Going on the Offensive:
Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in American Stage Comedy from 1881 to 1932

by

Rick DesRochers

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

THE GRADUATE CENTER OF THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
2013

© 2013

Rick DesRochers

All Rights Reserved

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.

Rick DesRochers______________________

May 16, 2013____________ ________________________________
Chair of Examining Committee

James Wilson_________________________

____
Executive Officer

James Wilson____

Jean Graham-Jones____

Morris Dickstein____
Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

Going on the Offensive:
Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in American Stage Comedy from 1881 to 1932

by

Rick DesRochers

Advisor: Dr. James Wilson

Going on the Offensive: Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in American Stage Comedy from 1881 to 1932 defines the new humor and how it was practiced by comic vaudevillians with an emphasis on the historical and cultural significance of their acts. The performers discussed in this project include the comedy team of Joe Weber and Lew Fields; the family act of the Three Keatons; medicine show stump speeches of W.C. Fields and Will Rogers; the school acts of the Marx Brothers; and the burlesque-inspired comedy of Mae West. Performances will be examined in relationship to progressive era reformers and their attempts to control and regulate popular entertainments on the vaudeville stage, as well as the divide between high and lowbrow American entertainments from the 1880s through the early 1930s. The new humorists will be evaluated with regard to their engagement and challenges to Americanization driven by such reformers as Jane Addams, Elbridge Thomas Gerry, E.A. Ross, and John Dewey. This analysis of comic vaudevillians serves to illustrate that the new humor of vaudeville comedy was intentionally disruptive to Anglo-American values through satire, broad physicality, and the mockery of middle-class propriety. Audience and critic's responses

to the new humor on the vaudeville stage provide an understanding of how significant comedy became as an art form that critiqued the divisions of class, ethnicity, and gender, during this period. This dissertation concentrates on the conflicts that progressives wanted to exploit in order to promote an Anglo-American agenda.

Going on the Offensive is a unique study in that it compares popular comic stage entertainment forms in relationship to suppression through sociocultural reform and censure. This is an area that needs further examination with consideration to the political and social pressures put on comic stage performers during the modernist era. By examining iconic and lesser-known comedic performing artists, *Going on the Offensive* seeks to reclaim an important part of American theatrical and cultural history that requires additional attention in United States performance studies and its influences on Americanness during the early twentieth century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate this project to the memory of Dan Gerould. Dan was my advisor at the Graduate Center since I began the Ph.D. program in theatre in the fall of 2007. Without his mentorship and unequivocal support I can honestly say that I would not have been able to complete my Ph.D. From my very first course with Dan in symbolist theatre, his delight, expertise, and insight into the unusual, comic, and satiric forms of the stage meshed with my own interests and expanded them in directions I could have never imagined. Certainly this dissertation would not have existed without him – "Whatever it is, I'm against it!"

I am profoundly in the debt of Jim Wilson for his guidance, feedback, and encouragement as my dissertation advisor. Jim's amazing dedication and goodwill during this project have been invaluable. During my time at the Graduate Center several professors were also influential in discovering my true potential as a scholar including Judy Milhous, Morris Dickstein, and Jean Graham-Jones. Their profound dedication to scholarship and critical thinking has truly transformed my own scholarly work. I also want to acknowledge Lynette Gibson, who was invaluable in helping me navigate the labyrinthine administrative madness of the academy, and for picking up the ball when I dropped it and keeping me in the game. Merci.

I want to thank Paul Meshejian for the endless hours we have spent talking theater and collaborating on amazing new plays for the past eight years. Paul is a true friend, a brilliant theatrical mind, and a profound and insightful human being. It is my pleasure to know you, sir.

I need to acknowledge the American Travel Research Fund (the Tackel Grant), multiple CUNY Salk Travel Grants, and several Long Island University Post Travel Grants that made it possible to do the archival research necessary for this project. And to Dr. Cara Gargano, Professor Maria Porter, Dr. Noel Zahler, and the many students over the years at Long Island University Post that have sustained my passion for the practice and scholarship of theater.

