roebuck, and Co. claimed sales and profits of \$2.8 million and \$141,000, respectively, in 1897. Thanks to his methods, those figures leapt to \$50.7 million and \$3.2 million a decade later. Perhaps more than any other individual in the mail order business, note Emmet and

¹³⁹ Tedlow, 271.

¹⁴⁰ Tedlow, 272.

Jeuck, Richard Sears paved the way for acceptance of “the great mail order colossi.”¹⁴¹ By 1906, the Sears corporation was receiving in excess of 900 sacks of mail—mostly orders—daily.¹⁴²

While Richard Sears turned words like “honesty” and “guarantee” into fetishized terms essential to conducting trade, a great many other mass marketers evinced a discourse that focused on purity, cleanliness, healthfulness, and freedom from contamination as a way of counteracting any prejudices potential customers may have had toward buying goods and services from impersonal entities based in far-away places. An examination of the advertising copy of the day reveals an obsession with terms like “pure,” “wholesome,” and “healthy” (see Figure 6). Here are some examples:

A Gillette Safety Razor ad from 1901 told the prospective customer that in addition to “no honing” and “no stropping,” he “will know what it means to enjoy a clean, comfortable, sanitary shave.” A Chiclets chewing gum ad from the same era not only touted the gum’s peppermint flavoring, but actually tried to sell the candy for its supposed medicinal qualities. “[Y]ou need but chew a Chiclet after eating a hearty meal to insure good digestion,” read the ad. An advertisement for Mennen’s “borated talcum toilet powder” not only extolled the product’s healing and soothing qualities but above all else reminded readers, “If MENNEN’s face is on the cover it’s GENUINE and a GUARANTEE of purity.” Ads for Ponds extract, a shaving lotion, warned readers, “Avoid imitations. Many are adulterated with active poisons. Refuse them.” Horlick’s, a popular brand of malted milk, which, if sold today, might make some claim to tasting good, told readers of its ads (adorned with pastoral scenes of a virginal young milkmaid and her cow), “Thousands of healthy and robust children have been raised entirely upon it. It is pure, rich milk, so modified and enriched with the extract of selected malted

¹⁴¹ Emmet and Jeuck, 31, 36, 43, 93-94, 150, 172.

¹⁴² Strasser, 213.

grains as to be easily digested by the weakest of stomachs.” Lifebuoy advertised itself as “health soap.” The product swore to kill germs and form a kind of protective layer from invading contaminants. Read its ad: “Everyone notices the clean, wholesome odor Lifebuoy has. Its antiseptic properties give it this pure, fresh odor of perfect health... The cocoanut and red palm oils in Lifebuoy are of great benefit in beautifying and softening the skin. But it is the antiseptic solution in Lifebuoy that makes it so remarkable in cleansing and purifying the skin.” Philip Morris cigarettes, in their ad, promised “Pure Turkish tobacco—nothing else,” while another ad for the same brand noted that the cigarettes were “perfectly blended in sunlit, sanitary, Government inspected factory...” Plexo face powder based its entire appeal on its sanitary qualities. “Why use an unsanitary Powder Puff at home,” read an ad from 1909, and carry the still more unsanitary Powder Rag while shopping, traveling, etc., when PLEXO Powder, the kind in a box with *the puff attached* entirely *eliminates* all this danger, bother, and expense.” White Rock, which heralded itself as “The World’s Best Table Water,” had yet to introduce its trademark nymph perched at a stream. But an ad from 1911 promised that the product was “Put up only in NEW Sterilized Bottles.” Lea & Perrins popular Worcestershire sauce not only added flavor to “soups, fish, chops, stews, game, gravies, salads, and cheese,” but it also possessed medicinal qualities. “It is a good digestive,” noted an advertisement from 1908. A 1907 ad for the famous Cracker Jack candies wasted little copy describing the confection’s taste or convenience. Rather, it pointed out that the product was sold “In Sealed ‘Triple Proof’ Packages.” The makers of Quaker Rice (Puffed) cereal told potential customers, in an advertisement depicting a rickshaw in the foreground and Mount Fuji in the background, “Quaker Rice has a charm of daintiness and deliciousness that is only equaled by its healthfulness and wholesomeness,” while another ad for the same product ensured that it “agrees perfectly with even the weakest stomach.” Ads for Sozodont, a popular tooth cleaning agent, said

nothing about the product's ability to clean teeth. Rather, they advanced the idea that it was free from contaminants of any kind. "Sozodont... is free from grit or any other substances that would be injurious to the teeth, gums or mouth, and should be the home dentifrice of all who are interested in the welfare of these vital organs, upon which so much depends for the general health of the body." Sozodont's product label said it was "A Vegetable Powder Prepared From A Collection of the Purest & Choicest Ingredients." Royal Baking Powder advertised itself as simply "Absolutely Pure." And Windham canned corn promised a "Pure and Wholesome" product above all else.¹⁴³

Richard Tedlow points out that Coca-Cola, one of the most successful of the early mass market products, relied on an advertising and publicity campaign aimed at convincing potential customers that Coke was as medicinal as it was flavorful. Coke advertising copy from 1905 states, "Coca-Cola is a delightful, Palatable, Healthful Beverage. It relieves fatigue..." (Pepsi ads from the era stated that the soft drink "aids digestion.") Susan Strasser states that Coca-Cola was originally sold as a headache remedy. In fact, Asa Candler, the man who built up the Coca-Cola company, long resisted selling his product in bottles, believing it should be dispensed in individual glasses at drug store counters, in part to underscore its use as a health aid. "He was a druggist and the picture in his head of his product—part medicine and part refreshment—was of an elixir to be consumed amidst the sociability of the fountain," writes Tedlow of Asa Candler.¹⁴⁴ Though Candler later relented, the initial tactic of pushing Coke as "healthful" was immensely successful. Coca-Cola sold twenty-five gallons of its product (which was Coca-Cola syrup) in 1886. By 1906, it was moving some 2.1 million gallons annually, and by 1916, just under 10 million gallons. As late as

¹⁴³ Various advertisements for products: Frank Presbrey, The History and Development of Advertising, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1929), 341; Strasser, 41-42.

¹⁴⁴ Strasser, 129; Tedlow, 355.

1924, Coca-Cola chief Robert Woodruff declared his product succeeded only by maintaining “the highest standards of purity.”¹⁴⁵ Other mass-marketers jumped on the bandwagon of promoting their products as medicinal. By the 1920s, states Roland Marchand, the makers of Fleischmann’s yeast were advertising their product as a remedy for “intestinal fatigue.”¹⁴⁶ In a sense, the promises of moral purity, cleanliness, and wholesomeness which the vaudeville marketers cast over their product were aimed at a similar goal. In order to sell a mass product to a public unused to it, one had to argue for its safety, its sterility, its freedom from any form of corruption or contamination—even if the truth was often otherwise.

Jackson Lears argues that a crucial shift in the approach taken by advertisers occurred as a mass, national market emerged in the late nineteenth century. According to Lears, one sees the birth of “therapeutic” advertising, which stressed purity, health, and bodily betterment. For Lears, this accompanied a change in the dominant culture’s moral values:

[T]he crucial moral change was the beginning of a shift from a Protestant ethos of salvation through self-denial toward a therapeutic ethos stressing self-realization in this world—an ethos characterized by an almost obsessive concern with psychic and physical health defined in sweeping terms... [and by] linking medical with moral standards of well being.¹⁴⁷

Accordingly, argues Lears, therapeutic advertising “arouse[d] consumer demand by associating products with imaginary states of well-being.”¹⁴⁸ Roland Marchand holds that advertisers played on consumers fears of loss of control in a mass-market society by drumming up “scare copy.” Notes Marchand: “Germs attacked, cars skidded out of

¹⁴⁵ Tedlow, 29, 50, 66, 70.

¹⁴⁶ Marchand, 17.

¹⁴⁷ Lears (1983), 4-6.

¹⁴⁸ Lears (1983), 19.

control, and neighbors cast disapproving glances.”¹⁴⁹ Fear of germs took the form of “concerns about ‘self-pollution’” argues Lears (elsewhere). Advertisers and entrepreneurs looking to do business on a mass scale implied that purity and physical well-being were essential components of the modern lifestyle. Writes Lears:

[A]dvertisers stressed not the exposure of corruption bred in filthy places (as muckrakers and other reformers had done) but the dissemination of a modernized standard of physical well-being. The nature of advertisers’ “power for good” was nowhere more visible, they claimed, than in the sanitation of Americans’ daily lives and personal appearance: the plumbing of bathrooms from Maine to California, the elimination of the American carnivore’s traditional greasy breakfast, the disappearance of beards and expansive stomachs among men, of body hair and facial blemishes among women.¹⁵⁰

Thus there emerged, in large measure due to national advertising, an increasingly purified vision of the body, and an ideal of healthful appearance and sanitized living conditions. This diverged from dominant cultural ideals of the early nineteenth century. “What had once been a set of pious maxims about cleanliness,” notes Lears, “had become an almost obsessive desire for a sanitary environment.”¹⁵¹

Kathryn Kish Sklar, in her article “The Consumers’ White Label Campaign of the National Consumers’ League, 1898-1918,” suggests that nascent consumer groups around the turn of the century “moralize(d) the relationship between consumers and producers.” They did so by equating unsanitary or impure products with immorality and society’s lower classes. “Clean and healthful,” states Sklar, came to betoken “middle class.” She elaborates: “Middle-class consumers were taught to fear that such garments [lacking the imprimatur of a certain consumer group] might import smallpox, diphtheria, or other diseases into their homes.” The turn-of-the-century consumer was led to believe that products could be either “righteously made and clean” or “degradingly made and

¹⁴⁹ Marchand, 14.

¹⁵⁰ Lears (1994), 160.

¹⁵¹ Lears (1994), 173.

unclean.”¹⁵² Thus, as advertisers and businessmen were disseminating a rhetoric of purity aimed at assuaging anxieties over mass-market consumption, consumer groups were propagating a discourse of morality that was inextricably linked with healthfulness, purity, and moral soundness.

Another strain of discourse employed by the emergent mass marketers—one related to that which focused on purity and healthfulness—stressed the authenticity, originality, or uniqueness of the product in question. Here it is likely that businessmen were anticipating anxieties over buying products produced en masse by unskilled or semi-skilled laborers in far away factories. For example, Fatima Turkish, a popular brand of cigarette, used “Distinctively Individual” as its oft-repeated advertising slogan. Hall & Ruckel, makers of Sozodont, advertised their Depilatory Powder with the following lead-in copy: “The first thing one desires to know about a depilatory powder, is, whether it is genuine.” It is possible, of course, that the first thing one desires to know about a depilatory powder is whether or not it removes hair effectively. But Hall & Ruckel hung their hopes on a different, and apparently effective, strain of rhetoric. So too did the makers of the “W.L. Douglas \$3 Shoe for Gentleman,” whose ads stated: “Caution, W.L. Douglas’s name and price are stamped on the bottom of all shoes advertised by him before leaving his factory... do not be induced to buy shoes that have no reputation. But only those that have W.L. Douglas’s name and price stamped on the bottom.” Eastman Kodak’s famous Land Camera advertised not only its ease of use but the importance of buying only the genuine article. “If it isn’t an Eastman, It isn’t a Kodak,” stated its advertising copy. And Jordan Motor cars advertised the virtues of a “personal, individual, intimate car.”¹⁵³ In an era when the market began to be flooded

¹⁵² Kathryn Kish Sklar, “The Consumer’s White Label Campaign of the National Consumers’ League, 1898-1918,” in Strasser, McGovern, Judt, eds., 17-19, 27.

¹⁵³ Presbrey, 349, 402; Marchand, 22.

with goods that looked alike and came from distant, anonymous sources, assurances of authenticity and originality allayed anxieties that one might somehow stray or make a mistake at consumption. “[C]onsumers wanted to believe that exclusiveness was still fully compatible with an age of mass-produced goods,” argues Roland Marchand. Fittingly, advertisements often assuaged “fears of inundation by the mob.”¹⁵⁴ It was the mass scale of the new commercial society that businessmen sought implicitly to address. “The advertising which attempted to create the dependable mass of consumers required by modern industry often did so by playing upon the fears and frustrations evoked by mass society,” writes Stuart Ewen in Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture.¹⁵⁵

One also sees a concern over authenticity and individuality amid the vaudeville producers and performers of the era. As early commodities of mass-market entertainment, vaudeville performers went to great efforts to advertise their authenticity or to point out that they had developed a particular routine, dance step, or piece of stage business. This was especially crucial in an age when intellectual property protections rarely extended to popular culture. Popular vaudeville performer Irene Franklin took out a large, attention-grabbing advertisement in the New York Clipper in 1910 after she secured an injunction against Edna Luby who had performed a song called “I’m a-Bringing Up the Family,” of which Franklin claimed ownership. “Irene Franklin Wins!,” read the advertisement. “Hear Ye! Hear Ye! Yes, the new Copyright Law will protect your original material. NOW it looks bad for the thieving numbskulls who live, like human leeches, by stealing material of proved value. Our fight is the fight of every originator, and our object is to drive the bunk mimic and imitator into honest vaudeville and honest applause... NOTE—Once Again I say, if You Want to Do an Imitation of

¹⁵⁴ Marchand, 205, 269.

¹⁵⁵ Ewen (1976), 45.

Miss Franklin, Sing 'RED-HEAD[.]' Brother [White] Rats and Friends will do me a great favor by wiring me of any attempt to use any of Our New Songs [including] 'I DON'T CARE WHAT BECOMES OF ME,' 'I WON'T SEND THE PRESENTS BACK,' 'THE PRIMA DONNA FROM AVENUE B.' 'I'VE GOT THE MUMPS.'" [and] 'THE PONY BALLET GIRL[.]'"¹⁵⁶

The theatrical trade papers of the day are full of similar advertisements, protests, and warnings about ownership, originality, and copyright infringement. As Irene Franklin's ad indicates, they were usually sarcastic, vitriolic, and bilious. "Maurice Burkhart is the Thief of Vaudeville," read an ad in Variety, which claimed Burkhart "GOT CAUGHT at the COLONIAL, NEW YORK this week doing the Most Original Single Act on the stage written by BLANCHE MERRILL." Shortly thereafter, Variety announced the creation of its "Protected Material Department," which offered to register "stage dialogue, business, or title" free of charge for the performer afraid of piracy.¹⁵⁷

Authenticity and originality—or the appearance thereof—were important traits for the commercial survival of the vaudeville artist. This even extended to matters of personal style and dress. "The trouble with the average vaudeville artiste is that she doesn't display enough individuality in dressing. She is content to go into a ready-to-wear shop and choose what she considers pretty, only to find a dozen others wearing the same dress," wrote one trade paper.¹⁵⁸ As we will see in the next chapter, some performers, like Valeska Suratt, achieved distinction and individuality explicitly through the use of clothing. But it was one more burden on the single performer in a huge entity that increasingly treated artists as interchangeable commodity elements—which in a sense they were.

¹⁵⁶ New York Clipper, 8 January 1910, 1217.

¹⁵⁷ Variety, 21 January 1916, 5; 4 February 1916, 5.

¹⁵⁸ Variety, 26 December 1914, 36.

If, by the 1880s and onward, mass marketers selling their goods, and vaudevillians, had hit upon the idea of pushing their products' purity, healthfulness, and authenticity, it was a relatively recent development—and one tied directly to reaching a newly galvanized, diverse market that was national, or even international, in scope. Notes Frank Presbrey in The History and Development of Advertising, as late as the 1870s, following the lead of patent medicine advertisers, "[E]ither the dishonest or the flippant style of copy" was the predominant mode of mass promotion. But in a short number of years, that approach began to change. Attempting to appeal to a more refined class of customer, certain businessmen began to include not only the appearance of honesty in their marketing schemes, but began to advertise honesty itself. "WIT: If we were giving instructions how to shop, the first thing should be: buy of a merchant who is himself above trickery," stated a late 1870s advertisement by retailers Lord & Taylor.¹⁵⁹ Retailers and catalogue merchants in fact led the charge against specious and sensationalistic advertising. When John Wanamaker began offering guarantees for the quality of his goods, it was "startling to businessmen at the time." By 1900, the "showman's tricks on the public were discarded as not suitable for a mercantile business." The Wanamaker model had replaced that of Barnum.¹⁶⁰

As the market for goods and services began to grow, so too did the modern profession of advertising. Individuals who presented themselves as adept at understanding the consumption patterns of the emergent mass-market customer began increasingly to plan and execute national marketing campaigns. Though the first advertising agency in the United States was founded in Philadelphia in 1845, firms such as N.W. Ayer began to change the goal and function of advertising professionals from

¹⁵⁹ Presbrey, 302, 307.

¹⁶⁰ Presbrey, 329, 336.

the 1880s onward.¹⁶¹ The “mere space-selling type” of agency began to decrease in importance, and in its place, according to Presbrey, emerged the firm that “analyzed and planned, and, instead of doing only what the advertiser proposed, made suggestions based on its own general experience and its own investigation into the advertiser’s special problem.”¹⁶² Thinkers began to expatiate on the most effective means of reaching the mass market. In 1903, Walter Dill Scott, a professor at Northwestern University published the first book ever on the psychology of advertising. In it, Scott argued for “deeper emotional appeals” to the prospective customer rather than merely stating what a product was and why one ought to spend money on it.¹⁶³ Noted an advertising professional in Harper’s Monthly Magazine, “If I were to name the qualities that enter into good advertising, I should say, first, imagination; second, knowledge of human nature; and third a little more knowledge of human nature.”¹⁶⁴ Advertising and marketing professionals had come to see themselves as social scientists, delving into the core of culture’s collective desires in order to produce measurable economic results. It was their gift to motivate the consumer as such, rather than simply informing him of his choices once he had already made a decision to buy. “Half of the customers in any community do not know all they want until somebody tells them,” wrote social observer Nathaniel Fowler in 1889.¹⁶⁵

If those in the advertising industry increasingly saw themselves as powerful manipulators of the desires of a great many Americans, they had good reason to. For as

¹⁶¹ Stephen Fox, The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising, (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1984), 14-16. Ayer conducted the “first crude marketing survey” according to James Playstead Wood in The Story of Advertising (New York: Ronald Press, 1958), 244, on behalf of makers of farm machinery.

¹⁶² Presbrey, 348.

¹⁶³ Cochran, 125.

¹⁶⁴ Lorin F. Deland, “At the Sign of the Dollar,” Harper’s Monthly Magazine, (March 1917), 526.

¹⁶⁵ Presbrey, 315.

the country grew together into a cognizable network of consuming patterns, few could avoid the siren call of mass promotion. Wrote Nathaniel Fowler in the 1890s, "There is no stratum of society not reached and influenced by advertising. The bluest-blue-blood descendent of the oldest family, who prides himself upon his impenetrability from things common, is affected and proves that he is by saying that he isn't. In no place within reach of the mail can there exist an impregnable spot."¹⁶⁶ Advertising professional Lorin Deland, looking back at the developments of his industry since the 1880s, wrote: "Forty years ago a daily newspaper was supported by its subscribers, advertising yielding about thirty-five percent of the total receipts; recently, in the case of a few papers, it has yielded as high as ninety per cent., and the revenue from subscriptions is almost negligible; so it is evident that advertising and fortunes are related in the public mind."¹⁶⁷ Advertising and marketing professionals began to view most Americans as contributing to the "public mind," and it was this entity that they believed themselves able to analyze, understand, and manipulate accordingly. No longer could claims to social status, education, or taste protect one from the discourse of mass marketing. Wherever a magazine, a newspaper, or a billboard could be situated, the advertiser's war of attrition could be waged. "[I]t is scarcely more than a score of years since magazines were without this feature [ads] that now receives hardly less attention than the text itself," noted Cosmopolitan in 1902.¹⁶⁸ In the often chaotic, densely populated world of the American city, exposure to advertising was merely part of the fabric of daily life. The sumptuous copy and illustrations of print advertising "transformed commodities into

¹⁶⁶ Presbrey, 312.

¹⁶⁷ Deland, 525.

¹⁶⁸ John Brisben Walker, "Beauty in Advertising Illustration," Cosmopolitan, September 1902, 491.

desirable items.” notes historian Rudi Laermans.¹⁶⁹ Consumption became a desirable thing in its own right, apart from the particular goods sought after.¹⁷⁰

It was in part to win this war, then, that advertisers and their clients began to rely on the discourse of purity. By stressing the sterility or healthfulness of a given product, businessmen were anticipating and allaying anxieties over the purchase of mass market goods. By 1898, Ivory Soap’s marketing copy reminded consumers that it was “99 and 44/100 percent pure,” though it failed to say pure from *what*. The New York Times contained “All the News That’s Fit to Print,” and nothing else. Cleveland Baking Powder was “Pure and Sure.” Shredded Wheat touted the fact that it contained “nothing but the wheat,” while Gorham’s line of silverware claimed buying its product was “a guarantee for pure metal.” And Pear’s Soap advertised itself with a short poem conveying its freedom from contaminants: “I will for aye its patron be/And praise its matchless purity.” Following the Uneeda Biscuit campaign of the 1890s, there began “constant hammering on sanitation by manufacturers of package goods.” The makers of Schlitz beer promoted the fact that each bottle was steam-cleaned prior to being filled with the product. Some businesses linked discussions of purity to questions of taste and refinement. Standard Manufacturing Co. of Pittsburgh, makers of bathtubs and toilets, ran the following advertising copy in 1890: “Ask Your Wife If she would not like to bathe in a china dish, like her canary does. Our Porcelain-lined Bath Tub is a china dish cased in iron. SANITARY, DURABLE, CHEAP.”¹⁷¹ Others linked purity to religion. An 1889 advertisement for Pear’s Soap carried a testimonial by famed preacher Reverend Henry Ward Beecher: “If cleanliness is next to Godliness, soap must be considered as a

¹⁶⁹ Rudi Laermans, “Summary of Learning to Consume: Early Department Stores and the Shaping of the Modern Consumer,” in Neva Goodwin, Frank Ackerman, and David Kiron, eds., The Consumer Society, (Washington, D.C. and Covelo, California: Island Press, 1997), 139.

¹⁷⁰ See: McGovern.

¹⁷¹ Presbrey, 368-69, 389, 402, 426; and Wood, 289.

means of Grace and a clergyman who recommends Moral things should be willing to recommend soap."¹⁷²

Understandably, soap manufacturers were in a logical position to advance the promise of purity. In England, the makers of Sunlight Soap offered £1,000 if users found "any impurity."¹⁷³ In America, in 1900, the makers of Sapolio soap, through rhyming verse and whimsical illustrations, crafted an imaginary world that was utterly and completely free of contamination of any kind. They called their pretend hamlet "Spotless Town." Several of its verses went:

This is the maid of fair renown
 Who Scrubs the floors of Spotless Town,
 To find a spec when she is through
 Would take a pair of specs or two
 And her employment isn't slow
 For she employs SAPOLIO

I am the mayor of Spotless Town
 The brightest man for miles around
 The shining light of wisdom can
 Reflect from such a polished man
 And so I say to high and low
 The brightest use SAPOLIO.

¹⁷² James Playstead Wood, The Story of Advertising, (New York: Ronald Press, 1958), 224.

¹⁷³ Wood, 238.

This is the butcher of Spotless Town.
 His tools are bright as his renown
 To leave them stained were indiscreet.
 For folks would then abstain from meat.
 And so he brightens his trade, you know.
 By polishing with

SAPOLIO¹⁷⁴

Not only had they appealed to a fetish for cleanliness and sterility, but the makers of Sapolio had linked such preoccupations to wisdom and intelligence

Soap makers were not the only ones who created a fictional world of cleanliness To emphasize their clean-burning anthracite coal, the Lackawana Railroad advertised its services with the character “Phoebe Snow,” a maiden in a pure white dress who rode the rails. “Said Phoebe Snow/About to go/Upon a trip to Buffalo:/My gown keeps white/Both day and night/Upon the Road of Anthracite... When nearly there/Her only care/Is but to smooth/her auburn hair/Her face is bright./Her frock still white/Upon the Road of Anthracite.”¹⁷⁵ The Lackawana ads conflated cleanliness with notions of maidenly virtue and beauty—a tactic that had surfaced elsewhere, as we shall shortly see.

Other advertisers seized upon the idea of feminine beauty and modesty as their versions of purity. A *Cosmopolitan* piece on fashion advertising noted a trend toward the use of “pretty faces and graceful figures” in advertisements of “a highly superior order

¹⁷⁴ Wood, 250-51.

¹⁷⁵ Wood, 256-57.

of merit because of beauty of face and raiment.” But, the article noted, there were certain lines that had not to be crossed in the creation of successful mass marketing campaigns: “At one time there was a disposition to use indelicate drapings. But in the course of time it came to be understood that good taste required that everything offensive should be eliminated, and that that advertisement was most effective which attracted all and offended none.”¹⁷⁶

Inevitably, the advertising industry began turning the discourse of purity and honesty inward, promoting its own operations as august, square-dealing, and above reproach. In The Story of Advertising, James Playstead Wood observes that N.W. Ayer, one of the first successful national advertising agencies, presented itself as “chaste, dignified, and solemn” in ads for its own services. By 1911, the Advertising Federation of America, a group comprised of the leading companies in the industry, publicly “declared” that they were “for ethical advertising.”¹⁷⁷ About this time, the Curtis Publishing Company, which put out Ladies’ Home Journal and The Saturday Evening Post and the recipient of a great sum of yearly advertising dollars, created its vaunted “Advertising Code,” which was soon to be copied by many other major publishing concerns in the United States. In its Code, Curtis publicly proclaimed, “We exclude all advertising that in any way tends to deceive, defraud, or injure our readers... Extravagantly worded advertisements are not accepted... Advertising of an immoral or suggestive nature is not allowed, and representations of the human form are not acceptable in any suggestive negligee or attitude.” In addition, Curtis swore to forbid advertisements for medical or alcoholic goods, ads which “knocked” other products, ads

¹⁷⁶ Brisben Walker, 494-97.

¹⁷⁷ Wood, 245.

from real estate speculators, and tried to discourage promotions for goods that could be bought on installment plans.¹⁷⁸

The message was clear: behind the organs of the emerging mass media supposedly were men with standards and integrity, men who could determine the rules of consumption better than the consumer herself. Like the vaudeville impresarios, they pulled the strings and kept the typical consumer safe from the potential pitfalls of the mass-marketed product. Little wonder that Columbia bicycles trumpeted the fact that its vehicles were “inspected in every detail by 21 engineers and mechanics.”¹⁷⁹ The more engineers, mechanics, scientists, and patriarchal protectors working together the better.

Promises like those of the Curtis and Columbia companies played well in a culture increasingly preoccupied with the potential hazards of mass consumption. Such concerns ran highest in urban markets where denizens were particularly dependent on faceless mass market goods. As might be predicted, worries over mass consumption often took the form of worries over disease, impurity, and contamination. “Bacteria exist by millions in every pinch of dust of the city street; they swarm in dust that the whole family inhales when the housemaid sweeps or beats a carpet. They settle on bread as it comes from the bakery. We cannot possibly hope to escape ingesting a certain number of them,” warned a Cosmopolitan article from 1913 titled “The Battle of the Microbes.” The message was clear: life in the city, a manner of existence inextricably linked to depersonalized mass consumption, was also a life replete with the threat of toxicity. Those least able to fend for themselves, those most innocent, were at the greatest risk. “At every other tick of the clock a baby dies, most of them killed by carelessness. Give the baby pure milk, and he will almost certainly live,” warned the same article. The germs, poisons, and toxins inherent in the world of the urban consumer were seen not

¹⁷⁸ Wood, 335-38.

¹⁷⁹ Presbrey, 412.

merely as arbitrary agents of nature but instead as rapacious invaders, possessed of an ill will all their own. Wrote Cosmopolitan:

[E]veryone read with horror a few weeks ago that ten thousand Turks were reported to have fallen in a single battle with the Bulgarians; the newspapers scare-headed the accounts from ocean to ocean. But no newspaper thought to mention that many times ten thousand victims had fallen on the same day before microbic foes that are far more relentless than Turk or Bulgar... they are treacherous ingrates: for, even as they bivouac under a flag of truce on your bodily surfaces, exterior and interior, they are forever on the lookout for an opportunity to invade your blood-stream and lymph-spaces; and when the opportunity comes, they will wage a guerilla warfare as ruthless as that waged by any one of the frankly hostile bacteria.

Thus, the microscopic contaminants that especially haunted urban locales, were cunning, deceptive, and “frankly hostile”: they sought to fight a ruthless war, one based on “guerilla” tactics. These threats, like those of Communism in a later era, were labeled variously, “The foe that is always with us,” and lethal “invaders” that had no trouble rounding up “recruits” with which to storm “[t]he barriers that hold them at bay—the walls and barricades of the human fortress....” Maintenance of the pure, the fresh, the wholesome was the key weapon humankind had to win this war—for example, “perfectly fresh milk (which is obviously impossible for the city dweller).” Unless such *materiel* were deployed, the infectants latent in store-bought goods would almost certainly overwhelm those least prepared to do battle: “Some market milk has 5,000,000 bacteria in a single drop—and a baby dies at every other tick of the clock.”¹⁸⁰

Others blamed those already sick, in addition to an urban environment of mass consumption. “The expectoration of a consumptive,” wrote one C.D. Zimmerman in a letter to Scientific American, “may contain millions of germs. Falling on the sidewalk of a city, it is soon tracked over a large area and gradually mixed with dust; the same on the street, especially on asphalt pavements, where each wheel acts as a milestone, grinding

¹⁸⁰ Stoddard Goodhue, “The Battle of the Microbes,” Cosmopolitan, September 1913, 434–42.

everything into the finest powder, to be raised by passing vehicles into the air and sent into thousands of healthy lungs... City streets should be kept scrupulously clean by hand labor, preferable to machines, and thoroughly sprinkled from four to ten times a day."¹⁸¹

On the one hand, with the potential for influenza and tuberculosis outbreaks in a highly contagious urban clime, concerns over public health, to be sure, may have reflected a realistic fear of disease.¹⁸² Yet on the other hand, the burgeoning urban environment was perceived as a chaotic and potentially lethal place, out of the control of traditional social forces. To combat its myriad inchoate dangers, the strictest vigilance, sanitation, and human "hand labor" were needed. In promising cleanliness, bowdlerization, and censorship, the promoters of vaudeville—the mass entertainment product of urban America—were similarly engaged in a timely and appropriate war of propaganda.

¹⁸¹ C.D. Zinneman, "Dust—is it Dangerous?," Scientific American, 18 April 1903, 299.

¹⁸² Although, the more one looks at the matter of germ-born disease at the turn of the century, the more one is struck with the fact that by about the first two decades of the twentieth century, infectious diseases were well on their way to being genuinely under control. The rise of "germ theory" began in the 1870s and 1880s with Pasteur's discovery of the anthrax microbe and Koch's discovery of the microorganism that spread cholera. These advances were followed by a typhoid vaccine in 1896 and a tuberculosis vaccine for humans shortly after the First World War. [J.N. Hays, The Burden of Disease: Epidemics and Human Response in Western History, (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 150; and William H. McNeill, Plagues and Peoples, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976), 267.]. Of anthrax and tuberculosis, states McNeill, "neither of these infections spread in a dramatically epidemic fashion" [McNeill, 267]. Even the vaunted influenza epidemic of 1918-19 did not hit the United States as hard as it might have: "[I]ts most dreadful effects were outside the Western world," states Hays [272]. Writes John Duffy in The Sanitarians: A History of American Public Health (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990): "By 1900 a good many pathogenic organisms had been identified; the role of insects and other vectors in the spread of disease had been discovered; antitoxins had been created to treat the victims of certain diseases; and vaccines were appearing on a scale large enough to protect entire populations" [126]. Overall death rates for infectious diseases dropped precipitously in the years 1900 to 1920. For tuberculosis, the rate dropped from 194.4 deaths per 100,000 population to 140.1; for typhoid, from 31.3 to 11.8; and for diphtheria, from 40.3 to 15.2 [U.S Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Bicentennial Edition, Part 1, (Washington, D.C., 1975), 58. This was even true for densely-populated urban areas. In Chicago, deaths by dysentery per 100,000 population dropped from 603 to 81 between the years 1850 and 1920; deaths by diphtheria from 291 to 24; by typhoid, from 174 to 2; and smallpox, 230 to 0.5 [George Rosen, Preventative Medicine in the United States, 1900-1975: Trends and Interpretations, (New York: Prodist,

In addition to being perceived as medical threats, those stricken with illness were blamed for their maladies, the belief being that the microscopic disorder must reflect some underlying moral or psychological shortcoming. "When a person is sick," noted Cosmopolitan, "it is a sign that the laws of nature, i.e., the laws of God, have not been complied with... The causes usually—lack of will, and ignorance." In some cases, the villains were vices such as "much tobacco... alcoholic drink, drugs, pickles, and all other queer things...." But the net result was the same: "The world is full of weak, unhappy miserable, people—people who are sick or who think they are sick."¹⁸³

If sickness reflected vice, then health was naturally the result of virtue. Women who strove after beauty and household industriousness, for example, would be less likely to fall ill to microscopic invaders, some believed. Dr. Louise Fiske Bryson, a reformer of the 1890s who lectured to girls and young women, "affirmed that systematic efforts to be beautiful will insure a fair degree of health and that happiness is the best safeguard against vice," according to an article in Scientific American. Bryson also argued that bathing, proper breathing, and good circulation would result from and produce further beauty. Exercise could be helpful as well, and there was "no exercise more beneficent in their results than sweeping, dusting, making beds, washing dishes, and the polishing of brass and silver. One year of such muscular effort within doors, together with exercise in the open air, will do more for a woman's complexion than all the lotions and pomades that were ever invented."¹⁸⁴ Lotions and pomades, after all, were just the sort of widely advertised, early mass-market goods that many reformers distrusted, despite the products' repeated claims of purity and freedom from contaminants.

1977), 4.]. In Chicago, typhoid deaths dropped from 67 per 100,000 population in the mid-1890s to 14 in 1910 to 1 in 1919—the lowest rate in the nation.

¹⁸³ Elbert Hubbard, "Is it a Disgrace to be Sick?," Cosmopolitan, October 1904, 742–43.

¹⁸⁴ "Beauty as a Means of Health," Scientific American, 2 May 1891, 273.

Cultural concerns over the purity of mass market goods found their greatest discursive and material expression in the Federal Food and Drugs Act, usually called the Pure Food and Drug Act, which was signed into law by President Teddy Roosevelt on June 30, 1906. But it was not Roosevelt who was the driving force behind the Pure Food act, despite his attempt to take credit for it later in his career.¹⁸⁵ Rather, it was Harvey Wiley, chief chemist of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and zealot in the struggle against “adulterated” foods produced by corporate concerns and sold to a supposedly naïve public. It was Wiley more than any other single figure of the era who devoted himself to “the whole matter of wholesomeness and unwholesomeness of ingredients in foods,” as he put it in his enigmatic, self-published tome, The History of a Crime Against the Food Law.¹⁸⁶

Harvey Washington Wiley was born in the countryside near Kent, Indiana in 1844. His father was a farmer and lay preacher. Religion, self-discipline, virtue, and moderation were stressed constantly in the Wiley household. As a boy, Wiley taught himself to read, taking to the Bible, Shakespeare, the Atlantic Monthly, Uncle Tom's Cabin, and John Abbott's The History of Napoleon Bonaparte. Wiley entered nearby Hanover College in 1862 where he remained for two years until he joined the 137th Regiment of the Indiana Volunteers, though he never saw active service in the Civil War.¹⁸⁷

Upon returning to civilian life, Wiley began developing an interest in health, nutrition, and vice. For Wiley, the body was a delicate and well-balanced machine, but one that waited to betray its owner should she or he ingest impurities or toxins of any

¹⁸⁵ Oscar E. Anderson, Jr., The Health of a Nation: Harvey W. Wiley and the Fight for Pure Food, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958), 190.

¹⁸⁶ Reprint: Harvey W. Wiley, The History of a Crime Against the Food Law, (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 4. (Originally published 1929.)

¹⁸⁷ Anderson, 2-6.

kind. Life, in Wiley's view, was "no idle gift... Man must be careful to preserve it." The "gross intemperate man," he wrote, would find himself with a body "made up of foul bundles of impurities, a miserable mass of tobacco, pork, and grease" should he treat his physical being idly.¹⁸⁸ Though never an openly religious man, Wiley seems to have transformed the sectarian zealotry of his childhood home into a kind of scientific and biological sectarianism. Certainly, self-righteousness resonated loudly in everything he did. "I had the good fortune to be ranged on the side of right in every important contest I can remember," he once said.¹⁸⁹ Others noted Wiley's penchant for fanaticism and prognostication. "I have referred to Wiley as a prophet," wrote a journalist in the Nation in 1916, "and it is no mere figure of speech. He is never at a loss for a prophecy...." The same journalist described Wiley as "a preacher of purity."¹⁹⁰

In 1868, Wiley began an apprenticeship in medicine with several local country doctors. The following year he started (a somewhat more) formal medical training by enrolling at the Indiana Medical College. Inspired by visits to local bath houses, a bit like Ibsen's Dr. Stockmann in An Enemy of the People, he began formulating theories on sanitation and diet. Despite his growing interest in science, though, Wiley was also a keen student of literature and the arts, teaching courses in Latin and Greek at Northwestern Christian University in Indianapolis in 1869.¹⁹¹ But it was poetry that interested him most among the humanities. Throughout his life, Wiley penned numerous poems about food adulteration and contamination. For example:

We sit at a table delightfully spread.

¹⁸⁸ Anderson, 8.

¹⁸⁹ Bernard A. Weisberger, "Doctor Wiley and His Poison Squad," American Heritage, February/March, 1996, 14.

¹⁹⁰ Tattler, "Notes from the Capital: A Preacher of Purity," Nation, 27 July 1916, 79-80.

¹⁹¹ Anderson, 9-11.

And teeming with good things to eat,
 And daintily finger the cream-tinted bread.
 Just need to make it complete
 A film of the butter so yellow and sweet.
 Well suited to make every minute
 A dream of delight. And yet while we eat
 We cannot help asking "What's in it?"
 Oh, maybe this bread contains alum and chalk.
 Or sawdust chopped up very fine.
 Or gypsum in powder about which they talk.
 Terra Alba just out of the mine.
 And our faith in the butter is apt to be weak.
 For we haven't a good place to pin it
 Annato's so yellow and beef fat so sleek.
 Oh, I wish I could know what is in it?
 The pepper perhaps contains cocoanut shells.
 And the mustard is cottonseed meal:
 The coffee, in sooth, of baked chicory smells.
 And the terrapin tastes like roast veal.
 The wine which you drink never heard of a grape.
 But of tannin and coal tar is made:

And you could not be certain, except for their shape.

That the eggs by a chicken were laid,

And the salad which bears such an innocent look

And whispers of fields that are green,

Is covered with germs, each armed with a hook,

To grapple with liver and spleen.

No matter how tired and hungry and dry,

The banquet how fine: don't begin it

Till you think of the past and the future and sigh.

"Oh, I wonder, I wonder, what's in it."¹⁹²

When Wiley looked at the cornucopia of mass-produced foods, despite its diversity and convenience, he saw the potential for harm lying everywhere just beneath the surface. Food in its pure, Platonic state was not inherently harmful, he believed. But when compromised for economic reasons, it turned into perhaps mankind's greatest threat. "[A]ssuming that the food of man, as prepared by the Creator and modified by the cook, is the normal food of man, any change in the food which adds a burden to any of the organs, or any change which diminishes their normal functional activity, must be hurtful," he wrote.¹⁹³

By his late twenties, Wiley had become a devout Darwinist and student of the dictates of rationality and science. He enrolled at Harvard and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 1873 and, following this, took a teaching position at Purdue. During his tenure at that university, Wiley traveled to Berlin where he familiarized himself with

¹⁹² In: Anderson, 126-27.

¹⁹³ Wiley, 24.

European research on impurities in food and drink. (By the 1870s, England, Germany, and Sweden had all enacted food purity statutes.) But it was in 1883, the same year that Keith and Albee formed their famous partnership, that Wiley's life was to take a fateful turn. For in that year he began working in Washington, D.C. as a chemist for the Department of Agriculture, eventually heading the Department's Bureau of Chemistry.¹⁹⁴

Upon arriving at his new post, Wiley undertook to resolve the great "sorghum question." It was his belief that the crop sorghum could yield sugar more cheaply and in greater quantity than either cane or beet. Developing a process for doing so would permit America to foster a robust domestic sugar industry. Political struggles and changes in administration sandbagged his efforts, however, and he turned his attention to the matter of food purity. Wiley broadly termed it the problem of food "adulteration." He saw adulteration as "not merely the debasement of a product but broadly as any purposeful change that altered its composition or the meaning of the name under which it was sold," according to Oscar Anderson, Jr., Wiley's biographer. In Wiley's eye's, "[W]ith the industrialization and urbanization of the Western world, the shift from domestic to commercial supplying and processing of food had accelerated. Adulteration followed commerce and manufacture."¹⁹⁵

For Wiley, then, concerns over food impurities were really anxieties over a new market in which trade was largely anonymous, solely profit-driven, and focused on an urban market. Argues Anderson in The Health of a Nation: Harvey W. Wiley and the Fight for Pure Food, "To maintain the integrity of the food supply, an ancient problem, had become more difficult with the advancing years. As processing shifted from home to factory, competition intensified, and manufacturers, their ethical standards dulled by the

¹⁹⁴ Anderson, 12-27, 70.

¹⁹⁵ Anderson, 69.

impersonality of their function, debased their goods in the struggle to survive.”¹⁹⁶ It is possible, even likely, of course, that small-scale manufacturers and merchants operating in an earlier, less depersonalized era, cut corners and “adulterated” the products they sold as well. Therefore, it was the anxiety of industrialization, urbanization, and the move toward mass selling that may have underscored the concerns of Wiley and others like him at the time.

In 1887, Wiley issued his first report on food impurities, titled Food and Food Adulterants. In it, he and his fellow chemists at the Department of Agriculture, declared that they had found milk to be watered down; butter to contain large amounts of margarine; spices rife with husks, dirt, crumbs, and charcoal; wine that contained water; lard that was extended with cottonseed oil; baking powder that was cut with salt; coffee that was inflated with chicory, acorns, and sawdust; and canned vegetables dressed in harmful coloring agents. In some cases, the foods contained adulterants that held the potential to make a person genuinely sick. But in others, the adulterants were really harmless additives that detracted only from the trade value of the item in question, such as water in wine or, in another instance, table sugar or molasses in maple syrup.¹⁹⁷ Thus, to Wiley, “impure” came to mean not only deleterious but misleading, misadvertised, or misbranded as well. In other words, the struggle against food impurity was as much a struggle against emergent modes of industrial mass production, promotion, and selling, supported by an anonymous discourse that publicized *en masse* without being responsive to the individual.

By 1900, Wiley had his sights set on forcing the government to enact sweeping food and drug legislation. Beginning in 1902, he began an experimental procedure aimed at advancing this end both through the accrual of knowledge and for the publicity it

¹⁹⁶ Anderson, 120.