And finally I want to extend my deepest gratitude and love to my family – my daughter, Lucy Frances, who keeps me smiling and laughing in the darkest moments when I think I cannot go on, and the love of my life, my thunderbolt, my passion, my wife, my friend, and my greatest joy. I could not do this thing called life without you. A la folie, baby!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS……………………………………….……………………vi

Chapter

INTRODUCTION ……………………………………………… …...….…1

1. THE LEGACY OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY POPULAR ENTERTAINMENTS AND THE NEW HUMOR OF THE MODERNIST ERA ……………....………………………………………………..……...13

From the *Shtetls* of Eastern Europe to the American Vaudeville Stage

The Formation of American Vaudeville

Comic Vaudevillians Putting It Over – From Nineteenth-Century Popular Entertainments to Vaudeville

Buster Keaton: Vaudevillian

2. THE NEW HUMOR: PUTTING IT OVER IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA ……………………….……………………………………………….…..…48

The New Humor Comes to America

The New Ethnic Humor and Progressive Reformers

All in the Family Act

Fear of the "Bogey" Man of the New Humor: W.C. Fields and Will Rogers On the Stump

3. THE FAMILY ACT GOES TO SCHOOL – THE MARX BROTHERS ……………………………...…………………………..……..….……105

The Show Biz "Three Rs" of Education – Gags, Singing, and the Time Step

The Marx Brothers On the Road to the School Act

The School Act

Fun In Hi Skule

Mr. Green's Reception

Home Again: The Third Incarnation of the School Act

ONE: CHICO

TWO: HARPO

THREE: GROUCHO

The School Act on Film: "Whatever it is, I'm against it!"

"Coming to You from the House of David:" From Vaudeville to Hollywood

4. THE NEW WOMAN AND THE NEW HUMOR: THE FEMALE COMEDIAN AS SOCIAL INSURGENT ……………………………..……..…………………………………………156

Burlesque and the New Women

The New Women and Progressive Reformers in Conflict

The Women Who Made Vaudeville Famous: Eva Tanguay, Marie Dressler, Kate Elinore, and Mae West

The New Woman as Comic Grotesque

EPILOGUE ……………………………………………………….….214

BIBLIOGRAPHY …………………………………………………....224

Introduction

In 1932, commentators in the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* accused comic vaudevillian and radio humorist Will Rogers of undermining business and, in particular, Wall Street bankers and investment firms as un-American.[1] Rogers, who was born to a prominent Cherokee Nation family in Indian Territory (now part of Oklahoma), turned the hypocrisy of corporate America and its supporters at the *Times* and the *Journal* against them by referencing his Native-American heritage in a vaudeville-inspired monologue:

> I hope that my Cherokee blood is not making me prejudiced, I want to be broad minded, but I am sure it was only the extreme generosity of the Indians that allowed the Pilgrims to land anywhere. […] The Pilgrims wouldn't even allow the Indians to live after the Indians went to the trouble of letting them land, of course, but they'd always pray. … I bet any one of you have never seen a picture of one of the old Pilgrims praying when he didn't have a gun right by the side of him. That was to see that he got what he was praying for.[2]

Will Rogers, through his vaudevillian character of the Okie-Indian known as "Will," offered a counter-narrative of Americanism, by using a vaudeville standard act known as the stump speech. As the mass influx of tens of millions of immigrants began to infiltrate the American landscape in the early twentieth century, an intense nationalism began to

---

[1] Unidentified editorial author, *New York Times* (28 November 1932), n.p, clippings file, Will Rogers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

[2] From Letter of Harry Chandler to Will Rogers (26 September 1932) in Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, Oklahoma, quoted in *The Autobiography of Will Rogers*, ed., Donald Day (New York: Avon Books, 1975), 268-69, and Will Rogers, "The Pilgrims," (14 April 1935), quoted in Steven K. Gragert, ed., *Radio Broadcasts of Will Rogers*, (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma State University Press, 1983), 119.

insist on sociocultural boundaries in the quest for Americanizing its newest citizens. Will Rogers, and his colleagues and competitors, engaged in a wave of new humor that dominated popular entertainment in early twentieth-century America.

Modernist American history scholar Michael McGerr discusses the "fierce discontent" that attended a backlash to Eastern and Southern European immigration at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States. McGerr notes that sociologists and economists began to recognize differentiations between white Europeans, separating them into racial and ethnic groupings such as "northern Teutonics," central Alpines, and the "darker southern Mediterraneans."[3] According to McGerr, Eastern and Southern European immigrants became "representatives of a different and inferior race," or, as early-twentieth-century sociologist and progressive reformer E.A. Ross called them, "beaten members of beaten breeds."[4] The rise of American nationalism was reinforced with the Immigration Restriction League and American Federation of Labor. Senator Furnifold M. Simmons of North Carolina vehemently opined with the hyperbole of extreme nationalism that the new immigrants were "nothing more than the degenerate progeny of the Asiatic hordes which, long centuries ago, overran the shores of the Mediterranean … the spawn of Phoenician curse."[5] Ultimately, notes McGerr, "the Immigration Act of 1907 doubled the entrance fee for immigrants … and set up an investigation commission on immigration."[6] It is in light of this opposition to the new

---

[3] Economist William Z. Ripley, *The Races of Europe*, 1899, as quoted in Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003, 213.

[4] E.A. Ross as quoted in Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 213.

[5] Senator Furnifold M. Simmons as quoted in McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 213-14.

[6] McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 214; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (East Rutherford, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 164-65.

immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century that the new humor posed a threat to Anglo-Americans and their associations of what constituted Americanness.

This dissertation looks at how these comic performers redefined what it meant to be an American through their confrontation and negotiation of progressive era reforms imposed on the new humor of the vaudeville stage. Popular entertainment cultural historian Henry Jenkins makes the case that comedy was generated in response to the struggles and conflicts endured by ethnic immigrants to the United States from the 1880s through the 1910s:

> Middle-class anxiety about jokes and laughter displaced legitimate fears about social change onto the aesthetic sphere; it was a submerged discourse about the cultural transformation of American life. "Canons of good taste" and notions of restrained laughter helped to maintain class boundaries and to naturalize inequalities of economic and social opportunity.[7]

By expanding on the work of scholars in the field of early-twentieth-century United States performance history, culture, and theory, like Robert C. Allen, Patricia Bradley, Stuart Hall, Henry Jenkins, Jackson Lears, Lawrence Levine, Lary May, Albert F. McLean Jr., and Kathy Lee Peiss, I provide a unique contribution to this field by focusing on class, ethnicity, and gender as the basis of the new humor in comic performance. I show how the new humor came to be associated with lowbrow/offensive humor perpetuated by comedians who were recently arrived immigrants – particularly Jewish, Irish, Italian, and Slovak – or first generation Americans whose parents had suffered

---

[7] Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 28.

bigotry and xenophobia as a result of being classified as poor, foreign, and, worst of all, lacking in what was perceived to be a highbrow cultural education.

Comedians were able to capitalize on the progressive movement and its sociocultural reforms in order to become successful entertainers as well as social commentators. Progressive reformers mounted campaigns to clean up popular entertainment in order to create an edifying and "American" cultural highbrow landscape that would compete with the cultural heritage and aesthetic values of Western Europe from the Victorian era. The confrontation between comedians who engaged in the new humor and progressive reformers will be the focus of the historical and cultural framework used here.