¹⁹⁷ Anderson, 72-73, 129.

would garner. Wiley gathered a group of young men, all volunteers, and fed them only foods, for months at a stretch, adulterated with a number of substances Wiley thought especially pernicious and commonly employed by food manufacturers. The substances included borax, formaldehyde, and saltpeter. "They signed a pledge to eat nothing or drink nothing excepting what we gave them at the table. They signed a pledge to pursue their ordinary vocations with any excesses and to take their ordinary hours of sleep. They agreed that they would collect and present to us every particle of their secreta." Wiley told Congress during the Pure Food and Drug hearings. "Up to this time," he later wrote, "no such extensive experiment on human beings had been planned anywhere in the world." The public was immediately fascinated with Wiley's undertaking, no matter that it used living human beings as its guinea pigs. George Rothwell Brown, a reporter for the Washington Post, dubbed the group of volunteers, the "Poison Squad."¹⁹⁸ The name quickly caught on. Wiley's public relations project was advancing with the same aplomb as his scientific one.

Vaudeville and music hall performers began to write songs about the famed "Poison Squad." In 1903, Lew Dockstader's famous minstrel company sang the following composition in a Washington, D.C. theater:

If you should ever visit the Smithsonian Institute,
 Look out that Professor Wiley doesn't make you a recruit.
 He's got a lot of fellows there that tell him how they feel,
 They take a batch of poison every time they eat a meal.
 For breakfast they get cyanide of liver, coffin shaped.
 For dinner, undertaker's pie, all trimmed with crepe:

¹⁹⁸ Wiley, 57-66.

For supper, arsenic fritters, fried in appetizing shade.

And late at night they get a prussic acid lemonade.

They may get over it, but they'll never look the same.

That kind of a bill of fare would drive most men insane.

Next week he'll give them moth balls, a la Newburgh, or else plain.

They may get over it, but they'll never look the same.

And S.W. Gillian composed "The Song of the Poison Squad," which went:

O we're the merriest herd of hulks the world has seen;

We don't shy off from your rough on rats or even from Paris green:

We're on the hunt for a toxic dope that's certain to kill, sans fail.

But 'tis a tricky, elusive thing and knows we are on its trail:

For all the things that could kill we've downed in many a gruesome wad.

And still we're gaining a pound a day, for we are the Pizen Squad.

On Prussic acid we break our fast: we lunch on a morphine stew:

We dine with a matchhead consommé, drink carbolic acid brew:

Corrosive sublimate tones us up like laudanum ketchup rare.

While tyro-toxicon condiments are wholesome as mountain air.

Thus all the "deadlies" we double-dare to put us beneath the sod:

We're death-immunes and we're proud as proud—

Hooray for the Pizen Squad.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ Both in: Wiley, 76-77.

Despite the opposition of large trade groups, such as the Food Manufacturers' Association, the "Poison Squad" experiments and the Bureau of Chemistry's several bulletins on food adulteration, swayed the government in favor of passing food legislation. The bill passed the Senate in February, 1906 by an overwhelming vote of 63 to 4, and the House did the same four months later by an equally astounding 241 to 17.²⁰⁰ No doubt, the publication, also in February, 1906 of Upton Sinclair's The Jungle, with its "vivid accounts of the disgusting, depraved practices that prevailed in the [meat] packing plants,"²⁰¹ helped greatly to sway public and governmental opinion in favor of such a statute.

The statute, under Harvey W. Wiley's urging, aimed itself as much at economic as chemical practices, specifically seeking to eliminate "any article of food or drug which is adulterated or misbranded." Accordingly, authority for enforcing the law would fall not only to the Secretary of Agriculture, but to the Secretaries of Commerce and the Treasury as well. The statute debarred the misuse of "terra alba, talc, chrome yellow, or other mineral substance or poisonous color or flavor, or other ingredient deleterious or detrimental to health, or any vinous, malt or spiritous liquor or compound or narcotic drug." It further inveighed against "any substance [that] has been mixed and packed... so as to reduce or lower or injuriously affect its quality or strength," and also any product from which "any valuable constituent of the article has been wholly or in part abstracted," or one "mixed, colored, powdered, coated, or stained in a manner whereby damage or inferiority is concealed." Of course, if a product should "contain any added poisonous or other added deleterious ingredient" it too would fall under the statute's injunction. The text here is fascinating, for it not only demonstrates an obsession with the toxins and contaminants that might be lurking in factory-produced items, but it also

²⁰⁰ Wiley, 56.

²⁰¹ Anderson, 188.

envisioned the manufacturer and seller of food as an enemy of the common good, both economic and biological. Appropriately, the Pure Food and Drug law contains specific provisions for mislabeled goods and products that are “an imitation of or offered for sale under the name of another article.”²⁰² The goal was to protect the public from naive consumption practices as much as from poisons and impurities in food.

Having seen the food law passed—and having made his share of enemies in Washington—Harvey Wiley left the government service in 1912. A headline of the day read, “Women Weep as Watchdog of the Kitchen Quits After 29 Years.” Wiley took a post at Good Housekeeping, where he helped run their product testing laboratories. He also continued to conduct his own private scientific research and crusaded for further matters of public health, such as infant care.²⁰³ To the end, he remained a staunch advocate of public health, never fully separating biological shortcomings from what he saw as moral ones. “[I]t is a sin to be sick,” he held.²⁰⁴ He joined the “Hundred-Years-Old Club, every member of which takes a pledge, on joining, to live a whole century or consign his memory to everlasting disgrace,” according to the Nation.²⁰⁵ In this pledge, Harvey Wiley Washington was to come up short. He died in 1930 at the age of 86.²⁰⁶

Harvey Wiley and his Pure Food law are perhaps the foremost examples of an obsession with purity and cleanliness present in turn-of-the-century American culture. As I have tried to show, such worries in fact betrayed deep anxieties over the emergence of mass commerce—its scope, its anonymity, its insatiability. Those increasingly in control of culture, whether lawmakers like Wiley or businessmen like Richard Sears,

²⁰² United States Statutes at Large, 59th Congress, 1905-07, Vol. 34, Part I, Chap. 3915, 768-70.

²⁰³ “Harvey W. Wiley: Pioneer Consumer Activist,” Good Housekeeping, February 1990, 146.

²⁰⁴ Weisberger, 14.

²⁰⁵ Tattler, 79.

²⁰⁶ “Harvey W. Wiley: Pioneer Consumer Activist,” 146.

Asa Candler, B.F. Keith, or E.F. Albee, met, and further fed, such concerns by propagating a discourse focused on contamination and sterility, microbial infestation and health, unwholesomeness and wholesomeness. They were products, and yet they were also among the chief authors, of their age. They were, in short, historical figures in every sense of the term.

Chapter Three:
“Of Pleasing Face and Form”: The Sexual and the
Sensual on the Vaudeville Stage

In the previous chapters, it has been my intention to show how vaudeville developed as the first nationally-oriented, mass-market form of corporate entertainment in the United States, and how it marshaled a rhetoric of purity and cleanliness in order to do so. Developing such a marketing discourse permitted the vaudeville chiefs to build a mass audience at a time when their peers in other industries were doing the same with great success. Furthermore, as I have shown, it permitted the vaudeville stage to win popularity as a space where sexually titillating or less-than-wholesome fare could be deployed and explored. For as I have already indicated, the vaudeville stage was a highly sexualized space, where unclad bodies, provocative dancers, and singers of “blue” lyrics all vied for attention. In this chapter, then, I will explore the various ways in which sexuality and what might be called unwholesomeness were depicted on stage. I hope to show that vaudeville provided an important site in which the female body was posed as an emergent sexual commodity within a burgeoning urban climate of commerce. In this climate, consumption, sexuality, and mass-marketing efforts often overlapped and interacted with one another. Because of acts like these, furthermore, a new degree of sexual liberalization emerged—if the objectification of the female body may be viewed as an example of liberalization. In any case, there developed, in the realm of popular amusements, a marked departure from earlier, Victorian mores and norms.

Historians and scholars have begun to explore how the female body became an object of particular sexual delight during a specific era and for specific reasons. In The Desirable Body: Cultural Fetishism and the Erotics of Consumption, Jon Stratton argues that “from around the middle of the nineteenth century the female body began to be

fetishized.” Stratton ties this development to the rise of consumerism, modern state administration methods, surveillance, and the “disarticulation” of sight from touch (with sight gaining cultural privilege). Drawing on a host of influences, including Crary, Comolli, Freud, and Foucault, Stratton argues that such fetishization resulted in “the spectacularization of the female body”—that it became, in other words, desirable as a sexual spectacle in and of itself—in a way that it had never quite been before. As we will see, the vaudeville stage was one important locale for the “spectacularization” of the female body—that is, its presentation as a viewable commodity gravid with visual erotic content.¹

Significantly, Stratton notes, “It was during this period that the individual members of the modern nation state began to experience the effects of the state’s ability to reach into, and regulate, their daily lives.” Accordingly, “the fetishization of the female body was, in the first place, bound up with the male experience of state....”² This period, therefore, not only saw the development of the mechanics of modern state governance but also, as we have seen, its close cousin, the mechanics of modern corporate governance with its bureaucracies, hierarchies, and rationalized organizational structures. And it was vaudeville that brought such developments to the field of entertainment, providing perhaps the key nexus of male administrative authority and female sexual objectification. Put another way, modern industries like vaudeville played a critical role in regulating, defining, and offering for sale the female body as a visually consumable sexual product.

As the American city, the modern market par excellence, continued to grow in the late nineteenth century, ever becoming the center of the nation’s cultural landscape,

¹ Jon Stratton, The Desirable Body: Cultural Fetishism and the Erotics of Consumption, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 25-58, 62-63.

² Stratton, 98-9.

the sexualized female body became ever more enmeshed within the practices of marketing, promotion, and consumption. Whether window shopping for clothing or stopping into an urban eatery for a quick meal, one was increasingly confronted with the alluring female body. Writes William Leach (with help from John Dos Passos) in Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture, his history of the modern department store:

Mannequins especially helped in extracting form from chaos, their purpose to "rivet" the eyes to a few goods, contribute to the making of centered ensembles, and "create an atmosphere of reality that aroused enthusiasm and acted in an autosuggestive manner." Displaymen even "dramatized" women's underwear on full-bodied mannequins in the show windows, a practice that departed radically from nineteenth-century methods, when merchants tended to pile up goods on shelves or mass them into architectural cones or arches. The novelist John Dos Passos was so impressed by these that he used them in his novel 1919 to show how a man's sexual desire could be stirred in this new urban setting. "All kinds of things got him terribly agitated," Dos Passos wrote of one of his characters, "so that it was hard not to show it. The wobble of the waitresses' hips and breasts, while they were serving meals, girls' underwear in store windows."³

In the American city of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the female body was on display as a sexual object as never before. However, it was either on display for a price as a consumer good, or was somehow connected to the act of purchasing. It was dressed up in underwear in department store windows to underscore its sexual power and it was treated similarly on the nearby vaudeville stage. Jackson Lears notes that by the late nineteenth century, advertising cards regularly showed women, as if seen through a peep-hole, in various states of undress, as a means of attracting attention for various products.⁴

In many ways, the female body was the act surest to please a vaudeville audience. "Audiences would rather see a mediocre sister act than a good brother act

³ William Leach, Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 58, 65-6.

(they were better to look at)” writes Joe Laurie, Jr. in Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace.⁵ A list of women who did little more than appear on stage in close-fitting or form-revealing outfits would go on and on. When a performer calling herself “Mardi Gras” appeared at Keith’s Fifth Avenue theatre in 1913, Variety wrote, “Mardi Gras looks fine in tights and could be booked on her figure [alone].”⁶ Some years earlier, another theatrical newspaper wrote that “Pauline Hall sang several songs and showed her fine figure to advantage in tights” at Keith’s Union Square.⁷

Understandably, female vaudeville performers began to conceive of acts that were little more than excuses for them to get on stage in tights, clinging gowns, or other revealing attire. The actress Patrice put on a “fairy” sketch at Proctor’s Fifth Avenue in 1900, in which she showed “the full figure of a gal” and “made a very pretty picture in her clinging gown.”⁸ while performer Josephine Hall went on at Koster & Bial’s two years earlier “in a tight-fitting suit of knickerbockers which showed that her figure had lost none of its trimness.”⁹ Gibson’s Bathing Girls, a popular attraction during the 1907 season, offered up a dance number set at a “seaside resort” in which the title performers naturally had to appear in “bathing costumes.”¹⁰ When the Louise La Gai dance company presented a mini-ballet called “La Tigresse” at Keith’s Fifth Avenue theatre in 1913, the lead female dancer “forgot to put on tights in the final scene, wearing but a leopard skin.”¹¹ Appearing “almost in nude form,” according to the New York Clipper.

⁴ Lears (1994), 148–49.

⁵ Laurie, 149.

⁶ Sime, “New Acts Next Week,” Variety, 4 April 1913, 16.

⁷ New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 April 1904, 18.

⁸ New York Dramatic Mirror, 22 September 1900, 18.

⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 3 December 1898, 18.

¹⁰ New York Dramatic Mirror, 24 August 1907, 14.

¹¹ Variety, 4 April 1913, 16.

La Gai proved "one of the hits of the long program" and rated "numerous encores."¹²

Increasingly, middle-class American audiences were learning that the female body could be publicly revealed rather than cloaked in layer after layer of finery.

In fact, actresses could easily counteract a lack of talent with a surplus of bodily exhibition. When the "Ladies' Comedy Quartette" appeared in vaudeville in 1907, the New York Dramatic Mirror noted that "their attempts at comedy were very sad... [but] when the four young women made their appearance at the finish in snugly fitting military costumes, the enthusiasm was pronounced."¹³ Some years earlier, performer Julie Mackey took the innovative approach of doing "The Lost Chord," in tights. "Just think," wrote the Dramatic Mirror, "of Sullivan's masterpiece coming before an audience in a pair of pink fleshings."¹⁴ So common were tactics like these that critics occasionally expressed surprise when a female vaudeville performer actually possessed artistic talent in addition to sexual wiles. "Alexandra Dagmar scored a success, not only with her beautiful face and stunning figure, but on account of her superb rendering of some well-chosen songs," mused the Dramatic Mirror in 1899.¹⁵

Still, if talent was admired it was not always essential. Mlle. Guerrero created a pantomime act concerning a robbery, but was nonetheless "heavily advertised as 'the most beautiful woman in the world,'" according to the trades, rather than for her miming skills.¹⁶ The New York critics noticed a similar tendency with actress Isabelle Urquhart. In 1897, Keith's Union Square theatre was "filled to the brim" to see Urquhart enact a sketch of her own devising. Wrote the Clipper, "Miss Urquhart has found her statuesqueness referred to in the newspapers so often that she has evidently become

¹² New York Clipper, 5 April 1913, 16.

¹³ "Good Singing, Poor Comedy," New York Dramatic Mirror, 31 August 1907, 14.

¹⁴ New York Dramatic Mirror, 26 February 1898, 16.

¹⁵ New York Dramatic Mirror, 28 October 1899, 18.

thoroughly impressed therewith, as she does little more in the sketch than display her form in a handsome gown to the utmost advantage."¹⁷

Lillian Herlein was one of the female vaudeville performers who became most adept at supplanting bodily display for either vocal, kinesthetic, or dramatic talent (see Figure 7). Her gowns were "cut particularly low in the back," while her bathing costume was considered "risqué." Altogether, according to one critic, it was not her songs but her abbreviated costumes that "had apparently the desired effect upon those [openly enthusiastic men] in the gallery."¹⁸ Several months later, when Herlein appeared at Keith's Fifth Avenue, *Variety* wrote that she was "bound to make talk. The talk will come from her appearance in full tights during her final song called 'Swim, Swim, Swim.' Miss Herlein is a tall, statuesque brunet with a twenty-two inch waist, and other proportions which are striking, to say the least! She makes a pretty picture in conventional clothes, but when she appears in tights the effect is well—er, well, she will make a talk as has been mentioned. The more display of her 'figger,' the more talk she will cause—and that is the principle aim of her act. It is designed as a drawing card, and should fulfill that function."¹⁹

If the display of female bodies proved appealing on the stage, certain theatre managers realized they could be used to increase revenues elsewhere about the theatre. When Ted Marks took over as manager of Koster & Bial's vaudeville house in 1900, he replaced "the stolid German waiters who have done duty there for years" with "three buxom barmaids" in the café.²⁰

¹⁶ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 28 November 1903, 21.

¹⁷ *New York Clipper*, 12 June 1897, 238.

¹⁸ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 5 February 1910, 21.

¹⁹ *Variety*, 29 January 1910, 16.

²⁰ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 5 May 1900, 18.

Sometimes, the proliferation of scantily-clad female bodies in vaudeville drew the moral ire of reform-minded onlookers. When “French dancers” the Dartos appeared at Koster & Bial’s in 1898, one journalist remarked that “the display of legs and lingerie is startling.”²¹ Similarly, a critic at Tony Pastor’s found the Washburn Sisters musically talented, but also worthy of rebuke: “The new member of the firm is an excellent substitute for her predecessor, being of pleasing face and form, but her stock of ‘ginger’ far exceeds the demands of refined variety audiences.”²² The following month, another singer at Pastor’s, Maud Nugent, was also deemed “much too spicy to admit of commendation” by the New York Clipper’s critic.²³ A sketch called “Mrs. Radley Barton’s Ball,” which was produced at Hammerstein’s Olympia in 1897 drew similar outrage. “[T]here are committed many offenses against good taste... [t]he costumes of the four girls who first appear in bathrobes are fully as suggestive as they are intended to be,” wrote the Clipper.²⁴ Still, comments like these had little effect on acts that, though controversial, were popular. Even E.F. Albee, according to Douglas Gilbert in American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times, believed audiences “ought to have a little fun” from time to time.²⁵

Female vaudeville performers not only perfected the art of exhibiting their bodies in revealing or form-fitting costumes but they actually improved upon it by working costume changes, in full view of the audience, or the discarding of clothes altogether, into their songs, dances, and dramatic sketches. Fannie Fondelier, a violinist, “discarded a cloak she wore at the opening and performed in tights,”²⁶ while the “clever

²¹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 17 December 1898, 18

²² New York Clipper, 22 May 1897, 190.

²³ New York Clipper, 12 June 1897, 238.

²⁴ New York Clipper, 3 April 1897, 76.

²⁵ Gilbert, 363.

²⁶ New York Clipper, 3 June 1911, 5.

French singer” Liane D’Eve changed “her costume several times in view of the audience” making her act “a decided success.”²⁷ Similarly, singer Gertie Van Dyke possessed a “pretty figure displayed in neat tights [which] was very effective. A couple of changes made in view of the audience helped along.”²⁸ Veronica Jarbeau “changed into tights” in order to sing “a song which was tinged with indigo...”²⁹ Zelma Rawlston made her changes of garb in full view of the audience the key feature of her performance. “Although the programme asked the audience to wait forty-nine seconds for Miss Rawlston to make her changes of costume, she accomplished the transformation in from twenty to twenty-five seconds,” noted the New York Dramatic Mirror.³⁰ By executing tantalizing costume changes in full view of the crowd, performers like these were in effect making the private public. In an era governed by restrictive Victorian mores, they permitted male theatre goers a voyeuristic glance behind the dressing screen. Spectacles that had previously played only on the burlesque stage, with that venue’s all-male, working-class connotations, were now brought into wider public view. This was indeed a privilege worth paying for.

Some went to the trouble of fashioning a sketch or short play that would result in a woman changing, stripping, or otherwise shedding her garb. In a skit called “The Lady and the Pugilist,” which went on at Tony Pastor’s in 1904, the leading woman “removed her walking suit to try on [a] new gown.”³¹ Several years later, in sketch called “The Billiard Room” at Percy Williams’s famous Colonial theatre, actress Liane De Lyle’s character wore a “long gown... [which] is later discarded to reveal the shapely

²⁷ New York Dramatic Mirror, 30 November 1907, 13.

²⁸ Dash, “New Acts Next Week,” Variety, 12 July 1912, 16.

²⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 20 January 1900, 18.

³⁰ New York Dramatic Mirror, 22 October 1898, 20.

³¹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 3 September 1904, 18.

form of the young woman in tights.”³² In “Sam Todd of Yale,” the title character, a proper Yale crew sculler, gives his clothing to “bathing Bessie Terry, whose clothes are stolen by a lunatic.”³³

An extremely popular sketch called “Au Bain” or “Suzanne at the Bath” advertised the fact that it contained a young woman changing out of her clothes in full view of the spectator” and perhaps little else. “The audience notices for the production in this city led to the belief that it would be broadly Gallic,” wrote the New York Clipper, appealing to theatre goers who held “hopes of seeing the full ‘limit’ reached.” Probably afraid of arrest or censure, the producers of “Au Bain” cleverly kept the actress’s act of disrobing in view of a pair of all-seeing, voyeuristic male eyes, without revealing too much to the audience: “Suzanne begins to disrobe in sight of the audience, but after taking off her waist goes behind shrubbery and the ‘man in the moon’ alone sees the completion of her preparations. He comes from behind the clouds, and by rolling his eyes, making various grimaces and looks of astonishment leaves the audience little to surmise as the progress of Suzanne’s disrobing.” The message was clear: Even if spectators were denied a full view of the unclad female body, it was nonetheless on display for pleasure, perusal, and judgment. By the following month, “Au Bain” had emerged as “the salient feature” of the bill at Koster & Bial’s “with Adele Ritchie doing the disrobing”³⁴ (see Figure 8).

Some enterprising female performers exhibited their bodies by combining circus or gymnastic feats with the removal of clothing. Again, the point was to end up displaying a nearly naked body rather than virtuosic physical coordination. Show women of this sort appeared early on the vaudeville stage. In early May, 1898, Adgie, “who

³² New York Clipper, 30 October 1909, 961.

³³ New York Dramatic Mirror, 7 October 1899, 18.

³⁴ New York Clipper, 9 April 1898, 92, and 7 May 1898, 160.

combines the talents of the lion tamer and disrober” impressed audiences at the Olympia theatre in New York. A critic who saw her show had little good to say about Adgie: “There is no telling where this boudoir business is going to stop, and if it is not squelched soon by the legislature or by the society that attends to such things it will become a nuisance... even the lions, which were supposed to be very fierce, and ready at a moment’s notice to chew the lady up, turned away in disgust.”³⁵ Later that year, Virginia Aragon walked the high wire at Koster & Bial’s. But it was not her balancing abilities that drew the attention of the crowd. “Miss Aragon’s figure retains its superb lines, and she makes a splendid appearance, which, as the old-time managers would say, is ‘alone worth the price of admission.’” wrote one critic.³⁶

In 1907, the team of O’Rourke and Marie improved on Aragon’s formula. “Marie is a young woman of lively spirits and exuberant personality who can undress on a slack wire and sing a song at the same time.” wrote a reporter who saw the show at Pastor’s.³⁷ In 1910, a performer calling herself “Venus on Wheels” also framed the display of her figure in an act containing circus-like feats of physical prowess. “Venus on Wheels has a well rounded figure, and a black union suit showed every curve in the girl’s possession... she discards her loose-fitting suit early on while thus garbed—if one can call such a costume a garb.” wrote a reviewer for the New York Clipper who saw Venus perform bicycle stunts for the crowd.³⁸

Other female disrobers attempted to couch their striptease in the trappings of high art, such as “The Girl With the Dreamy Eyes.” Wrote the Clipper in 1910, “The Girl With the Dreamy Eyes is Mabel Adams. At Hammerstein’s last week she offered

³⁵ New York Dramatic Mirror, 14 May 1898, 16.

³⁶ New York Dramatic Mirror, 10 December 1898, 18.

³⁷ New York Dramatic Mirror, 17 August 1907, 11.

³⁸ New York Clipper, 24 September 1910, 797.

her violin playing while garbed in scant attire, going down into the audience and wandering halfway down the aisle, while thus dressed—or undressed—playing the violin meanwhile. She was bare-armed and bare-legged, save for little sandals on her feet, and her body was draped simply in black lace, which fell about the knee. A joke like in the programme said the ‘costumes were designed and executed by Lady Duff Gordon.’”³⁹ Whether playing the violin or walking a high wire, these performers successfully pleased male theatre patrons by giving them a version of the burlesque hall striptease made respectable by the use of clever framing devices. They also appealed to patrons by serving up the sexually titillating in the guise of circus, a form of entertainment already popular with a middle-class clientele.

Stripping the female body of clothing on the stage could transform that body into a kind of sexual commodity—just one act in a succession of similar acts that one was certain to get for the price of admission. However, the female body could just as easily be commodified through the use of clothing. Rather than taking off their clothes, a number of female vaudeville personalities achieved success by draping themselves in luxurious raiment. They became, in a sense, walking arguments for consumerism, every bit as much the object of desire as their clothes-shedding peers, but objects of consumption rather than sexual fetishization. “Miss Walters displayed a magnificent new gown beautifully trimmed with lace that caused women in the audience to buzz for several minutes after she came on,” wrote the New York Dramatic Mirror of an actress who appeared at Keith’s Union Square in 1903.⁴⁰ A week earlier, Florence Bindley had created “a sensation with a new costume she wears called the ‘diamond dress.’ It is the

³⁹ New York Clipper, 26 November 1910, 1021.

⁴⁰ New York Dramatic Mirror, 24 January 1903, 18.

most expensive gown ever worn on the vaudeville stage and is covered with over 4,000 brilliants, giving it the appearance of a ball of fire:" according to one impressed critic.⁴¹

Performers like Walters and Bindley cleared the way for other women whose apparel proved their chief attraction. When Carrie Perkins appeared in a sketch called "Have You Seen Bill" at Tony Pastor's, the Dramatic Mirror wrote, "Her gown was a superb creation and it displayed her ample figure admirably."⁴² Perkins had achieved the double success of presenting both her clad body and the alluring figure beneath it as desirable objects. With richly-adorned gowns grabbing attention in vaudeville, it was only a matter of time before the "dress display" or "fashion show" took to the vaudeville boards. Variety reporter Sime Silverman observed, "This 'Fashion Show' thing appears to be the greatest discontent breeder ever thought of for the stage... To a henpecked husband watching this thing with his wife it must be like living in a death cell. There are now two kinds of 'girl acts' in vaudeville, with and without clothes. One will draw the men the other will keep them away."⁴³ Silverman is suggesting that the stripper or scantily-clad female on the stage provided a kind of spectatorial satisfaction that, while a form of consumption, nonetheless offered relief from life's day-to-day burdens. In his view, it would seem, the women of high fashion provided a similar pleasure for those women in the audience. As Joe Laurie, Jr. writes, "The male patrons came to get some laughs and look at the beautiful women and the lady patrons came to see the latest styles in clothes and hair-dos."⁴⁴

In some ways, the female performers who fared best on the vaudeville stage were those who combined sexual allure with elements of pure visual spectacle. As

⁴¹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 17 January 1903, 18.

⁴² New York Dramatic Mirror, 31 October 1903.

⁴³ Variety, 15 October 1915, 14.

⁴⁴ Laurie, 228.

Robert Allen has argued, vaudeville audiences were drawn to performances based on “visual novelties” rather than an abundance of narrative content.⁴⁵ Performers who wanted to combine sexual titillation with visual effects could do so by quantity—offering, say, a gaggle of undraped female bodies to overwhelm the senses—by special effects like water and light, or by a combination of these two elements. In 1902, the Fadettes, “an orchestra composed of good-looking and clever young women” took the first of these approaches. “[T]he fact that the eye is pleased while the ear is tickled with sweet sounds makes the orchestra an irresistible attraction,” wrote the New York Dramatic Mirror. Accordingly, the Fadettes enjoyed a healthy run of three weeks.⁴⁶ Similarly, when Keith’s Fifth Avenue presented a female-only bill in 1912, Variety’s Dash observed, “There were many men in the house, unquestionably drawn by the ‘All Women’ billing.”⁴⁷ Other producers followed suit. Two years later, Hammerstein’s theatre scored big with “13 Girls in Blue,” which was based on a popular burlesque act of the period, “22 Girls” in tights.⁴⁸

In addition to sheer numbers, female performers could improve their sexual cachet by making their bodies the center of a technological or special effects display on stage. “In these dances,” notes Joe Laurie, Jr., “all the gals did was practically pose in transparent gowns and a guy from the orchestra pit would throw different colored slides on them.”⁴⁹ As early as 1899, Letta Meredith “appeared for the purpose of having a series of colored effects projected upon her shapely form and the folds of the cloak.”

⁴⁵ Robert C. Allen, “The Movies in Vaudeville: Historical Context of the Movies as Popular Entertainment,” in Tino Balio, ed., The American Film Industry, (Madison, Wisconsin and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976, 1985), 65.

⁴⁶ New York Dramatic Mirror, 18 October 1902, 18, and 1 November 1902, 18.

⁴⁷ Dash, “Fifth Avenue,” Variety, 3 February 1912, 20.

⁴⁸ Dash, “New Shows Next Week,” Variety, 30 January 1914.

⁴⁹ Laurie, 40.

according to the New York Clipper.⁵⁰ Those who combined numbers with spectacle achieved even greater success. At Keith's Union Square in 1901, the Eight English Roses, "an octette of uncommonly pretty young Britons," danced in frames using light and mirrors to create optical illusions with their bodies. "The girls were exceedingly good to look upon," noted the a reporter for the New York Dramatic Mirror. But, he lamented, because each Rose's name was not listed in the program, "Just think of how many 'mash' notes they will miss."⁵¹

By 1910, the combination of electrical illumination and the female form had become so commonplace that some critics doubted audiences would still respond. Following the appearance of Loie Fuller's "Ballet of Light" at the Fifth Avenue theatre, Variety's Rush wrote: "The New York Public has become sated with barefoot dancing. They have seen so much of it under the full glare of all the lights that the exhibition of six girls unclad as to the legs is not particularly startling."⁵²

Using water was another way to heighten the spectacle and sexual allure of a woman's body on the vaudeville stage. Whereas electrical effects conflated female sexuality with notions of technology, industry, and progress, water held connotations of arousal, fertility, and procreation. An act at Proctor's Pleasure Palace in 1898 called "La Pluie et la Nieve" brought forth "a number of very pretty girls in a dance beneath showers of real water."⁵³ Some years later, Odiva, "the Living Mermaid," developed an act where she disrobed and performed other tasks while entirely submerged (see Figure 9). According to the New York Telegraph, Odiva was born in London but was shipwrecked at age three "in the South Pacific and got ashore in the Samoans to grow up

⁵⁰ New York Clipper, 11 November 1899, 768.

⁵¹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 21 September 1901, 18.

⁵² Rush, "New Acts of the Week," Variety, 26 February 1910, 17.

⁵³ New York Clipper, 22 January 1898, 776.

among the soft-voiced Kanakas that Robert Louis Stevenson loved.”⁵⁴ The story of her background is unlikely; it was probably fabricated by vaudeville promoters accustomed to selling freak acts to dime show spectators. What is certain, though, is that Odiva could hold her breath for long periods of time and looked pleasing in a bathing suit. Wrote

Variety:

A huge tank with glass front sets on the stage, placed well down toward the footlights, surrounded by a pretty forest set with springboards on both sides. An announcer in a short but carefully worded explanation introduces Odiva, who enters wearing a light color walking dress... she immediately goes into the water, where she strips to a black union suit.⁵⁵

Underwater for two full minutes, Odiva engaged in “sewing, eating, and acrobatics” without once having to come up for air.

Odiva may not have been truly “Samoan,” but she was presented as such and her appeal was thus tinged with an air of the exotic. Similarly, the female body on the variety stage lent itself to images of colonial fantasy and historical curiosity. In 1901, “50-Beautiful Ladies-50” appeared at Keith’s Union Square in a “pageant of the nations,” with each woman flying the colors of a different country. In addition to “two Amazonian marches and a dance,” one woman put on an “Egyptian scarf dance” while another demonstrated the “Drill of the Red Hussars.”⁵⁶ A decade later, the “Dance Dream” at the Colonial theatre featured “reveries” of “dancing girls of different periods, wearing the costume and doing the popular dance of the day.”⁵⁷ If a shapely female form under the stage lights offered one kind of voyeuristic fantasy, the same body posed as a geographic, historical—or in the case of Odiva, physical—oddity posed yet another.

⁵⁴ “Mlle. Odiva’s Great Act,” New York Telegraph, 15 May 1910. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

⁵⁵ Variety, 14 May 1910. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

⁵⁶ New York Dramatic Mirror, 13 April 1901, 18.

⁵⁷ Dash, “New Acts Next Week,” Variety, 1 November 1912, 20.

Odiva and her seemingly exotic peers may have been popular for a time, but no water-frolicking woman proved more successful in vaudeville than Annette Kellerman. Kellerman billed herself as the “Diving Venus,” and engaged in displays of diving, swimming, and water ballet. Although she had been swimming since early childhood and had, at age 16, swum “almost the breadth of the English Channel,” according to the Philadelphia North American.⁵⁸ her main appeal was her bathing suit-clad body. E.F. Albee himself set up an elaborate system of mirrors behind Kellerman on the stage to provide ample views of her tightly-clad rear.⁵⁹ In 1908, the New York Dramatic Mirror, reviewing her vaudeville act, described how “her superb figure [is] shown to particular advantage,” and also remarked, “Much has been written of Miss Kellerman’s figure but mere words fail to do the subject justice. [She] inspires painters and sculptors to do their best work.”⁶⁰ The New York Clipper, writing of Kellerman’s show at the Victoria Roof Garden, observed, “Her graceful dancing and fine physique call forth enthusiastic applause at every performance”⁶¹ (see Figure 10).

When the Diving Venus appeared at Keith’s Fifth Avenue theatre in 1909, one enthusiastic male spectator rushed the stage and tried to snap pictures of the performer who was wearing a “short-skirted bathing suit.” Spotting the eager photographer before he could expose any film, Kellerman dove into the tank of water before her and proceeded to strip and change her attire, like “a sort of submarine Charmion,” in the words of Variety’s Rush who compared her to a popular vaudeville striptease artist named Mlle. Charmion (of whom more will be said later).⁶² Despite this purported

⁵⁸ From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

⁵⁹ Samuels and Samuels, 40.

⁶⁰ New York Dramatic Mirror, 5 December 1908, 17.

⁶¹ New York Clipper, 19 June 1908, 487.

⁶² Rush, “New Acts Next Week,” Variety, 2 January 1909, 13.

modesty, the papers were filled with photos of Kellerman, not to mention numerous other paeans to her beauty. In 1909, the New York Star ran a poem entitled "A Midsummer Rhapsody to Annette Kellerman." It contained the lines, "O, girl, your form makes all artists stare / O, girl of curves that please the cultured eye."⁶³

Whatever skills Kellerman possessed in swimming or diving were eclipsed by her appearance. "She had a beautiful figure and when the water hit that tight-fitting black suit... B-R-O-T-H-E-R," writes Joe Laurie, Jr.⁶⁴ Perhaps more than any other single woman in vaudeville, Kellerman and her producers and promoters helped forge an emergent notion of the woman as viewable sexual commodity. It was her observable body, displayed in scant or tight-fitting attire, arrayed on the stage in a spectacle of light and water that made her a huge hit. Wrote Variety: "She is a rare jewel among women who expose their 'figure' to an audience's gaze. There could be no more perfect figure than Miss Kellerman presents as she appears in her diving costume of black silk tights... It fits snugly to the skin... a perfect figure neither sex would tire [of] seeing." Though Kellerman found great success in the vaudeville theatre, the era's primary form of corporate urban entertainment, she was promoted as a "natural" beauty who owed her feminine allure to a freedom from the urban locale. "[O]ne may notice her suppleness, which no hothouse beauty could develop in an atmosphere of cigarette smoke and press agents," read the same Variety article.⁶⁵

Kellerman herself advanced the idea that the trappings of civilization were injurious to a woman's beauty potential and sexual allure. "Nothing can be more mistaken than the idea that the frills and gewgaws of raiment which serve rather to

⁶³ "A Midsummer Rhapsody to Annette Kellerman." New York Star, 7 August 1909. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

⁶⁴ Laurie, 34.

⁶⁵ Variety, 28 November 1908, 12.

conceal than to set off the figure are becoming. No matter how beautiful a dress may be, it cannot but look out of place on a woman who is compelled to tight-lace herself to an agonizing degree to wear it," she wrote in the New York Journal.⁶⁶ On another occasion, she told a reporter for the New York Mail, "Clothes ruin us! They do harm to our bodies. But they do worse to our souls. There would be no fat people... if we wore only a little chiffon."⁶⁷

Kellerman's attitude (and that of her producers) presented most women with a conundrum. On the one hand, they were encouraged to display their natural form; yet on the other, that natural form was implicitly to be compared to Kellerman's and those of other "perfect women" in the eroticized public sphere of performance and consumption. Naturally, Kellerman and her backers tried to capitalize on this position by forming "The Annette Kellerman Health and Physical Development School of Correspondence for Women." For a fee, subscribers could receive health and beauty advice allegedly written by the Diving Venus herself. "Every Woman Should Have A Beautiful Figure Health and a Clear Complexion" read the banner headline of a 1910 advertisement for the Kellerman School. "The attainment of beauty and health is not a matter of luck or of being born so. Nature intended every woman to enjoy these possessions. If you are too thin—too fleshy—underdeveloped or unshapely—if your complexion is sallow—if you are weak, ill, tired or languid, or in any respect not as Nature intended you to be, I can be of great help to you." read the ad copy. On the one hand, Kellerman suggested that "Nature"—and not clothing or make-up—could make a woman thin, beautiful, tan, or whatever she fantasized about with regard to her appearance. Yet only by spending

⁶⁶ Annette Kellerman, "Miss Annette Kellerman Tells How to Dress Comfortably," New York Journal, 19 January 1909. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

⁶⁷ Zoe Beckley, "Don't Wear Any Clothes, Annette's Sincere Advice," New York Mail, 18 December 1916. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

money could Nature's beneficial effects be unlocked. And Kellerman, owner of a "perfect" body, claimed to hold the key. Performers like Annette Kellerman, while liberalizing mores about the body, were also feeding women's anxieties about their sexual allure and bodily perfection. Stuart Ewen notes that advertising images of about this time were busy doing much the same: "[W]omen were being educated to look at themselves as things to be created competitively against other women: painted and sculpted with aids of the modern market."⁶⁸

Unlike many other female vaudeville performers, Annette Kellerman made the successful transition from stage to motion picture screen. Her first film, released in 1914 and produced by Universal, was called Neptune's Daughter. The movie was shot on location in Bermuda, a rarity during the silent era when cheap studio sets which could be recycled for film after film were the norm, and ran to seven reels (approximately 150 minutes), also unusual when feature pictures typically ran three or four reels. Neptune's Daughter also boasted impressive special effects, elaborate costumes, and a cast with hundreds of extras. The plot was an arcane mix of fairy tale, melodrama, romantic fantasy, and farce. Kellerman played a mermaid fittingly named Annette who seeks revenge against King William whom she holds responsible for the death of her sister at the hands of a fisherman. Predictably, Annette falls in love with William whom she had met when he was disguised as a woodsman. Antagonists come in the form of Olga, William's fiancée, and Boris, Olga's scheming lover, who manage to stage a coup and throw the rightful King William in prison for a time. However, Annette returns, "slays William's adversaries, and upbraids the people for their injustice to him."⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ewen (1976), 180.

⁶⁹ Patricia King Hanson, ed., American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States, Feature Films, 1911-1920. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), 656.

Neptune's Daughter was a huge success. Upon its premiere, the Chicago Tribune wrote, "For hours some of the people waited, standing in line to see the pictures of Annette Kellerman in 'Neptune's Daughter'... The seats were so precious that theater parties were willing to be separated scattering about inside from the first row to the balcony," while the Cincinnati Times Star reported that "a theatreful of humanity eagerly watched the long film through two and one-half hours Sunday night in heat that made an icy plunge more appropriate amusement... Had Annette Kellerman herself appeared on Keith's stage in all her personal glory, she would have had no larger audience than her film presence attracted Sunday."⁷⁰ Indeed, as these news reports suggest, Kellerman's objectified form was perhaps the perfect item to transplant from the live stage to a cinema increasingly concerned with the gazing pleasures of the male spectator.

Not everyone was enthusiastic about Kellerman's onscreen image, though. Upon seeing Neptune's Daughter, one woman complained to the mayor of her town that Kellerman's movie was potentially harmful: "The high dive in which Miss Kellerman in fleshings swims to cover when people approach gives the impression that she is nude. This is suggestive and not good for boys and girls of high school age to see... And in that part where the mermaid is turned to an earth maiden and comes out of the woods seemingly clothed only in her flowing hair, it is suggestive to the impressionable youth of [our town]."⁷¹ Similarly, Mayor V.A. Schreiber of the small town of East Liverpool,

⁷⁰ Percy Hammond, "Annette Kellerman in Pretty Pictures," Chicago Tribune, 19 May 1914; "Annette Kellerman Film Sets Record at B.F. Keith's," Cincinnati Times Star, 24 August 1914. No page numbers available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

⁷¹ "Annette's Form Wakes Malden," Morning Telegraph, 14 February 1915. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

New York, found posters of Kellerman in “flesh-colored tights” to be “beyond all bounds of decency.”⁷²

Despite moral burbles like these, Kellerman was given another film to star in, this one even more elaborate, pretentious, and risqué than Neptune’s Daughter. It was the Fox-produced A Daughter of the Gods (see Figure 11), whose title suggests that its creators were trying to capitalize on the success of Kellerman’s first picture. The film took eighteen months to make, had a cast of 19,744, and cost over \$1,000,000. Like Neptune’s Daughter, A Daughter of the Gods was a collage of fantasy, fairy tale, melodrama, and sexual display for the scopophilic patron. In it, Kellerman plays a girl who, disconsolate after the death of her bird, hurls herself into the ocean only to be reborn as “Anitia, a daughter of the Gods,” also described as “a mysterious beauty.” A confusing plot involving characters with names like “Chief Eunuch,” “Fairy of Goodness,” “The Sultan,” and “The Arab Sheik,” results in Anitia vanquishing the “Witch of Evil.”⁷³ Though the film, like Neptune’s Daughter, had a complex narrative and bewitching visual effects, it was Kellerman’s unclad figure that formed its centerpiece. “Beauty is the keynote of the film. Beauty and symmetry of the female form,” noted Moving Picture World.⁷⁴ Male spectators sought out this very quality. A West Virginia woman made “four deep gashes in her husband’s head” with a potato masher following the release of A Daughter of the Gods. “That scoundrel went to see that Annette Kellerman movie three times in three days, and he’d tell me every night

⁷² “Annette Posters Shock Hizzoner,” 14 January 1915. No other information available. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

⁷³ “Daughter of the Gods a Great Opportunity,” New York Dramatic News, June 1917, 23; “How the Newest Film Spectacle, ‘A Daughter of the Gods,’ Was Made,” New York World, 22 October 1916. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection; Hanson, ed., 193-94.