My theoretical approach will encompass the modernist United States and the unprecedented wave of immigration, particularly from Eastern and Southern Europe. This will serve as a backdrop for my examination of the paradigm shifts as a result of sociocultural upheavals through the lens of class, ethnicity, and gender, during the height of progressive reforms. Cultural historians, theorists, and critics of the period, like Mary Cass Canfield, Walter Lippmann, H.L. Mencken, and Sime Silverman, point to the progressive movement in the United States in the 1910s and 20s that called for the "the clean up [or] close up" by ad hoc organizations like the Committee of Fourteen and the Gerry Society, among many others.[8] Self-appointed reform organizations claimed that "hundreds of places formerly notorious for evil have been forced by the Committee [of

[8] The Committee of Fourteen was founded on 16 January 1905 by members of the New York Anti-Saloon League, it remained in effect until 1932. The Gerry Society (officially called the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) was founded in 1874 as the world's first child protective agency. It is better known as the Gerry Society named for one of its co-founders, Elbridge Thomas Gerry. It remains active to the present day.

Fourteen] to reform on penalty of being closed outright."[9] Contemporary cultural historians, Patricia Bradley, John Houchin, Jackson Lears, and Lary May, discuss the influence of such censorship "committees" on popular entertainments with reference to vaudeville, silent film, and Tin Pan Alley songwriters; however, they only tangentially focus on comedy and its challenges to the progressive era agenda of reforms.

I concentrate exclusively on comedy and the ethnic acts, family acts, stump speeches, school acts, and burlesque acts that were standard vaudeville routines of the progressive era, and will serve as a lens through which to examine the new humor and its unique interpreters during this time of tremendous social and cultural change. The vaudevillians I examine reflect those "dialect, eccentric, and nut comedians in exaggerated costumes and facial make-ups,"[10] as vaudeville historian Douglas Gilbert characterized them, associated with the rise of the new humor. These acts juxtaposed the narrative clarity of understanding, conventional wisdom, and propriety with the new humor of immigrant and first generation American vaudevillians as independent, and potentially threatening and offensive to the self-perceptions and values of the already established middle and upper classes of Anglo-Americans.

This dissertation traces popular comic entertainments in the United States by looking at major figures in stage humor who worked in vaudeville at the turn-of-the-twentieth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, including Kate Elinore, Eva Tanguay, and Weber and Fields, in addition to those who made the

---

[9] Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 52; see also Patricia Bradley, *Making American Culture: A Social History, 1900-1920* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

[10] Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times* (New York: Dover Publications, 1940), 393.

transition from vaudeville to silent films and nascent comedic sound films, like Marie Dressler, W.C. Fields, Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers, Will Rogers, and Mae West. I also examine progressive reformers such as Jane Addams, John Dewey, Elbridge Thomas Gerry, E.A. Ross, and Josiah Strong, who led crusades to bring American middle-class values to popular entertainments, especially comic vaudeville acts. I concentrate on the evolution of popular comic entertainment from minstrelsy, the medicine show, and burlesque comedy, to the vaudeville stage during the American modernist period. These popular entertainments specifically with regard to stage comedy will be examined in relationship to the historical and cultural influences of comic vaudevillians, and the advent of the "new immigrant" and the "new woman".

Popular comic vaudeville acts will be evaluated to show how comedic performers challenged and rejected a newly minted and burgeoning middle-class notion of Anglo-American morality and prosperity in an attempt to destabilize and confront stage representations of a definitive "American." Working from the inside of established traditions of the stage, I show how successful comedians flouted the values of middle-and upper-class Anglo-American propriety in order to create an intentionally offensive new humor. I look to raise such questions in the existing scholarship as; what made the new humor offensive to reformers based on class, ethnic, and gender-based types? Were these performers, writers, directors, and self-promoters challenging the notion of the real "American" through their comedy, and how did these popular entertainers negotiate censorship, bigotry, and sexism even as they strove to engage audiences through their comic vaudeville performances? Did comedic vaudevillians challenge and ultimately

influence what cultural historian Patricia Bradley calls the "merge to the middle"[11] of American culture in the early twentieth century? This study seeks to show that popular comic entertainers redefined what it meant to be an American by confronting and negotiating progressive era reforms from the vaudeville stage.