⁷⁴ Stephen Bush, “‘A Daughter of the Gods,’” Moving Picture World, 4 November 1916. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

what a pretty form she had," complained the angry wife.⁷⁵ The lifting of Victorian sexual mores clearly presented new difficulties for the average American woman.

Kellerman also made the 1918 Fox picture Queen of the Sea (see Figure 12), which, as its title suggests, fit into the boilerplate formula of her other films. In this fantasy film, Kellerman plays Merilla, queen of the sea. A fabulous plot mixing romance and melodrama has Kellerman falling in love with Prince Hero, rescuing Princess Leandra from the treacherous "Tower of Knives and Swords," and saving the lives of several lucky sailors. The picture ends happily, and Merilla ends up with her Prince Hero.⁷⁶

Perhaps more than with any other single female performer, the imperatives of consumer capitalism and the fetishizing gaze of the heterosexual theatre patron found their surest inscription on the body of Annette Kellerman. Indeed, others tried to copy the Kellerman formula. When Joe Smith and the Louise Alexander dancers appeared in a routine called "The Devil Tempting Innocence" at Keith's Fifth Avenue, Variety's Dash reported that the lead female performer wore an outfit "cut extremely low, and for color this pale yellow thing has it all over the pink for appearing flesh like... after the pattern of the bathing suit worn by Annette Kellerman."⁷⁷ Similarly, when Kellerman signed with the Keith interests, rival William Morris engaged Rose Pitnof, "a fifteen year-old girl who swam from Charleston Bridge to Boston Light" and had a figure to rival Kellerman's.⁷⁸ In the standardizing system of corporate entertainment, few things signaled success as clearly as being copied.

⁷⁵ "Kellerman Form Causes Woman to Beat Husband," Toledo Blade, 10 January 1917. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

⁷⁶ Hanson, ed., 749.

⁷⁷ Dash, "New Acts Next Week," Variety, 3 April 1909, 16.

⁷⁸ Laurie, 34.

Another performer who capitalized on her appearance in a bathing suit was Lalla Selbini, who created an act called "the Bathing Girl." Compared to Selbini, Annette Kellerman had the athletic skills of an Olympian. In fact, despite her attire and the name of her act, there is no evidence that Selbini ever went near the water, on stage or off.

Wrote Variety editor Sime Silverman:

It isn't so much what the young woman does as what she wears that will attract attention. Well made up, looking almost handsome on the stage, Miss Selbini after a few simple juggling tricks discards her costume, appearing as nature intended her with only a skin-tight piece of cloth separating her natural color from the gaze of audience. Without the aid of corsets she presents a figure that excites admiration, and while riding a wheel assumes positions that leave little to the imagination... Miss Selbini is frankly indecent in her exhibition and will probably become a drawing card thereby. As a "living picture" she is immense.⁷⁹

Sime was right. Selbini drew large crowds and inspired "gasps of astonishment" when she went on.⁸⁰ When she appeared out west on the Orpheum circuit, the Los Angeles Times too noted that Selbini's act was little more than an elaborate striptease:

Lalla Selbini, a classic beauty almost au natural, is the sensation at the Orpheum this week. There have been other girls in tights, some of them very roguishly naughty, but there have been none so fascinating as Selbini... her act is very much of nothing. Last night she tried to twirl a silver baton, and only cracked her fingers on the floor.. There is a little ordinary juggling, a little singing in a small parlor voice, a little bicycle riding, an act on a single wheel—and, suddenly, as she stands at the top of her pedestal, there is a single hook unfastened, a quick swirl of draperie, and Selbini a la Eve—save for that tight-clinging, filmy blue—finishes her act.⁸¹

Selbini went on to appear in her "startling bathing suit" on the vaudeville stage for over half a decade, trading on "the meager clothing of her body and the generous expose of her shapely form, perfect in its beauty," (see Figure 13) according to a

⁷⁹ Variety, 9 June 1906, 6.

⁸⁰ Variety, 14 July 1906, 10.

⁸¹ "Players and Playhouses," Los Angeles Times, 17 July 1907. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

Cincinnati newspaper.⁸² “She was a beautiful gal with a beautiful form, so who cared if she juggled or not,” writes Joe Laurie, Jr.⁸³ When questioned in the Midwest about the propriety of her act, she told the Detroit Free Press. “It is just what they wear on the other side [of the Atlantic] at all the fashionable bathing beaches and nothing ever is thought of it.”⁸⁴ Like other disrobing performers, Selbini tried to tie her erotic behavior to European taste and fashion to lend it an air of class and acceptability. She played the sophisticate in the face of critics who found her shocking, sometimes promoting herself as “La Belle Baigneuse.”⁸⁵ But it did not always work as she intended. In 1906, Selbini was arrested on indecency charges in Pittsburgh following complaints by a number of women.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, such instances were rare.

Eventually, Lalla Selbini put together an elaborate and expensive stage setting to frame, and thereby further legitimate, her bathing suit-clad antics. When she came to Keith’s Union Square in New York in 1913, she sported a “carload or more of scenery... thirty European artists, including a band of fifteen, several horses, a real live lion, and numerous other accessories.” The theatre was packed “to the doors at every performance” with patrons hoping to catch a glimpse of “one of the prettiest figures on the stage.”⁸⁷

⁸² “Lula Salbini,” Cincinnati Commercial, 8 October 1906. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

⁸³ Laurie, 31.

⁸⁴ “Great Lafayette’s Protégé Appears at the Miles in Startling Bathing Suit,” Detroit Free Press, 18 September 1913. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

⁸⁵ Alice Rohe, “Be Good: Bathe Three Times a Day,” New York World, 15 June 1906. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

⁸⁶ “Selbini’s Fair Critics Took to the Woods,” Pittsburgh Leader, 23 September 1906. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

⁸⁷ “The Great Lalla Selbini,” New York Telegraph, 22 May 1913. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

She helped further advance the notion, too, that the female body was capable, and indeed made for, the attainment of physical perfection. “Be good if you would be beautiful,” she told the New York World in 1906. Also, advised Selbini, take three cold baths a days, eat a breakfast consisting of “plenty of fruit, a soft-boiled egg and a glass of milk,” and get lots of sleep and exercise. Reporting her weight and height—121 lbs. and 5’4”—the World noted that the Bathing Beauty had “the exact measurements of that prototype of all perfect forms, the Venus de Medici.”⁸⁸ Whereas images of feminine perfection in prior ages had been idealized in artistic renderings of immortal beings, the modern era increasingly placed this onus on ordinary women of flesh and blood—women who consumed, went to the theatre, and inhabited the mercantile landscape of turn-of-the-century urban culture.

Works of art were also used in vaudeville as the basis for scores of “posing” or “classical statue” acts, who costumed themselves in the high-brow rhetoric of cultural refinement—and little else. In Living Pictures on the New York Stage, Jack McCullough notes that posing acts in the form of tableaux were popular in New York from about 1840 onward. Though promoted as chaste and morally uplifting, many living pictures were in fact designed to be sexually titillating in their presentation of feminine beauty and perfection. No wonder they fell afoul of the law and reformist efforts several times during the nineteenth century.⁸⁹

In vaudeville, though, by presenting themselves as “artistic” and therefore rarified, many posers and statue-imitators got away with giving eager audiences a generous serving of nudity while avoiding the moral censure of authorities and anti-vice crusaders. Clara Betz was one of the earliest performers to ply her trade as a poser. When she appeared at Koster & Bial’s in 1898, the New York Clipper wrote, “Clara

⁸⁸ Rohe.

⁸⁹ McCullough, 12-16, 37.

Betz... in a full suit of tights, giving the appearance of the altogether [sic], she gave an exhibition which on the bills was called 'classic poses.' She is pretty and well formed."⁹⁰

The New York Dramatic Mirror was a bit more cynical: "Clara Betz of 'perfect figure' fame was put instead to do some posing in the make believe 'altogether.' She struck various attitudes under such a strong calcium and held the breathless attention of the gentlemen who are long on applause and short on hair. Even the 50-cent crowd put the elastics in their neck to a severe strain trying to get a good view of the lady with the curves."⁹¹ It was not rarified artistry the patrons were interested in glimpsing so much as a display of the unclothed female form that treaded the fine line between voyeurism and exhibitionism.

Other producers of "living pictures" and posing acts made a greater effort than Betz to link their presentations to the world of fine arts, such as one might see at a museum. Professor Brengk's "Parisian Statues" offered "three men in bronze" and "three women in porcelain" in such poses as "Venus," "The Vase," and "The Atlas Group."⁹² Robbie Gordone took a similar approach to great avail. "A beautifully formed woman is Miss Gordone, and her series of reproductions of famous statues won her much applause. Hers is an act that appeals only to the eye, and is intensely interesting," wrote one critic. Gordone's stances included, "Persecution of a Virgin," "The Awakening of Galatea," "The Lion's Bride," and "The Death of a Dancing Girl." The crowds at both the Keith and Proctor theatres supplied "liberal applause" for Gordone.⁹³ Mlle. Lorraine won similar plaudits when she appeared at a Keith theatre "posing as bronze statues...

⁹⁰ New York Clipper, 12 November 1898, 642.

⁹¹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 26 November 1898, 18.

⁹² Walt, "New Acts Next Week," Variety, 11 December 1909, 16.

⁹³ New York Clipper, 25 May 1912, 14; 28 September 1912, 7; 13 April 1913, 7.

artistically presented,” while Nirvana’s living pictures specialized in views of the life of Mazeppa, many on horseback.⁹⁴

Although some observers felt that living picture acts were simply transplants from the burlesque stage,⁹⁵ the cover of refinement in which they shrouded themselves often protected them from rebuke or censure. After a posing act produced by Ray Beveridge appeared in New York in 1908, the New York Dramatic Mirror wrote, “Nothing could possibly be taken as questionable... the golden dust coverings of the models served as a better veil than any amount of draperies could possibly have done.”⁹⁶ Other acts, which did not employ much in the way of covering or “draperies” also avoided criticism, by dint of their supposed cultural refinement. When “Art Studies” appeared at Keith’s Union Square, one critic felt that the sixteen pictures it offered, “including several nudes ... were so artistically posed that even the most fastidious could not help admiring them.”⁹⁷ In all likelihood, male theatre goers accustomed to burlesque shows admired them the most. Similarly, Jean Marcel’s Living Pictures, perhaps the most consistently popular of all such posing acts, won high praise from critics, onlookers, and spectators for its artistic allure. Despite tableaux such as “In Italy,” which proffered “a reproduction of the sensuously painted scenes of the women

⁹⁴ New York Dramatic Mirror, 26 October 1907, 14; 26 September 1903, 18. Actress Adah Isaacs Menken had made a career of posing, seemingly nude, as Mazeppa during the 1860s. Notes the Cambridge Guide to American Theatre: “[Menken’s] dark good looks and splendid figure compensated for her mediocre talent... When a bigamous marriage to the pugilist John Heenan (1859) ended in scandal, she exploited it by appearing in flesh-colored tights to bound a ‘wild horse of Tartary’ in Milner’s melodrama *Mazeppa* (Green Street Theatre, Albany, NY, 1861). This role, played throughout the U.S. North and West, brought her notoriety and stardom as the ‘Naked Lady.’” Don Wilmet, Tice Miller, eds., Cambridge Guide to American Theatre, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 310-11. See also: Wolf Mankowitz, Mazeppa: The Lives, Loves, and Legends of Adah Isaacs Menken, (London: Blond & Briggs, 1982).

⁹⁵ See: New York Clipper, 30 March 1901, 115.

⁹⁶ New York Dramatic Mirror, 26 December 1908, 17.

⁹⁷ New York Dramatic Mirror, 23 February 1901, 18.

of the Latin country,"⁹⁸ Marcel was held in high moral regard. In addition to being "artistically posed"—or perhaps because of it—"the absence of vulgarity and suggestiveness is also a thing that calls for high praise," felt one reviewer.⁹⁹

What worried onlookers was not necessarily nudity, but nudity purveyed in an atmosphere dictated by mass-market demand rather than the authority of cultural elites. Unclad bodies were not in and of themselves evil, but when placed in a mass amusement venue and sold for the price of a cheap ticket, they suddenly became threatening. An editorial on nudity in popular amusements in the New York Clipper clarifies this point:

Assuming that nude models are used by artists and sculptors to create masterpieces, can we, by any stretch of the imagination, allow these same nude women the freedom of the public on the motion picture screen? [In the artist's studio] it is dressed in the form of art and not in the guise of amusement. Its sole purpose is to educate and not to amuse. The studio of the artist offers no open door to the curious throng, and his finished painting, though it be a reproduction of the original model in form and color, is still cold and motionless, and is gazed upon and admired by mature minds, principally in the art gallery or home of wealth. [But in a popular amusement hall, nudes appear] before the eyes of a mixed and motley audience.¹⁰⁰

For this editorialist, the nude female body posed a threat only when available to "the curious throng" or the "mixed and motley audience," possessed of neither wealth nor education. Such consumers were bound to lack the maturity and discerning taste required to look upon the female body as artistic rather than erotic.

Thus, the nude or semi-nude artistic posing act could occasionally fall afoul of critics and onlookers, usually when it began to resemble popular amusement fare—such as that of the burlesque hall—more than an artistic or educational project. After seeing Charlotte Davies do her posing act at Hammerstein's theatre, Variety's Jolo had this to say, "Arrayed in full fleshings and in a picture frame, she poses on a platform for 14

⁹⁸ Sime, "New Acts Next Week," Variety, 12 November 1910, 5.

⁹⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 November 1907, 13; 22 December 1900, 64.

¹⁰⁰ "The Nude in Pictures," New York Clipper, 25 December 1915, 29.

different attitudes [including] Statue of a Maiden, September Morn, The Dancer, The Bath, [and] The White Slave." Concluded Jolo, "[T]his act was merely a vulgar display of robust undraped femininity."¹⁰¹ As the titles of Davies's poses indicate, her appeal may indeed have been more prurient than aesthetic. Jolo's Variety colleague Sime Silverman had already observed that the word "classical" in a vaudeville act typically meant that its players were not "fully dressed," and furthermore that "the usual posing number [relies mostly on] nudity."¹⁰²

Very little eluded Sime's analytical skills or wry commentary. When Mervin Morgan put on "Visions D'Art" by posing on a stone block in her underwear, he wrote, "Merv has some figger [and] figger goes a long way toward getting salary from the box office."¹⁰³ Others were less sanguine when it came to posing acts. When Maud Odell, "the English prize beauty," brought her posing act of "living pictures" to the vaudeville stage, which included "a startling view of Miss Odell's figure from the rear" in a stance entitled "Spring," one drama critic felt it was "too strong for audiences that have stood the various Salomes without protesting very loudly. The art of undress can go no further than this, which in the language of the day is the 'full limit.'"¹⁰⁴ Writes Joe Laurie, Jr., "She would pose, and after each pose she would wear less clothes, and didn't start with much. It got pretty bad and the police made her put on more clothes."¹⁰⁵

The posing act that promised to reach "the limit" came to the vaudeville boards in 1898. It was known as "An Affair of Honor," and it featured two nude female duelists in a dramatic sketch based on two paintings, "Une Affaire d'Honneur" and "La

¹⁰¹ Jolo, "New Acts Next Week," Variety, 24 April 1914, 14.

¹⁰² Sime, "New Acts Next Week," Variety, 19 May 1910, 16 and 17 February 1912, 16.

¹⁰³ Variety, 10 January 1913, 23.

¹⁰⁴ "Beauty Poses in a Sketch," New York Dramatic Mirror, 21 November 1908, 17.

¹⁰⁵ Laurie, 37.

Reconciliation' by Emile Antoine Bayard¹⁰⁶. But the dramatic content was not the act's main appeal. Rather, word got out (probably intentionally leaked to the trade press by the theatre management) that the women, in an effort to precisely reproduce the painting, would appear naked to the waist. Indeed, in rehearsals, observed by several journalists, this was the case and the resulting buzz drew huge crowds to Koster & Bial's. Fearing police action, though, the managers decided to tone it down a bit for public presentation—at least temporarily. Reported the New York Dramatic Mirror, "An Affair of Honor was produced on Monday evening last week, but not as it was done at the private rehearsal mentioned in last week's MIRROR. The management decided that the limit in the undressing line would not do, and so the fair duelists wore pink fleshings when they prepared for the fray. The house jammed with an expectant throng of sensation-seekers who... departed in a gloomy mood when they found that their hopes had been dashed to the earth by [the manager]. On Wednesday evening, however, the women appeared naked to the waist, but such a storm of protest was raised that the fleshings were put on again during the remainder of the week." Two weeks later, though, the performers were arrested "on a charge of violating a section of the code relating to offenses against public decency." Following a "police-court brawl expensive and

¹⁰⁶ "They Have 'An Affair of Honor' Now at Koster & Bial's." New York Times, 27 December 1898, 7:2. It is possible to call An Affair of Honor an instance of "ekphrasis." Though that term is typically used to refer to descriptions of works of visual art in poetry, one may just as well apply it to the dramatic arts or, in this case, popular culture. James Heffernan defines ekphrasis as "the literary representation of visual art," or, more precisely, as "*the verbal representation of visual representation*" (italics his). Heffernan points out that the concept of ekphrasis dates back to classical antiquity, and may be seen in works of poetry throughout the ages, including Virgil, Dante, Byron, Keats, and John Ashbery. Significantly, Heffernan finds Ekphrasis to be "gendered." He writes: "In talking back to and looking at the male viewer, the images envoiced by ekphrasis challenge at once the controlling authority of the male gaze and the power of the male word." Clearly, An Affair of Honor is "gendered," to quote Heffernan. It posed the female body, however, as a sexualized, viewable, *consumable* commodity for large numbers of male patrons in an affordable medium. This difference—between the putatively feminist power of ekphrastic texts from high culture and the objectifying intent of the ekphrastic in popular culture—may constitute one of the key differences in ekphrasis as one moves from the rarified culture of poetry to the mass medium of vaudeville. See: James Heffernan, Museum of Words:

disorderly,” the case was subsequently dismissed and “An Affair of Honor” was permitted to continue to the relief of those ringing up the box office receipts.¹⁰⁷

Capitalizing on the relative freedom afforded nude acts that wore the “classical” or “artistic” mantle, some vaudeville performers began offering “classical dances” to audiences eager to see the unclad female body in motion. Upon seeing classical dancer Tamara de Swirsky’s act, Dash of *Variety* made the following humorous observation: “Recipe for the making of a classical dancer: Strip the subject, wind three and half yards of gauze around the body, not allowing any below the knees, then have the subject hop on her right foot, leaning slightly forward at the same time giving a short backward kick with the left.”¹⁰⁸ The “classical” dancer, who probably owed more to the modernist styles of Ruth St. Denis, Isadora Duncan, and Maud Adams than to Greco-Roman antiquity, became popular on the vaudeville boards for her exposed flesh and her flaunting of Victorian sexual mores. “[O]ne of the pastimes of youth in these days is looking for bare-legged girls [and] bare legged young women in ‘classical’ dances,” wrote *Variety*.¹⁰⁹ The trappings of high art also reminded vaudeville patrons that powerful, patriarchal figures were in charge behind the scenes, carefully, even scientifically, regulating the amusement fare for mass consumption.

Mary Rita Fleischer notes that early modern dancers in high culture were often described as “classical” or “barefoot.” According to Fleischer, these terms “connote a sense of liberation from artistic and social constraints and a hearkening back to ancient

The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1-7.

¹⁰⁷ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 7 January 1899, 18; 21 January 1899, 18; *New York Clipper*, 31 December 1898, 740. Gilbert, 190.

¹⁰⁸ Dash, “New Acts Next Week,” *Variety*, 17 September 1910, 14.

¹⁰⁹ Sime, “New Acts Next Week,” *Variety*, 7 May 1915, 12.

models.”¹¹⁰ The scantily-clad “classical” dancers on the vaudeville stage took a page out of high culture’s notebook, and then popularized, commodified, and sensationalized it. Indeed, many vaudeville dancers may have been trying to mimic Isadora Duncan who, on stage, “presented a ‘natural’ body: uncorsetted and loosely draped in her signature form-revealing tunics of floating silk or chiffon, hair flowing freely.”¹¹¹

Like their cousin the posing act, the classical dancer in vaudeville could invoke censure if she pushed the accepted limits of respectability. Mlle. Memereau, according to the New York Clipper, was a “‘classical’ dancer with all that the name implies. In this instance the ‘Mlle’ displays about as much of her undraped form as she possibly can without incurring the displeasure of the authorities. [Her act is] distinctly out of place in a family vaudeville theatre.”¹¹² But her act was quite *in place* in a theatre heavily attended by men seeking a new form of entertainment—the mass-marketed erotic spectacle.

Though male “classical” dancers were few and far between, they too occasionally appeared in vaudeville. Rather than providing visual pleasure or provoking rebuke, they typically earned little more than the scorn of onlookers. After seeing Paul Swann at Hammerstein’s, Sime Silverman wrote: “New York men haven’t been educated up to classical dancers of the Paul Swann type. He is wholly classical. The women may like him. The older the woman the more they will like to see him float about the stage with his arms moving snakewise and his body twisting, almost squirming. But the men over here don’t understand it... Mr. Swann danced three times, each in a different costume, but never at any time wearing enough clothes to cover him

¹¹⁰ Mary Rita Fleischer, “Collaborative Projects of Symbolist Playwrights and Early Modern Dancers” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1998), 15.

¹¹¹ Fleischer, 17.

¹¹² “New Vaudeville Acts,” New York Clipper, 6 December 1913, 19.

up. He was almost as naked as some of the women who have danced around for different reasons."¹¹³

Players like Swann presented a conundrum, for the unclad male body was a kind of counterfeit currency in the sexual economy of mass amusement at the turn of the century. His referent was the unclad female dancer, but phenomenologically he put forth a male body, thus confusing codes of spectatorship based on female objectification and the erotic male gaze.

Performers who put on classical dances, or reproduced well-known scenes from art and mythology, posed the female body as an alluring sexual commodity. It is not surprising then that sketches in which women played artist's models or other objects of visual pleasure were common on the vaudeville stage. In some cases, these sketches and short dramatic playlets, most of which were set in an artist's studio, featured little in the way of plot. Merely, they were an excuse to have a woman pose for, or impersonate, a work of art. When actress Frankie Bailey appeared in "My Lady's Picture" at Proctor's Twenty-Third Street theatre, one trade paper wrote, "She is noted for her beauty and it is agreed that the contour of her lower limbs entitles her to be regarded as having the most perfect figure on the American stage... [She appears] in a becoming costume consisting of black tights and a close fitting jacket, in which, it is needless to say, she makes a most alluring picture."¹¹⁴

In "The Silhouette Girl," a woman enters an artist's studio, discards her clothing, "leaving the girl in her little union suit," against a background which "threw the woman's figure into sharp relief."¹¹⁵ Similarly, Mlle. Rialta brought a sketch called "The Artist's Dream" to Keith Theatres in 1910. Set, as per usual, in an artist's studio,

¹¹³ Sime, "New Acts Next Week," *Variety*, 31 October 1914, 18.

¹¹⁴ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 24 September 1904, 18.

¹¹⁵ Sime, "New Acts Next Week," *Variety*, 3 December 1910, 14.

the model posed inside a frame while the artist slept, dreaming about “Rialta’s very shapely build [which] is shown to capital advantage.”¹¹⁶ Acts like “The Artist’s Dream” wove male fantasies of being able to summon scantily clad women on demand with the reality of woman as purchasable sexual object. Logically, these performances sometimes suggested a form of relief from the strictures of marriage and husbandhood. In an act called “The Goddess,” from 1907, a “sculptor has chiseled a Diana and after disposing of the statue for \$10,000, it comes to life in his studio, and demands that his wife be slain so their lovemaking may proceed without interference.”¹¹⁷ Here, the image of woman not only affords the man who has made her a financial boon, but escape from the drudgery of wedded life as well.

Artist’s studio sketches usually suggested that the model, a woman useful solely for her bodily allure and willingness to take her clothes off, was inevitably the object of the artist’s forbidden lust. In a “comedieta” entitled “My Husband’s Model,” a suspicious wife disguises herself as the model in her artist husband’s employ to find out if her suspicions are based in fact.¹¹⁸ (They are. But, like most of the myriad vaudeville sketches dealing with infidelity, the married couple is reconciled at the end. This stock ending was not merely intended to stave off moral criticism but, moreover, to allow the sketch to contain a healthy quantity of cheating husbands, secreted lovers, and surreptitious trysts without actually seeming to condone it all.)

In an interesting variation on the artist’s model sketch, one such playlet had a woman playing a wax mannequin “who is apparently smitten with the window dresser who manipulates her arms and—er—limbs and also dresses and un—well he prepares

¹¹⁶ Wynn, “New Acts Next Week,” Variety, 2 July 1910, 14; New York Clipper, 9 July 1910, 529.

¹¹⁷ Variety, 25 May 1907, 10.

¹¹⁸ New York Dramatic Mirror, 4 February 1899, 18.

her for public view anyway [in] a pretty negligee."¹¹⁹ Here the woman is offered up as not only a sexual object but a totem of consumption as well—the department store mannequin—not to mention a being who falls in love with the man who controls her every position.

Perhaps the most famous solo vaudeville performer who posed herself as an artwork was known simply "La Milo." Once referred to as the "famous poseuse of Great Britain," La Milo covered her body in "alabaster whiting for the marble effect" and, thus coated, impersonated numerous famous statues and characters from classical mythology. Though some "looked for a sensational disclosure of the nude in art" in La Milo's show, her act was said to be free of "all taint of immodesty and any appeal to coarseness."¹²⁰

La Milo was actually an Australian woman named Pansy Montague who had achieved great success in vaudeville by the time she was twenty-two years old. "She wears no clothes but the drapery necessary to make her poses resemble the original statues which she imitates. Her body is covered with an enamel preparation that gives the appearance of marble," wrote the Detroit News. The paper further opined, "Nobody who is not ashamed to take his wife to inspect the classic statues of an art gallery should be ashamed to see La Milo."¹²¹

Not every onlooker felt La Milo's appeal was purely artistic and devoid of the sensual, though. "Tom, Dick and Harry, each armed with opera glasses, the lenses of which are almost powerful enough to pierce the enamel that alone protects the stage goddess from the world, have been filling the London Pavilion since she opened her

¹¹⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 21 August 1909, 23.

¹²⁰ Sime, "New Acts Next Week," Variety, 21 November 1914, 18.

¹²¹ "La Milo," Detroit News, 20 November 1906. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

engagement... she is the talk of the town," reported the New York Telegraph.¹²² Despite her artistic pretensions, La Milo was every bit as much a voyeur's fantasy. According to the New York American, La Milo chose to impersonate statues of Venus, Diana, Phryne, Lady Godiva, Monna Vanna, "and other mythological and historical women renowned especially for their virtues, pulchritude and utter disregard for prevailing modes."¹²³ especially where sexual mores were concerned.

As if to underscore her voyeuristic appeal, and publicize her exhibitionistic tendencies, La Milo simulated Lady Godiva's ride by galloping on horseback "through the streets of Coventry" in England in 1907 clad only in several lengths of chiffon and a long, flowing wig. "[E]very man in the thousands who jammed the streets was a 'Peeping Tom,'" wrote the Chicago Tribune.¹²⁴

In addition to her sexual appeal, La Milo was yet another example of a female vaudeville personality promoted as a "perfect woman," a fetishized ideal of feminine sexuality to which ordinary women were to compare themselves. "She is perfect in every measurement. Artists say of her she is a new Venus de Milo. Even her flesh is marble," commented the New York Star.¹²⁵ A newspaper advertisement promoting La Milo in 1907 stated that her "representations of Venus, Psyche, Hebe, Io and other classical ladies are a valuable educational treat." But it went on to construct the posing beauty as a kind of Platonic archetype of the female body:

¹²² "Stage Venus Wears No Tights," New York Telegraph, 6 May 1906. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

¹²³ "Lady Godiva is to Ride Here Again," New York American, 9 November 1914. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

¹²⁴ "Gauze and Grouch Ride With Godiva," Chicago Tribune, 8 August 1907. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

La Milo's proportions are said to be perfect. She is a splendid specimen of mature womanhood who has been compared inch by inch with all the beauties of mythology and has not been found wanting. We are told that she "arrives so near to perfection as to constitute almost a challenge from nature, the creator, to art, the idealizer." Here are her proportions: Height, 5 feet 8 inches; Bust, 37½ inches; Hips, 42 inches; Waist, 26 inches; Upper Arm, 12 inches; Forearm, 9¾ inches; Wrist, 6 inches; Throat, 13½ inches. She weighs 162 pounds, is 21 years of age, has a clear complexion, blue eyes, and nut-brown hair. The only criticism leveled at the entertainment is that the poses are too "marble cold" and lack the warmth of living flesh, but all London goes to see La Milo just the same.

By including the description of La Milo as "marble cold," her promoters were trying to avoid objections to the display of a naked woman in a supposedly respectable theatre environment. But by describing her as little more than a series of measurements and physical traits, they were also implying that the ideal of feminine beauty could be reduced to a formula and was therefore obtainable. Of course, most women could never hope to look like La Milo. It helped little that "her message to the American woman is 'do not sag.'"¹²⁶

Posing acts like that of La Milo and others also capitalized on the increasing popularity at the time of artist's models, some of whom began to achieve notoriety around the turn of the century, not unlike fashion "supermodels" of today. "In her way, too, she is an artist," wrote Cosmopolitan in a 1901 article entitled, "Women Who Pose." "Almost as much as the actress, she must have the histrionic temperament." Cosmopolitan pointed out that many models "like queens content themselves with one name." Hence posers like "La Milo" or "Le Deodima."¹²⁷

¹²⁵ "La Milo, the Perfect Woman," New York Star, 25 November 1914. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

¹²⁶ "About La Milo's Beauty," Cincinnati Commercial Tribune, 17 February 1915. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

¹²⁷ Vance Thompson, "Women Who Pose," Cosmopolitan, December 1901, 180, 185.

As a genre, posing acts were eclipsed in popularity by the so-called “Salome” dancers who appeared suddenly on the vaudeville scene around 1907-08. The Salome dancers cooked up their own variations on a common theme: a wild, gyrating interpretive dance number based on the Biblical story of the young woman who dances for King Herod, its rendering by Oscar Wilde, its operatic iteration, or some creative combination thereof.

Artistic representations of Salome go back at least as far as the Middle Ages. Some medieval artists rendered Salome as “a minstrel doing handstands or sword-juggling,” John Southworth writes of a twelfth century illustration in The English Medieval Minstrel.¹²⁸

By the nineteenth century, the story of Salome had become of great interest to writers, composers, dancers, and painters. In The Salome Dancer: the Life and Times of Maud Allan, Felix Cherniavsky points out that the writers Heinrich Heine, Gustave Flaubert, and Oscar Wilde, and composers Alexander Galzunov, Jules Massenet, and, of course, Richard Strauss, all adapted the tale of Salome in their respective works. “All these nineteenth-century artists focused on Salome’s sensuality, perverseness, and seductive powers. By the end of the century she also personified the decadence of an old society on the brink of radical reform or dissolution,” writes Cherniavsky.¹²⁹

Richard Bizot, like others, gives credit to Maud Allan for starting the “Salomania” fad of both the high and popular stages, beginning about 1907. Inspired by Wilde’s play and Strauss’s opera, Allan developed an act “composed of sexuality and pseudo-spirituality, apparent innocence, a transparent skirt, and thinly disguised lust, the

¹²⁸ John Southworth, The English Medieval Minstrel, (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 1989), 6-7.

¹²⁹ Felix Cherniavsky, The Salome Dancer: the Life and Times of Maud Allan, (London: McClelland & Stewart), 142.

whole package wrapped up in the rhetoric of High Aesthetic Purpose."¹³⁰ This appealing combination of sexuality and the artifice of high culture would soon make Salome dancers the perfect commodity for the mass amusement needs of the vaudeville circuits.

In The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville, Anthony Slide argues that Gertrude Hoffman was the first to bring a Salome dance before the vaudeville public, in 1908, and was not inspired by Maud Allen's Salome dance. By the fall of 1908, though, Hoffman was just one of an onslaught of women bringing various versions of the Dance of the Seven Veils to the major circuits. The Salome craze was so pronounced, contends Slide, "that the United Booking Office was unable to keep up on demands coming from theatres across the United States."¹³¹ As Variety noted, "Even the 'rubberneck' ballyhoos have changed their cry. Now it's 'Take the automobile and go Saloming.'"¹³² In 1908, Hoffman's Salome number "smashed several Hammerstein [box office] records to smithereens, the receipts on Wednesday being the largest in the history of the house."¹³³ Eva Tanguay, Ada Overton Walker, La Sylphe, Millie De Leon, Pilar Morin, and numerous others successfully posed themselves as Salome dancers during the act's brief, but intense, period of popularity. Mlle. Dazie, who Bizot states was the first to perform Salome before an American audience in Florenz Ziegfeld's Follies of 1907, had even opened a "school for Salomes" which by the summer of 1908 was graduating no fewer than 150 aspiring Salome dancers per month.¹³⁴

The narrative content of a typical Salome dance was described in one program as follows:

¹³⁰ Richard Bizot, "The Turn-of-the-Century Salome Era: High- and Pop-Culture Variations on the Dance of the Seven Veils," Choreography and Dance 2 (1992), 76.

¹³¹ Anthony Slide, The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 449.

¹³² Variety, 8 August 1908, 15.

¹³³ "All About 'Salome,'" Variety, 1 August 1908, 7.

¹³⁴ Bizot, 78.

Salome, daughter of Herodias, has, at the instigation of her mother, received as a reward from Herod, for the dance of the seven veils, the head of John the Baptist. The dance of the seven veils or bridal dance, the climax of virginity, typifying the surrender Maidenhood, may be for no man's eyes other than the bridegroom's; wherefore Herodias' vengeful triumph over John the Baptist is the utter destruction and desolation of Salome. Broken, lost in the horrors of remorse, her Spirit an outcast, her body a reproach, Salome follows upon the call of the Christ, "Come ye... apart into a desert place."¹³⁵

Salome dancers added various touches to personalize and differentiate their routines. For example, some traipsed about with the cleaved-off head of John the Baptist, while others omitted this detail. But every Salome dancer traded on the scant attire, sensual abandon, and frenetic movement she brought to her act. By offering live-motion images of a woman possessed, the Salome dancers suggested sexual climax, rebellion against restrictive moral norms, and, like the "classical" posing and statuary acts, vestiges of the objectified female body of the burlesque stage. "In burlesque is the proper place for it," wrote one journalist. "The dancer," he continued, "whoever she may be, should acquire a 'cooch' undulating movement, and when the last of the seven veils is removed, even less than a veil should remain."¹³⁶

Certainly, it was essential for the performer to expose as much of her body as possible, either directly or filtered through the insinuation of gauzy fabric. "And still the Salomes rush in upon us! Truly, there seems to be no stemming the tide of nearly naked dancers of this description, and the public is not yet satiated with the terpsichorean novelty, judging by the business done at all the houses where that feature is put on," wrote the New York Clipper late in the summer of 1908.¹³⁷ Of Eva Tanguay's Salome, Variety observed, "One of Miss Tanguay's innovations will be the costume worn, if a

¹³⁵ In: Sime, "New Acts Next Week," Variety, 1 August 1908, 14.

¹³⁶ Variety, 2 February 1907, 10.

¹³⁷ New York Clipper, 29 August 1908, 701.

strip of cloth may be described as a costume. There will be little else in the way of clothing, excepting an expensive, flimsy covering...."¹³⁸

As with any act demanded by the public, competition was fierce. Each Salome struggled to differentiate herself from a gaggle of rivals, while providing enough erotic predictability to "put over" her act successfully. Ada Overton Walker, the only African-American Salome dancer in mainstream white vaudeville,¹³⁹ attempted to refine her Salome act, not by covering up or toning down her dance steps, but by eliminating some of the scene's gore and carnage. "Miss Walker deserves credit for eliminating the gruesomeness of dancing about the stage, carrying the head of 'John the Baptist,'" wrote one trade paper. "[S]he merely placed her lips to the head and falls prostrate as the curtain closes in."¹⁴⁰

Others tried to claim ownership of their Salome number. Dancer Millie De Leon took out an advertisement which proclaimed:

SALOME DANCERS

¹³⁸ "All About 'Salome.'"

¹³⁹ Laurie, 204. There were few outlets for African-American performers in mainstream white vaudeville. There was, however, a vibrant black vaudeville circuit which nurtured some of the country's finest talent (even though, like the circuits described in this work, it was controlled by a white businessman, F.A. Barrasso). For further reading see the superb book by Mel Watkins, On The Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor That Transformed American Culture, From Slavery to Richard Pryor, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), chapters 3, 4, and 9.

¹⁴⁰ New York Clipper, 10 August 1912. "All About 'Salome,'" Variety, 1 August 1908, 7. Walker was also famous for teaching "white elite society how to do the cakewalk," according to David Krasner in his recent book on African-American theatre. Walker succeeded in doing so, argues Krasner, "by *rewriting the bodily gestures of the dance* [italics his] in ways that appealed to white elites as well as African Americans." Walker made cakewalking a professional undertaking, lending it an air of sophistication and refinement, thus winning plaudits from both white society and her own African American community. She won further acceptance for cakewalking by "mov[ing] along a fine line separating overt from covert sexual expression." Clearly, she employed a similarly appealing modesty—a modesty eschewed by white Salome dancers, to great success—in her Salome turn. One is led to the conclusion that, as virtually the only African-American woman on the white vaudeville stage, Ada Overton Walker understood that she had to respect parameters overtly flouted by her white contemporaries. For more see: David Krasner, Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 76, 83, 92.

¹⁴⁰ New York Clipper, 10 August 1912.

—ATTENTION—

MILLIE DE LEON...

CHALLENGES

All Salome Dancers that she can outdance her imitators, in style and execution, for any amount of money.¹⁴¹

With characteristic pluck, Eva Tanguay too attempted to claim sole right to the Salome number.¹⁴² Tanguay's version, entitled "A Vision of Salome," with original music by Melville Gideon, premiered at Keith's Alhambra in New York City in the summer of 1908. Her routine also featured an impressive setting consisting of "a river in the background and the great brazen torches in which the lights burned, and a massive stairway"¹⁴³ all of which hearkened back to the extravagant settings of nineteenth-century melodrama. In Tanguay's Salome act, though, it was more the actress than the role that drew the crowds. As usual, Tanguay merely used a popular trend to frame her unique personality and unpredictable stage antics. Wrote the Brooklyn Citizen:

Brooklyn playgoers had a charming glimpse of "Salome" yesterday. It was really Miss Tanguay whom they saw, clad in Biblical garb—or what there was of it—and if the real daughter of Herodias was as cute and pretty and lithesome as her latter-day imitator, why, then the little lady can't be blamed for a good many things that has prompted Maud Allen to imitate somebody so that somebody else mistake her [sic]... Imagine a beautiful stage setting with the head of St. John peeking out of the well; then imagine the cyclonic one in pearls and gauze in the foreground, with all the musicians banging away as though they were playing the overture to the day of judgment and, in front, the audience going wild with a sea of opera glasses trained where they will do the most good....¹⁴⁴

Some critics lauded Tanguay for cleaning up the Salome craze. "[T]here is absolutely no vulgarity to it," wrote the Brooklyn Times, "nothing that is either

¹⁴¹ New York Clipper, 12 September 1908, 763.

¹⁴² New York Dramatic Mirror, 26 September 1908, 17.

¹⁴³ New York Clipper, 15 August 1908, 653.

suggestive or offensive unless one be hypocritical.” But other onlookers held a different opinion of Tanguay and her Salome number. Wrote the Brooklyn Daily Eagle:

Beyond the craze for “Salome” of every brand and variety there is not the slightest legitimate reason for Miss Tanguay’s effort. The dance is merely an accentuation of the actress’s peculiar step, by which her songs are invested with the quality of perpetual motion, if not harmony. Eva Tanguay not alone has not the slightest conception of “Salome,” from either a biblical or Oscar Wilde viewpoint, but had she such a conception it would be impossible for her to give expression to it, for the very good reason that she knows next to nothing of the art of dancing. The singer has capitalized on a popular if not a laudable public fancy, but as to artistic results there are absolutely none... [T]he singer manages to dispense with wearing apparel to a point just within the ban of the law... and the final effect is merely ludicrous and grotesque.¹⁴⁵

Tanguay was not alone in drawing the ire of moral reformers. A number of critics and crusaders saw Salome acts as a base form of pandering. The Salome numbers inspired New York pastor John Wesley Hill to proclaim that “amusements to-day are as bad as in the old days of pagan Rome.”¹⁴⁶ But it was not just clergymen, already predisposed to distrust theatrical entertainments, who spoke out. So shocking and transgressive were the Salome performers that they inspired at least one actress to inveigh publicly against them as well. Marie Cahill, according to the New York Times, made “a frank attack on the vaudeville managers for giving ‘Salome’ dances” and declared “that they have thrown discretion to the winds and have forfeited the privilege of judging what the youth of the country may be permitted to see.” According to Cahill, Salome dancers “clothe pernicious subjects in a boasted artistic atmosphere, but which are really an excuse for the most vulgar exhibition that this country has ever been called on to tolerate.” Cahill went so far as to write a letter to the New York State Republican party requesting that official action be taken. She wrote:

¹⁴⁴ Reprinted in: Variety, 3 October 1908, 2.

¹⁴⁵ Variety, 3 October 1908, 2.

¹⁴⁶ “Says Salome Spirit Pervades Theatre.” New York Times, 22 February 1909, 9:5.

Dear Sir: In the hope that it may serve to call to the attention of yourself and your committee the lamentable tendency of the stage, and especially the vaudeville section of it, to become more and more vulgar and indecent, and that you may see fit to take some action which will result in legislation that will put a stop to this willful poisoning of that great teaching institution, the drama, I have the honor to suggest the incorporating in the platform to be adopted by the State Convention a plank favoring the establishment in the State of New York of a commission with powers of censorship over the dramatic stage... There has been a time when "refined vaudeville" was a fact, and the mother was glad to take her immature daughter to spend an afternoon in one of these houses, but the managers of this class of entertainment seem now to have thrown discretion to the winds.

Cahill saw vaudeville as especially dangerous because its inexpensive admission price made it easily accessible to the "multitude of our young people who cannot go to school because they must work" and who "have acquired little or taste for reading good books."¹⁴⁷ An inexpensive, mass-market entertainment, available for the simple price of admission, which had no use for the elite arbiters of taste, looked especially threatening to Cahill and others like her.

Marie Cahill was not alone in suggesting that Salome performances clothed "pernicious subjects in a boasted artistic atmosphere," much like the posing and statuary acts of vaudeville. One journalist, who termed the fad "the Salome infection," felt this kind of routine made especially clear the fact that vaudeville clothed itself in a rhetoric of cleanliness that permitted it to get away with offenses against moral decency. "Here was a vaudeville world in New York vaunting itself as a safe and elegant resort for middle-class families, providing clean but entertaining performances that the feeblest intellect could enjoy, putting out guileless stories in the papers how certain reckless performers or 'teams' had had to omit even the mildest cuss-words from their 'acts' under the threat of having their contracts canceled. And yet... the vaudevillians had Pearian Salome's cavorting in undress all over their 'safe and elegant' stages," wrote

¹⁴⁷ "The 'Salome' Dance Gets Into Politics," New York Times, 24 August 1908, 2:5

Joseph I.C. Clarke in the New York Times. Clarke makes clear that the vaudeville chiefs were more concerned with the appearance of impropriety, and with the propagation of a marketing rhetoric aimed at advancing it, than with impropriety itself. Incorrectly, Clarke thought such a project would ultimately fail: “It is as normal for American audiences to demand clean plays as clean shirts. The mind of America is morally sound.”¹⁴⁸

Even Martin Beck, who controlled the powerful Orpheum circuit of vaudeville theatres, objected to the Salome craze. “I personally would rejoice were vaudeville to accept a dancer such as Isadora Duncan is. A ‘Salome’ dance is a degrading art... The Orpheum Circuit is diverting its energies to the higher and loftier plane of entertainment.”¹⁴⁹ In this pronouncement, Beck was doing just as Clarke implied—telling the organs of public discourse his theatres were clean in order to get away with the presentation of acts that were not. In response to public outcry, usually instigated by members of the clergy, Salome dances were, for a time, banned in Brooklyn and New Jersey, and placed “under observation” by the police in New York.¹⁵⁰

Martin Beck may have thought near-naked dancing acceptable if proffered by a highbrow artist such as Isadora Duncan. But, as Mary Rita Fleischer makes clear, practitioners of refined, high-status art dancing like Duncan and her peers embraced “Salomania” just as enthusiastically as their popular culture counterparts. Moreover, they appealed to audiences with a healthy dose of nudity and sexual suggestiveness. Ida Rubinstein, who prepared a Salome dance, which was accompanied by a custom-written score, courtesy of St. Petersburg Conservatory Director Alexander Glazunov, generated considerable buzz in Moscow by intimating that she would cast off all seven veils and

¹⁴⁸ “Conditions of the Stage,” New York Times, 14 February 1909, part V, 8.

¹⁴⁹ “No ‘Salomes’ on Orpheum Circuit,” Variety, 12 September 1908, 1.

“appear completely naked.” Despite threats of closure by Russian authorities, the show went on in December 1908. Legendary Russian acting coach Konstantin Stanislavsky, who saw Rubinstein’s Salome show in Paris the following year, inveighed against her act, saying, “I have never seen anyone more naked, and vapidly naked. How shameful! The music and Fokin’s staging of the Dance of the Seven Veils are very good. But she is without talent, and naked.” But nudity did not bother Ida Rubinstein. Her sexuality was central to her identity and she posed nude for a number of well-known artists.¹⁵¹

Despite occasional outcries in America, Salome dancers continued to draw huge crowds in vaudeville and inspired the greatest evidence of its success: parody. Ada Overton Walker, who had done a straightforward Salome dance for a while, was thought to do the best burlesque of Salome, though Jessica Preston was a close second. Julian Eltinge, the famous cross-dresser, would have pleased Oscar Wilde himself, by creating a popular Salome act.¹⁵² Blackface comedian John Hymer composed a kind of “coon song” on the Salome phenomenon entitled “De Sloamey Dance.” It went:

If yo`se got a little act
 An` yo` can` t git any time.
 Don` t go an lay de blame
 On Mistah Rush or Sime.
 Tho` `way yo` clothes—wear a smile,
 Read hist`ry an` den take a chance:
 Git a piece uv skeeter bar

¹⁵⁰ New York Dramatic Mirror, 26 August 1908, 17; 5 September 1908, 19; 24 October 1908, 17.

¹⁵¹ Fleischer, 144–48.

¹⁵² Variety, 9 August 1912, 20; 12 December 1908, 14. New York Dramatic Mirror, 1 August 1908, 14.

An` go do de Sloamey dance...

I seed a lady do dat dance

I was kinder disapp`nted.

She didn`t weah much clo`es at all

An` she sho`ly wuz loose j`nted.

Dey say it`s classic—I don`t know.

But from all that I can see

Dat thing dey call de Sloamey dance

Looks like old Hooch a kooch to me.¹⁵³

Lubin, the motion picture producer, even committed a version of the Salome dance to film. "This is the play the whole country is talking about. Our film depicts, in vivid scenes, the drunken feast given to the Senators by Herod; shows a Salome executing 'The Dance of the Seven Veils,' and ends with the hurried entry of Salome's mother, throwing a leopard skin around her daughter. Length, 400 Feet. Price, \$44."¹⁵⁴

Even after the public craving for Salome dancers died down a bit, performers experimented with untamed dances in form-revealing outfits that owed a clear debt to the Dance of the Seven Veils. In 1910, Adeline Boyer brought an act called "The Princess of Israel" to the vaudeville boards. The number, like the Salome, was set in a mythic-Biblical locale, specifically "the Royal Palace of King Solomon's brother" and contained dances with cymbals, daggers, and at least one seduction scene. The New York Clipper wrote that Boyer's "Hebrew dances are much on the order of the 'Salome'

¹⁵³ "All About Salome."

¹⁵⁴ New York Clipper, 9 February 1909, 1360.

dances seen so much of late. During one of the dances she unwound a scarf from her body and disclosed herself in a costume that was scant, to say the least."¹⁵⁵

Simone de Beryl and Emile Agoust drew on the another well-known Bible story to create an act that featured enough disrobing and sinuous dancing to make it just as much at home on the burlesque hall stage. It was called "The Temptation of Adam and Eve." Wrote Variety, "It was near the naked truth of the Biblical incident as they dared follow it... Miss de Beryl is the 'few clothes woman' while Adam... looked like an unshaven miner who had come up from the bowels of the earth in a fairy's outfit."¹⁵⁶

Other performers discovered that titillating acts like these needed not rely solely on Western religious myths. The performer "Princess Sita Diva" concocted an act called "The Diva Dasi" set in a "Hindu temple." Wrote one reviewer, "Princess Sita Diva, a shapely woman who had no compunction about showing her figure, appeared to introduce a little pantomime and a dance of passion, a first cousin of the gone-before Salome or coochee-coochee."¹⁵⁷ In addition to owing an obvious debt to the Salome-ers, Sita Diva also reprised an act by "Radha," who some years earlier toured with a dance also set in a "Hindoo temple" in which she displayed "the nudity of the body between the skirts and bodice."¹⁵⁸

Of all the Salome dancers, perhaps the best known—and certainly the one whose career withered most lamentably after the fad was over—was a woman who called herself "La Sylphe." Like many female vaudeville performers who relied on the sensual, an exotic, European-sounding name lent her an air of refinement and legitimacy. La Sylphe was actually Edith Lambelle, born in New York City in 1882. The

¹⁵⁵ New York Clipper, 5 March 1910, 81.

¹⁵⁶ Variety, 22 May 1914, 14.

¹⁵⁷ New York Clipper, 27 May 1911, 5.

¹⁵⁸ Variety, 17 February 1906, 6.

Blue Book Magazine reported that Lambelle/La Sylphe was “the first of the Salome sisterhood to arrive in New York,” and that she initially danced with “limbs and feet bare” until the police ordered her to wear “tights at least.” Eventually, she settled on a “transparent skirt and a small bodice” to play her trade.¹⁵⁹

In addition to showing a great deal of skin, La Sylphe put together an impressive stage setting of special effects and astounding visuals. In her act, according to one paper, “The rise of the curtain displays a scene of gloomy, ghostly interest in which passing clouds and lightening flashes spasmodically obscure the moon. In the midst of this elemental tumult Salome makes her appearance, a dejected, remorseful, desolate being come to an more desolate spot to cast her self in a despairing effort of soul sacrifice at the feet of the monolith.”¹⁶⁰ The “monolith” was a stage element called the “Monolith of the Dead Faiths” and seems to have been unique to La Sylphe’s act. “Seldom has Broadway witnessed a more weird, wild, and ecstatic dance of abandonment,” wrote the New York Dramatic Mirror.¹⁶¹

Still, the main appeal was La Sylphe’s unclad body, on display on the stage. “Public interest in the ‘Salome’ undressed dance has risen to a fever pitch,” observed Variety after La Sylphe’s appearance at Keith & Proctor’s 125th Street theatre.¹⁶² La Sylphe (and her managers) never lost sight of this fact. “The hint that she would wear less and less as the week progressed brought people from North, South, East and West in droves, and from Tuesday matinee on the house treasurer was as busy with the pasteboards as he ever had been during his life,” wrote the New York Clipper during her

¹⁵⁹ Charles Darnton, “Stageland,” Blue Book Magazine, October 1908, 1341.

¹⁶⁰ “La Sylphe in New Salome Dance,” New York Mirror, 8 August 1908. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

¹⁶¹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 8 August 1908, 14.

¹⁶² Variety, 11 July 1908, 14.

engagement at the Keith & Proctor house. Not surprisingly, La Sylphe flirted with touring the burlesque circuit, or wheel, following her United Booking Office engagement.¹⁶³

Gertrude Hoffman, who is credited by some with having started the Salome craze, also put together an act that relied on scant clothing and untamed dance steps, which conflated modern dance and the burlesque hall. Her "Vision of Salome," which debuted in July, 1908 caused a "mob" scene of "mid-summer madness," thanks in part to her "gauzy" shirt and "transparent black skirt." Hoffman's "dance full of abandon" climaxed in a moment wherein she flung her body to the floor and kissed the severed head of John the Baptist.¹⁶⁴ Variety called the dance number, which contained "a most perceptible wiggle" and "several corkscrews with her arms" little more than "dignified 'cooch'."¹⁶⁵ Despite such scathing remarks, Hoffman's Salome was a decided success. The week of her Salome number proved the biggest ever for Hammerstein's box office.¹⁶⁶

While others went on to copy Salome, Hoffman experimented with different exotic dances and further pushed the limits of acceptability. Her presentation of "Radha," a "Hindoo Temple dance," in 1909 featured Hoffman in filmy skirts writhing about on stage in a depiction of "the five senses."¹⁶⁷ A similar dance earned her arrest in New York where she was "charged with violating a section of the penal code, which relates to an offense against public decency," according to the New York Clipper.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³ Sam M'Kee, "La Sylphe Declares She Doesn't Wish to be a Burlesque Queen," New York Telegraph, 20 July 1908. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

¹⁶⁴ New York Dramatic Mirror, 25 July 1908, 14.

¹⁶⁵ Variety, 18 July 1908, 12.

¹⁶⁶ Variety, 25 July 1908, 16.

¹⁶⁷ New York Clipper, 28 August 1909, 731.

¹⁶⁸ New York Clipper, 31 July 1909, 629.

Hoffman was eventually released, but continued to present shows which got her in trouble with legal authorities. In 1911, she starred with a troupe of Imperial Russian dancers at the Winter Garden theatre in a ballet based on the life of Cleopatra. "It is known that shortly after the opening of the performance two weeks ago letters began to pour into the Mayor's office complaining of certain incidents in the ballet and the scant costuming of one of the performers," reported the New York Times.¹⁶⁹ One such letter, from a B. Ogden Chisolm of 66 Beaver Street, complained. "My Dear Sir: I attended a few nights ago, a performance at the Winter Garden, which purported to give an exhibition of Russian dancing, and I was surprised to find that a performance so lewd and disgusting, with very little to redeem it, should be allowed the privilege of public presentation in this city... I hope that you have the power with you as Mayor to eliminate some of the disgusting features of this exhibition, which should not be allowed to continue in its present form." The Mayor, who had actually ruled in favor of motion picture interests some years earlier when anti-vice crusaders threatened to close the city's nickelodeons, swayed with the political current. "Dear Mr. Chisolm," he wrote, "I thank you for your letter... There are certain people here who are doing all they can to degrade the public stage in this city. I am sufficiently assured that the play is disgusting."¹⁷⁰ Gaynor ordered the police to have a look at Hoffman and the Russian ballet and, perhaps because the managers of the ballet had reportedly toned it down, the police found "nothing indecent in the show as it is now being given."¹⁷¹

Still, Gaynor had a political career to think about, and those in charge of the performance were presented with a summons to appear in the West Side Court on charges that "the dance given by Miss Hoffman and her troupe of Russian dancers is not

¹⁶⁹ "Police at Winter Garden," New York Times, 27 June 1911, 9:4.

¹⁷⁰ "Police Not Shocked by Russian Dances," New York Times, 1 July 1911, 11:1.

¹⁷¹ "Police Not Shocked by Russian Dances."

proper for the stage.” David Belasco came to the hearing to testify on behalf of Morris Gest, Hoffman’s manager-director, and J.F. Cass, manager of the Winter Garden.

Belasco, perhaps concerned about the negative economic impact that censorship and show closings might eventually have on his own enterprises, tried to defend Hoffman by pointing out that standards of decency can change across cultures and historical periods. He also tried to frame the event as artistic and dignified rather than base and popular.

Said Belasco:

The only interest I take in the case is that I do not think it right to summon these managers on such a complaint. The dance which is complained of is not indecent. In fact, ever since the time of Christ we have had dancing in fleshings, and if they complain about this dance they will have to complain against every dance at the Metropolitan Opera House this coming season. If tights are eliminated in dancing you will eliminate all beauty from it. It is necessary for dancers of this kind to show their limbs to bring out all the beauty of the art. A group of Russian dancers appeared last night before the King and Queen of England, dressed in much scantier clothing than the dancers at the Winter Garden, and I am sure that if it were not a respectable dance it would not have been performed before the King and Queen.¹⁷²

For their part, the Russians too expressed shock at the narrow mindedness and ethno-cultural ignorance of the American authorities. “Here in America we are astounded to learn that our dances are to some eyes ‘immoral’ and ‘salacious’; we have been subjected to surveillance of the police. Our managers have been subjected to annoyance on the part of personal enemies. We think it is due to ourselves, as aliens in a foreign land, to acquaint the highest representative of the Imperial Russian Government with the information that we ourselves have done nothing to degrade the art which we love and which we are offering in this country as we were taught in our imperial schools at Moscow and St. Petersburg,” protested the Russian dancers.¹⁷³ It helped little. Hoffman and her Russian ballet never returned to the city.

¹⁷² “Want to Suppress Dance,” New York Times, 28 June 1911, 5:1.

¹⁷³ “Russian Dancers Appeal,” New York Times, 3 July 1911, 7:3.

Another vaudeville performer who followed closely in the footsteps of the Salome trend was Princess Rajah. Rajah combined scant attire with unconventional dance moves and an impressive display of bodily strength to appeal to audiences. The Milwaukee News described Rajah as a “black-eyed, dark-skinned beauty from the banks of the river Nile” whose movements on stage were “wild, Barbaric and graceful,” while the Louisville Post wrote that she “goes through a series of wriggles and gyrations of the body which are not essentially different from those of the various Salomes.”¹⁷⁴ Variety called Rajah’s act a “‘cooch’ thing” characterized by a “seductive wiggle.”¹⁷⁵ No wonder that several Midwestern cities, including Chicago and Pittsburgh, imposed a temporary ban on Salome and Salome-like dancers following Rajah’s appearances in those cities.¹⁷⁶

Rajah not only offered burlesque-like dance fare, but added a circus element by bringing a live snake on stage. “The two great dances by the Princess Radjah [sic] reveal the acme of terpsichorean art, although essentially oriental. Her first number is interpretive of the story about Cleopatra, not omitting the tragic finale, the bite of the serpent and the death scene. The realism is brought to a climax when she lifts a real serpent—a Mexican adder—from a box, and fondles it as if it were a kitten,” wrote the Toledo Blade.¹⁷⁷ Rajah’s efforts inspired imitators. “We must judge all snake dancers now by Princess Rajah,” noted Variety.¹⁷⁸ The snake, a kind of phallic symbol and emblem of female sin and seduction, must have pleased male theatre patrons greatly. Like other vaudeville performers, Rajah helped accomplish the form’s delicate balancing

¹⁷⁴ “Princess is Sensation,” Milwaukee News, 14 August 1912; “Princess Rajah at Keith’s,” Louisville Post, 11 March 1912. No page numbers available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

¹⁷⁵ Variety, 23 January 1909, 17.

¹⁷⁶ Variety, 3 June 1909, 6.

¹⁷⁷ “Good Show at Keith’s,” Toledo Blade, 12 October 1920. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

¹⁷⁸ Sime, “New Acts of the Week,” Variety, 17 April 1909, 16.

act: she staked out new sexual territory for the female body while simultaneously permitting powerful businessmen to dictate the commercial terms of that body.

In addition to the thrill of having a supposedly poisonous snake on stage, Rajah possessed remarkable physical strength which she showcased in her "sensuous muscle dance" in the words of the New York Dramatic Mirror.¹⁷⁹ "[A] most attractive woman, and she is beyond doubt one of the greatest muscle dancers that ever stepped on a stage... A short play with a snake is followed by her former finish, which consists of grasping a chair firmly in her teeth, holding it aloft while she is in a reclining position, and then rising and whirling about like a top, still gripping the chair in her teeth. The patrons of Hammerstein's showed great enthusiasm over the act, which is undoubtedly a great one," wrote another critic.¹⁸⁰ If Rajah's act, with its live snake and unorthodox use of a chair, seems like it fit better among the curios of a dime museum than on a vaudeville stage, then perhaps it did. Rajah was discovered by Willie Hammerstein as she performed at Huber's Dime Museum.¹⁸¹

Other performers capitalized on the appeal of exotic or seemingly non-Western dance numbers to provide the audience with a sexually provocative show. Chief among them was Mlle. De Leon. When she appeared at Koster & Bial's, the New York Dramatic Mirror wrote: "She was an exuberant brunette who did an Oriental dance of the sort commonly designated by the expressive term 'coochee-coochee,' and she emphasized the various stages of the game by the gradual discarding of sundry articles of raiment... In some particulars the act very nearly approached the limit of the law and it was entirely unnecessary and uncalled for. At the end it, Mlle. De Leon further borrowed Charmion's specialty by removing her garters and tossing them out to persons

¹⁷⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 30 January 1909, 10.

¹⁸⁰ New York Clipper, 30 January 1909, 1245.

in the audience. Charmion, however, uses only one pair of garters, while Mlle. De Leon exploited no less than three pairs.”¹⁸² Not surprisingly, De Leon was eventually arrested for presenting a dance considered “indecent” at one New York venue.¹⁸³

As the passage above from the Mirror indicates, De Leon, like Rajah, Hoffman, and the slew of Salome dancers in vaudeville all owed a debt to Mlle. Charmion, who was among the first to bring burlesque elements to vaudeville (see Figure 14).

Charmion, who pioneered the approach of using a European name and identity to push the limits of respectability, successfully posed herself as a sexual object in a production system that nonetheless billed itself as clean. In that regard, the vastly popular Eva Tanguay, who will be the subject of the next chapter, would also be indebted to Charmion.

Mlle. Laveria Charmion burst onto the vaudeville scene in the final years of the nineteenth century. She called herself “the Parisian Sensation” to add an air of exoticism to her persona, and to allow herself greater leeway in the presentation of sexually suggestive material. At the time of her death in 1936, the New York Evening Post reported that her legal name was “Mrs. E. Marion Bird” and that she he had been born about 1880.¹⁸⁴ By that time, Charmion had long since faded from the public eye. Her act was little more than an excuse for “the Parisian Sensation” to take her clothes off in a provocative manner on stage. Consider this review of her act from the New York Dramatic Mirror in 1897:

¹⁸¹ Variety, 9 January 1909. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

¹⁸² New York Dramatic Mirror, 27 July 1901, 14.

¹⁸³ New York Dramatic Mirror, 17 July 1909, 18.

¹⁸⁴ “Charmion Dies; Nation’s First Strip Teaser.” New York Evening Post, 28 December 1936. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

She... attempted one or two [trapeze] tricks, but seemed to find her clothes a bother, so she began to unhook her waist... Finally, the waist came off. Then she hung by her feet, and the skirts, etc., naturally fell down over her head, leaving a view of lace unmentionables, black stockings, purple garters, and a large amount of pink silk fleshings between the garters and her hips. This part of the exhibition was received with a mixture of laughter, applause and hisses. She loosened and removed "skirts," "unmentionables," chemise, shoes, garters, stockings, hat until clad in the conventional costume of the female acrobat.

Charmion's act flew in the face of Victorian values, and the performer drew ample criticism as a result. The same critic who wrote the review above stated, "It is a vulgar exhibition and it is certainly to be deplored that any part of the public demands acts of this kind."¹⁸⁵ A critic at the New York Clipper felt similarly. He conceded that although Charmion "proved herself to be a clever performer," her act "culminated in the most disgustingly suggestive exhibition seen on the local stage for some time, and is unworthy of further mention."¹⁸⁶ Somehow, Charmion avoided legal entanglements and upped the ante in her show by flinging garters "one at a time" into the cheering crowd.¹⁸⁷ It worked. Charmion was retained for an extended run at Koster & Bial's shortly thereafter. When she played New York several years later, her "disrobing act" won "frequent bursts of applause" from the enthusiastic crowd.¹⁸⁸ In fact, around 1900, Charmion could claim with some legitimacy that she was "the greatest drawing card in existence."¹⁸⁹

Like other female vaudeville performers who relied fundamentally on sexual appeal, Charmion made her body the site of parallel desires: consumerist for the women in the audience, sexual for the men. "Charmion wore at the start an immensely stunning

¹⁸⁵ New York Dramatic Mirror, 25 December 1897, 18.

¹⁸⁶ New York Clipper, 18 December 1897, 602.

¹⁸⁷ New York Dramatic Mirror, 29 January 1898, 18.

¹⁸⁸ New York Clipper, 26 February 1898, 860; and 22 June 1901, 364.

¹⁸⁹ New York Clipper, 17 March 1900, 51.

gown and, as it was removed by degrees, revealed an assortment of fearful and wonderful lingerie that, of course, passeth the understanding of mere man,” observed one critic.¹⁹⁰

Charmion’s sexuality may have drawn rebuke, but it was also a powerful tool. It excited many even as it disgusted some (and indeed, these two groups undoubtedly overlapped at times); it became a purchasable commodity while it suggested the purchase of other consumer goods like gowns and lingerie. The seeds of fetishism Charmion planted grew healthily as Victorian society and its restrictive mores loosened. By the time of her 1909-10 tour, critics and observers took her act in stride, rather than viewing it as a disruptive force. “Charmion was a big winner in her trapeze turn, involving the disrobing incident... She makes display of her curves generously,” wrote Variety.¹⁹¹ And the New York Clipper, which had found her “disgustingly suggestive” a decade earlier, had a few nice things to say: “She is decidedly fair of form and feature, and, showily costumed, she displays a muscular strength which enables her to execute what, apparently, are very difficult feats of physical strength and suppleness. But it is now, as it has always been with this performer, the disrobing portion of her act which seems to enhance her value as a vaudeville attraction.” As further evidence of cultural legitimacy, Charmion had also graduated to playing Keith-owned and U.B.O.-booked theatres.¹⁹²

Charmion’s body itself was the subject of intense interest, becoming an early example of the ideal for women to emulate and men to possess. An article called “Ladies How Does Your Figure Correspond With The Measurements of Charmion” ran in the Denver Post in 1904. The piece listed Charmion’s every measurement in obsessive

¹⁹⁰ New York Dramatic Mirror, 29 June 1901, 16.

¹⁹¹ Variety, 11 September 1909, 11.

¹⁹² New York Clipper, 1 January 1910, 1181.

detail: Height, 5'1"; weight, 125 lbs.; length of face, 7½"; wrist, 6½"; calf 14"; figure. 36-22-36. The article noted that she was "admired by all men and most women for her beautiful form and generally considered the most perfect type of physical culture in women." Though Charmion was perhaps "perfect," her athletic body also posed vexing questions for a society accustomed to repletion in its women. "[H]er arms, which when she performs any feat of unusual strength, show the muscles of a Sandow, rather than the lovely curves one likes to see in a woman's arm," wrote the Denver Post which also pointed out, "No telltale hollows [on the neck] betray age, but the rounded neck comes at the expense of just a bit of slenderness. The slope from neck to shoulders is graceful, but violent and severe exercise has made the shoulder caps stand out like knobs." The paper provided a copy of Charmion's diet, suggesting the "perfect" body lay within reach of any woman inclined to make the effort. For breakfast, some grain mush and milk, plus fruit. No pastry or coffee. No intoxicants of any kind. For dinner, soup, steak or roast beef, and vegetables. A cold bath every morning completed the regimen.¹⁹³ Charmion liked to suggest that her physical allure was the result of a temperate and modest life. She told the Des Moines Register:

Any woman—almost any, at least—could be as I am if she would stop eating pudding and pie, exercise on the trapeze and dine twice a day... I never smoke, I never touch liquor, I never go to cafes after the performance; for if I did I'd fall off the trapeze some day and probably break my neck. When you hear of a performer's killing himself, or a champion fighter or wrestler's being defeated, you can almost always blame it on the way he has been living.¹⁹⁴

Thus, Charmion, whose act was decidedly unwholesome, flaunted an air of wholesomeness about her person nonetheless. Her figure was within reach, she argued.

¹⁹³ Florence Heath, "Ladies How Does Your Figure Correspond With The Measurements of Charmion," Denver Post, 9 October 1904. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

and therefore ordinary women might be expected to have “perfect” figures as well.

Throughout her career, Charmion rarely failed to please.

Charmion’s act relied in small measure on the use of sumptuous gowns and in large measure on the use of a sumptuous figure. Valeska Suratt, another perennial favorite in vaudeville, reversed this formula to great effect. She displayed her body and often crossed the fine line between acceptability and censure. But perhaps more than any other single performer, she made herself an icon of fashion and personal adornment (see Figure 15). From her early days on the vaudeville stage, Suratt created an act in which sex appeal and fashion fetishism were inextricably bound. When her “snake dance,” a number not unlike Princess Rajah’s, played Hammerstein’s in 1908, *Variety* wrote, “It was a toss-up which was the more fascinating—the snake or the clinging gown. One shows as many curves as the other.”¹⁹⁵ Suratt also devised a sketch called “Hip, Hip, Hurrah” in which she played a character called the “Queen of Fashion.” *Vogue* magazine took notice and described her gowns in almost lurid detail, treating her raiment as others had treated Charmion’s or Annette Kellerman’s “perfect” body: considered in its most infinitesimal elements. The fashion magazine wrote that Suratt was

Recognized as one of the best dressed women of the stage... One of the loveliest [of Suratt’s gowns] is the beautiful evening coat of unlined smoke gray silk Brussels net worn over an evening gown of dull rose satin. It has a clinging Japanese effect—loose, yet revealing the lines of the figure—with long wide sleeves falling in soft lines to the hem of the gown, bordered with appliqué designs of silk, hand-painted and embroidered in soft tones of old rose, pinkish heliotrope, and dull mauve. These are outlined with gold thread.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ “Charmion Herself,” *Des Moines Register*, 9 December 1908. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

¹⁹⁵ *Variety*, 21 November 1908, 17.

¹⁹⁶ “Dress on the Stage,” *Vogue*, 10 October 1907. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

The Vogue article, which described a number of other Suratt gowns in equal detail, recalls the text of the brochure describing every refined and luxurious nuance of Keith's New Theatre in Boston. Like Vogue, Suratt was trying to appeal to an audience of modest means who aspired to greater wealth and were increasingly mobilized as consumers in a market society.

Suratt brought images of finery to a new level in 1913 with a fantasy sketch in which she played a damsel who is "found chained to woe" and, at last, "awakened by Love who takes her from crepe to diamonds."¹⁹⁷ It is interesting that in Suratt's allegorical playlet, Love is useful in as much as he leads her to the heights of fashion and luxury. The New York American reported that Suratt sported "\$20,000 worth of personal adornment" and that the "audience was amazed at the wealth of silk scenery and modiste's creations that she wore."¹⁹⁸ Several days later, Alan Dale, also writing for the American, described Suratt as a "riot of clothes" and stated that her routine demonstrated "how to crowd five acts full of clothes into a twenty minutes' sketch!"¹⁹⁹

But Suratt was no mere mannequin. She was also adept at weaving sexuality with fashion, the body exposed with the body adorned. After her "musical comedy drama" called "The Belle of the Boulevards" appeared in 1909, Variety's Sime Silverman wrote about Suratt's "striking gowns from which her stage presence could not well be separated... So much 'back' to be seen all at once has never presented itself

¹⁹⁷ Nellie Revell, "Alhambra Acts Are Entertaining," New York Telegraph, 9 October 1913. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

¹⁹⁸ "Valeska Suratt Scores Triumph at the Palace," New York American, 4 November 1913. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

¹⁹⁹ "Alan Dale," Valeska Suratt, 'a Riot of Clothes at Palace,'" New York American, 8 November 1913. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

before in vaudeville.”²⁰⁰ The show, in which Suratt played the title character, “a profligate Parisian chum of a degenerate spendthrift who puts modish gowns and brilliant gems on her, while she in return inducts him into the reckless life of Paris.” drew the censure of the police, who “regard it as an offense,” according to the Terre Haute Tribune.²⁰¹ By conflating material desire with sexual desire, Suratt was in some ways anticipating techniques that would later become commonplace in mass-market advertising.

Suratt pushed the sexual envelope in other ways as well. Her sketch “The Girl With the Whooping Cough” was shut down by New York’s Mayor Gaynor in 1910 because he had found it “salacious.” Gaynor had been informed ahead of time that Suratt’s show might be sexually suggestive, so he obtained a copy of the script, but “did not find anything particularly objectionable in it,” according to New York’s Sun. Undaunted, the Mayor sent one of his stenographers to the theatre to transcribe the act as it occurred on stage, believing perhaps he had seen a bowdlerized version of the playscript. The resulting document revealed that “the lines which had been complained of were due mostly to ‘gagging’ that is [how] the players interpolated them.” On this basis, the Mayor of New York shut down the show, though he never actually saw it.²⁰² She fared equally poorly in other cities. The Philadelphia Times called “The Girl With the Whooping Cough” “coarse” and “vulgar.” “It was a performance which no self-respecting person would care to see,” argued the paper.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ Sime, “Valeska Suratt,” Variety, 20 November 1909, 12.

²⁰¹ “Valeska Suratt Startles New York With Playlet,” Terre Haute Tribune, 12 December 1909. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

²⁰² “Mayor Shut Valeska’s Show,” The Sun, 11 May 1910. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

²⁰³ “Suratt Farce Coarse, Vulgar,” Philadelphia Times, 5 April 1910. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

For Suratt, though, fashion was useful in as much as it helped create that most desired and yet elusive good in mass market culture, personal style. In an article called “Personality—That’s Me,” which she wrote for Green Book Magazine in 1915, she outlined her philosophy:

It’s my personality that wins for me. I’m no singer. Heaps of people can beat me dancing. Precious few of them, though, get the salary I do. Why? Because I’m *me*! When I come on stage I *get* them. To begin with, I never copy anybody or anything. I originate. I study myself. I sit in front of my mirror and work out styles for myself. Look at the way I wear, for instance. Did you ever know anybody else who would *dare* wear her hair that way?... There’s a lot said and written about my clothes. Know why? I’ll tell you. They’re part of *me*.

Suratt went on to decry “the great majority of women who never go beyond the style in choosing their gowns.” She claimed that she had once torn the neck off a dress to alter its appearance. “That was the star of my emancipation from the bondage of style”²⁰⁴ In a sense, Suratt was expressing, and trying to deal with, the fundamental paradox of an emergent mass-market culture: the art of retaining one’s individuality through the consumption of mass-produced goods. For Suratt, and for so many others (notably Eva Tanguay), the answer lay in the evanescent notion of personal “style.” She performed the role of one who had resolved the paradox by making a personal imprint on goods that would otherwise cloak her in factory-produced anonymity. Though her approach may have had its problems, Suratt was acutely aware of a truth that individuals in her era and onward had increasingly to recognize: that consumer goods and their contribution to personal style were the primary tools people had at their disposal to navigate a complex social world. “Where images and things had once connoted one’s place within an immutable network of social relations, they were now [around the turn of the century] emerging as a form of social currency in an increasingly mobile

²⁰⁴ Valeska Suratt, “Personality – That’s Me!,” Green Book Magazine, September 1915, 420.

commercial world,” notes Stuart Ewen in All Consuming Images: the Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture.²⁰⁵

Men were rare in disrobing or sexually suggestive acts, because the commodified sexuality of the vaudeville stage, as in many other areas of an emerging commercial culture, was inscribed on the object of woman. Like the posing and artist’s studio acts, a vaudeville routine that offered up a woman for the (presumably male) voyeur’s gazing pleasure had a good chance at success. Consider the work of Charlotte Wiehe, who specialized in creating “mimodramas,” a kind of pastiche of drama, dance, and pantomime. Her most well-known mimodrama was “La Main,” in which Wiehe, “gifted by nature with beauty of face and form... assumes the role of Vivette, a dancer, and during the action of the piece she disrobes with the intention of retiring for the night,” according to the New York Clipper.²⁰⁶ The New York Times described “La Main” in greater detail: “It is the story of a danseuse, who, having repulsed her too ardent escort from the theatre, practices her new dance she is rehearsing while she is preparing for bed. Unknown to her, there is a burglar in the room. He cannot refrain from watching her—who could?—and while her back is turned to him she catches sight in a mirror of his hand holding the curtains apart.”²⁰⁷ Thus, Wiehe improved upon the voyeuristic gaze scenario by creating a piece that was itself centered around a voyeuristic gaze. In other words, spectators looked at another spectator looking, thus authorizing the primary spectatorial act of looking.

So it was that men who wanted to participate in the performance of sexually suggestive vaudeville acts had to team up with a woman. That was the case with Bert French, who created some of vaudeville’s most popular, and sexually titillating numbers.

²⁰⁵ Stuart Ewen, All Consuming Images: the Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture. (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 29.

²⁰⁶ New York Clipper, 31 October 1903, 859.

with his partner Alice Eis (see Figure 16). French and Eis first gained notoriety in bigtime vaudeville around 1909 with a creation called “The Vampire Dance,” which was loosely based on Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “The Vampire.”²⁰⁸ The number dealt with a Parisian prostitute and her feminine wiles, but was really an excuse to have Eis cavort about the stage in various degrees of undress, striking seductive poses. The New York Dramatic Mirror wrote that “it is or ought to be to the shame and discredit of those in charge of the United Booking Offices and of the Fifth Avenue Theatre that this act was given a public showing... To call it a dance is a libel against the name of art,” while Variety felt that “The Vampire Dance” contained “a degree of vivid detail that is almost medical.” What is certain is that Eis wore “a tight-fitting dress” with “a skirt slashed almost to the waist line and the only underdressing is a covering of fleshings.”²⁰⁹ Moral critiques did not impede, and may in fact have helped, “The Vampire Dance” to become a big success, drawing capacity houses even in the heat of summer and receiving “vociferous applause.”²¹⁰

In 1913, Eis and French brought an act called “Le Rouge et Noir,” an allegorical dance routine with Eis “dressed in a jeweled filigree corsage, loose black skirt slit up the side, and very little else,” to vaudeville.²¹¹ After playing for a remarkably long stint, six weeks, they were arrested for “violating the section of the Penal Code relating to obscene exhibitions,” according to the New York Telegraph, though the two were later

²⁰⁷ “Charlotte Wiehe Pleases,” New York Times, 22 October 1903, 9:3.

²⁰⁸ “Borrowing the French-Eis Idea,” New York Telegraph, 15 August 1909. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

²⁰⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 7 August 1909, 19; Variety, 31 July 1909, 12.

²¹⁰ Variety, 7 August 1909, 17; New York Clipper, 23 October 1909, 941.

²¹¹ Variety, 17 January 1913, 19.

acquitted of any indecency charges.²¹² Later that year, Kalem filmed Eis and French for motion picture audiences.²¹³

Perhaps chastened by their run-in with the authorities, Eis and French developed a new number in which costumes were neither revealing nor shed. "It's funny to see the French-Eis people all dressed upon the stage" wrote Variety's Sime Silverman of "The Lure of the North."²¹⁴ But not long thereafter, the two were up to their old tricks. In "The Dance of Fortune," Eis romped about the stage "clad in scarcely more opaque raiment than adorned Mother Eve before the fall," according to the New York Review. The two were summarily arrested "on a charge of presenting an act... which offended public decency." Their lawyer, Arthur Hamm, defended it as "a work of art."²¹⁵ In doing so, he was merely following the pattern established by others who sought to bring sexually provocative material to vaudeville while avoiding social or governmental censure. If a naked body or a suggestive dance could be placed in the category of "art," it was no longer within the purview of the appetitive and threatening mob. "Art" could be controlled, delimited, defined, and disseminated by culture's elites. But mere entertainment obeyed only the strictures of the marketplace—and therein lay its power and its danger.

When men appeared by themselves in states of undress they were rarely defended as engaging in "artistic" creations, like many of their female counterparts. Rather, they were presented as examples of athletic accomplishment. They were

²¹² "Three Arrested for Star Act at Hammerstein's," New York Telegraph, 21 February 1913; "Jury Thought Dance Proper," New York Telegraph, 28 March 1913. No page numbers available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

²¹³ Moving Picture World, 4 October 1913. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

²¹⁴ Sime, "New Acts Next Week," Variety, 10 December 1915, 16.

promoted for their strength, musculature, and physical prowess, divorced from any hint of sexual allure. When Max Unger appeared at Koster & Bial's in 1900 he lifted men on bicycles and permitted a board holding eight people to see-saw across his "massive chest"; he was subsequently called "a magnificent specimen of physical development."²¹⁶ Indeed, undressed men in vaudeville, be they weight lifters or oarsmen, were almost seen as a distant relation of the freak act.

Eugene Sandow, the muscle-builder and strong man, was perhaps the best known of the men who appeared solo and nearly naked on the vaudeville stage. Clad in a toga (which was presently discarded), Sandow offered "displays of the apparently superhuman power that is his" in 1902 at Keith's Union Square Theatre. One critic noted that he put on "an exhibition that if attempted by any woman would be promptly suppressed." Clearly, Sandow was not meant to be perceived as overtly sexual, even though a great many women, and certainly a few of the men, in the house must have appreciated the scantily clad muscle man in just such a way. Noted the New York Dramatic Mirror, "Sandow's attire, or rather the scarcity of it, suggests that he might do well to give out, besides his dissertations on how to develop the physique, a few friendly tips on how not to develop pneumonia."²¹⁷ But Sandow was seen as an oddity—an impressive oddity, to be sure—but an oddity nonetheless. Unlike Charmion or Annette Kellerman, men were not expected to try to emulate Sandow, but rather to observe him from afar and offer up droll commentary. This despite the fact that he was, quite literally, put up on a pedestal during subsequent tours.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ "Bert French and Miss Eis Go To Trial," New York Review, 22 February 1918. No page number available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Theatre Collection.

²¹⁶ New York Dramatic Mirror, 27 January 1900, 18.

²¹⁷ New York Dramatic Mirror, 8 March 1902, 18; 16 March 1902, 18.

²¹⁸ New York Dramatic Mirror, 19 October 1901, 18.

Even when unclad men offered themselves up as works of art, they were rarely objectified sexually in the same way that their female peers were. When Treloar, an "ex-Harvard varsity oarsman," executed various poses at Keith's Union Square, he did so in "a large frame in which his really superb muscular development was shown to great advantage." Despite the possibility of objectification, the ex-Harvard man was seen as an "exponent of modern physical culture" rather than a sexually alluring body who might draw censure.²¹⁹ Similarly, Francis Gerard put on "a very interesting display of his wonderful muscular development in a cabinet brightly illuminated." The same critic noted that "expressions of admiration came from all parts of the house as the fine physique of the athlete was displayed in various poses."²²⁰ Unclad men in vaudeville offered up their "physique" for public inspection, a non-sexual, physiologic entity, while women put their "figure" on display, an item tied closely to their erotic allure and sexual objectification. Only Jimmy Britt was called "the handsomest fighter in tights," which was the mildest of appellations.²²¹

Unclad men could also be viewed with impunity if they were non-White or non-Western. As in so many other places in turn-of-the-century culture, the non-White or non-Western body was emptied of its potential for sexuality by dominant culture onlookers. To do otherwise would be to risk the threatening anxiety that accompanied viewing the "other" as fully human and, therefore, a potential sexual rival. Toon and Mounge Thit, "two Burmese jugglers" appeared in 1899 "in nature's habiliments save for a breech cloth and tatooing on their nether limbs." No objection was made to their nudity.²²² Indeed, the Burmese performers must have offered a kind of colonial pleasure

²¹⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 7 November 1903, 18.

²²⁰ New York Dramatic Mirror, 27 August 1904, 16.

²²¹ Laurie, 122.

²²² New York Clipper, 18 March 1899, 48.

for Western audiences. After Fatma and Smaun, billed variously as “Burmese Midgets” and “Indian Pygmies” put on a show consisting of acrobatics and slapstick comedy, “the manager takes them through the orchestra among the audience. They are very small people and they scored largely for their diminutive proportions.”²²³ Even more so than the undressed male physique, the non-Western body constituted a site of fascination like that of the freak act. And like the unclad female body, it could be seen as an object of consumption.

The right sort of naked body on the vaudeville stage—white, female, well-proportioned—provided erotic pleasure. But it also permitted a kind of temporary escape from the exigencies of marriage and family life. By gazing at an unclad woman other than his wife, a man might experience the artificial thrill of sexual adventure or infidelity. Nude acts were not the only routines that provided this kind of excitement. A vast number of vaudeville sketches centered around cheating husbands, jealous wives, cases of mistaken identity involving spouses, and comic turns that mercilessly lampooned the institution of marriage provided similar enjoyment (for men).

One species of sketch featured men fantasizing about past loves, who appeared conveniently on stage as they sprung to mind. In “A Dream of Fair Women,” following a fight with his wife, a man sleeps while “his former loves pass in review.”²²⁴ In “All in the Family,” a young man, in bed with an illness “and rather delirious, falls asleep and imagines he is visited by four or five different women, each claiming to be his wife.”²²⁵ Both pieces envision marriage as a fluid and voluntary state, and the male as never fully possessed by the woman. A sketch from 1901 called “The Bridegroom’s Reverie” is perhaps the best example of such an entertainment. In it, a bachelor retires to his den

²²³ New York Dramatic Mirror, 27 April 1901, 18.

²²⁴ Variety, 30 January 1915, 16.

²²⁵ New York Dramatic Mirror, 30 November 1901, 18.

shortly before his wedding day. "He decides to smoke his last cigar as a bachelor... A picture frame, hidden in painted smoke, reveals to him all the visions of his reverie, a succession of comely girls... appearing in tableaux, songs, and instrumental solos. They are supposed to be old sweethearts of his," though he eventually realizes that the girl he is to marry is "the best ever."²²⁶ Sketches like these always pretended to recuperate the idea of marriage and typically ended with an estranged couple happily embracing one another and any misunderstandings cleared up. But they did so more to avoid criticism, and to present fantasies of infidelity within a framework of acceptability, than to proffer a moral lesson. "The Bridegroom's Reverie" in particular combined several elements that must have appealed to men in the audience at the time: women as objects of visual beauty, fantasies of bachelorhood and all that it entails, and the man as able to call forth at will an abundance of attractive females.

A similar sketch, which also brought in the oft-used trope of the jealous wife (as if to paint all wives as burdensome nags) was called, appropriately enough, "My Wife Won't Let Me." In it, "a hen-pecked husband... who is brow beaten by a jealous wife" ends up giving refuge to a female acrobat who is "dressed in her stage clothes, a particularly scant arrangement of tights." The wife, naturally, finds her husband with the acrobat and the comical crisis comes to a head until it is resolved. "Tights are all right in an Amazon march or amid other appropriate surroundings, but when the setting is a private drawing room there is all the difference between propriety and immodesty," wrote *Variety*.²²⁷ But the appeal of this sketch was based on the fact that a scantily-clad women ends up in the private quarters of a hen-pecked man. That is, she invades the very space marked by marital tyranny. Her uncensored sexuality acts as a challenge to that burdensome restriction.

²²⁶ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 22 June 1901, 16.

²²⁷ *Variety*, 31 October 1908, 16.

Sketches like these delighted in showing women disrobing in private quarters, especially when such women were around men other than their husbands. In "The Order of the Bath," two strangers at a boarding house, a military captain and a young woman "in her petticoat," end up locked in the bathroom together ready to take a bath, while the sketch "A Duplicate Husband" featured a robber who inadvertently sneaks into his brother's apartment whereupon the woman of the house, taking the robber for her husband, "calls upon him to unfasten some mysterious nether garment."²²⁸ In "Bob Rackett's Pajamas," a young man and a woman are accidentally assigned the same hotel room. The woman, arriving while the man is in the bathroom, puts on his pajamas and pretends to be a man. Upon seeing her dressed up as such, he "threatens to remove her pajamas by force." She confesses and it turns out the two are estranged sweethearts who reconcile with one another at the end of the sketch.²²⁹ In this piece, male spectators may have derived pleasure from the androgynous sexuality of the woman-in-man's-clothes and the prospect of her being made to disrobe in his private chamber.

While strange women disrobing provided one kind of fantasy scenario, this was not the only vice associated with freedom from the married state. Smoking, drinking, poker-playing, and similar diversions were also presented as guilty pleasures most married men were no longer permitted to indulge in. In "How to Get Rid of Your Mother-in-Law," which played Keith's Union Square in 1901, a man named Dr. Rich "makes violent love to [an] old lady, and Mrs. Rich discovers them embracing, besides catching mamma smoking and drinking with Rich."²³⁰ Similarly, in "Dangerfield '95," Madge Primrose is engaged to Jack Dangerfield who is in Harvard's class of 1895 when "she learns that he is in the habit of gambling and drinking, and has other vices common to

²²⁸ New York Dramatic Mirror, 25 April 1908, 17; 7 July 1900, 16.

²²⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 24 September 1898, 18.

²³⁰ New York Dramatic Mirror, 6 July 1901, 16, 16.

the rich men's sons contingent in every college." To foil him, she plays at indulging herself in these vices as well, and the two end up "wrapped in each other's arms."²³¹

Though wives and fiancées typically ended up reconciled with their men at the end of a sketch, this was not always the case. In "Who's Safe," a sketch from 1898, a jealous wife who suspects her husband is carrying on with his typist, "disguises herself as an Irish scrubwoman, and, in this way, manages to watch the billing and cooing of her husband and his fair clerk at close range." The disguised wife eventually beats up the typist and demands a divorce and alimony from her cheating husband.²³²

Jokes at the expense of marriage were ubiquitous on the vaudeville stage. A famous vaudeville couplet held, "Marriage is an institution. So is a lunatic asylum."²³³ Another comic monologist quipped, "I believe every man should take a wife, but be careful whose wife you take," and "None of my folks attended the wedding; they said they wanted to remember me as I was in life."²³⁴ Routines like these made marriage a perpetual scapegoat and object of insult; they implied that marriage was an unpleasantness to which most men eventually surrendered. For men in the audience, routines like these must have been empowering—reaffirming and justifying fantasies of independence and irresponsibility.

Depictions of vice also held a certain appeal for vaudeville spectators, both male and female, because they too provided a kind of voyeuristic escape from the strictures of respectable middle-class life. Acts set in opium dens, brothels, and amid society's marginal elements facilitated a theatrical version of slumming. Consider a musical sketch called "The Smoke Queen" from 1913, which was set in "the interior of a

²³¹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 18 February 1899, 18.

²³² New York Dramatic Mirror, 24 December 1898, 18.

²³³ Snyder (1989), 153.

²³⁴ Laurie, 421-22.

Chinese hop-joint” and featured the title character singing “in a delicious soprano that made us all yearn for one of those ‘pills.’”²³⁵ A variant on this type of act had “a poor, half-dead ‘dope’ fiend of a girl” brought into a District Attorney’s office. The lawyer holds “‘koke’ as bait” before the addicted girl in order to ascertain the whereabouts of a missing boy. In a touch straight out of melodrama, the investigating attorney discovers the doped-up girl to be his long-lost sister-in-law and agrees to let her go without pressing charges.²³⁶

Though skits like these could be used to convey the evils of drugs on one level, at another they provided a highly contrived glimpse of the city’s seamy though fascinating underbelly. Accordingly, vaudeville performers developed numerous variations on the genre. Singer Gladys Vance developed an act in which she claimed to “sing a song by a reformed dope fiend” during which she held forth on “the effects of the drug, going into various fits of raving about home and mother during the telling,” according to *Variety*.²³⁷ A milder permutation featured impressionist C.W. Littlefield imitating a “boy smoking his first cigar,” which one critic found to be “not a thing for house frequented by refined people.” Nonetheless, Tony Pastor invited Littlefield back a few months later.²³⁸

Acts which claimed to provide a view of slum life were similarly popular with vaudeville audiences. “A Romance of the Underworld,” a “playlet” by Paul Armstrong which came to Keith & Proctor theatres in 1911, was a substantial hit and saw its run extended on at least one occasion. The critic for the *New York Clipper* felt the mini-drama was successful “because it draws the curtain aside for a few minutes and enables

²³⁵ *New York Clipper*, 28 June 1913, 17.

²³⁶ *New York Clipper*, 27 June 1914, 6.

²³⁷ *Variety*, 11 October 1912, 20.

²³⁸ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 18 December 1897, 18; 12 February 1898, 18.

people to see slum characters very much as they really are, and there is to the average man a strange fascination about the criminal types."²³⁹ Players Aurelio Coccia and Mlle. Amato devised a pantomime on the same subject matter, but with an international flair, called "A Night in the Slums of Paris" featuring Amato in a "wild apache dance."²⁴⁰ In an urban world with increasingly defined economic and cultural boundaries, acts which purported to open a window onto life on the other side, however artificial, must have been thrilling.

Acts depicting drug use, slum life, and the like were not chiefly meant to confer moral messages. But others were. On occasion, vaudeville managers and producers would offer up turns with a distinct progressive or reformist philosophy. Usually, this was done for the public relations value, because routines like these were not consistently popular with vaude audiences. Every once in a while, someone would suggest that vaudeville was a good venue for moral instruction. "Clean, pure vaudeville is the brilliant spark that flashes light into the shadows of the soul and sings sweet songs to the soul that needs rest... The good theater is a good physician that works wondrous cures, without the taste of bad medicine," argued J. J. Sullivan, Cleveland's District Attorney.²⁴¹ But most onlookers knew better than to make such statements.

Short plays and skits inveighing against excess, particularly drugs and alcohol, appeared in vaudeville from time to time. A sketch at Keith's Union Square from 1903 dealt with a rural couple who move to the city, whereupon the man begins dreaming of extravagant wealth and narcotics. But "his awakening brings him to his senses and he and his better half decide to return home at once."²⁴² Still, acts that cast city life in a bad

²³⁹ New York Clipper, 8 April 1911, 5.

²⁴⁰ New York Clipper, 28 May 1910, 389.

²⁴¹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 13 February 1902, 20.

²⁴² New York Dramatic Mirror, 14 November 1903, 20.

light were destined for scant success in vaudeville, the quintessential form of urban mass entertainment at the turn of the century. Others enacted the perils and pitfalls of drink. “A Daughter of Bacchus,” which one critic called “not only a very diverting little comedy but an eloquent temperance lesson as well,” showed a woman who renounces the bottle and subsequently patches up her ailing family relationships.²⁴³

Famed temperance activist Carrie Nation also saw in vaudeville the potential for moral instruction. When an actress at a theatre in Butler, Tennessee sipped a glass of iced tea meant to look like liquor, Nation, believing the prop was the genuine article, stormed onstage and smashed the bottle. “You can’t make this little girl do any drinking when Carrie is around!” she announced to a dumbfounded audience. The crowd failed to applaud.²⁴⁴

Vaudeville sketches sometimes tried to teach the lesson that doing charity work was one’s duty, especially if one was a child of privilege. In “The Awakening,” an allegorical skit that was seen at the Palace in 1915, the character “Miss Millionaire” learns from her fiancé, Kirk Fairplay, that the workers in her father’s factory are starving and underpaid. Presently, she goes to sleep whereupon she has a prophetic dream in which she “is confronted with visions of Miss Starvation, Mr. Crime, Miss Redlight” and other characters that look like the latter-day relatives of medieval morality drama. Miss Millionaire awakens “with a full sense of conditions and a determination to do settlement work.”²⁴⁵ The cultural onus to do charity work may have been strong in the Progressive Era (and thereafter), but not if it meant disturbing more deeply held hegemonic beliefs. A “comedietta” entitled “For Reform,” which played Keith’s Union Square in 1899, “not only amuses but teaches an excellent lesson to wives who think

²⁴³ New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 December 1899, 18.

²⁴⁴ New York Dramatic Mirror, 1 August 1903, 16.

²⁴⁵ Variety, 18 June 1915, 13.

they are doing noble work by neglecting their homes for fashionable charity work,” wrote one critic.²⁴⁶ Another morality lesson in vaudeville was called “Hanged,” a “sensational sketch” that simulated a hanging and inveighed against capital punishment.²⁴⁷

Finally, some suffragists tried to use the vaudeville stage as pulpit to preach equal rights for the sexes. Singer and violinist Jeanette Lowrie used her act to deliver a “dissertation on woman’s rights,” and sang numbers with names like “I Want to Vote” and “I Guess I’ll Please Myself.”²⁴⁸ Hammerstein’s even announced “Woman’s Suffrage Week” in 1912, inviting suffragists to come watch sketches and songs on the topic of women’s right to vote. Unfortunately, “The suffragists drove away the regulars” and the experiment was not repeated.²⁴⁹ Though Keith and Albee were never outspoken on the suffrage issue, they too saw in it the potential to increase box office revenues, and in 1913 they banned “jokes at the expense of suffragists, even the militants,” according to the New York Times.²⁵⁰

Overall, though, acts that tried to teach moral lessons or hold forth on reformist issues were rare in vaudeville. Even sketches and short plays that ended with a couple in a happy embrace were hardly arguments for the sanctity of marriage. As I have tried to show, endings like these were really just palliatives tacked on to titillating sketches about cheating, jealousy, and promiscuity. If the good name of marriage was marred by such acts, it was further bad-mouthed by numerous comics whose acerbic jokes blamed on the married state all of malekind’s, and many of femalekind’s, daily woes. In any case, acts with any kind of message, good or bad, never gained the popularity of acts

²⁴⁶ New York Dramatic Mirror, 4 November 1899, 18.

²⁴⁷ Variety, 1 May 1914, 3.

²⁴⁸ New York Dramatic Mirror, 14 November 1908, 17.

²⁴⁹ Variety, 13 September 1912, 8.

featuring women in scanty outfits, suggestive dance numbers, or, preferably, some combination thereof. As the businessmen who controlled vaudeville were beginning to discover, the sexualized female body was a valuable, if reproducible, commodity. Accordingly, they made plenty of time for Salome dancers and other women willing to put their "perfect" bodies on display. In so doing, they were effecting a brilliant balancing act. On the one hand, they were helping to liberalize public acceptance of the female body; on the other, though, they were gaining control over the female form as a commercial entity. To some extent, women throughout the twentieth century would try to recover control of their bodies from the patriarchal forces that claimed its ownership around the turn of the century.

²⁵⁰ "Vaudeville to Spare Suffragists." New York Times, 6 August 1913, 7:3.

Chapter Four:

“Wild Woman”: Eva Tanguay as Vaudeville’s Temptress and Sexual Rebel

In the preceding chapter, I tried to demonstrate how the vaudeville stage was rife with sexual content and how such practices were made possible by a far-reaching marketing and promotional apparatus that, paradoxically, repeatedly emphasized cleanliness, moral purity, and wholesomeness. In addition, I have also shown, in the preceding chapters, how such marketing techniques were consonant with the approaches taken by other early mass-marketers at the turn of the century. Finally, I have suggested that the purveyance of the sexualized form permitted a new liberality with regard to the body—the female body in particular; at the same time, we must recognize that the patriarchal business magnates who profited from the dissemination of those bodies consigned women to an increasingly objectified role.

In the present chapter, it will be my intention to investigate how a particular performer both reaped the benefits of this new liberalization of the body and, at the same time, helped further pave the way for a certain kind of sexual expression in American popular culture. Specifically, we will see how one actress in particular may be seen as both the product of a system bent on selling sexualized femininity and, at the same time, as a challenge to existing mores of female behavior both on stage and off. It will be, in other words, a kind of case study of sexuality and the vaudeville stage at the turn of the century, and therefore directly pertinent to the present investigation. We turn, therefore, to the life and work of Eva Tanguay (see Figure 17), who, despite her popularity, remains an elusive personage, as we will see, in the historical writing on American popular culture. I will, of course, suggest some reasons for this exclusion.

By most accounts, Eva Tanguay (pronounced “TANG-way”) was vaudeville’s biggest star and highest earner. She “was the greatest attraction and biggest money-

maker to appear in the two-a-day circuits” wrote the American Weekly, the magazine supplement to Hearst newspapers in the 1930s and 1940s.¹ “Eva Tanguay... represented the true spirit of vaudeville,” according to Joe Laurie, Jr. in his Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace.² And Sophie Tucker, in her autobiography, Some of These Days, said, “She was the biggest attraction in vaudeville, barring none; the most publicized and highest-paid performer.” According to Tucker, Tanguay made up to \$5,000 per week at the height of her career.³

Tanguay’s birthplace was Marbleton, Quebec, Canada. But if you look at many maps and atlases, you are not likely to find the hometown of this one-time superstar. Described as “a post-village of Wolfe co., Quebec, 29 miles NNE of Sherbrooke. Pop. About 600,” in A Complete Pronouncing Gazetteer or Geographical Dictionary of the World, published in 1922, Marbleton, some 30 miles from the Maine border, fails to show up on many maps and atlases that claim to be comprehensive, listing innumerable hamlets and villages in such far-flung locales as Kazakhstan, Chad, and Cambodia.⁴

In 1935, Tanguay, her health failing and her stage career a distant memory, opened a costume shop at 6027 Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. But the store, “exhibiting many of the rich and valuable costumes which she wore during her stage days as well as many new creations of her own design,” no longer exists.⁵ In fact, a survey of the block reveals that not only is Tanguay’s shop, in any iteration, extinct, but

¹ Eva Tanguay, “I Don’t Care,” American Weekly, 29 December 1946, 12.

² Laurie, 58.

³ Sophie Tucker, Some of These Days: the Autobiography of Sophie Tucker, (© 1945, Sophie Tucker), 80.

⁴ See, for example, the DK World Atlas (DK Publishing, Inc., 1997) and even the Reader’s Digest Atlas of Canada (Montréal: The Reader’s Digest Association, Ltd., 1995).

⁵ “Eva Tanguay Opens Store,” Los Angeles Examiner, 10 March 1935. No page number available. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California; “Eva Tanguay Opens a Shop,” New York Times, 10 March 1935, ii, 8:3.

the very address—6027 Hollywood Boulevard—is no longer extant either, the lot having since been rezoned to accommodate several small businesses and offices.

It is as if the life of Eva Tanguay, who defined the most popular form of mass amusement in her day, has been erased from the artifacts of cultural memory. Her home town and the site of her shop are nowhere to be found. I mention the notion of erasure because it serves as a meaningful term for understanding the life, work, and influence of Eva Tanguay. As we will see, Tanguay was both a product of her era, and yet one who defied mores and traditions, especially in regard to emergent notions of womanhood and women's sexuality. Perhaps because of her historical specificity, and her simultaneous resistance to conventional categorization, she has been more or less forgotten. In this chapter, then, I will attempt to reconstruct her life, not only as a potentially useful theatre history exercise, but because her career exemplifies so many of the conflicting and complicated attitudes toward sexuality and womanhood played out on the vaudeville stage in the early years of the twentieth century.

Writings about Tanguay, despite her erstwhile popularity, are hard to come by. Though she long spoke of authoring an autobiography, which she planned to call Up and Down the Ladder, no such work exists.⁶ Nor is there a biography of the actress, though many exist for other vaudeville stars and stage performers who were her contemporaries. In 1943, Tanguay claimed she gave source materials for a biography to writer and sometime radio personality Elza Schallert, who was married to Los Angeles Times drama critic Edwin Schallert. No book was ever produced, and Tanguay initiated legal proceedings for the return of her materials or a payment of \$75,000. In the suit, filed in Los Angeles County Superior Court, Tanguay alleged she had surrendered to Elza Schallert

⁶ "Eva Tanguay Dies in Hollywood, 68," New York Times, 12 January 1947, 59:1.

Manuscripts and other written data and materials containing information concerning the life of the plaintiff, suitable for adaptation for a stage, screen or radio story of plaintiff's life, or for use in preparing a story of plaintiff's life for publication in book or magazine form.

Tanguay claimed Schallert had held the materials since mid-January of that year. But Tanguay was either fabricating the incident or lacked the evidence to make her argument tenable. The case was subsequently dismissed, "with prejudice as to all defendants," on October 14, 1943.⁷

Until the end, Tanguay longed for an extended written documentation of her life and work. In the bungalow at 6207 Lexington Avenue (in Los Angeles) where she finally died, "[s]he had literally covered the walls of her bedroom with old photographs of herself," according to the Los Angeles Times.⁸ These "age-yellowed photos of herself," reported the Los Angeles Examiner, allowed Tanguay to relive "the fading glory of her illustrious career."⁹ In this regard, Tanguay's life might as well have informed the tale of Norma Desmond in the famous film Sunset Boulevard, which was released several years later.

The closest Eva Tanguay came to seeing a book written about her was a series of articles which appeared in the Hearst newspapers' magazine supplement the American Weekly. Starting in the last week of 1946 and running for five consecutive weeks, the series, entitled "I Don't Care," after her trademark musical number, told the life story of Tanguay allegedly from her own pen (though almost surely ghost written.

⁷ Los Angeles Superior Court, case 488459, 30 September 1943, and 14 October 1943. Filed by Louis Labarere, attorney for plaintiff.

⁸ "Eva Tanguay, of 'I Don't Care' Fame, Dies at 68." Los Angeles Times, 12 January 1947, i, 3.

⁹ Joseph Santley, Jr., "300 at Funeral of Eva Tanguay." Los Angeles Examiner, 15 January 1947. No page number available. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

given Tanguay's bedridden state¹⁰). The series, accompanied by lavish illustrations of an idealized Eva clad in revealing outfits, in fact revealed little about her history. Rather, it contained her pathetic, if sometimes whimsical, reminiscences about life, her career, and several of her ill-fated romances. For example:

I have been lying on a sickbed in California for the last six years and the legs that carried me around the footlights of the world won't carry me any more. Of all the millions who paid all the millions of dollars to see me, few people come to see me any more.¹¹

As if to mark her complete erasure from history, Tanguay did not live to see the end of the serialized American Weekly autobiography, passing away on January 11, 1947, the cause of death either a heart attack or a stroke—or both—depending on which report one reads.¹² Her death rated lengthy obituaries in several of the major New York and Los Angeles papers, but only brief mentions in Time and Newsweek.¹³

Ironically, though, perhaps the greatest act of biographical erasure was the production of a 1953 biopic about Tanguay entitled The I Don't Care Girl produced by Twentieth Century-Fox (see Figure 19). The film not only invented numerous "facts" about Eva Tanguay's life, and indeed centered the narrative around relationships she never had, it altogether sanitized and bowdlerized a performance style that had been marked by "brazen and electric" sexual suggestiveness, according to Albert F. McLean in American Vaudeville as Ritual.¹⁴ Moreover, though much of the film is supposedly set

¹⁰ In Tanguay's obituary, the New York Times described the late actress as "a lonely but courageous invalid for most of the last two decades." When the occasional friend or well-wisher would stop by her small cottage, she would murmur, through the door, "Don't come in. Eva Tanguay is not here." "Eva Tanguay Dies in Hollywood, 68."

¹¹ Tanguay, 29 December 1946, 12.

¹² "Eva Tanguay, of 'I Don't Care' Fame, Dies at 68," and "Death Takes Eva Tanguay," Los Angeles Examiner, 12 January 1947. No page number available. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

¹³ "Eva Tanguay Dies in Hollywood, 68"; "Death Takes Eva Tanguay"; "Eva Tanguay, of 'I Don't Care' Fame, Dies at 68"; Newsweek, 20 January 1947, 52; Time, 20 January 1947, 81.

¹⁴ McLean, 23.

in the first decade of the twentieth century, when Tanguay rose to fame and fortune, the costumes, sets, dance numbers, and mise-en-scene fairly shout a late 1940s, jazz-inflected modernism. The I Don't Care Girl, which starred Mitzi Gaynor in the title role, was not even reviewed in The New York Times and seems to have barely limped at the box office. Anthony Slide, in The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville, calls the picture, simply, “dismal.”¹⁵

In order to understand why the movie erased and rewrote the actual life and particular qualities of Eva Tanguay, it is necessary to understand how the narrative went about recounting the life of the onetime vaudeville superstar. The movie (in striking Technicolor) begins with Gaynor, as Tanguay, performing an elaborate stage number while a theatre full of spectators—mostly men—look on in a rapt daze. But shortly after Gaynor/Tanguay begins her turn, the producer of the show declares, “There’s something wrong with Eva Tanguay,” and instructs a technician to bring down the curtain. The title sequence follows, and, after it, we find ourselves on the Twentieth Century-Fox lot. A lone man walks up to a security guard at the gate and tells him that he has heard they are making a picture about Tanguay’s life. The lone man says he knows something about the actress’s life, and is duly directed to the office of George Jessel, who plays himself as the film’s producer. We then cut to Jessel’s office where the onetime vaudevillian-cum-Fox producer is telling several staff writers that he is dissatisfied with the progress of the Tanguay picture. “Well, GJ, how’d you like the script?” asks one of the brown-nosing scribes. Jessel, it turns out, does not like it one bit. “It’s all worthless,” says Jessel. I’ll tell you why. It simply tells us that Eva Tanguay was a madcap. But what made her a madcap? What made her the terror of all theatrical managers?”

¹⁵ Anthony Slide, The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), 490.

“Maybe she had an unhappy childhood. Maybe her father beat her,” offers one of the writers. “She could have been neurotic,” hypothesizes the other, resorting to the ubiquitous Freudianism of the early 1950s.

“I don’t want any psychoanalysis,” retorts Jessel. “I want to know about Eva Tanguay the woman... Boys, underneath those feathers and sequins and that wild mop of curls is a woman, with a brain, and a heart, and a soul.”

Thus begins the filmic reconstruction of the life of vaudeville’s most popular actress. Rather than coming from Tanguay, though, it is the product of men seeking to impose hegemonic order on the life story of a woman who often resisted hegemonic imperatives. What Jessel and his cohorts decide, throughout the course of the film, is that Eva Tanguay’s life is best told through the eyes of the men she loved, the men whose affections she sought, and to whose wishes she continually bent.

The trouble is, however, that Tanguay’s life was hardly defined by her love affairs. As we will see, telling the life of Eva Tanguay as a concatenation of romantic entanglements would be tantamount to telling the life of Bill Clinton as a series of patriotic or military endeavors. The film, then, is a kind of early post-modern odyssey. Three men—producer George Jessel, director Lloyd Bacon, and, most important of all, Fox production chief Darryl Zanuck—artificially retell the life of a woman via the romantic remembrances of men who never existed; the framing device by which they do so is the production of a movie about the life they are struggling to recount. In so doing, they rob that life of any authenticity, imposing instead their own cinematic, narrative, and cultural sensibilities on the subject matter.

Though former vaudevillian George Jessel clearly had a major hand in the creation of The I Don’t Care Girl, as did director Lloyd Bacon (who directed over a hundred studio-era films including 1948’s Give My Regards to Broadway and 1940’s

Knute Rockne, All American¹⁶), it was Darryl Zanuck who made the deepest imprint on the picture. According to film historian George Custen, no Zanuck-era Fox film was ever very far from Zanuck's dictatorial purview. "[T]he films he made inevitably bore his authority," writes Custen in his biography of Zanuck, Twentieth Century's Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood. "[E]very film on the lot was informed 'by the taste of Cinemogul Zanuck' ... Zanuck was Twentieth Century-Fox... no one in Hollywood had to ask whose ideals were imprinted on the films at Fox."¹⁷ Indeed, though Zanuck never appears in The I Don't Care Girl, his palpable presence nonetheless looms just off screen. At one point, Jessel instructs his secretary that he is not to be bothered—unless "Zanuck wants me." Custen points out that some of Jessel's actual dialogue, particularly the monologue where he instructs his writers to fashion a script delivering "Eva Tanguay the woman," was taken directly from a production memo by Zanuck addressed to Jessel.¹⁸

Though he worked in many genres, Zanuck was perhaps best known for his biographical films or biopics, a genre "he virtually invented," according to Custen, who describes Zanuck as "an ardent patriot and political conservative." Accordingly, many of Zanuck's biopics showed "sanitized, edited" versions of a famous individual's life. This was especially so in the case of Eva Tanguay, whose scant need for a husband and untrammelled sexual allure made her a kind of cultural rebel in her day. Add to this the fact that Zanuck often struggled when dealing with female biopic subjects, and one can better understand why The I Don't Care Girl is the inoffensive, ineffectual product that it is. In so many ways—from the extended, jazzy dance numbers (Custen points out that

¹⁶ Internet Movie Database: <http://us.imdb.com/Title?0045898>.

¹⁷ George Custen, Twentieth Century's Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood. (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 1.3.

¹⁸ George Custen, Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 173.

dance, in Zanuck's films was often "a kind of substitute for sex") to the costumes that seem more at home in post-World War II America than its pre-World War I counterpart—the film tells us less about the life of a vaudeville temptress from the turn of the century and more about the values of wealthy, white, male, American film executives circa 1950. In the creation of visual materials, such as films, paintings, or advertisements, John Berger may have put it best: "The past is never there waiting to be discovered, to be recognized for exactly what it is. History always constitutes the relation between a present and its past."¹⁹ In depicting Eva Tanguay's life on film, Darryl Zanuck engaged the consummate act of historical erasure.

Nor is Eva Tanguay easily to be found in the works of scholars and historians. Not only is there no book-length study of Tanguay, but there is no dissertation devoted entirely to her. In fact, I was able to uncover only one doctoral dissertation that deals even in part with the life of Eva Tanguay: "An Investigation of the Life Styles and Performance of Three Singer-Comediennes of American Vaudeville: Eva Tanguay, Nora Bayes, and Sophie Tucker," which earned Jane R. Westerfield her Doctor of Arts degree at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, in 1987, devotes one chapter—some fifty pages—to Tanguay's life and accomplishments. The chapter is a fairly straightforward work of traditional theatre history, recounting Tanguay's early stage career, rise to stardom, fall from grace, and incidents from her private life that seem especially relevant. Westerfield tries to offer reasons for Tanguay's success. "Eva Tanguay's fame continued to spread for a variety of reasons," writes Westerfield, "her outlandish

¹⁹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), 11.

publicity stunts, her strange, unusual costumes, her choice of repertoire when she had her own vaudeville act and her outrageous attitude toward life."²⁰

Westerfield goes on to state that "the conclusion may be drawn that Eva Tanguay's musical style onstage and her personal lifestyle were remarkably parallel in nature. The erratic, eccentric and often irresponsible behavior which characterized her personal life was also manifested in her onstage performances."²¹ This summation provides Westerfield's work with an organizing logic and may be seen as a kind of gestalt statement. Westerfield wants us to read Eva Tanguay's stage career as an extension of her private life—or vice-versa.

In addition to advancing this thesis, Westerfield wants to argue that Tanguay was a rebel. "Eva Tanguay represented a tangible expression of a cultural revolution taking place in American life. She gave voice and gesture to the restlessness and discontent of her era."²² This somewhat vague generality may or may not be true; the trouble is, Westerfield provides little evidence either way. Her script for Tanguay's life offers little social context or evidence outside the very life she is trying to describe. It is my hope to contextualize and historicize the life of Tanguay—something not yet attempted by writers and scholars—thereby more fully elucidating the actress's work, personality, and overall significance in American popular culture. My take on Tanguay's life, in other words, will be that of the social historian.

Westerfield's dissertation may be most useful where she turns to the matter of Tanguay's sexual suggestiveness onstage. Though this aspect of the performer's life, more than perhaps any other, rises to the surface of biographical accounts, Westerfield

²⁰ Jane R. Westerfield, "An Investigation of the Life Styles and Performance of Three Singer-Comediennes of American Vaudeville: Eva Tanguay, Nora Bayes, and Sophie Tucker," (Ph.D. diss., Ball State University, 1987), 15.

²¹ Westerfield, 51.

²² Westerfield, 55.

tackles her “flaunting sexuality” as competently as other Tanguay-writers. “In the years when she was a vaudeville headliner,” writes Westerfield, “this incredible woman almost single handedly jolted the maudlin, eye-dabbing public of the early 1900’s with the ‘vigor of unashamed sex’” (quoting Douglas Gilbert).²³ Again, Westerfield puts forth certain well-worn assumptions about American society in the early 1900s, yet offers little or no evidence to support her point.

Westerfield wants specifically to make the point that Tanguay, through her revealing costumes (see Figure 18), suggestive lyrics, and sensual gyrations on stage, posed a threat to polite society and the managers who ran the theatres where she made her living. “Effervescent, vital, exploding with life, Eva Tanguay unabashedly exhibited unprecedented sexuality in her performances. Newspaper critics all over the country denounced her vulgarity and lack of talent. They pretended to be indifferent to Tanguay’s sex dynamics and spent most of their time harping on her lack of ability,” states Westerfield who goes on to posit: “Eva Tanguay’s exploitation of sexually suggestive song titles caused constant chagrin among her employers, such as B.F. Keith, as well as her fellow vaudevillians.”²⁴ As we have seen, B.F. Keith, E.F. Albee, and the other big vaudeville magnates were canny, shrewd men who together crafted the first true form of mass amusement in the United States. Though they may occasionally have tried to temper Tanguay’s performances, they hardly wanted to tamper with a formula that worked so well. It was Tanguay, after all, who drew a record 12,000 fans to the 44th Street Music Hall in 1913 and who enjoyed the longest uninterrupted run in the New York City vaudeville circuits—some fourteen months—from 1908 to 1909. As early as 1907, even before her career peaked, the New York Dramatic Mirror recognized

²³ Westerfield, 22, 31.

²⁴ Westerfield, 25-7.

Tanguay as a “magnet” able to attract crowds like none other.²⁵ To portray Eva Tanguay as constantly at odds with the repressed and repressing Albee and Keith is to miss what may actually have been going on.

Other vaudeville historians who discuss Tanguay also fixate upon her sexuality, and try to argue that her ribaldry and license on stage were carried out in open defiance of strict censorship codes. “The terrific Tanguay was an electrified hoyden, a temperamental terror to the managers, a riotous joy to her audiences. A singing and dancing comedienne, it is easy to analyze her act: it was assault and battery. She cared no whit for anyone and under the very nose of Albee got more sex into her shouted numbers than could be found in a crib street in a mining town.” writes Douglas Gilbert in American Vaudeville: its Life and Times.²⁶ Tanguay may have used sex as a drawing card, but she hardly outwitted E.F. Albee, a man who built an entertainment empire by advertising cleanliness and wholesomeness—and then, quite often and deliberately, delivered otherwise.

In American Vaudeville as Ritual, Albert McLean takes a sociological view of Tanguay’s stage antics. According to McLean, “Eva Tanguay’s brazen and electric performance typified the new aggressiveness of the American female” and signaled the “gradual relaxation of strict conventional attitudes toward sex.”²⁷ For McLean, then, Tanguay was a bell-weather rather than simply an anomaly.

When she died, even the newspapers remembered Tanguay chiefly for her sexual daring on stage. The New York Times wrote:

She did much to bring vaudeville out of its decorous front. She sang songs which were daring for the time, such as “I Want Someone to Go

²⁵ Variety, 12 December 1913, 18; New York Clipper, 20 February 1909, 39; New York Dramatic Mirror, 22 June 1907, 16.

²⁶ Gilbert, 327.

²⁷ McLean, 23.

Wild With Me” and “It’s All Been Done Before But Not the Way I Do It”... One of her most profitable acts was in “Salome” in 1908 and she once said that her costume consisted of “two pearls.” Censors complained loudly, while the act rolled up a record gross at the box office.²⁸

Similarly, the Los Angeles Times eulogized, “Sometimes her lyrics and costumes drew the wrath of local Puritans, but the customers lined up for blocks.”²⁹

Eva Tanguay clearly took a chance in putting forth sexuality as her main drawing card. Although, as we have seen, she was far from the only woman in vaudeville to do so, we must not underestimate the degree of criticism which a woman who dared to seem impure or lacking in virtue opened herself up to. “To a woman the most sacred thing is her virtue,” argued the Arena in 1895, just before Tanguay took to the vaudeville boards, “the seal of her purity, the crown of her womanhood. That the function of maternity may be guarded from pollution, only at the behest of love may she, in innocence, lay aside the virgin sanctity of her person. This is the law, outranking all other statutes, written only in the hearts of men and women, that makes a woman’s virtue the most sacred of things.”³⁰ About the same time, Scribner’s Magazine, complaining of a widespread “lack of womanliness in American women,” argued the following: “The womanly woman is the good mother, the devoted wife, the gentle sister, the quiet guardian of the hearth-fire.”³¹ Clearly, Eva Tanguay chose to ignore such cultural strictures, and sought instead to extend and redefine what might be acceptable in regard to virtue, purity, and female behavior. She rode on the backs of other female vaudevillians who pushed the limits of respectability, and, in a sense, worked in concert

²⁸ “Eva Tanguay Dies in Hollywood, 68.” (Note: the New York Times’ wording here seems to have been directly lifted from The Associated Press Biographical Service, No. 2977, issued 15 August 1942.

²⁹ “Eva Tanguay, of ‘I Don’t Care’ Fame, Dies at 68.”

³⁰ J. Bellangee, “Sexual Purity and the Double Standard,” Arena, February 1895, 372.

³¹ Aline Gorren, “Womanliness as a Profession,” Scribner’s Magazine, May 1894, 612.

with the Keiths and Albees to deliver a product that would titillate, amuse, and arouse spectators.

Discussions of Eva Tanguay's sexual expression on stage seem inextricably to link such efforts to an equally strong expression of her unique personality. It is as if onlookers and writers could not separate her rebellious eroticism from her uniqueness and unforgeable personality. "It is virtually impossible to overestimate Tanguay's personality, or her influence in vaudeville... Precisely when the vaudeville public was listening to such treacle as 'You'll Be Sorry Just Too Late,' Tanguay was screaming 'I Want Some One to Go Wild with Me'; 'It's All Been Done Before but Not the Way I Do It'; and 'Go as Far as You Like.' These naughtily suggestive titles she developed in her brassy delivery almost to physical perfection," writes Douglas Gilbert in American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times. He adds that Tanguay would "shake her torso, wriggle her thighs," and find herself onstage "explosively shrieking." According to Gilbert, Tanguay's success on stage also "had been due to the exploitation of her personality."³²

Tanguay seems to have realized early on that her lack of conventional stage talents—singing, dancing, etc.—compelled her to develop a different appeal, one that that would distinguish her from her peers and help her gain a foothold in the competitive world of vaudeville. In the American Weekly series she discusses her early recognition of this fact:

I couldn't dance and I couldn't sing, yet they called me the world's greatest comedienne and America's greatest eccentric... My first appearance on Broadway was in a musical comedy at the Imperial music hall just after Weber and Fields, Lillian Russell, and Fay Templeton finished a run there. Never will I forget my opening night there. I was Coloma, the Hoo-doo, a bare-footed Fiji Islander with a flimsy voile slit skirt... There was but one thought in my mind—to

³² Gilbert, 328-29.

move so fast and whirl so madly that no one would be able to see my bare legs. I whisked through my act like a cyclone and ran off stage.³³

Tanguay seems to be arguing that she developed a wild and energetic performance style to cover up for her sexual allure. But it is clear that she soon realized the success to be had by a fortuitous combination of the two. “Eva Tanguay’s appeal for those who never saw or heard her is, of course, difficult to explain... She did have boundless energy. She sang suggestive songs in an inimitable fashion,” writes Anthony Slide in The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville.³⁴ And according to Jane Westerfield, in her dissertation on vaudeville actresses, “Tanguay ran wildly across the stage and seemed to careen from one corner of the set to the other, wriggling her hips, wagging her breasts, kicking her legs wildly, and shaking her derriere. Often, she appeared to be approaching the reenactment of erotic fantasies in front of her audience.”³⁵ Tanguay, then, may have raised eyebrows, but she did so with the implicit authorization of patriarchal powers seeking to develop a new kind of sexualized entertainment product—one based on the female body.

It was not long before the press picked up on Tanguay’s unique and inimitable style. “Miss Tanguay’s chief claim to recognition is a superabundance of energetic vitality that finds vent in a series of movements in which every muscle in her body is brought into full play,” wrote the New York Dramatic Mirror in 1904.³⁶ Three years later, the Mirror called Tanguay a “little human dynamo,” and observed, “There is an indescribable something in Miss Tanguay’s work that makes an audience like her. The energy, vitality and ginger that she displays, together with her altogether charming and

³³ Tanguay, 29 December 1946, 12.

³⁴ Anthony Slide, The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville, (Westport, Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press, 1994), 488.

³⁵ Westerfield, 28.

³⁶ New York Dramatic Mirror, 19 March 1904, 18.

effervescent manner, are so unusual that people with sluggish blood in their veins feel compelled to sit up and take notice when the agile Tanguay begins to entertain.”³⁷ This journalist was accurately describing the inseparable combination of energy, vitality, sexual allure (“ginger”), and uniqueness of personality that was to win Tanguay her fame and fortune. For Tanguay, the female body was a site of experimentation and caprice, one which could rise above conventional cultural standards and yet appeal to an increasing mass market for commodified female sexual showmanship. Her “semidelirious dances,” which would be, as the Mirror correctly observed, “valueless in other hands,” soon earned her the nickname “the Cyclonic One.”³⁸

Tanguay, “she of the dimpled smile and the nimble feet and the extremely active body,”³⁹ almost suggested a kind of mental derangement or pathology to certain onlookers. In 1910, Variety humorously wrote, “Having grown to believe that ‘Eva Tanguay’ meant a waving of head, body and arms, surmounted by a bunch of hair, all emitting lyrics that no sane person alone would believe could be applauded.”⁴⁰ Accordingly, Tanguay became known as a “wild” performer, one who was untamed and untamable, one who lived outside of society’s norms and mores. With full and calculating awareness of this identity, Tanguay made a motion picture in 1916 called The Wild Girl (see Figure 20), in which she not only exhibited her gyrational dancing and revealing costumes, but played an itinerant gypsy girl as well, one who lived in the wild and was in touch with nature.

³⁷ New York Dramatic Mirror, 11 May 1907, 17; New York Dramatic Mirror, 20 April 1907, 17.

³⁸ Variety, 8 December 1906, 2; New York Dramatic Mirror, 4 May 1907, 16; Slide, 488.

³⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 6 July 1907, 14.

⁴⁰ Variety, 24 September 1910.

The Wild Girl was produced by Selznick Pictures, but was financed by the Eva Tanguay Film Corporation, an entity the actress herself shrewdly created to capitalize on her stage success. The Tanguay Film Corporation had made a “a self-promoting feature” in mid-1916 called Energetic Eva,⁴¹ but no prints of this earlier film exist according to librarians at the Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center. The ridiculous plot of The Wild Girl, directed by Howard Estabrook, is as follows:

In a gypsy camp a dying stranger abandons a baby girl with a note explaining that on her eighteenth birthday, she is to inherit a Virginia estate. The gypsy chief, aware of the girl's value, instructs Sabia, the tribe's matron, to dress her and rear her as a boy. Years later, while the tribe is traveling in Virginia, Vosho, the chief's son, discovers the true sex of the girl, now called Firefly, and demands to marry her. Forced into marriage, Firefly flees from the camp on her wedding night and meets up with Donald McDonald, a local newspaper editor. Donald, thinking that Firefly is a boy, hires her as an errand runner and she soon falls secretly in love with him.

Eventually, Vosho is vanquished, Donald discovers Firefly's true identity, and he and Firefly are joined in love.⁴²

Predictably, Tanguay sought to transport the wild abandon of her vaudeville shows to the moving picture screen. “In this, her first production, she displays to advantage all those qualities which have made her name *the by-word for entertainment* with audiences the world over,” read the copy of an advertisement for The Wild Girl in Moving Picture World, a film industry trade paper of the day.⁴³ According to the same publication, Tanguay spared no expense in creating the sets and costumes for The Wild Girl, just as she had for stage shows.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Patricia King Hanson, ed., American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States, Feature Films, 1911-1920, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), 1037.

⁴² Hanson, ed., 1038.

⁴³ Moving Picture World, 1 September 1917, 1335.

⁴⁴ Moving Picture World, 22 September 1917, 1872.

In crafting a stage and screen persona that focused on an irreproducible, blatantly sexual, and highly individuated body, Eva Tanguay appealed to certain progressive-minded social reformers of the day. "Woman's body... is increasingly looked upon as her personal property," wrote Earl Barnes in the Atlantic Monthly in 1912. "[I]t is now pretty generally recognized that a woman should have the right to control her own person... It is not that women are demanding more property; they are demanding some definite individual property as a home for their souls and they are coming to realize that if this property rests on some one else's feelings and caprices it is no home for the soul: it is only a tavern."⁴⁵ Perhaps more than any other performer of her day, Tanguay represented the growing desire to control and freely express her body and its sexuality. Observers like Earl Barnes were willing to forgive the degree of wildness and tempestuousness that often accompanied such efforts: "Instead of talking of 'unquiet women' to-day, we should talk of an unquiet world."⁴⁶ Eva Tanguay both shaped and reflected that "unquiet world" in her stage offerings.

Others were less forgiving of women who chose to put forth an "unquiet" or wild body and personage, and tended to see such efforts as ripping at the very fabric of society. In 1891, the publication the Nineteenth Century identified a new type of woman in American society. The title of the piece, "The Wild Women as Social Insurgents," speaks volumes. Author Lynn Linton described this new phenomenon as "that loud and dictatorial person, insurgent and something more, who suffers no one's opinion to influence her mind, no venerable law hallowed by time nor custom consecrated by experience, to control her actions. Mistress of herself, the Wild Woman as social

⁴⁵ Earl Barnes, "The Economic Independence of Women," Atlantic Monthly, August 1912, 262-63.

⁴⁶ Barnes 265.

insurgent preaches the 'lesson of liberty' broadened into lawlessness and license."⁴⁷ The author went on to describe the "Wild Woman" type in greater detail:

Her ideal of life for herself is an absolute and personal independence coupled with supreme power over men. She repudiates the doctrine of individual conformity for the sake of the general good; holding the self-restraint involved as an act of slavishness which no woman worth her salt would be guilty... The Wild Woman of modern life asks why; and she answers the question in her own way... Nothing is forbidden to the Wild Woman as social insurgent; for the one word that she cannot spell is, Fitness. Devoid of this sense of fitness, she does all manner of things which she thinks bestow on her the power, together with the privileges, of a man; not thinking that in obliterating the finer distinctions of sex she is obliterating the finer traits of civilization, and that every step made towards identity of habits is a step downwards in refinement and delicacy—wherein lies the essential core of civilization.⁴⁸

Wild women like Tanguay, for example, who made strong choices for herself onstage and off, threatened, according to this writer, to eat away at "the essential core of civilization."

But women like Tanguay, according to the Nineteenth Century's Linton, were of an especially pernicious breed: actresses and dancers. According to Linton, "the restlessness which makes of the modern Wild Woman a [word obscured] driving her afield in search of strange pleasures and novel occupations, and leading her to drink of the muddied waters so long as they are in new channels cut off from the old fountains. Nothing daunts this modern Io. No barriers, no obstacles prevent. She appears on the public stage and executes dances which one would not like one's daughters to see, still less perform. She herself knows no shame in showing her skill—and her legs."⁴⁹ As a "wild woman" and an actress-dancer, Tanguay, therefore, posed a double cultural threat. Wrote Linton.

⁴⁷ Lynn Linton, "The Wild Woman as Social Insurgent," Nineteenth Century, October 1891, 596.

⁴⁸ Linton, 596-97.

⁴⁹ Linton, 600.

There is no reason why perfectly good and modest women should not be actresses. Rightly taken, acting is an art as noble as any other. But here as elsewhere, are gradations and sections; and just as a wide line is drawn between the cancan and the minuet, so is there between the things which a modest woman may do on the stage and those which she may not. Not long ago that line was notoriously overstepped, and certain of the permissible into those wider regions of the more than doubtful, where, it is to be supposed, they enjoyed their questionable triumph—at least for the hour.⁵⁰

In Linton's view, women lost their femininity when, like Tanguay, they danced or moved with kinesthetic abandon: "The prettiest woman in the world loses her beauty when at these violent exercises."⁵¹

For observers like these, women were to be graceful and decorous, even on stage. In the article "What Men Like in Woman," written for Cosmopolitan in 1901 (though uncannily similar to some articles in today's Cosmopolitan). Rafford Pike argued, "There is one thing which appeals to every man of taste and imagination, and that is grace. Awkwardness in a woman is very hard to overlook. Perhaps grace is admired the more by men because it is the last thing which they ever acquire."⁵² Tanguay was many things on stage, but graceful was not one of them. Rather, she was, in Anthony Slide's words, "outrageous or repellent, with bosoms bursting out of bras and thighs rippling with fat."⁵³ A woman like Tanguay ran the risk of losing her feminine identity through the raucous and volatile paces through which she put her body onstage, even though it often pointed to a new kind of female sexuality. "Whenever she elects to be something more than a gentle cow with its calves," noted a writer in Harper's Bazar in 1907, a woman runs the risk of becoming "unsexed."⁵⁴ In many ways, then, Tanguay onstage was a challenge to certain prevailing, if dominant, notions of

⁵⁰ Linton, 600.

⁵¹ Linton, 598.

⁵² Rafford Pike, "What Men Like in Woman," Cosmopolitan, October 1901, 610.

⁵³ Slide, 488.

womanhood. Rather than unsexing herself, though, she offered new possibilities for the public face of female sexuality, even if such offerings were always, in the end, authorized by male business powers.

Others, though, saw women as particularly well-suited to the stage. "This is the era of the woman in the drama," wrote Arthur Pollock in Harper's Weekly. "Nothing so well demonstrates the changing attitude of the world toward and the increasing importance attributed to her position in society as the effect she is having upon all phases of the theatre. The status of woman at any period in history has been reflected on its stage... woman is now a dominating factor in all things theatrical."⁵⁵ Women like Tanguay could excel on the boards because the stage offered a locale where a woman's body and personal attributes might be displayed to greatest profit—in contradistinction to more abstract forms of creativity, such as writing, painting, and musical composition in which a woman did not seem to put forth her body as an artistic signifier. "Woman is so much nearer to Nature than man that we more readily ascribe to her natural attributes," wrote the editor of Harper's Monthly in 1910. "Most intimately she shapes humanity, as if she were its earth, and mother, after the ancient earthly pattern... We should expect from her, then, peculiar excellence in the purely personal arts—singing and dancing. In Nature, generally, the male is preeminently the singer; but among the many contradictions to Nature in human civilization, this one is conspicuous—that in these personal arts woman has gained upon man, her distinction being greatly enhanced by her physical charm."⁵⁶ A woman like Tanguay, who sang for a living, though in some sense defying the natural model, could be nonetheless condoned by certain onlookers.

⁵⁴ Marie Corelli, "Man's War Against Woman," Harper's Bazar, May 1907, 426.

⁵⁵ Arthur Pollock, "The Woman in the Theatre," Harper's Weekly Harper's Weekly, 4 September 1915, 237.

⁵⁶ "Editor's Study," Harper's Monthly, February 1910, 478.

Actresses like Tanguay could be lauded for their mimetic capacities as well, since they were thought to be much closer to the inner well of human emotion. Wrote the Arena in 1901, "In imitative art, women succeed much better than men. If we look back at the history of the stage we see more famous actresses than actors. This emotional explosiveness is largely due to this same repression of sex and social compunction that puts women by their very natures in the position of actors. Great actresses in a way express their own natures."⁵⁷ Thus, good acting skills could be the happy by-product of social repression.

French writer and theorist Constant Coquelin, writing for Harper's Bazar in 1901, felt women made good actresses because they combined a man's sense of humor with an intrinsic emotionality. "The sense of humor is universal," wrote the Frenchman. "It knows neither time nor country nor sex... Perhaps I could not cite a better example that women have been given the sense of humor than by pointing to Madame Bernhardt [who made very successful tours of vaudeville in 1910 and 1912⁵⁸]. She is full of it. She sees the lightest fling; there is no bit too subtle for her to seize. And then how she enjoys it! Her sense of the ridiculous is most keen. She portrays life's tragedies, but not one of its comedies escapes her. Her smile, her laughter, they are ever ready to break out. They cannot be suppressed. She feels the mirthfulness of the world, and that makes her only more keenly alive to its sorrows."⁵⁹ Tanguay, whose personal and distinctive bodily "charm," "emotional explosiveness," and "mirthfulness" were seemingly inseparable from her onstage antics, fit the bill appropriately.

⁵⁷ "The Artistic Impulse in Man and Woman," Arena, October 1900, 419.

⁵⁸ See: Leigh Woods, "Sarah Bernhardt and the Refining of American Vaudeville," Theatre Research International 18 (Spring 1993), 16; "Bernhardt Arrives Younger Than Ever," New York Times, 2 December 1912, 11:1; "Chicago Cheers Bernhardt," New York Times, 3 December 1912, 2:6; and "Bernhardt and Vaudeville," New York Times, 23 September 1910, 12:6.

⁵⁹ Constant Coquelin, "Have Women a Sense of Humor?", Harper's Bazar, 12 January 1901, 67-8.

Many felt that women, as a social category, made not only for the equal of men on the boards, but for better stage artists than men altogether—even as purely mimetic performers. Writing for Cosmopolitan in 1906, Alan Dale remarked:

Have you ever had the sensation, as you sat in a playhouse and watched sound, healthy, able-bodied men pretending to be somebody else, uttering trifling platitudes, sitting on gold drawing-room chairs or—worse still—cavorting around in musical comedy—have you ever had the sensation that the much-vaunted dignity of the sex was singularly disturbed? Have you ever felt a desire to cry out to these men, “Go out into the world and do something—build things, invent things, write things, talk things, but do stop posing as blooming, silly make-believes”? And then when you have thought all this—if you have—have you ever heaved a sigh of relief as the women carry on in sweet, feminine sincerity, and seemed to make the play live and pulsate, the “pretending” less evidential, the pose not as heartless, and the absurdity distinctly lacking? Acting is innate in the woman⁶⁰

Dale finally goes on to posit that “acting is a woman’s rather than a man’s pursuit; the art of simulation is distinctly feminine rather than masculine.”⁶¹

Dale’s words are, to be sure, something of a back-handed compliment. For him, men are at their best when they are “out” in “the world,” making, building, doing, and speaking. More importantly, though he attaches to woman a kind of built-in falseness, an ability to dissemble and imitate of which man is simply less capable. Dale redeems himself somewhat by offering cultural and historical reasons for woman’s innate superiority at the mimetic arts: “She has been the under-dog for centuries; and she has simulated, and pretended, and rused, and acted before she was allowed a chance to breathe.”⁶² Similarly, Cora Sutton Castle, in her pseudoscientific 1913 “Statistical Study of Eminent Women,” found that, throughout history, “The stage has been the stepping

⁶⁰ Alan Dale, “Why Women Are Greater Actors Than Men,” Cosmopolitan, September 1906, 517-18.

⁶¹ Dale, 518.

⁶² Dale, 521.

stone to eminence for more than eight times as many women as became noted for their religion.”⁶³

As actresses and performers, women, particularly Eva Tanguay, ran the risk of seeming awkward and unwomanly. Yet at the same time, they were fulfilling a cultural prejudice which viewed them as inherently *always* on stage, in one form or another, hiding some putative true self in the folds of their feminine wiles. In 1913, in Munsey's Magazine, Karin Michaelis posed the question, “Why Are Women Less Truthful Than Men?” Wrote Michaelis, “Does a woman really lie more than a man? Yes, unquestionably yes, if the lies are reckoned by their number.” Woman's lies, according to Michaelis, “appear in vast numbers, like weeds along the roadside.”⁶⁴ According to Michaelis, while men could readily distinguish between lies and truth, “Woman lies in many little things simply because she is a woman. She lies with the whole of her person. She transforms herself in accordance with the changes of fashion, as if she were a piece of soft metal that is put over and over again into the melting pot and recast. She puffs out her hair with pads and artificial braids, and uses dye to conceal the fading of its color. She improves her complexion with powder and paint.” Womanhood, then, in the estimation of Michaelis and others like her in the period, was itself a kind of consummate performance. To be a woman was inexorably to be false in one way or another. This extended beyond hair and dress and permeated a woman's entire attitude and bearing. “The wife, perhaps, has never told her husband a falsehood, but is not her conduct a continual lie? Is it not keeping the man in ignorance of something which legitimately concerns him?” she wondered.⁶⁵ “*Varium et mutabile semper femina.*” This

⁶³ Cora Sutton Castle, “A Statistical Study of Eminent Women,” Popular Science Monthly, June 1913, 601.

⁶⁴ Karen Michaelis, “Why Are Women Less Truthful Than Men,” Munsey's Magazine, May 1913, 185.

⁶⁵ Michaelis, 187.

variability of women is one of the oldest and most widely accepted of the popular myths about them," observed well-known feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman in Harper's Bazar in 1908.⁶⁶ To be a woman was perforce to be mutable, variable, and never settled in one's own person—or at least such was a prevailing view in the dominant culture.

Women lied too in their sexual liaisons, according to Munsey's Michaelis, and in this arena committed perhaps their greatest transgressions against truth.

To the American woman, flirtation is as innocent a sport as tennis, dancing, or skating. There is only this great difference—that whereas dancing, tennis, and skating are healthy forms of exercise for muscles and sinews, flirtation is a mendacious game with the feelings to which a woman should be holiest and noblest. The young woman considers it her right—and society smilingly sanctions this right—to give to men, with glances, smiles, and a thousand coquettish tricks, promises that she does not intend to keep... By her flirtations the American woman lies, not only more than the man, but more than the woman of any other nation.⁶⁷

Rafford Pike, writing in Cosmopolitan, argued similarly that frankness was simply not in woman's nature, especially where sexual flirtation was concerned. "Finer than any other single trait in woman, because it is rarer, is perfect frankness, not on word alone, but in thought and act—the courage of conviction, the splendor of sincerity... This feeling is at the base of every form of coquetry. It teaches women to play at indifference even when their very bones are turned to water and when their hearts are melting like wax before the flame of their desire."⁶⁸ And the editor of Harper's Monthly put forth similar sentiments when he argued that the "modern feminization of culture" was resulting in the strengthening of the "plastic side of our nature"—that which could be molded, transformed, and remade at will to meet the needs of any situation.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Woman, the Enigma," Harper's Bazar, December 1908, 1194.

⁶⁷ Karen Michaelis, "Why Are Women Less Truthful Than Men?", Munsey's Magazine, June 1913, 345.

⁶⁸ Pike, 613.

⁶⁹ "Editor's Study," Haper's Monthly, May 1910, 640.

To deal with a woman, then, meant to deal with an expert in hiding the truth under a skillfully false face. Writing for the Independent, Susanne Wilcox, in a piece called "The Unrest of Modern Woman," identified "subtlety and subterfuge" as "the pre-eminently female characteristics in the animal as well as human world."⁷⁰

For his part, George Bernard Shaw, no stranger to either female psychology or actresses, felt simply that women lied easily due to an inherent weakness of their psyche. "There are interesting things about the American woman," the Irish playwright told Cosmopolitan magazine in 1907, "She does not really believe in enjoying herself. She has no conscience."⁷¹ The editor of Scribner's Magazine put it bluntly in 1901 when he wrote, "[I]t is the business of woman rather *not* to be original."⁷² Thus women were seen as naturally fit for creative endeavors which seemed to rely on dissimulation rather than originality, masking rather than revelation. The stage was thus a natural, (more) socially sanctioned outlet for creative women like Eva Tanguay.

Yet there was a price to be paid for actresses like Tanguay who chose the stage as a means of artistic expression. Given the commonly-held beliefs about women, many viewed Tanguay and other performers like her as capable *only* of falseness, of acting, of dissimulation. For a woman to engage in artistic creation did not mean that she would create a unique reflection of truthful nature but rather that she would simply summon up her own innate powers of falsity and put them on display. Whereas men could claim originality in artistic creation, women, by virtue of their nature, could never hope to do so. Speculating about the creative process in women, author Winifred Kirkland writing for the Atlantic Monthly in 1916, stated, "I cannot see that woman's brain is the equal of

⁷⁰ Susanne Wilcox, "The Unrest of Modern Woman," Independent, 8 July 1909, 62.

⁷¹ "Bernard Shaw on American Women," Cosmopolitan, Sept 1907, 560.

⁷² "Women as Individualists," Scribner's Magazine, April, 1901, 507-08.

man's in originality, in concentration, or in power of sustained effort."⁷³ For Kirkland, women lacked true powers of creation and originality because they were always creating from a highly personal place within. For a woman to create, argued Kirkland, she had merely to give face to her already dissimulating self; her creative intellect was inseparable from her body, emotions, and soul. She wrote:

The chief difficulty about analyzing a woman's brain is that it is so hard to separate her brain from the rest of the woman, whereas men are put together in plainly discernible pieces—body, mind, and soul. The perfection of a woman's intellect depends upon the perfection of its fusion with her personality. A woman amounts to most intellectually when she amounts to still more personally. She cannot move in pieces like a man, or like an earthworm. It needs the whole woman, acting harmoniously... A man possessing a separable intellect and an imagination so original that it can sometimes create what he personally is little capable of experiencing, may sometimes write one thing and be another; but not so a woman.⁷⁴

Kirkland longed to have a man's intellect and emotional make-up. "[M]y head," she wrote, "is different in substance from a man's. I get most work out of it when I copy a man's mental methods. My brain is a vague and volatile mass, shot through with fancies, whimsies, with flashes of intuitive and illuminative wisdom, and it is a task surpassingly difficult to hold all this volatility, this versatility, to the rigors of artistic expression...."⁷⁵

Tanguay was in tough spot. On the one hand, she would not be taken seriously if she claimed originality as an artist. On the other hand, in the ultra-competitive world of mass entertainment—a world created for money by men like Albee and Keith—she had to define herself as somehow unique and different, if only from her fellow actresses. The solution, as we have begun to see, involved the creation of an energetic, sexually charged stage persona which many assumed mimicked her private life, though this was

⁷³ Winifred Kirkland, "The Woman Who Writes," *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1916, 48.

⁷⁴ Kirkland, 48.

⁷⁵ Kirkland, 49.

in fact rarely the case. She took the risk of seeming awkward and volatile in creating an appealing, if slightly forbidden, embodiment of staged amusement.

If Eva Tanguay was to suffer from attempting to present originality in a profession which naturally led others to assume simulation and falsity, she turned such prejudices to her advantage by putting forth a close relative of originality—namely, individuality. “People may differ as to the amount of stage talent possessed by this rather erratic young woman,” wrote the New York Clipper in 1913, “but there is no gainsaying the fact that the stage has not a performer just like her.”⁷⁶ Two years earlier, Variety had stated that Tanguay always and unmistakably put “the ‘I’ stamp” on all her stage doings, even by imparting what appeared to be a large measure of “personal information.”⁷⁷

For a woman in Tanguay’s day to put forth her individuality—and, moreover, in Tanguay’s case, to capitalize on it—was a tricky matter. “Of the various elements in the now widely spreading movement for the elevation of woman, that which causes the most general perturbation and resentment in the average man is this feminine claim to individuality in purpose and action, in other words to the development of woman’s innate genius according to her own promptings and in her own manner,” remarked an author in the Westminster Review in 1902.⁷⁸ Florida Pier, writing for Harper’s Weekly, put matters more succinctly: “What every woman feels the need of is self-expression,” even though such expressions could be “careless” and “reckless.”⁷⁹ Margaret Deland, writing on “The Change in the Feminine Ideal” in the Atlantic Monthly in 1910, argued that several changes were underway in the social psychology of women. “There are, it

⁷⁶ New York Clipper, 11 January 1913, 7.

⁷⁷ Variety, 27 May 1911, 5.

⁷⁸ “The Individuality of Woman: From a Masculine Point of View,” Westminster Review, November 1902, 508.

⁷⁹ Florida Pier, “The Gentler View: The Need of Self-Expression,” Harper’s Weekly, 5 June 1909, 28.

seems to me, two forces at work: one is the sense of individualism...."⁸⁰ Individualism increasingly became a trait with which women were associated, if not downright accused of, in turn-of-the-century America. For Eva Tanguay, individualism was inextricably linked with an erotics of performance and bearing, though an erotics that fit well into the apparatus of the vaudeville industry.

Such a drive toward individualism, and individuality, as exemplified by Eva Tanguay, however, could lead to that most unfeminine of traits in the Victorian world, selfishness. Wrote Maud Howe in "What is a Lady" in Harper's Bazar in 1909:

Like the struggle against dirt and disorder, it is not a battle that can be fought and won once and for all; it is part of the daily battle of every woman's life, to be renewed with every sunrise. Just as I must bathe and brush and comb and polish this tiresome body of mine every day, so must I work away at curbing my selfishness, at polishing my manners, at trying to deserve that it shall be said of me, "she is a lady."⁸¹

For Howe, being unselfish was as important as grooming and keeping up the appearance of personal cleanliness and beauty that was the natural burden of womanhood. To be unselfish, and thus unindividualistic, according to Howe, a woman had to undertake a regimen aimed not only at psychological control but all aspects of being and bearing:

Though we cannot all afford to pay for elocution lessons like Mrs. Glad, we can all have free elocution lessons. When we go to church or to a lecture, to a club meeting, we can listen attentively to the men and women who speak well and try to learn from them what qualities to cultivate. A low voice is an excellent thing in a woman. It may be that you have naturally a loud voice, but it is quite within your power to moderate and modulate your voice; if you cannot perfect it, you can at least improve it... Avoid making unnecessary noise. Be as nearly noiseless in your house as you can be, so shall your neighbors bless you and your landlord refrain from raising your rent. Never call to your children or your servants. If they are in another part of the house, either ring for them or go find them.⁸²

⁸⁰ Margaret Deland, "The Change in the Feminine Ideal," Atlantic Monthly, March 1910, 292.

⁸¹ Maud Howe, "What is a Lady?," Harper's Bazar, February 1909, 179.

⁸² Howe, 180-81.

It is hard to imagine a woman whose stage persona adhered less to such recommendations than Eva Tanguay's. Loud, "cyclonic," awkward, and unabashedly individualistic, Tanguay embodied an emerging possibility of woman—one that was both at odds with certain aspects of hegemonic culture and yet posed a deep fascination for the growing numbers of mass-entertainment seekers in turn-of-the-century America.

As an actress, as a woman, as one who performed sexual allure onstage, and as an individualist, Eva Tanguay stood astride the cusp of cultural upheaval. She could be criticized or admired, but not ignored. In some ways, she exemplified the "new woman" emerging shortly after the turn of the century. The "new woman," according to a writer for Harper's Weekly, might especially be found in the performing arts: "They are let loose upon the world as bankers' daughters, teachers, stenographers, and actresses."⁸³

Tanguay's journey to the stage began at an early age. She was born on August 1, 1878 in the small village of Marbleton, Quebec. According to Westerfield, "Her mother was French-Canadian; her father, Dr. Gustave Tanguay, was a Parisian physician who had heard the call of the wild." When Eva was seven, the Tanguay family moved to Holyoke, Massachusetts; Dr. Tanguay died soon afterwards.⁸⁴

According to most biographical accounts, around 1886, with the Tanguay family near complete destitution, Eva was spotted on the street by the owner of a local theatrical touring company and hired on to fill a number of child roles, including Little Lord Fauntleroy.⁸⁵ Tanguay remained with the Redding Stanton Repertoire Company for several years, and graduated to soubrette roles in what would seem to be stock.

⁸³ James Henle, "The New Woman," Harper's Weekly, 20 November 1915, 503.

⁸⁴ Slide, 488; Westerfield, 5.

⁸⁵ Westerfield, 5.

nineteenth-century melodramas. In these roles, recounted Tanguay, “I dashed in night after night to save the heroine from being sawed in two by the vile villain.”⁸⁶

Tanguay’s first New York appearance was in a show called The Engineer, produced by Bertram and Willard at the People’s Theatre on the Bowery. After that job, she got a shot at a musical comedy at the Imperial Music Hall on Broadway—the one where she decided to dance too fast for the audience to notice her bare legs—though she fails to mention the name or date in her putatively autobiographical piece in the American Weekly.⁸⁷

By 1901, Tanguay was given a role in a major musical comedy production on Broadway, My Lady, at the Victoria theatre. The show, with book by R.A. Barnet, and music by H.L. Hertz, E.W. Corliss, Robert Morse, and D.K. Stevens, was described as “a three-act extravaganza travestying The Three Musketeers,” according to the New York Dramatic Mirror. The show had originated in Boston at the Tremont Theatre on 5 February 1900 under the name Mindi and the Musketeers. It moved to the Columbia Theatre, Boston, several weeks later, and debuted at the Victoria in New York under the name My Lady on 11 February 1901, before “a very large audience.”⁸⁸

Though Tanguay claimed, in her ghost-written autobiographical series, to have hit upon the idea of dancing as fast as she could to hide her scanty attire before her stint in My Lady, her experience in the Musketeers spoof must have made a much deeper and lasting impression on her. For it was in this show that she was exposed to the drawing power of feminine beauty and sexual allure, dressed up in exotic costumes, and put on display before an eager audience. Wrote the New York Dramatic Mirror:

⁸⁶ Tanguay, 29 December 1946, 12.

⁸⁷ Tanguay, 29 December 1946, 12.

⁸⁸ New York Dramatic Mirror, 23 February 1901, 16.

If My Lady is a go in New York it will be due chiefly to its dazzling display of feminine beauty. Such a plenitude of pulchritude, as Manager A.H. Chamberlyn has gathered has rarely, if ever, been seen here. From Violet Holis, tall and stately, to Mlle Proto, petite and dainty—the gamut being one of stature only—all the women, both principals and chorus are “peaches.” They showed themselves in an extensive array of stunning costumes, and made the stage a garden of loveliness.

Though the Mirror found the score “light, tuneful, spirited,” it had less kind things to say about the overall plot, which the paper regarded as “a tiresome series of ancient jests, stupid lines and unfunny ‘business.’ About half of the stuff should be cut.” Nonetheless, the Mirror pointed out, “Eva Tanguay and Lotta Faust also deserve mention.”⁸⁹

The New York Times was equally critical of the book:

Of the quality of the verbal humor in that piece, by the way, a fair example is found in the interchange of badinage between two of the musketeers. One of them is weeping and shakes bits of lead from his handkerchief. “Look,” cries the other, “he weeps bullets!” “No,” exclaims the weeper, “they are musket-tears!” And this is 1901.⁹⁰

Little wonder that My Lady has been more or less forgotten in the annals of theatre history.

Tanguay’s next stint on Broadway came in a musical called The Office Boy, written by Ludwig Englander, which debuted at the Victoria Theatre, in November, 1903. The New York Times described The Office Boy as little more than a “vehicle” for comic performer Frank Daniels, noting that “it provides plenty of opportunities for the comedian.” With a convoluted, farcical plot involving the law office of “Ketcham & Cheatham,” a botched robbery attempt, and several romantic intrigues, the Times determined that The Office Boy was “likely to please those who want to laugh and grow fat.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 23 February 1901, 16.

⁹⁰ “The Office Boy,” New York Times, 14 February 1901, 9:3.

⁹¹ “The Office Boy.”

Though largely a showcase for the comedic talents of Frank Daniels, however, The Office Boy provided Eva Tanguay with another chance to shine onstage.

"Opportunity is also provided for a song and dance by Eva Tanguay, who is quite as lively as ever, and whose dancing, while it does not at any time suggest the poetry of motion, has a quality of abandon that many people like just as much."⁹² Thus Tanguay, as early as 1903, was refining her distinctive style of energetic, if ungraceful, dancing and stage movement which would serve her so well on the vaudeville stage in the near future.

About this same time, Tanguay appeared in another musical which would lead to perhaps the most important developments in her career. The musical was called The Chaperones, with music by Isidore Witmark and book and lyrics by Frederic Ranken. Set in Paris and Alexandria, Egypt, in the first and second acts, respectively, the "rudimentary plot has something to do with a dashing adventuress named Aramanthe Dedincourt (Miss Trixie Friganza), who furnishes chaperons, or guides, in the form of pretty girls, to strangers in Paris at so much 'per.'" according to a description in The Theatre magazine.⁹³

As with her other musical comedy efforts, Tanguay stood out, despite being relegated to a "rather small"⁹⁴ part. According to The Theatre, Tanguay played "a madcap girl detective named 'Phrosia' who's after a stolen seal."⁹⁵ But Tanguay garnered special attention for herself in her rendering of a song called "My Sambo." Noted The Theatre, "The plot has really nothing to do with what Mr. Perley's comedians say and sing. It does not account for their sudden sextette... nor for that catchy coon

⁹² "The Office Boy."

⁹³ "The Chaperones," The Theatre, July 1902, 5-6.

⁹⁴ Westerfield, 8.

⁹⁵ "The Chaperones," 6.

song, 'My Sambo,' which Miss Tanguay sings and dances with amazing *entrain*...."⁹⁶

"My Sambo" was of the "coon song" genre, popular at the turn of the century. It contained the lyrics, "I got a beau, I love him so. He's my sweet 'lasses Sam. I love him like rasper' jam. I never cared for a man but Sambo!"⁹⁷ As with other coon songs, and minstrel show elements, the mimicking of supposedly authentic African-American cultural nuances permitted white performers a degree of rawness and license not permitted in one's own racial persona.⁹⁸ Eva Tanguay almost certainly made full use of such an opportunity to let loose, wail with emotion, and further develop the "wild" persona that would become her stock-in-trade.

With Tanguay's rendering of "My Sambo" gaining popularity, the "madcap" comedienne was given a chance to star in a musical in 1904 called The Blonde in Black. Due to the success of the song, though, the title was changed to My Sambo Girl for its 1904 debut. My Sambo Girl was crucial to Tanguay's career, not only because it provided her with a chance to demonstrate her formidable talents in a larger role, but also because it featured Tanguay singing a number called "I Don't Care," which was to become her inseparable trademark—even when she wished to shake it off—for the rest of her life. Written by Jean Lennox, who the New York Telegraph called a "poetess" and who the New York Star described as "a handsome young woman with a happy knack for saying smart things in smart verse,"⁹⁹ and Harry Sutton, the song "I Don't Care" was a kind of explosion of gaiety and nonchalance, perfect for the emerging talents of Eva Tanguay. Some of its lyrics are:

⁹⁶ "The Chaperones," 6.

⁹⁷ Tanguay, 29 December 1946, 13.

⁹⁸ For more see: Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁹⁹ New York Telegraph, 14 April 1908 and New York Star, 3 April 1909. No page numbers or titles available. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

I don't care, I don't care

What they may think of me.

I'm happy-go-lucky, men say I'm plucky

So jolly and care-free.

I don't care, I don't care

If I do get the mean and stony stare,

If I'm never successful, it won't be distressful,

'Cos I don't care.¹⁰⁰

Something about the song caught the public's imagination. Its lightheartedness no doubt appealed to urban amusement-goers, and the energy and tinge of eroticism Tanguay brought to its rendering must have added additional appeal. Perhaps predictably, she later came to loathe the song that was her entrée to vaudeville, national fame, and considerable wealth. In 1913, she told a journalist for The Theatre magazine, "That wretched song ['I Don't Care'] has been the cause of all my trouble. It has cost me all my friends. It has cost me the respect of everyone who has ever seen me. Everybody thinks I'm crazy or impossible to get along with. The most terrible stories are told about me. And why? Because that wretched song 'I Don't Care,' has pursued me night and day from the first time I sang it. I'm not going to cry any more. But I can't tell you how many hundred times that song has made me weep."¹⁰¹ Tanguay was likely exaggerating for histrionic effect (she was, after all, an actress), but, although it is unlikely she lost her friends due to a song, it is possible that she felt severely hemmed in by the tyrannical

¹⁰⁰ ¹⁰⁰ Tanguay, 29 December 1946, 12.

¹⁰¹ Karl K. Kitchen, "Undone by a Song," The Theatre, May 1913, 143.

success of “I Don’t Care.” The song hung around her neck like an albatross, one that led her into a world of wealth and notoriety, yet shackled her to a rock, unable to move.

As she turned her musical comedy career into a vaudeville career, about 1905, she began adding other songs to her repertoire. These numbers contained the vitality and zest of “I Don’t Care,” and yet added a noticeable dollop of sexuality. Such songs as “I Want Someone to Go Wild With Me,” and “It’s All Been Done Before But Not the Way I Do It,” according to the New York Times, “did much to bring vaudeville out of its decorous front.” She added to her sex appeal by creating a fabulously successful Salome act—astride the others that were then glutting the vaudeville stage—in 1908. As Salome, it was said that her costume “consisted of two pearls.”¹⁰² Noted the New York Dramatic Mirror of Tanguay’s Salome outfit. “Her pretty figure was shown to advantage in scant costume” to the spectators “who filled every seat and every inch of available standing room in the theatre.”¹⁰³

The Salome act drew heavy sighs from anti-vice crusaders, but went on to ring up a “record gross,” according to the Times. The following year, Tanguay appeared, to great positive attention, in Florenz Ziegfeld’s “Follies of 1909.”¹⁰⁴ Tanguay’s leading spot in the Follies had originally been meant for Sophie Tucker, whom Tanguay beat out for the role.¹⁰⁵ Ziegfeld then had his associates rewrite the part “especially for” Tanguay.¹⁰⁶

As she drew increasing attention for her brazen lyrics and energetic style, she also began to make a name for herself as a wearer of outrageous, and typically alluring, costumes (see Figure 21), which, claimed the comedienne, she had always designed

¹⁰² “Eva Tanguay Dies in Hollywood, 68.”

¹⁰³ New York Dramatic Mirror, 15 August 1908, 14.

¹⁰⁴ “Eva Tanguay Dies in Hollywood, 68.”

¹⁰⁵ Tucker, 80.

herself.¹⁰⁷ Sometimes, her outfits were merely vehicles designed to accentuate her already Rubenesque figure. "Of course... Miss Tanguay's shapely form was then shown in tights," remarked the New York Clipper following Eva's appearance at Keith & Proctor's Fifth Avenue theatre in 1909.¹⁰⁸ The outfit was apparently so form-revealing that it caused a police intervention later that year. When Tanguay appeared "fully clothed in tights" at Morrison's Theatre in July a plain-clothes policeman named McVey approached the comedienne with the intention of arresting her for violation of Article 2,152 of the Penal Code, "which suggests that artists who appear in Sunday night sacred concerts at the variety theatres shall wear only clothes of the sort which can be worn in the streets," according to the New York Times. For her part, Tanguay was incensed. Her costumes—or lack thereof—were a key part of her act and constituted no small part of her drawing power, and therefore her income. "Don't touch me! Don't you dare come near me! How dare you! Go right away from here!" whelped Tanguay at the hapless constable. Still, the police prevailed and the actress was let go on \$500 bail.¹⁰⁹

On other occasions, Tanguay would add an exotic flair to her form-fitting or revealing costumes, such as a "harem skirt that was a dream in white and purple silk" according to the New York Clipper.¹¹⁰ But most of the time, the costume, no matter how fancy or bejeweled served one main purpose: the display of the body of Eva Tanguay in its full sexual glory. "Her bodices fit even tighter with more form revelation than ever before, impossible though it may seem," wrote Variety in 1914, just as Tanguay's career was beginning to drop off.¹¹¹ Like other vaude actresses of her day, Eva Tanguay

¹⁰⁶ "Ziegfeld Gets Eva Tanguay," New York Times, 7 July 1909, 9:2.

¹⁰⁷ Tanguay, 29 December 1946, 13.

¹⁰⁸ New York Clipper, 9 January 1909, 1179.

¹⁰⁹ "'I Do Care!' Cried Tanguay," New York Times, 5 July 1909, 1:3.

¹¹⁰ New York Clipper, 13 May 1911, 6.

¹¹¹ Variety, 14 November 1914, 18.

heightened the sexual allure of her costuming by conducting changes onstage.¹¹² In 1930, the Depression in its onset, and her figure long past its ideal, Eva Tanguay concocted a dress made entirely of one dollar bills. As accompaniment, she sang a song called “Money” while a “negro jazz band” kept the rhythm.¹¹³

In utilizing unusual, decorative, and always revealing costumes, Eva Tanguay was taking a tack that many other female vaudeville performers also took. She was making the female body a site of both sexual, spectatorial allure, and also a site of conspicuous consumption. In effect, her costumes conflated the notion of consumption with that of sexuality—a tactic not unfamiliar in today’s market culture. But Tanguay was also exemplifying a common belief of her day, specifically, that in order for a female to be fully a woman—to perform her gender, in a sense—required her to be clad in the finery of “glitter” and “ornament.” Wrote W.I. Thomas, a professor at the University of Chicago, in an article entitled “The Adventitious Character of Woman” for the American Journal of Sociology in 1906:

One of the most powerful stimulations to either sex is glitter, in the most general sense, and the interest in showing off begins in the coloration and plumage of animals, and continues as ornament in the human species. It is true that the wooing connotation of ornament was originally its most important one, and that it was characteristic of man in particular; but woman has generalized it as an interest, and as a means of self-realization. She seeks it as a means of charming men, of outdoing other women, and as an artistic interest; and her attention often takes that direction to such a degree that its acquisition means satisfaction, and its lack discontent.¹¹⁴

¹¹² “Eva Tanguay Big ‘Hit’ in Topline at Pantages.” Los Angeles Times, 7 August 1928. No page number available. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

¹¹³ “Eva Tanguay to Appear in Dress Made of \$1 Bills.” Los Angeles Examiner, 17 October 1930. No page number available. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

¹¹⁴ W.I. Thomas, “The Adventitious Character of Woman,” American Journal of Sociology 12, (July 1906): 39.

One detects more than mere psuedo-scientific analysis—common to the social sciences of the day. One also detects a subtle critique of woman's use of ornament, even as the author acknowledges its necessity. "Ornament," according to this sociologist, is "a means of charming men and outdoing other women." Women like Tanguay were in a sense caught between the need to fully realize their feminine identity via alluring ornament and a society that found such efforts slightly suspect. In some ways, we may say that Eva Tanguay managed that conflict to her best advantage.

Others were more overtly critical of women who relied too heavily on costume or dress to gain attention. "On the street—generally the chief and most public one of the city or town—we meet the schoolgirl overdressed and in the worst possible taste," wrote one Mrs. Rhodes Campbell for the Arena magazine in 1898. "A jaunty velvet cape, hat with nodding plumes and flowers, and at an angle which challenges our wonder and admiration as to its 'coherence of parts,' kid gloves, perhaps laces. She is generally pretty, with a most evident consciousness of the fact, and carries herself with the self-possession and cool assertiveness of a woman of the world... yet simplicity and naturalness are utterly lacking."¹¹⁵ Women were in a difficult spot. They were expected to fill a primarily sexual role in society, as wife, mother, and reproductive agent. At the same time, the exhibition of self for sexual or self-seeking purposes could provoke censure and disdain.

Even the famed proto-feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman felt women should exhibit modesty, especially in the realm of dress and personal adornment. "It is a mark of wisdom," wrote Gilman in the Independent in 1905, "of ability to recognize facts, and of self-control, which is one of the greatest virtues of all—a root virtue, absolute requisite of many others. This modesty, proof of clear perceptions, good judgment, a

¹¹⁵ Mrs. Rhodes Campbell, "The American Girl: Her Faults and Her Virtues," Arena, August 1898, 254-55.

sense of justice and self-control, is to be admired and cultivated, altho [sic] the natural variety is far superior to the cultivated as showing better inherent qualities." According to Gilman, the "most familiar" form of self control is "maiden modesty," and a woman ought to aim at "sex-modesty" which, above all else, involved "an instinct of concealment," and a "tendency to withdraw." In fact, Gilman saw modesty as a mark of evolutionary development. "[W]omen in their dress should recognize the glaring immodesty of continual advertisement of sex, and, as they become more developed humanly, should outgrow it."¹¹⁶ On the one hand, Gilman seems to have been hoping that women would eventually come to rely less and less on sexual expressiveness, particularly in the area of bodily adornment. On the other hand, though, she leaves little room for a woman such as Tanguay who deployed sartorial immodesty to her own material benefit. Rare were the observers of the day who noticed that women were held to different standards than men, or that such standards might not have a basis in natural law at all. "[T]he standard of judgment which condemns the woman and pardons the man is solely a social standard," argued J. Bellangee in the Arena in 1895.¹¹⁷ Such sentiments, though were few and far between.

In flaunting both the material ornament of her costumes and, at the same time, using those costumes as a means of advertising her sexualized form, Eva Tanguay played a key part in the sociosexual upheavals of the early 1900s. She showed women that a certain degree of flash and glamour in dress could make a woman both attractive and individualized. Perhaps more importantly, she showed men a new model of consumable female sexuality, there on display, if elegantly wrapped. Such dual appeal

¹¹⁶ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Modesty: Feminine and Other," Independent, 29 June 1905, 1447-50.

¹¹⁷ Bellangee, 370.

was surely not lost on the men who made considerable sums of money promoting Eva Tanguay and others like her.

At the same time that Eva Tanguay was making a name for herself as vaudeville's interestingly clad vixen, she was also acquiring a well-publicized reputation for combativeness, insubordination, and unpredictable—and at times violent—behavior. The year 1909 saw one of the best examples of Tanguay's famed combativeness. That was the year of her run-in with Willa Holt Wakefield, who Variety described as "a pianologist, noted this season as being one of the best and cheapest acts playing the United Booking Offices time."¹¹⁸

In March of that year, Wakefield was in the middle of a multi-week run at Hammerstein's Theatre in New York. "She had played the matinee and was notified that she was not to 'go on' for the night shows just after leaving for the dressing room, prepared for the stage." The article continued:

Perplexed and undecided [as to] what to do, and without the benefit of an advisor, Miss Wakefield, who was in a nervous state, having been accompanied to the theatre by her private physician (who was refused permission to re-enter the stage door after having left her), walked around to the front entrance of the theatre in her stage clothes, picture hat and make-up, endeavoring to find her manager, Louis Newman, who had also been barred from the house without Wakefield's knowledge. When Miss Wakefield was informed Mr. Newman had not been allowed in Hammerstein's Monday evening, she returned to her dressing room, garbed herself in street attire and quietly left the theatre for her hotel.¹¹⁹

When questioned about the matter, theatre owner Willie Hammerstein tried to make it seem as if Wakefield had voluntarily debarred herself from performing: "I heard reports that Miss Wakefield had 'packed the house,'" said Hammerstein, "and ordered that she go on 'No. 5' or follow Miss Tanguay. She declined to do either, and I closed her. I

¹¹⁸ "Act Closed at Hammerstein's Without Notice 'Flops' Over," Variety, 13 March 1909. No page number given. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

¹¹⁹ "Act Closed at Hammerstein's Without Notice 'Flops' Over."

could not afford to take any chances on a disturbance. Last week I asked Miss Wakefield, in deference to my headliner for this week (Eva Tanguay), to withdraw all her billing and advertising matter. She did so. Miss Tanguay had no knowledge whatsoever of this."¹²⁰

But the truth seems to have been otherwise. This was 1909. Eva Tanguay was at the height of her popularity, having recently finished her house-packing Salome turn and her appearance in Ziegfeld's Follies. No vaudeville owner could afford to alienate Eva Tanguay, the most popular star in the genre. Moreover, Tanguay was beginning to play hardball. She was learning to use her influence and popularity to her best advantage, even if that meant the arbitrary and capricious exercise of power. For her part, Wakefield tried to mend fences with Tanguay, Hammerstein, and the United Booking organization. "It is not so that I refused to follow Miss Tanguay. I was not given an opportunity," she told a reporter. "I would have gone on any spot on the program had I been given sufficient notice, and as for following Miss Tanguay I would have appeared after the moving pictures rather than disappoint some of my friends who I knew were in the audience."¹²¹ However, Wakefield told a different story to the New York Times.

According to that paper, Wakefield

blames all her troubles on Eva Tanguay, who appeared on the same bill, and as a result threatened last night to leave the United Booking Circuit and go over to the William Morris circuit of independent vaudeville. Miss Wakefield said she learned last week that Miss Tanguay objected to her appearing on the same bill with the dancer, and as a result of these objections doing so [sic]. She left the theatre in high dudgeon.¹²²

In the battle of the divas, Eva Tanguay had fought and won. Not only was she establishing a name for herself as potentially explosive, she was, more significantly,

¹²⁰ "Act Closed at Hammerstein's Without Notice 'Flops' Over."

¹²¹ "Act Closed at Hammerstein's Without Notice 'Flops' Over."

¹²² "Blames Eva Tanguay," New York Times, 9 March 1909, 2:5.

learning to look out for her own rights and prerogatives. In a time when women were commonly expected to be selfless and servile, Eva Tanguay was striking out new territory for female behavioral codes in the dominant culture.

As it turned out, Tanguay's melee with Willa Holt Wakefield was to be one of the more peaceable of her career. Five months after the Wakefield incident, Eva Tanguay was arrested in Louisville for allegedly attacking one Clarence Hess, "a youthful stage employee," with a hatpin; Hess eventually filed suit against Tanguay for \$1,999.90 in damages. The facts of the incident are sketchy, but the Times reported that, at McCauley's theatre in Louisville, "George Rough, the property man for the company, and Clarence Hess, a stagehand, came together because Hess did not get out of the way when Miss Tanguay rushed from the stage to her dressing room. In the melee that followed, Hess was knocked down a flight of stairs. Rough came near being mobbed by the other hands and Miss Tanguay slapped right and left to protect her champion." When the police arrived, Tanguay produced a wad of cash and told the arresting officer, "Take it all and let me go, for it is now my dinner time."¹²³ The incident may seem comical in historical retrospective, but I think it suggests that Tanguay, who had grown accustomed to defining the limits and capabilities of her body on stage, was merely doing the same offstage as well. In the end, after a three-hour trial, Tanguay was ordered to pay a mere forty dollars for the infliction of what Hess claimed were "three punctures in the abdomen."¹²⁴ In another incident, which also found Tanguay wielding a sharp instrument, the actress cut a stage curtain "to shreds" at a vaudeville theatre in Evansville, Indiana, after the house manager fined her for missing a matinee.¹²⁵ There is no evidence that she ever returned to that theatre again.

¹²³ "Eva Tanguay Arrested," New York Times, 2 March 1910, 18:4.

¹²⁴ "Eva Tanguay Fined," New York Times, 4 March 1910, 7:2.

¹²⁵ "The Associated Press Biographical Service: Sketch 2977."

For a woman to be combative, self-interested, and even physically violent in Tanguay's day was no mean feat. It meant transgressing accepted codes of femininity and creating a new model of public womanhood. Still, Tanguay must have provided a kind of off-beat hope for nascent feminists. Though *Harper's Bazar* argued that the "birth of a son is a happy event; that of a daughter, a trial," the proto-feminist magazine nonetheless concluded, in an article called "The Destiny of Woman," that "[i]n a word, woman should have the courage and pride of her sex."¹²⁶ Rather than viewing Eva Tanguay as a reckless hysterical, as certain of her contemporaries might no doubt have done, or as simply a "madcap," as Darryl Zanuck and his employees did in the 1950s, we might instead see the comedienne as an early example of what would later in the century become something of a cultural cliché: the liberated woman. Liberated financially (at least until the Depression left her virtually penniless) and professionally, Tanguay sought to liberate her person bodily as well.

Eva Tanguay was also unique in her personal involvement with men. Though she was married three times, the love and partnership of men never seemed important to her, each marriage falling apart in short order. Perhaps because she did not have to rely on a man for financial security, Eva Tanguay was able to function as a cultural rebel in the days long before many women realized that companionate marriage was a choice—one which could be ignored as easily as adhered to—and not a necessity.

Each time she married, Tanguay chose men in show business. Her first marriage, to dancer John Ford, lasted three years. But it was a union her heart was not in, and it did not last very long, though the divorce took three years to come through on paper, in 1917. "Three days after my marriage to John Ford I was beginning to figure a

¹²⁶ Charles Wagner, "The Destiny of Woman," *Harper's Bazar*, June 1906, 486.

way out of it," wrote Tanguay.¹²⁷ Tanguay recounts the events of her hurried romance and hasty marriage to Ford in 1913, following a vaude stint in the Midwest:

We were playing in Ann Arbor, Michigan. One of the men in the company was Johnny Ford. He was very dapper with his cane and his spats, a happy-go-lucky fellow, and a fine trouper. I liked him but our association was strictly professional. As I walked up to the theater for our afternoon performance Johnny was standing at the corner, swinging his cane, quite the dude. He had a twinkle in his eye. I started to walk by when he stopped me. "I've been waiting for you, Eva," he smiled. "See that Justice of the Peace sign across the street?" I saw it, a shingle swinging back and forth in the wind. Johnny was a great prankster. I wondered what the joke was going to be. "Well, you know what?" he went on. "I've been waiting so we could go over there and get married." "Very funny, Johnny," I laughed, "but not your best." Then I saw he was serious. At first I was indignant. Then Johnny started in about how lonely he was and how much he loved me. I laughed again and ran for the theater. Marriage was the last thing on my mind. Johnny followed me to the dressing room and went on pleading. I finally had to push him out of the dressing room to get ready for the show. That afternoon I stepped into the wings to watch him while he was on. The boy was clever. He was good-looking. I found myself beginning to wonder. Then I thought, "Oh, he'll forget about it." It was nearly 6 o'clock when I stepped out of the theater. Johnny was waiting. "I told the Justice of the Peace to wait," he said. "We'll have to hurry. He told me how much he loved me. I thought it might be nice after all to have someone around who really cared. The next thing I knew Johnny had me by the arm and we were wading through mud across the alley to the Justice's office. In a few minutes I was Mrs. Johnny Ford. Back in my dressing room before the night show I began to cry. Why had I done such an impulsive thing? Here I was a successful headliner. I had received proposals from dozens of men, wealthy men, able to give me everything money could buy. I had turned all of them down. I had plenty of money. I could do as I pleased. Now I found myself married to a fellow actor. When Johnny went on that night the audience screamed and yelled. They kept shouting "Poor John! Poor John!" All the time I was wondering why the didn't say "Poor Eva! Poor Eva!"¹²⁸

From the very start of her capricious nuptials with Ford, Eva Tanguay realized that her economic security and sexual desirability were her own to control, and that marriage was

¹²⁷ Eva Tanguay, "I Don't Care," American Weekly, 26 January 1947, 6. (Though I am giving Tanguay credit here for having authored the "I Don't Care" series in the American Weekly, that credit is strictly nominal. As I have stated earlier, the articles were almost certainly ghost written by someone else. Still, I will continue to state that she wrote them, in the body of the text, for ease's sake.)

¹²⁸ Eva Tanguay, "I Don't Care," American Weekly, 19 January 1947, 7.

something for which she did not need to opt. This made her fairly unique among women in her day. Nonetheless, the thirty-three-year-old actress was wed to John Ford, one year her junior, with three members of the troupe acting as witnesses, on November 24, 1913.¹²⁹

But the union, as I have mentioned, was doomed from the outset. Tanguay was not truly in love with Johnny Ford and, based on an overview of her entire romantic life, it seems likely she never wanted to tie herself down to one man. By 1915, Tanguay had separated from Ford; the two were formally divorced two years later.¹³⁰ Notes Douglas Gilbert in American Vaudeville. "Ford in his counterdivorce action accused her of intimacies with many men."¹³¹

It is indeed likely that Eva Tanguay carried on with other men—perhaps many—even during her marriage to Ford. She was a woman who flaunted her sexuality on the stage, and it appears she made no effort to curtail her sexuality or sexual appetites off of it. Perhaps the most infamous episode of Tanguay's trysting occurred in 1907. Martha Zittell, wife of New York Mail drama critic (and later Tanguay's manager) C. Florian Zittell, suspected her husband was carrying on a sexual liaison with Tanguay. Mrs. Zittell hired two private detectives to investigate the matter. The private eyes dressed themselves as bellhops in order to gain entry to Tanguay's room, whereupon they discovered Florian and Eva in carnal embrace. The Cleveland News wrote that the sleuths-cum-bellhops "found [Mr.] Zittell in pajamas and Miss Tanguay even more

¹²⁹ "Eva Tanguay Marries." New York Times, 25 November 1913, 3:7.

¹³⁰ "Eva Tanguay Alone Now." New York Times, 14 May 1915, 11:6; "Eva Tanguay Divorces J.W. Ford." New York Times, 20 December 1917, 9:2.

¹³¹ Gilbert, 330.

scantily clad than she has ever appeared in any of her stage productions."¹³² It is almost as if such behavior were expected of Tanguay.

The affair did not cause a black cloud of scandal to hang over Tanguay. Nearly the opposite. Less than a year later, a record number of people—some 25,000—packed the Brighton Beach Music Hall to see the comedienne during her week-long engagement. She also filled Keith & Proctor's Fifth Avenue with a record 1,783 audience members the same month.¹³³ It is likely that Eva Tanguay avoided scandal because she never tried to create an image of virtuousness for herself, eschewing the dominant ideal of "feminine purity"¹³⁴ (in Ann Douglas's words) that was common to Victorian, and even post-Victorian America. She was a woman who looked to the future, rather than the past, for her paradigm. Accordingly, audiences, who were beginning to read the image of popular performers through their offstage personas,¹³⁵ grew fascinated rather than disgusted.

Though her marriage to Johnny Ford was less than a model relationship, it was by far the best of the three marriages to which Eva Tanguay was party. Sometime in late 1910s or early 1920s, she reportedly married a fellow vaudevillian named Roscoe Ails. There is little information on this union, its very existence mentioned only in Tanguay's obituary in Variety and the New York Times (and it seems probable that the Times

¹³² "Eva Tanguay is Named By Wife as Correspondent," Cleveland News, 29 September 1907. No page number given. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

¹³³ "Eva Tanguay Sets New Mark," Morning Telegraph, 26 July 1908. No page number given. From a clipping file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

¹³⁴ Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 5.

¹³⁵ See: Richard deCordova, Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America, (Urbana, Illinois, and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

merely copied Variety).¹³⁶ Since Tanguay fails to mention in it the American Weekly serial, it is possible there was never such a marriage at all.

In July, 1926, Eva Tanguay wed for the third and final time, to a pianist named Alexander Boone. But several months later, Tanguay sought an annulment, claiming that, among other things, Boone “did not use his true name when marrying the actress and deceived her in other ways.” In fact, charged Tanguay, Boone had also gone by the names Allen Parado (or Parada, depending on which account one reads) and Chandas Ksiaziewicz.¹³⁷ As with her marriage to Ford, Tanguay appears once again to have made a poor and hasty decision; but then it does not seem that choosing a proper husband was ever very high on Eva Tanguay’s list of priorities. “My marriage to Parada, like the first one, turned out to be a mistake, as I learned all too soon... In two months I got a divorce and went on my way again—alone.”¹³⁸ Tanguay put more attention and greater focus into the creation of her costumes and the fine print in her contracts than into her nuptial choices.

Of all of Eva Tanguay’s romantic and quasi-romantic entanglements, one more than any other seems to have a profound effect upon the actress, and may have trained her early on not to rely on men for either emotional or financial security. Sometime early in her vaudeville career, Tanguay, playing New York, went to her dressing room to find flowers and a card waiting for her. “Dear Miss Tanguay,” read the card. “This is my first visit to New York City. I was fortunate enough to see your performance. I am only a wanderer but at present fascinated to the extreme and desire your presence at dinner. I have no motive only to sit with you. Will you see me tomorrow at 6:30 at the Astor

¹³⁶ “Eva Tanguay Dies in Hollywood, 68”; Ed Barry, “Eva Tanguay—‘I Don’t Care Girl’—Slips Away, Taking an Era With Her,” Variety, 15 January 1947, 48.

¹³⁷ “Eva Tanguay Seeks Marriage Annulment,” New York Times, 9 October 1927, 13; “Eva Tanguay Gets Divorce,” New York Times, 22 October 1927, 2:5.

¹³⁸ Tanguay, 26 January 1947, 7.

Hotel?" Tanguay agreed to meet "the wanderer" and seems to have fallen for him almost from the start, describing him many years later as "my Prince Charming... tall, a six-footer, with fine hair, beautiful teeth, elegantly groomed."¹³⁹

Though Tanguay sought some kind of romantic relationship with "the wanderer" (she never reveals his name) it did not come to pass. Still, the two grew close over the next few months and Tanguay kept her hopes alive. "He began showing me every attention. He certainly knew the way to a woman's heart. More and more I began to feel that he was indispensable in my life... His technique was perfect."¹⁴⁰ Despite the lack of a romantic union, the Wanderer announced one day that he would leave his job and accompany Tanguay on her vaudeville tour. "My companion sort of took over the functions of manager for me. I received every possible attention from him, but still no love. He was sweet but he was distant." Soon, the Wanderer was handling all of Tanguay's expenses and he eventually "went on the payroll."¹⁴¹

In time, though Eva Tanguay and the Wanderer were still not romantically linked, their friendship began to take on the hallmarks of what might today be referred to as an "abusive relationship." Once, when Tanguay struck up a conversation with a fellow actor in a bar on a cruise ship, the Wanderer became "livid with rage" and shouted at the comedienne. "Understand this... you are not to talk to anyone else. You belong to me." Shortly after this event, their relationship began to unravel, as Tanguay realized what kind of a man she had become attached to. The Wanderer, it turned out, was using Tanguay's money to ferry another woman from city to city with him as he traveled. "I was footing the bill," Tanguay later wrote. Tanguay also implies that the Wanderer may have stolen cash and some \$40,000 worth of diamonds from her

¹³⁹ Eva Tanguay, "I Don't Care," *American Weekly*, 5 January 1947, 17.

¹⁴⁰ Eva Tanguay, "I Don't Care," *American Weekly*, 12 January 1947, 6-7.

¹⁴¹ Tanguay, 12 January 1947, 7.

apartment.¹⁴² The subtext is that her involvement with the Wanderer, despite its technically platonic status, forewarned her about attachments to men. The men she did choose to marry were financially and, in terms of power and popularity, her inferiors. In any case, she never seems to have considered staying with any of them for very long.

On the stage, Tanguay challenged and mocked at marriage as well. In 1908, she sang a song called "That Wouldn't Make a Hit With Me." She sang:

When you marry some old guy
Who hasn't the decency to die,
Or you marry some old pill
Who can neither cure nor kill,
That wouldn't make a hit with me.

Though sung with "charming naivete,"¹⁴³ according to Variety, Tanguay was shedding a new light on marriage—a humorous, cynical take that had been strictly the province of male comics in vaudeville until that time. Some nostalgic onlookers tried to argue that even when "mauled and pawed over" in the "ditties of vaudeville," a certain "dignity clings" to the ideas of motherhood and marriage nonetheless.¹⁴⁴ But Tanguay's raw words proffered no such dignity; instead, they forced audience members to distance themselves, if comically, from the central institution of culture, legal wedlock.

In treating marriage lightly, both in her personal life and in her vaudeville act, Eva Tanguay was pressing one of the social hot buttons of the day. There were those who saw marriage as an endangered species—endangered largely by women like Tanguay, who seemed selfish and slightly reckless. Wrote the Westminster Review:

¹⁴² Tanguay, 12 January 1947, 7.

¹⁴³ Variety, 30 May 1908, 14.

¹⁴⁴ "The Absurd Sex," The Bookman, September 1912, 59.

The Twentieth Century, in a few years, has upset the whole cult of woman, the angel wife and mother, substituted for spiritual love the frankly erotic instinct, brought into fashion a half-humorous barbarism, and generally set itself to smash all its parents' household furniture. The words formerly used in connection with sex are now obsolete, and anyone who talked of modesty or delicacy or tenderness or spirituality or purity, would provoke a smile at once, and would be set down as a grandmotherly prig... Woman is now the hunter, man is her game.¹⁴⁵

Few individuals embodied the “frankly erotic instinct” and eschewed “modesty or delicacy” more completely than Eva Tanguay. She was indeed the hunter in her married relationships, though the prey turned out to be less than prize possessions.

Some began to notice that not only were women's needs and desires changing in regard to marriage, but many were choosing to go through life altogether unmarried—as, in effect, Tanguay had decided to do. An article in Popular Science Monthly, on “The Celibate Women of To-Day,” attributed what it saw as a growing phenomenon to woman's increasingly selfish wants and needs: “With our enormous number of unattached men, it would be foolish to imagine that the great majority of single women in America could not marry if they wanted to do so... Why do so many woman elect to walk through life alone?” The author concluded that women

have ceased to be merely ‘the sex’; they have become individuals. Under simpler conditions of life, such as prevailed in our colonial period, if a woman found a man of her race, religion and social position, who was personally agreeable to her, little more was necessary to insure a happy marriage. But now a woman seeks fulfillment not only for her personal liking, but for all the qualities of her varied personal life. She has not only racial, religious and social interests, but she has an intelligent attitude towards the whole of life; she has musical, dramatic or literary tastes; she is interested in social justice or in the vested interests of caste; she cares for travel or she desires a quiet home; and in a hundred other directions she is an individual. Such a complex individuality does not easily find its complement.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ “The New Sex Psychology,” Westminster Review, November 1909, 501-02.

¹⁴⁶ Earl Barnes, “The Celibate Women of To-day,” Popular Science Monthly, June 1915, 551-52.

In other words, in living a life more fully defined outside of the home, individualist women of the day were having a harder time building the home relationship at all. In addition, they had to “give up a salary” and sought typically to accept only a mate of “superior intelligence.”¹⁴⁷

Others saw women like Tanguay as specifically unmarriageable due to their heated pursuit of professional and artistic goals. “The born artist puts her passionate appreciation of the elemental instincts into tangible form, and often by doing so gets rid of them from her daily life,” wrote Juliet Wilbor Tompkins in *Cosmopolitan* in 1907. In Tompkins’s estimation, a woman had simply just so much psychic energy to expend in her life. Should she choose to spend it on creative pursuits, it would be in low reserve, or completely used up, when it came to romantic matters. “A woman is endowed with just so much fuel; she may use it for a burnt offering to love and maternity, or she may devote it to the productive processes of her art.”¹⁴⁸ A woman like Tanguay, in devoting so much energy and effort to her art had clearly to forgo any meaningful wife/mother relationships for want of “fuel.” Though this might be the simple thermochemical calculus underlying love, Tompkins goes on to imply that a woman who chose art over love, as Tanguay in effect did, would sooner or later realize she had made a mistake. “Part of her very zest in freedom has been an unrealized sense that marriage is there just beside her if choose to turn; that she has left the door propped open. Let her one day turn and see—perhaps through the mirror—that the door has blown shut, and she has come to the end of her first period, the period of joy and ignorance, wherein she rode her career as a charger.”¹⁴⁹ Thus, the illusion of choice was simply that, an illusion, and one that would surely eventuate in unhappiness. Famed psychologist Havelock Ellis saw the

¹⁴⁷ Barnes, 552.

¹⁴⁸ Juliet Wilbor Tompkins, “Why Women Don’t Marry,” *Cosmopolitan*, February 1907, 470-71.

individual of remarkable talent or “genius” as perforce unmarriageable. “Such ability,” he wrote in an Atlantic Monthly article entitled “The Mind of Woman,” “involved a radically different temperament, for it means seeing the world from a different angle from other people and feeling it with a different sensibility. Such a person is necessarily solitary.”¹⁵⁰

Some saw the modern woman, caught between the proprietary marriages of yesterday and the choice-driven, companionate marriages of today, as doomed to failure in wedlock. Speaking of the modern woman, Rafford Pike (who, the reader may recall, had argued a year earlier against womanly awkwardness) wrote, “They hate the social order as it is, since it has brought them only disappointment and disgust. Hence they cry out loudly against marriage and against the ‘man-made’ laws and customs which have made the marriage-relation mean the merging of a woman’s separate life and interests in her husband’s.” Accordingly, Pike argued, “the great majority of women are neither happy in their wedded life nor yet unhappy. They have failed most wretchedly, yet they are not aware of it.”¹⁵¹ Eva Tanguay may have been like the women of her day in being aware of the shortcomings of the married state. However, her celebrity, wealth, and itinerant life-style afforded her an opportunity that most married women did not have, the opportunity to live alone and play at a palette of lovers.

Even women who chose marriage early and firmly as the way to expend their “fuel” came under fire from certain social critics and observers of the day. One writer, Mrs. Amelia E. Barr, writing for the North American Review, went so far as to suggest that many women married simply to engage in abundant, if safe, flirtation with other men. Wrote Barr:

¹⁴⁹ Tompkins, 469.

¹⁵⁰ Havelock Ellis, “The Mind of Woman,” Atlantic Monthly, September 1916, 367.

¹⁵¹ Rafford Pike, “The Woman’s Side,” Cosmopolitan, July 1902, 326.

If some good and thoughtful woman who died fifty years ago could return to this world, what in our present life would most astonish her? Would it be the wonders of steam, electricity, and science; the tyranny of the working classes, or the autocracy of servants? No! It would be the amazing development of her own sex—the preaching lecturing, political women; the women who are doctors and lawyers; who lose and win money on horses, or in stocks and real estate; the women who talk slang, and think it an accomplishment; who imitate men's attire and manners; who do their athletic exercises in public; *and, perhaps more astonishing than all, the women who make marriage the cloak for much profitable post-nuptial flirtation.* (italics mine)¹⁵²

With flirtation the main thing on most brides' minds, Barr saw the virtuous marriage as a thing of the past. "Can married women preserve their delicacy of thought and their nobleness of manner; can they be truly loyal to their husbands and to themselves throughout the different phases of a recognized flirtation? It is an impossible thing." For Barr and others like her, many modern women were conducting a kind of guerilla warfare. Safely in the social cloak of marriage, the modern bride wanted nothing more than to seek quasi-sexual thrills in flirtation with strange men. The new bride was defining her sexuality by the way that dozens, perhaps hundreds, of men reacted to her flirtations. For Eva Tanguay, such activity was carried out largely onstage, rather than in some private, supra-nuptial sphere.

If Tanguay ultimately resisted marriage, it may also have been due to a deep desire to resist motherhood, perforce the complement of wifedom at the turn of the century. Not only did Tanguay perhaps feel that her lifestyle unsuited her to motherhood, but it is likely that others would have felt this way as well. "No woman who is soon to become a mother should be allowed to work, and all women should be given three days continuous rest each month," wrote social theorist Robert Hunter in Cosmopolitan in 1905.¹⁵³ Such a prescription was not possible for Eva Tanguay, who

¹⁵² Amelia E. Barr, "Flirting Wives," North American Review, January 1893, 69-70.

¹⁵³ Robert Hunter, "Burdens Borne by Women," Cosmopolitan, December 1905, 162.

performed pretty much until her body began to fail (which, as we will see, it did quite young).

But to some women, Tanguay must have been an icon of hope, a living example of a woman who had freed herself from the traditional cultural bonds of matrimony and motherhood, choosing instead a life of glamour, wealth, and freely-chosen sexual liaisons. Her persona onstage and off must have seemed exciting to those American women who felt trapped in their marriages and ensnared by the cultural demands of motherhood. "Deep in my soul was a bitter resentment toward God for having made me a woman," wrote an anonymous diarist in the Ladies' Home Journal in an article entitled, "What Being a Woman Has Meant to Me." As she felt herself bound in by the exigencies of matrimony and motherhood, and looked at teenage girls playing together outside her window, the diarist identified "an awful sinking of the heart, and [I] knew distinctly, without equivocation, that I wanted to be out in front there with those happy, light-hearted youngsters. The baby cried and cried."¹⁵⁴ In her own way, Eva Tanguay, especially onstage, seemed forever to give off the air of a light-hearted youngster. Though inside she was often wracked with feelings of depression and worry, her outer façade must have seemed to many a tantalizing alternative to conventional life. In rejecting the traditional role of woman as wife and mother, Tanguay was thus seen as rejecting the responsibilities of adulthood. Some at the time believed this fitting. "[T]he feminine mind seems hardly to get beyond the stage of adolescence" wrote Margaret Ladd Franklin in The Nation in 1913.¹⁵⁵ Eva Tanguay thus not only embodied, but in fact celebrated the inherently adolescent nature of woman, both onstage and off. "She likes and dislikes by flashes—with the acute sensibilities of a child," wrote the New

¹⁵⁴ "What Being A Woman Has Meant to Me," Ladies' Home Journal, September 1908, 10.

¹⁵⁵ Margaret Ladd Franklin, "Woman's Mind," Nation, 27 February 1913, 202.

York Dramatic Mirror of Eva Tanguay in 1915,¹⁵⁶ just one of many organs of discourse that further accused Tanguay of an inherent immaturity. In any case, her off-stage choices and behaviors were of her own making, adhering only to the strictures of culture rather than the dictates of her male producers, Keith, Albee, Beck, and the like.

Even as she indulged in fleeting or failed romantic attachments, Tanguay's popularity continued to grow. In 1908, just before the smashing popularity of her *Salome* turn, Eva Tanguay was voted the second most popular act in vaudeville, drawing 6,083 votes in a poll taken among patrons of Percy Williams's Colonial Theatre—not far behind winner Irene Franklin (with 7,414 votes), but way ahead of third place contestant Alice Lloyd, who garnered only 2,948 votes.¹⁵⁷ By 1911, Tanguay had become the most popular act in vaudeville, however. That year, Williams awarded a diamond medal to Tanguay in recognition of her status as “the greatest box office attraction” at his theatre, beating out not just women, like Valeska Suratt, but a number of men, including Nat Goodwin.¹⁵⁸

Perhaps the greatest measure of Tanguay's success, though, was the number of Tanguay imitators—performers who made their living simply aping or burlesquing Eva Tanguay's act—that began springing up around 1909-10. Bessie Browning, who began making a name for herself as a Tanguay copy was recognized as one of the stronger entries in this unusual category. “Tanguay is so often imitated,” noted the New York Clipper (indicating the size of the Tanguay copy wave), “and usually so badly done, that it is a relief to see a good imitation of the ‘whirlwind’ every once in a while.”¹⁵⁹ The New York Dramatic Mirror, though, considered Billie Seaton “Eva Tanguay's ‘best little

¹⁵⁶ Frederick James Smith, “‘I Do Care!’ Says Eva Tanguay,” New York Dramatic Mirror, 27 January 1915, 30.

¹⁵⁷ Variety, 9 May 1908, 7.

¹⁵⁸ “Eva Tanguay Winds a Medal,” New York Times, 13 February 1911, 7:4.

¹⁵⁹ New York Clipper, 12 June 1909, 437.

imitator.”” and lauded Seaton for “the merits of her costumes (or lack of them)... the startling gownlessness of her costume” and her “risqué” musical numbers.¹⁶⁰ In order to copy Tanguay—ultimately, an impossible task—one had to reveal one’s body and tint one’s song lyrics toward the blue. William J. Gane, manager of a theatre that employed Seaton, felt that paying the Tanguay imitator to appear made simple economic sense. “I cannot afford to engage Miss Tanguay at our prices of admission,” Gane told Variety, “so I have signed Billie Seaton for a run. She pleases my audiences immensely, and has proven a drawing card. I think the girl is a great mimic, so I bought her costumes like those Tanguay wears.”¹⁶¹

Men too got in on the Tanguay facsimile wave. In July, 1910, the New York Dramatic Mirror reported on Harry Breen, at Keith & Proctor’s Fifth Avenue, “who calls himself the male Eva Tanguay.”¹⁶² If there were money to be made in looking or sounding like Tanguay, men as well as women wanted in on it. Several years later, Gaby Deslys created an act based on Tanguay’s trademark tune, “I Don’t Care.”¹⁶³

For her part, Tanguay did not always see the flattery in copy acts. In fact, she viewed them as legally infringing on her economic livelihood, an understandable fear given the mass-market competitiveness of the vaudeville business and many stars’ interchangeability (though this was less of a threat to Eva Tanguay, the ultimate individualist). “Authors of books are protected; why not an originator of his or her line of work?” opined Tanguay. “Night and day, I plan and worry and pay out most of what I earn only to have it stolen by *imitators*. There is no protection against an imitator and they know it, so they pick the artistes who have the best material, steal it, then call their

¹⁶⁰ New York Dramatic Mirror, 19 March 1910, 21.

¹⁶¹ “Eva Tanguay on ‘Imitators,’” Variety, 6 March 1909, 5.

¹⁶² New York Dramatic Mirror, 16 July 1910, 17.

¹⁶³ Variety, 13 September 1913, 26.

act an imitation. It is impossible to imitate me, for my work depends upon my mood. I could not imitate myself, for I do not know my points, and always working naturally. I leave all to my condition." Tanguay estimated that each of her songs costs "from fifty to one hundred dollars" and that it took "hours of thought to design a costume, and to plan six or seven means brain work."⁶⁴ Though her words are tinged with hyperbole and the absurd, they nonetheless reveal a keen sensitivity to the emerging mass-market economics of entertainment. Few vaudeville performers established their bodies as being as unique and individuated as Tanguay did; yet, at the same time, few were so consistently copied.

For this reason, among others, Eva Tanguay took out lavish advertisements in the theatrical trade papers of the day, from time to time, to reassert her individuality, unique drawing power, and unrivaled success. "Eva Tanguay in justice to herself, offers the following" read the headline of a banner advertisement in *Variety* in 1915. In the ad, Tanguay pointed out that she had been called "The Girl Who Made Vaudeville Famous," and a number of other appellations, including, "The Genius of Mirth and Song"; "America's Champion Comedienne"; "The Girl Who the Whole World Loves"; "Vaudeville's Greatest"; and "The One Best Bet." In addition, the advertisement proclaimed:

Eva Tanguay is the only vaudeville attraction who ever remained in New York City for three years, playing vaudeville all of that time, without leaving this city for an engagement...

Eva Tanguay can claim that her clothes, from gowns to shows, slippers, gloves and tights, are distinctive and replaced more often than has been done by any other woman who ever appeared upon the stage...

⁶⁴ "Eva Tanguay on 'Imitators.'"

Eva Tanguay has drawn more people into vaudeville theatres who were never in them before, and if they remained patrons of vaudeville thereafter, that was a benefit contributed by Eva Tanguay...¹⁶⁵

Her hubris may be forgiven if one recognizes that Eva Tanguay was merely a product in a competitive, consumer marketplace, and that she was fully aware of this fact. Looked at in this light, one can almost view her advertisements as promotions of the brand "Eva Tanguay," a unique body in a mass market that relied on some measure of predictability.

There is, of course, little evidence that Eva Tanguay ever suffered any kind of economic setback at the hands of imitators. As her career grew, so did her personal fortune. At the height of her career she spared herself no expense, luxury, or personal comfort. "In New York," she wrote, "I lived in a 13-room apartment at 116th Street and Morningside Drive. The furnishings were the last word in elegance. One room was decorated with red velour drapes that covered the walls. There was a 14-foot tiger skin rug. In my bedroom with its lavender drapes and gilt furniture there was a little fountain, water playing through blue and amber lights."¹⁶⁶ Following her marriage to John Ford, Tanguay bought "a home in Sea Gate [Brooklyn, presumably] for \$40,000. We had to have two cars. I always was extravagant about automobiles. When I got tired of one, and that was often, I gave it all away and bought another. I never thought of selling one. Then we had to have a boat."¹⁶⁷ In her heyday, Tanguay was famous for carrying "nothing smaller than \$1000 bills" which she would peel off unthinkingly to calm a stir she had caused or reward some especially loyal cohort.¹⁶⁸

Such behavior may seem endearing or eccentric to us now, but in her day it was potentially transgressive. In criticizing "the wild woman as social insurgents," the

¹⁶⁵ *Variety*, 1 January 1915, 22-23.

¹⁶⁶ Tanguay, 12 January 1947, 6.

¹⁶⁷ Tanguay, 26 January 1947, 6.

Nineteenth Century derided females like Tanguay: "As a rule, these women have no scruples about money. They are notorious for never having small change," wrote Mrs. Lynn Linton.¹⁶⁹ In turn-of-the-century America, women were expected to be frugal and economical, to pay careful attention to what things cost and how to get the best deal, especially when purchasing items for the home. Wrote Ida Tarbell, in "The Business of Being a Woman" in the American Magazine in 1912:

Her concern is with retail prices. If she does her work intelligently she knows the why of every fluctuation of price in standards. She also knows whether she is receiving the proper quality and quantity...¹⁷⁰

Few women of Tanguay's day paid so little attention to the minutiae of price fluctuations as did Eva Tanguay. Her concern was with living large, spending lavishly, and picking up the pieces later. One newspaper reported that Tanguay has "once owned and lost 14 houses" in her day.¹⁷¹

For all her wealth—and life narratives like Tanguay's always seem to end this way—Tanguay settled into near poverty in her September years. Observers estimated that she lost the bulk of her \$2 million personal fortune in the stock market crash of 1929.¹⁷² In early 1930—having resettled to Los Angeles by this time—Tanguay was forced to sell "her \$45,000 home on Toluca Lake and its \$50,000 worth of furnishings and objets d'art." Auctioneers Netzel & Netzel Studios handled the sale of items, including several of her silk costumes, that once bejeweled her spacious ten-room

¹⁶⁸ "Tanguay Flashed \$1000 Bills at Her Peak; Left \$500," Los Angeles Examiner, 24 January 1947. No page number available. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

¹⁶⁹ Linton, 601.

¹⁷⁰ Ida Tarbell, "The Business of Being a Woman," American Magazine, March 1912, 565.

¹⁷¹ James Murray, "Eva Tanguay, 67 Today, Ill, Almost Blind," Los Angeles Examiner, 1 August 1946. No page number given. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

¹⁷² "Eva Tanguay Dies in Hollywood, 68."

abode.¹⁷³ Another report valued Tanguay's possessions at closer to \$100,000.¹⁷⁴ In the end, she died with a mere \$500 in "personal effects" to her name and no will.¹⁷⁵

Shortly after her economic losses of 1929, and no doubt feeling the need for additional income, Tanguay planned a stage comeback, a "one woman show with a band."¹⁷⁶ Convalescing from one of her many illnesses at her modest new home in a small Los Angeles apartment complex, Tanguay declared that a "New York capitalist" had agreed to back her. "As soon as I have recovered, I am going to New York to do a 'one-woman show.' I'll use the best songs in my repertoire, and, believe me, I'll try to 'panic 'em,' just to show how grateful I am that I'm alive and well!"¹⁷⁷

But Tanguay was far from "well." The body that had carried her around the stage in many a cyclonic frenzy, the body that she had claimed so potently as her own, was beginning to fail. "Age overtook her with the rapidity of a sword thrust," wrote the Los Angeles Examiner.¹⁷⁸ Vaudeville and the age of performers like Tanguay was ailing as well, the prognosis poor. In fact, the deterioration of Tanguay's physical and mental self seems to have perfectly symbolized the decay of the era that gave her success and wealth.

Her physical troubles began in the early 1920s, as her stage career—and vaudeville itself—was also slipping into a weakened state. In December, 1924, Tanguay

¹⁷³ Los Angeles Times, 21 February 1930. No title or page number available. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

¹⁷⁴ "Eva Tanguay Sells Home Furnishings," Los Angeles Examiner, 26 February 1930. No page number given. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

¹⁷⁵ "Eva Tanguay Left \$500," New York Times, 24 January 1947, 16:2.

¹⁷⁶ "Eva Tanguay to Return to Stage," New York Times, 2 February 1933, 21:4.

¹⁷⁷ "Eva Tanguay, Better, Pland Big Comeback," Los Angeles Examiner, 23 October 1932. No page number given. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

¹⁷⁸ Murray.

had to cancel several engagements in Providence due to the grip. "It was the first time in her career," reported the New York Times, "that she had been compelled to quit the stage because of her illness."¹⁷⁹ It would not be the last. Of course, it would be increasingly unnecessary for Tanguay to blame her failing career on her failing health, for vaudeville was already past its heyday, as Tanguay was past hers. She convalesced at the Hotel Embassy in New York, but appears never to have fully shaken her malady. The following year, she developed "an abscess in the throat" which affected her ability to sing.¹⁸⁰

In 1930, Tanguay fell "very ill" following a seizure at the El Fey Club, at which she was appearing, in New York City.¹⁸¹ Though she recovered temporarily,¹⁸² she again took sick, this time more deeply and intractably. A number of blood transfusions seemed to bring her back to the brink of recovery, but this bromide was short-lived, as Tanguay slipped to the edge of death.¹⁸³ At this point, most the people close to Tanguay figured she was going to die and began sending "flowers to the little bungalow where she lies near death."¹⁸⁴ Said Tanguay's sister, "She is suffering from a complication of Bright's disease [a kidney disorder], rheumatism and a heart affliction." With little or no money

¹⁷⁹ "Eva Tanguay Has the Grip," New York Times, 24 December 1924, 10:1.

¹⁸⁰ "Eva Tanguay Convalescing," New York Times, 26 December 1924, 15:4; "Eva Tanguay Not Seriously Ill," New York Times, 31 May 1925, 24:3.

¹⁸¹ "Eva Tanguay Very Ill," New York Times, 30 May 1925, 5:3.

¹⁸² "Eva Tanguay Out of Danger," New York Times, 2 September 1932, 18:5.

¹⁸³ "Eva Tanguay Suffers Relapse," New York Times, 8 September 1932, 17:5; "Miss Tanguay Out of Danger," Los Angeles Times, 1 September 1932. No page number given. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

¹⁸⁴ "Old Comrades Flock to Aid Eva Tanguay," Los Angeles Examiner, 28 August 1932. No page number given. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

to pay for her treatment, a number of theatre magnates and stars, including impresario Sid Grauman, took care of Tanguay's medical expenses.¹⁸⁵

Tanguay had also been battling failing eyesight for a number years. This, perhaps more than any other single physical ill, spelled the end of her career. "My eyes grew dimmer," wrote Tanguay. "The specialists finally told me that cataracts were growing over both eyes. I tried to go on. The day came when it became necessary for the managers to put a red bulb in the center of the footlights to guide me to the center of the stage. One day in Baltimore I stepped off the edge of the stage and fell into a bass drum."¹⁸⁶ By 1933, she was "fighting near blindness and came very close to losing an eye altogether."¹⁸⁷ Perhaps because her visual appeal—and a live performer's simple need to see—were so central to her stage act, Tanguay's eye ailments seem to have struck the deepest emotional chord of any of her bodily malfunctions. Upon recovering much of her eyesight in 1934, she declared, "I'd like to make enough money to endow a hospital to treat the sightless eyes of children."¹⁸⁸ This, of course, was pure fancy, as Tanguay had barely the funds to see to her own medical care, much less endow a hospital. In fact, Sophie Tucker had paid for Tanguay's eye operations.¹⁸⁹

Though Tanguay claimed she could now "see perfectly,"¹⁹⁰ her condition continued to deteriorate, and by 1938 she was again being written off as near death. "I'm afraid her case must be termed hopeless," said her physician, Dr. Wendell Starr. For her

¹⁸⁵ "Stage Idol's Old Friends Rush to Aid," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 18 September 1932. No page number given. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

¹⁸⁶ Tanguay, 26 January 1947, 7.

¹⁸⁷ "Eva Tanguay Saves Eye," *New York Times*, 20 May 1933, 11:3.

¹⁸⁸ "Eva Tanguay Plans to Return to Aid Blind," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 9 April 1934. No page number given. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

¹⁸⁹ Barry, 48.

¹⁹⁰ "Eva Tanguay Recovers," *New York Times*, 12 May 1934, 12:6.

part, Tanguay seemed resigned to death, perhaps because she knew a comeback was impossible and had no immediate family for which to live. "My life has been a full one," she whispered to a friend, amidst blood transfusions and intravenous injections. "It's all right. The end has to come to every one some time."¹⁹¹

Still, Tanguay held on, somehow, for eight more years. By late 1946, however, she was truly at death's door. "Bed-ridden, near blind, unable to use her hands or feet because of an arthritic condition, the once famous comedienne will see no one," reported the Los Angeles Examiner. "Everything is shadowy now..." she told a rare visitor. On January 11, 1947, shadow turned to darkness and Eva Tanguay passed on, despite some twenty-six blood transfusions.¹⁹² "Death was probably due to a heart attack and cerebral hemorrhage" said her physician, the appropriately named Dr. Starr.¹⁹³ Some 500 people showed up at Tanguay's funeral, including several of Tanguay's peers from vaudeville (though many had themselves passed on), such as Trixie Friganza. "Eva Tanguay's Funeral Draws Stage Star 'S.R.O.'"¹⁹⁴ read a headline in the Los Angeles Examiner.

For all her physical ills, though, Eva Tanguay seems to have been equally troubled psychologically throughout her life. In late 1908, following the success of her Salome act, Tanguay reportedly suffered a "nervous breakdown."¹⁹⁵ It was not to be her first. In the early 1930s, Tanguay repaired to the famous Hot Springs, Arkansas spa

¹⁹¹ "Eva Tanguay Failing," New York Times, 11 December 1938, 4:2.

¹⁹² Barry, 46; "Eva Tanguay, of 'I Don't Care' Fame, Dies at 68."

¹⁹³ "Death Takes Eva Tanguay," Los Angeles Examiner, 12 January 1947. No page number given. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

¹⁹⁴ "Eva Tanguay's Funeral Draws Stage Star 'S.R.O.'," Los Angeles Examiner. No page number or date given. From a clipping file in the Southern California Regional History Office, University of Southern California.

¹⁹⁵ New York Dramatic Mirror, 28 November 1908, 17.

having recently “suffered a nervous breakdown” among her other health problems as well.¹⁹⁶

Though on stage Tanguay played the part of the madcap, bellowing “I Don’t Care” to the back of the house, she sometimes confided that she felt quite differently on the inside. “I am supposed to be a heedless, foolish, joyous, capricious minx, girl or woman, girl or minx, just as you like, with no more heart than a stone, no more feeling than an electric sign and no more serious than a moth... Fiction—all fiction... I never go a day without a good cry,” she told a journalist in 1919.¹⁹⁷ In a similar vein, she told The Theatre magazine in 1913, “I never cried when I was a little girl... yet I’m not the happiest of mortals... I’m not quite happy in my mind.”¹⁹⁸ The New York Dramatic Mirror described Tanguay as moody and mercurial. “She likes, dislikes, by flashes—with the acute sensibilities of a child,” noted the paper.¹⁹⁹ It is as if Tanguay’s trademark childishness, which served her so well in public life, had its genesis in some dysfunction of the mind. That, at any rate, is what we are led to believe.

The necessity of appearing as whimsical and carefree offstage as on must have taken its toll on Eva Tanguay. She had to continually sell herself as a product associated with whimsy and light-heartedness; at the same time, she was a woman with problems and ills of her own. The pressure to keep up appearances must only have added to any depression, anxiety, or other psychological frailties to which she may have been naturally disposed.

¹⁹⁶ “Eva Tanguay Taking Cure,” New York Times, 24 December 1932, 10:3.

¹⁹⁷ Unattributed newspaper clipping from the Robinson Locke Collection, series 2, volume 297, page 158, 2 February 1919. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

¹⁹⁸ Kitchen, 143.

¹⁹⁹ Frederick James Smith, “‘I Do Care!’ Says Eva Tanguay,” New York Dramatic Mirror, 27 January 1915, 30.

For all that, we might still look upon Eva Tanguay as a remarkable figure, one who personified the social and sexual struggles of her day, and yet broke new ground on both these fronts. As a performer, she had no peer. She helped make vaudeville the massively popular, mass-market phenomenon that it was. She profited from the sexual liberalization of the female body authorized by the vaudeville magnates and effected by the performers described in the previous chapters. She grew out of, and responded to, her particular moment in history. She rode the wave of, and yet helped define, the first form of mass entertainment in American history. Accordingly, when the amusement with which she was so closely identified began to fade from the American scene, so too had she to. In the intervening years, her existence was not only overlooked but even in part erased by the record of culture. This chapter has been a modest attempt to reconstruct her story in its social context; other attempts are surely needed.

Conclusion:

“Signals of Distress”: Film and the Fall of Vaudeville

For all its fanfare and popularity, for all the high salaries paid to stars like Eva Tanguay and Annette Kellerman, and for all the luxuriously appointed theatres erected by Keith, Proctor, and their peers, the vaudeville era did not end up lasting very long in America. Vaudeville emerged from the concert saloon, burlesque hall, and dime museums of the 1880s, drawing on preexisting forms of variety entertainment which, it could be argued, date back as far as Greco-Roman antiquity—in spirit anyway. By the 1890s, though, it had taken on a shape all its own and quickly coalesced into a corporate-controlled, centrally managed, standardized form of mass amusement—the first true form of mass entertainment in the United States.

By 1898, vaudeville was achieving mass entertainment status in part by drawing its crowds from across class lines in the urban sphere. The “upper circle of New York society,” wrote the New York Dramatic Mirror in early 1898, were going to vaudeville “with a vengeance.”¹ As the century turned, vaudeville gained steam, attracting larger crowds to an increasing number of theatres. “Not since the commencement of the vaudeville craze has there been such activity in this field as at the present time... the demand for new attractions is at its height,” wrote the Mirror in the summer of 1902.² Two years later, the same publication observed simply, “The Public are vaudeville mad.”³

Nothing seemed to stop the growth of vaudeville. The oligarchic handful of corporations that controlled the massively popular form of amusement saw no end to the

¹ New York Dramatic Mirror, 8 February 1898, 18.

² New York Dramatic Mirror, 23 August 1902, 16.

³ New York Dramatic Mirror, 17 January 1904, 17.

extension of their franchise. Wherever there was a city—or a town that acted like a city—there was the potential to build a profitable vaudeville theatre. And once one player landed in a territory, others followed. “The present indications are that no town or city of importance at the opening of the season 1906-1907 will be left uncovered by the vaudeville magnates... The United States will be thoroughly vaudevillized very soon.” wrote the trade paper Variety.⁴ Even such a lesser metropolis as Cincinnati was deemed “vaudeville mad,” according to the New York Clipper.⁵

Yet the rage did not last. By 1914, the urban public was beginning to draw away from the entertainment to which it had once flocked. In that year, Keith’s New York houses finished in the red, losing between \$100,000 and \$150,000, according to Variety. To fight the trend, the vaudeville lords did what they knew best: attempted to put acts that were ever novel on the boards. An act called “Hanged,” which simulated an execution, was staged in May of 1914. Critics, who had cheerfully smirked at the nudity and suggestiveness vaudeville offered, found nothing redeeming in “Hanged.” One reviewer found it “sordid and morbid... gruesome... repellant.”⁶ Vaudeville must have begun to seem decadent rather than simply indecorous and pandering rather than simply titillating.

The downward spiral continued. It was as if vaudeville had risen quickly to prominence, shone brightly, and then burned out its store of fuel. Perhaps it is impossible to expect longevity of a form of entertainment that relied on so much novelty, so many live bodies, and, ultimately, such generic standardization. But the fact is that the vaudeville magnates had found a formula that had served them well, at least

⁴ Variety, 10 March 1906, 4.

⁵ New York Clipper, 27 November 1909, 1058.

⁶ Variety, 22 May 1914, 3.

for a while. Now, however, that formula was beginning to turn on its creators. Wrote the New York Clipper in 1914:

Vaudeville *is not what it used to be*. Houses here and there in particularly favorable localities continue to pack 'em in, *but the great majority of continuous houses are flying the signal of distress...* hard-pressed to find attractions and harder pressed for audiences. Wise managers, realizing that conditions are growing *steadily worse*, will give up a hopeless struggle with GENERAL FILM... For some vaudeville houses complete programme of motion pictures is the only hope. For others a vaudeville bill bolstered with a few high-class pictures will solve the problem.⁷

Though vaudeville in the United States would continue in some form or another for another two decades, the vaudeville era, in a real sense, was gone by 1918. The Clipper reporter above saw the writing on the wall: Motion pictures would cleanly and profitably fill the void in urban amusement-going left by vaudeville. Indeed, they would jump in and fill it before such a void ever existed. Vaudeville, which had provided the first mass venue for the commercial projection of motion pictures,⁸ now saw itself defeated by the seed it had planted.

As I have pointed out, the burgeoning motion picture business came under much heavier and more consistent fire from reformers and moral authorities than vaudeville ever did. There are, as I have further indicated, several likely reasons for this. One is that, while vaudeville may have been perceived as a form of amusement controlled by well-intentioned Christian American men (which it largely was), the movies were seen as the province of outsiders: immigrants, Europeans, Jews, men with little formal education who came from low backgrounds and disreputable lines of business.⁹ As late as the 1930s, social observers still considered the film moguls, even those who had risen

⁷ New York Clipper, 14 February 1914, 22.

⁸ See: Robert C. Allen, "The Movies in Vaudeville: Historical Context of the Movies as Popular Entertainment," in Balio, ed.

⁹ See: Neil Gabler, An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood. (New York: Anchor Books, 1989).

to fame and wealth, as lowborn outsiders. Consider this appraisal of William Fox, founder of the Fox film studio, from the pages of elite Fortune magazine in 1930:

It may be a good thing for a man to start at from the bottom. But it is not such a good thing for him to start from a subcellar. For obviously he will be inflicted with a terrible inferiority complex, and although he may make of that very inferiority a driving power forcing him toward a success, he is bound to do his climbing with a chip on his shoulder and a belligerent attitude long after he has reached the top... At the height of his success, in the full confidence of his powers, Mr. Fox was able to negotiate with Park Avenue and Wall Street on friendly and equal terms. In a crisis, however, and confronted with a division of interest between himself and his highborn associates, ancient and half-obliterated distrust were bound to reassert themselves with overwhelming force.¹⁰

In the above passage, we may note how the writer refers to Wall Street investment bankers, from exclusive, Protestant-led firms, as “highborn,” while accusing the untrustworthy Fox of being in the clutches of “ancient” prejudices and irrepressible, almost animal-like, inner drives. It is interesting and noteworthy that the vaudeville chiefs never turned to Wall Street for money the same way that the early film moguls did beginning in the early 1920s. Some vaudeville magnates, like Keith and Albee, took financing from the church. But most seem to have financed their operations with their own income. Had B.F. Keith or F.F. Proctor approached Wall Street, they would almost certainly have had an easier time securing funding—and respect—from their highborn brethren.

Nor did the early film entrepreneurs attempt to market their wares as safe or sanitized, at least not in the same way that the vaudeville magnates, who built theatre environments that seemed cleansed and controlled, did. In contrast to Keith theatres, which mimicked high-class refinement, early “nickelodeon” theatres were typically little more than converted store fronts, dark and perhaps dingy.¹¹ Certainly they posed a threat

¹⁰ “The Case of William Fox,” Fortune, May 1930, 48.

¹¹ See: Douglas Gomery, Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 18-33.

of fire. "Many of us probably know moving pictures as a clattering, rackety performance, carried on in semi-darkness..." wrote William Inglis in Harper's Weekly magazine in 1910.¹²

So, while vaudeville theatres were built to fit in with the growing cityscape, meshing with and enhancing trophy properties like department stores and existing legitimate theatre spaces, the nickelodeon theatres of the early twentieth century were viewed by many as a plague-like encroachment. One anti-film crusader in New York City felt that "the evil lies in the conditions in which so many [movies] are given—the dark room, filled with adults and children, absolutely without supervision, affording no protection against the evil-minded and depraved men who frequent such places and sit beside the innocent boys and girls without a question or suspicion until irreparable harm is done." His solution: "We ought to have the lights turned on and have all these theatres illuminated in such a way that any immoral or undesirable conduct is an impossibility."¹³ Thus, the vaudeville magnates created spaces that were seen as safe and, because they mimicked high-culture splendor, further seen as salutary additions to the urban climate. Not so movie theatres. The nickelodeons that began springing up in American cities after about 1905 did so quickly, like an invasion, and almost without warning. Mostly, they were converted storefronts and their dark, stuffy innards catered, at least initially, to working-class immigrants.¹⁴

If movies suffered a degree of moral censure that vaudeville did not, despite the fact that the latter contained its share of potentially objectionable material, it may also have been simply due to the remarkable popularity of the moving picture. By 1910,

¹² William Inglis, "Morals and Moving Pictures," Harper's Weekly, 30 July 1910, 12.

¹³ "The Campaign to Curb the Moving Picture Evil," New York Times, 2 July 1911, v, 15:1.

¹⁴ See: Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905-1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," in Balio, ed., 85.

some 26 million Americans were going to the movies at nickelodeon theatres every week; in New York City alone, the weekly figures amounted to between 1.2 million and 1.6 million.¹⁵ As popular as vaudeville was, it was never as explosively popular as this. Surely vaudeville had laid the groundwork for a mass national amusement. But such plans were more fully realized with the movies. Their very popularity made them push the hot buttons of crusaders and reformers in a way that vaudeville never could. The early moral objections to vaudeville and the legitimate stage, which, as I have shown, were based on fears of a free-market determination of moral acceptability, came to full fruition with the film. "Morality," observed George Bernard Shaw in the Literary Digest, "in fact, is only popularity; and popular notions of virtuous conduct will no more keep a nation in the front rank of humanity than popular notions of science and art will keep it in the front rank of culture."¹⁶ Movies, more than vaudeville, threatened to wrest the power of moral determination from cultural authorities and place it squarely within the realm of the free market—that is, in the hands of the putatively uneducated, pleasure-seeking masses.

In addition, motion pictures threatened to cement the mass, national scope of entertainment more firmly than vaudeville, which could be tailored to meet the needs of a specific locale. That is, while the vaudeville chiefs conceived of the possibility of a nationwide market (and, therefore, the possibility of a translocal notion of popular culture), the film chiefs actualized it more completely by providing a product that was created in an industrial setting and finalized before it was ever seen by a movie-going public. Eva Tanguay's act in Memphis was very close to Eva Tanguay's act in Minneapolis. But at least the *possibility* of local variation—that is, the tension of the negotiable live body on stage before a responsive audience, existed (though, as we have

¹⁵ Merritt, 86.

¹⁶ "Europe's Call to Arms," Literary Digest, 8 August 1914, 234.

seen, the vaudeville magnates encouraged audiences to keep their responses to a minimum). When film came along, it was quite certain that what was seen in Memphis was *exactly* like that which was seen in Minneapolis. And New York. And Los Angeles. And on and on.

This poses some interesting possibilities for future study. As entertainment has become increasingly a mass-scale, corporate controlled affair—now it is largely in the reins of a handful of huge multinational organizations—there continue to be objections of one sort or another over the content of popular amusements and its supposed deleterious effects. But those in charge have not responded with claims of wholesomeness and purity. Those were the historically-located and logical tactics of businessmen at the dawn of the mass-market era in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; mimicking those efforts would be no more appropriate than trying to recreate vaudeville itself in the current moment. In part, I would argue, this is so because the mass-entertainment businessmen who followed in the footsteps of the B.F. Keiths and the E.F. Albees have sold to a public more accepting of mass commerce in general. Thus, they have tended to respond with Constitutional claims of freedom of speech and expression. In other words, they have attempted to add a political element to the discourse whereas the vaudeville chiefs remained solely commercial in their efforts. Put another way, the modern-day heirs of the mass-amusement paradigm instigated by the vaudeville chiefs have appealed to notions of individual rights of consumption and self-regulation rather than relying on the construction of a patriarchal force empowered to keep things clean and healthy for the masses.

In its own way, vaudeville was also more fully a public entertainment at a time when urban Americans were seeking out new and pleasing ways to spend their leisure dollars. They did so in the company of fellow urbanites in locales that placed them together *en masse* and in close proximity. Thus, vaudeville was much more a mass

experience than is the consumption of a movie today, many of whose consumers will see it in the privacy of their own homes on the VCR or cable box. “The newest, most technologically advanced amusement sites are our living rooms,” observes David Nasaw in Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements.¹⁷

The end of vaudeville heralded the beginning of the end of urban public amusements more generally.¹⁸ The American public (if such a term can be used unproblematically these days) had been given an entertainment product—vaudeville—that had much in common with its antecedent forms, the licentious burlesque hall and the ribald variety theatre; at the same time, its anxieties over mass spectatorship had been quelled by promises of purity, wholesomeness, and sterility. In a sense, the battle for the hearts, minds, and wallets of amusement-seeking Americans had been won. Now it was up to the urban populace to retreat to the suburbs, to the comfort of private living rooms and the glow of the television. Here, to be sure, people could be sold representations of sexuality on such a massive scale that even E.F. Albee might be shocked.

¹⁷ Nasaw, 255.

¹⁸ See: Nasaw, 241-56.

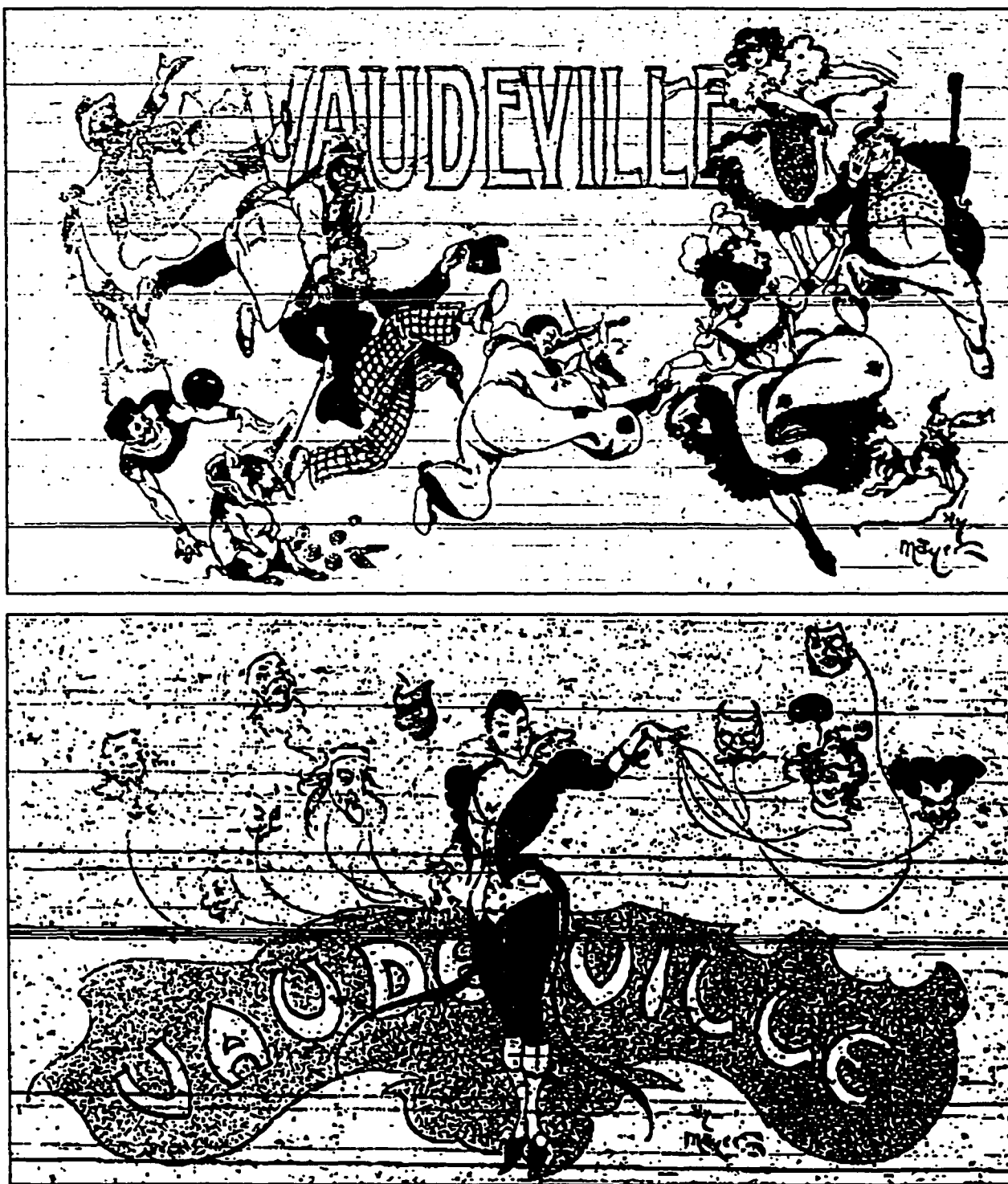


Figure 1. Vaudeville column art from the New York Dramatic Mirror. As if to acknowledge the sexually suggestive nature of many vaudeville acts, the New York Dramatic Mirror changed the art accompanying its weekly vaudeville column in 1900 from a circle of playful clowns to a curvy, she-devil temptress.

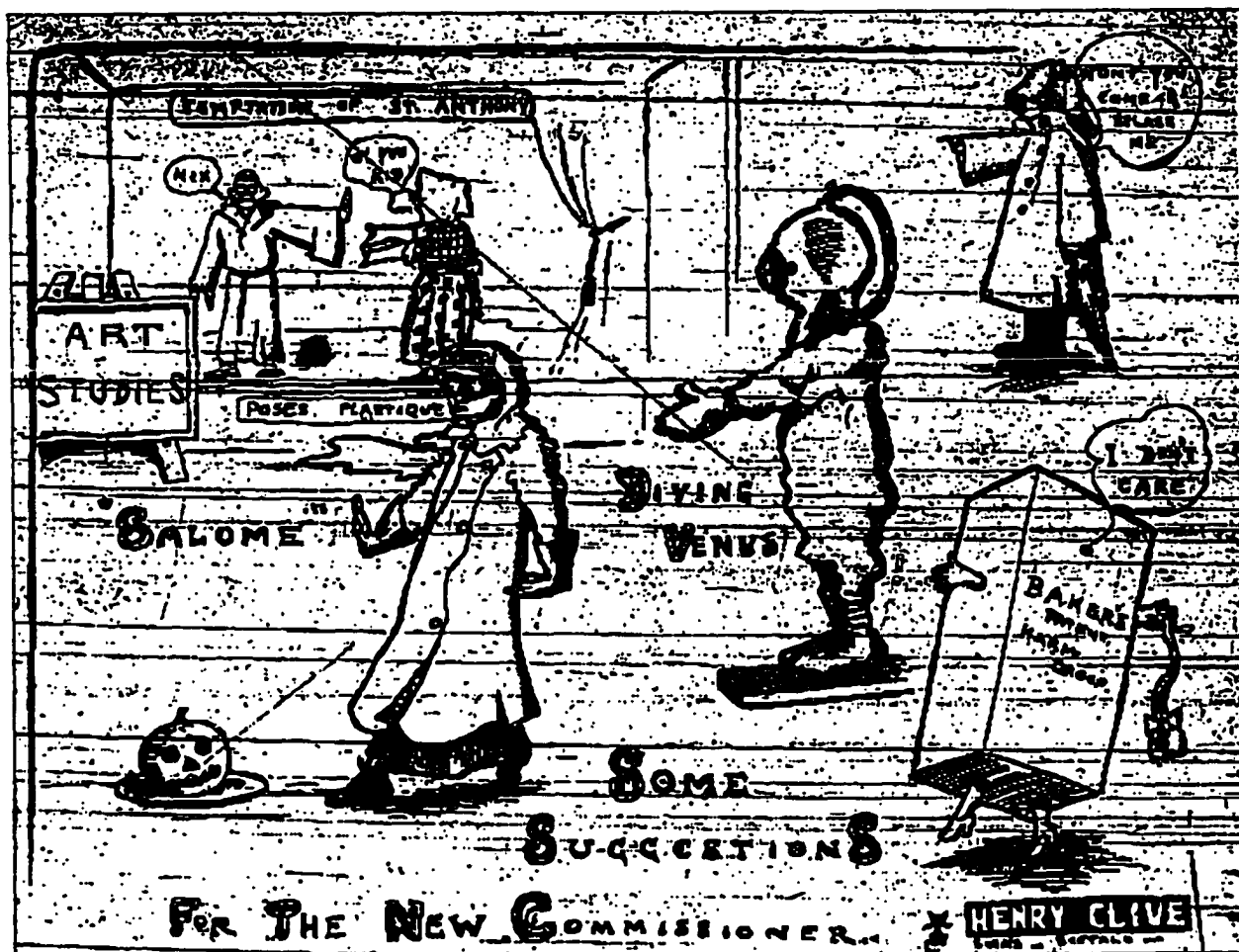


Figure 2. Cartoon from *Variety*. This humorous cartoon from *Variety* (31 July 1909) clearly shows the number of sexually suggestive acts in vaudeville--acts which, it was feared, would fall afoul of the New York City police commissioner. Note Eva Tanguay in the Baker's box at the right.

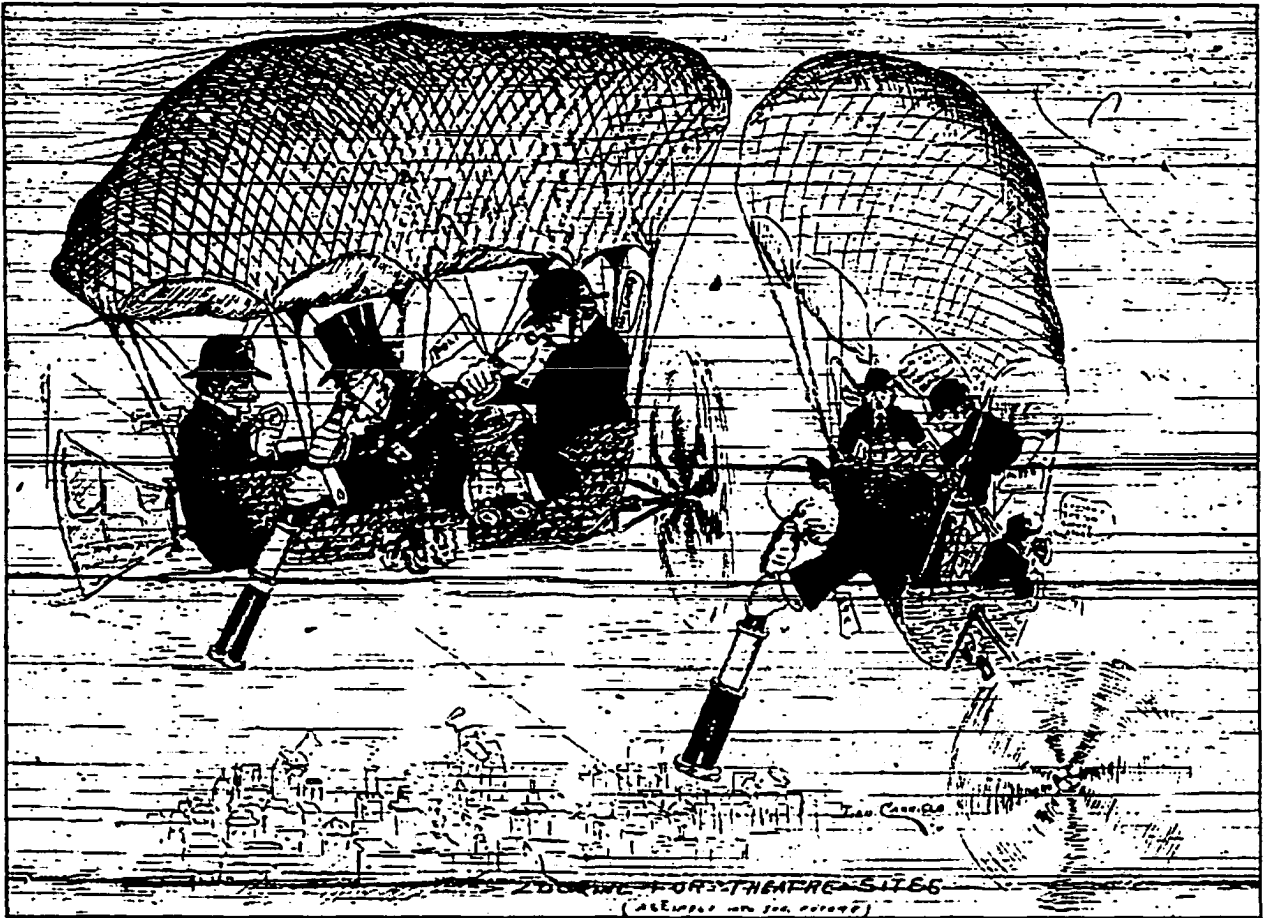


Figure 3. Cartoon from *Variety*. This cartoon from *Variety* (31 March 1906) depicts vaudeville magnates like B.F. Keith (note the “BFK” tag on the character at the right with the long telescope) as hungry, conquering warlords scouting about for new territory with the aid of the latest technology.



Figure 4. Cartoon from *Variety*. This cartoon from *Variety* (11 August 1906) suggests the increasing power of the theatre chain owners and the difficulty it posed for the hapless performer.

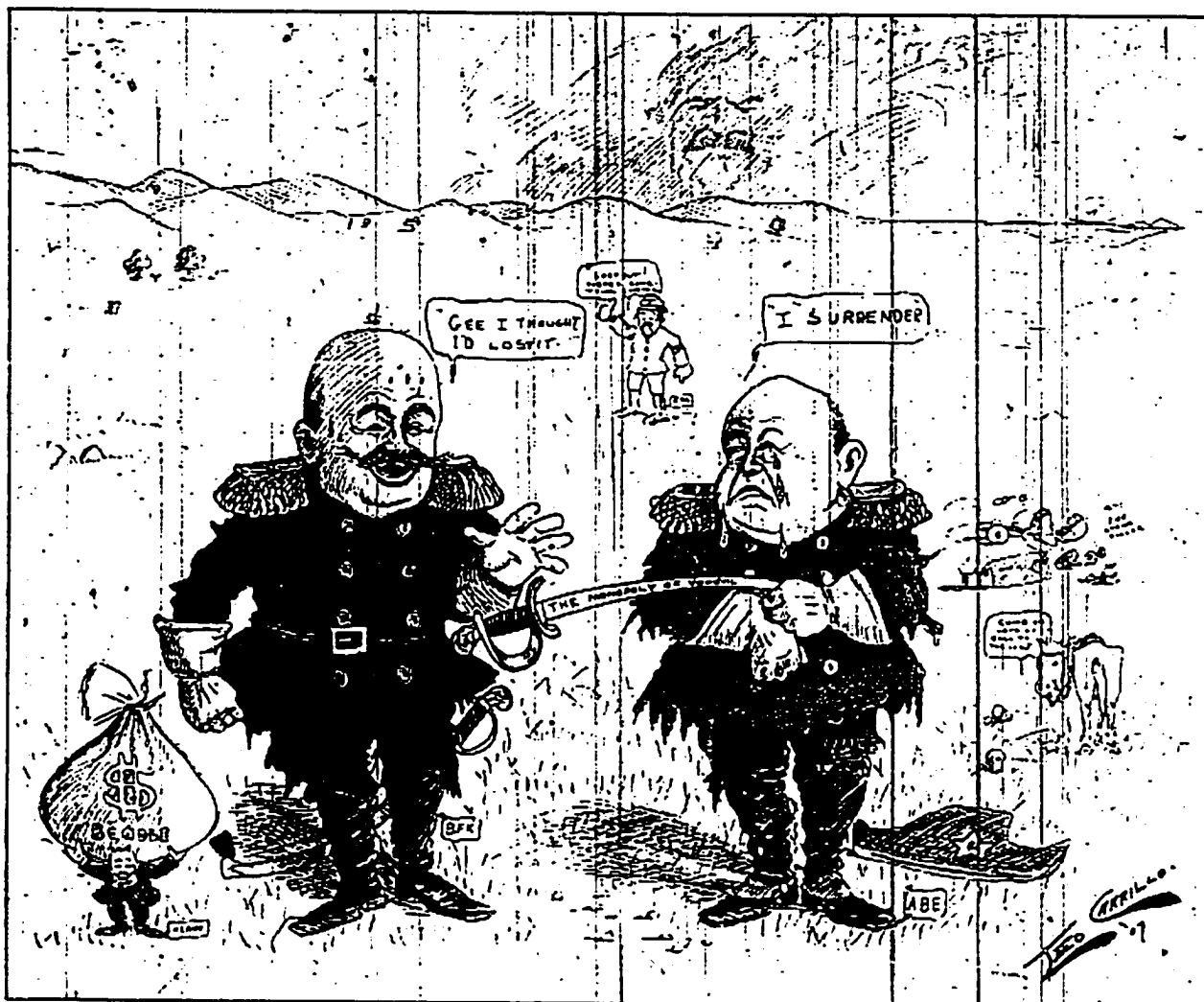


Figure 5. Cartoon from *Variety*. This cartoon from *Variety* (16 November 1907) depicts B.F. Keith as the victorious general in the mass-entertainment war that was vaudeville.

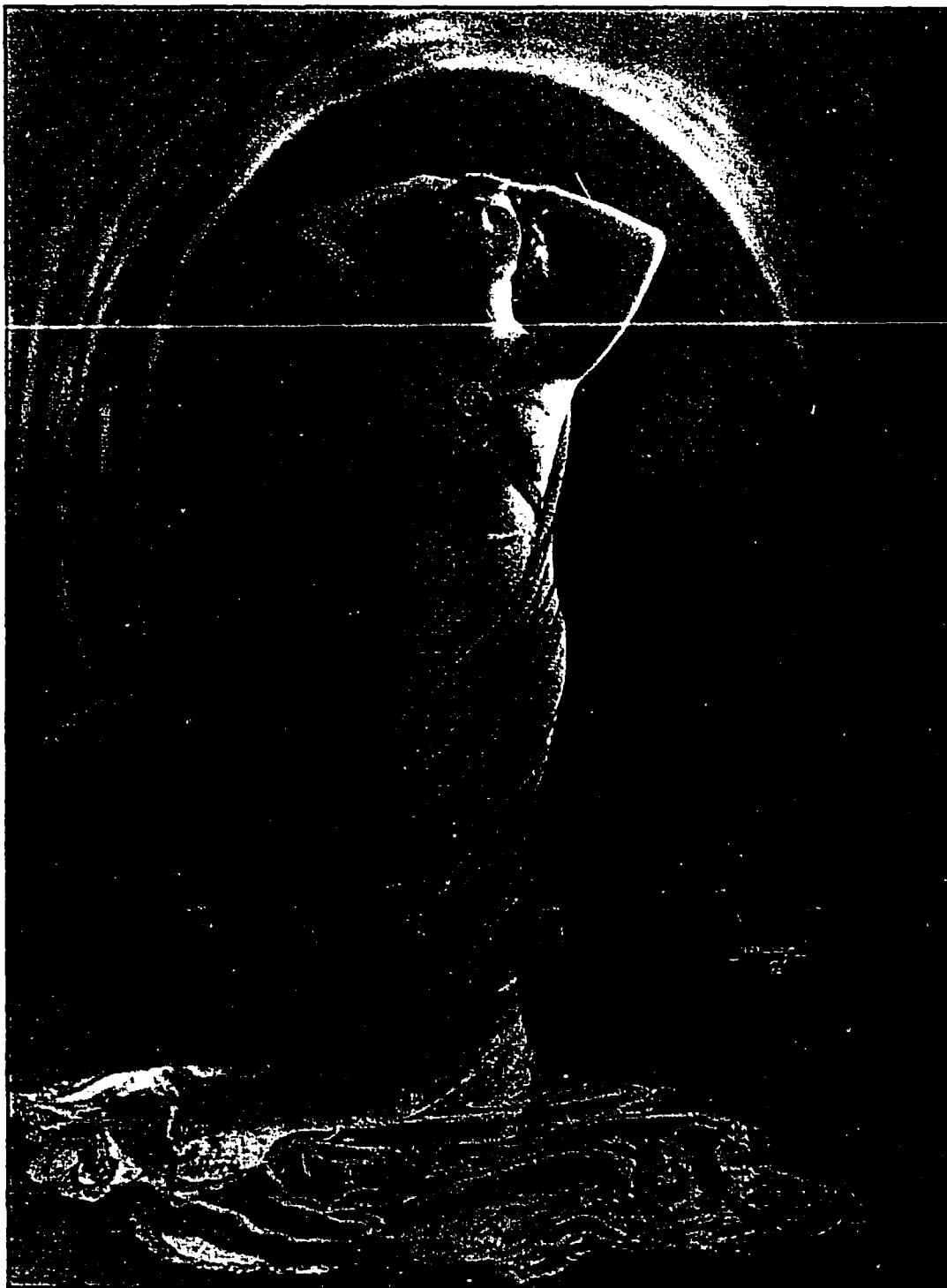


Figure 7. Lillian Herlein. Lillian Herlein used alluring gowns and tight-fitting clothes to sculpt her body into a sexual commodity par excellence on the vaudeville stage. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)



Figure 8. Adele Ritchie. Like other vaudeville actresses, Adele Ritchie used a combination of unique, luxurious costumes and her own sexual allure to please audiences. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)



Figure 9. Odiva. Odiva, the “Living Mermaid,” performed underwater feats of strength and agility in vaudeville. That she did so in a tight-fitting bathing suit did not hurt. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)



Figure 10. Annette Kellerman. Annette Kellerman impressed vaudeville audiences with her swimming displays and the amount of bare or scantily-clad skin she also displayed. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)

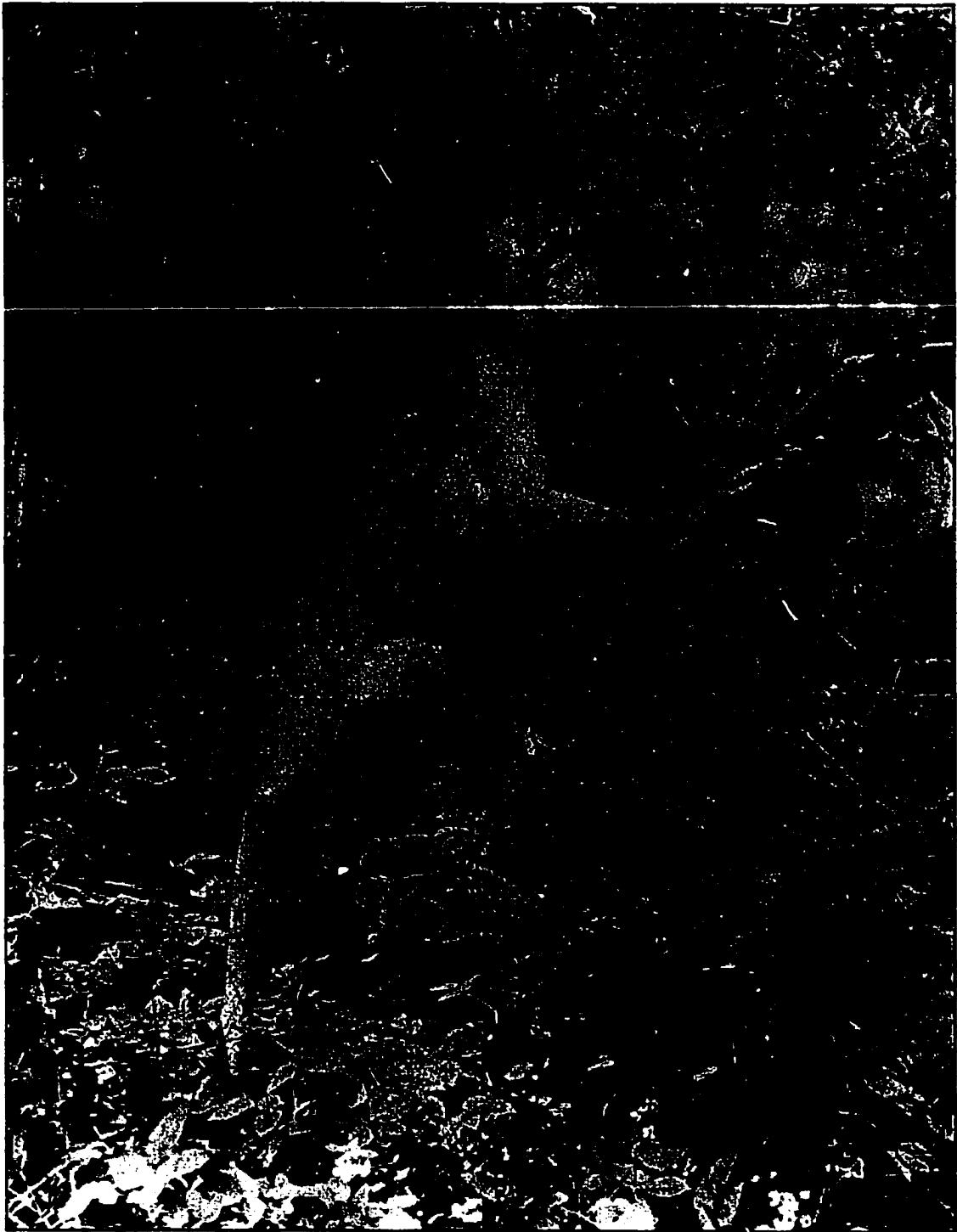


Figure 11. A Daughter of the Gods. Vaudeville star Annette Kellerman made three films. This still is from her 1917 picture A Daughter of the Gods. The film, which featured an unclad Kellerman, caused one woman to beat her husband after he had gone to see it three times in three days. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)



Figure 12. Queen of the Sea. A still from Annette Kellerman's 1918 movie, Queen of the Sea. As usual, she wears little other than a revealing bathing suit. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)



Figure 13. Lalla Selbini. Lalla Selbini was another vaudeville actress who capitalized on a pretty figure, which she showed off to great advantage after disrobing on stage and cavorting about in skin-tight, flesh-colored outfits. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)



Figure 14. Charmion. Mlle Charmion in a characteristically seductive pose. The trapeze was her vehicle for an elaborate disrobing number, one which smacked of burlesque. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)



Figure 15. Valeska Suratt. Valeska Suratt was popular in vaudeville as much for her attractive figure as for her unusual and distinctive costumes. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)



Figure 16. Alice Eis and Bert French. Vaudeville favorites Alice Eis and Bert French performed erotic dance duets which usually resulted in Eis displaying various states of undress, such as is seen here. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)



Figure 17. Eva Tanguay. Vaudeville's biggest star. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)

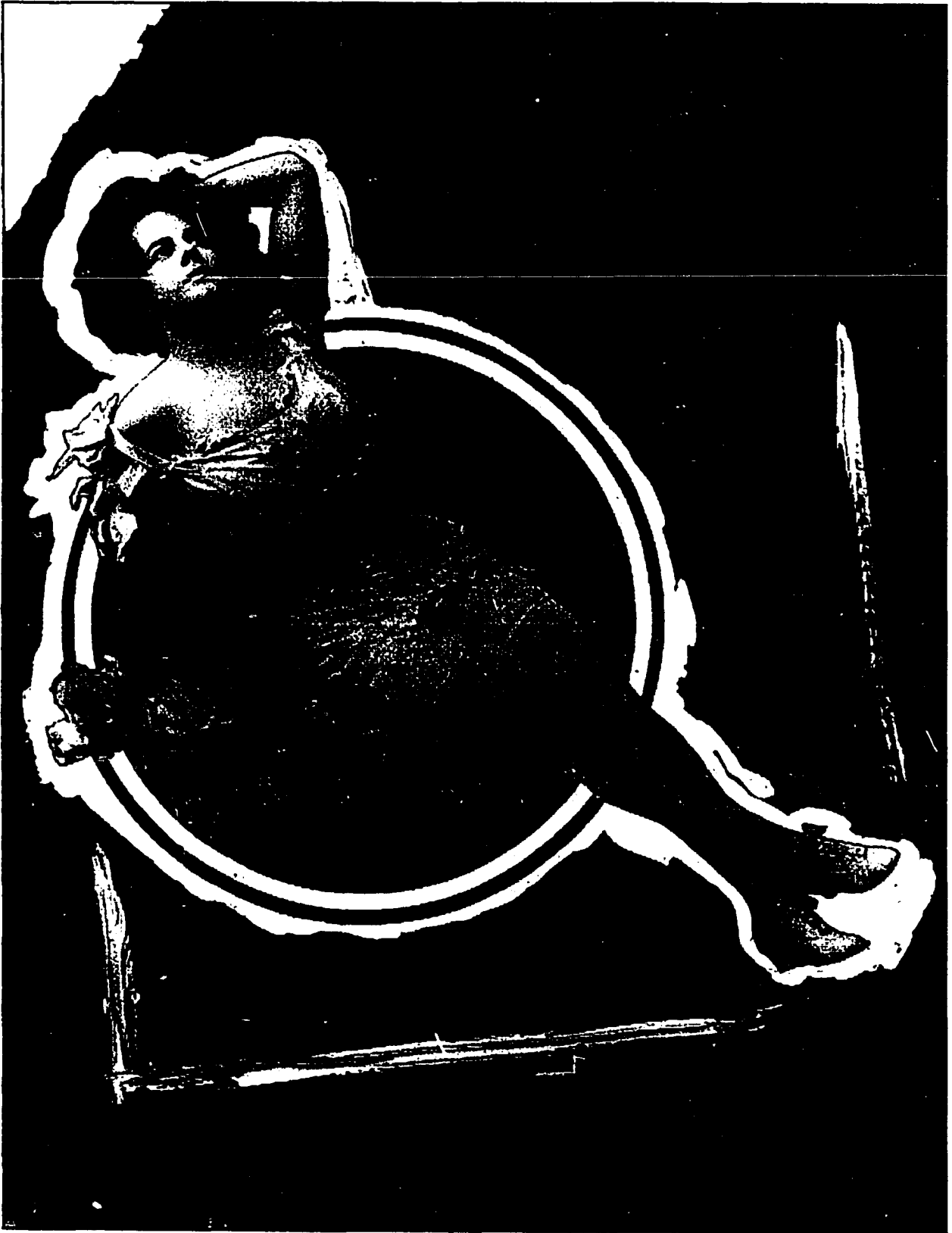


Figure 18. Eva Tanguay. This promotional photograph of Eva Tanquay capitalizes on her shapely form and seductive posture. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)



Figure 19. The I Don't Care Girl. The life of Eva Tanquay was sanitized and subjected to the conservative value system of 1950s America in the film The I Don't Care Girl (1953) starring Mitzi Gaynor, who is seen in the baby carriage here. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)



Figure 20. The Wild Girl. A promotional still from The Wild Girl, a 1916 film starring Eva Tanguay. (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.)



Figure 21. In addition to being a sexual temptress, Eva Tanguay was the queen of the outrageous on the vaudeville stage. She claimed that she designed all of her own costumes. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)

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