Chapter 1, "The Legacy of Nineteenth-Century Popular Entertainments and the New Humor of the Modernist Era," asks the central question, how was vaudeville comedy during the progressive era influenced and formed from its comic heritage as practiced in the nineteenth century? I examine the trajectory of comedy's history and structures of popular comic entertainments such as Yiddish theater, minstrelsy, medicine shows, and burlesque comedy, and the shift from nineteenth-century comedic forms to American vaudeville of the early twentieth century. Popular comic performers who were influenced by these earlier stage forms in their vaudeville acts, like Eddie Cantor, W.C. Fields, Buster Keaton, Groucho Marx, Sophie Tucker, and Bert Williams, will serve as examples of the transition of popular theatre from the nineteenth to twentieth century, and their significance in the Americanization of the vaudeville stage. How these distinctly American forms of comic popular entertainment came into conflict and threatened the notion of Americanness of middle-class Anglo authority will be the subject of Chapter 1.

Chapter 2, "The New Humor: Putting It Over in the Progressive Era," will begin by examining the history and legacy of the comic form from burlesque to vaudeville in order to trace the effect of the new immigrant and the new woman on the new humor during the progressive era. This chapter analyzes how the new humor and its variety of acts served to reflect the perceived threat of the new ethnic American with regard to authority, class, ethnicity, gender, and cultural institutions. I look at comic performers

[11] Bradley, *Making American Culture*, 9.

and performances from 1880 to 1932. Beginning with the turn-of-the-century comic performers Weber and Fields, I move to vaudeville circuit comedy acts, many of whom performed for up to twenty years onstage, including the comic team of Joe Weber and Lew Fields, W.C. Fields, Buster Keaton, and Will Rogers.

Through a comprehensive study of vaudeville stage comedy from manuscripts of stage sketches and musical revues, newspaper reviews and interviews, biographies and autobiographies of the performers in question, as well as commentary from cultural critics of the period, I look at how these comedians exploited the new humor to create a potentially intentional offensive comedy that was reflected in the disruption of narratives, social structures, and values associated with middle-and upper-class Anglo Americans. I use the sociocultural historians of the American modernist era who will provide a jumping off point from which I argue that progressive social reformers created an adversarial relationship with the new humorists of the period at the same time that they resisted moral and aesthetic censors. This chapter will examine the notion that the new humor became intentionally offensive and directly challenged the notion of "Americanness" and the values it represented as perpetuated by social reformers. I contend that the new humor asserted a new vision of "the American" that rejected the efficacy of fixed notions of nineteenth-century Anglo-American dominance.

Chapter 3 will be a case study entitled "The Family Act Goes to School – The Marx Brothers." This chapter is framed by bookending the vaudeville performances of the Marx Brothers beginning in 1910 with *Fun in Hi Skule* to their highly successful 1932 film, *Horse Feathers*. I focus on the Marx Brothers's beginnings in the third-tier vaudeville circuit where they formed the core comedic trio of Chico, Harpo, and

Groucho.[12] The Marx Brothers were able to disrupt and destabilize the traditional school acts in vaudeville by breaking the binary of insider and outsider. This chapter shows a more complete picture of traditional tropes of popular stage comedy as seen through the lens of vaudeville represented by the Marx Brothers in the 1910s and 20s, and their subsequent film work based on their vaudeville acts in the early 1930s. I expand upon the scholarship of comedy historian and theorist Henry Jenkins and his comprehensive study of early sound film comedy, including the Marx Brothers, by offering critical analysis of their stage work in relationship to the vaudeville aesthetic and the new humor from the perspective of the brothers' twenty-year stage career.

I analyze the Marx Brothers and their school act in its multiple variations including *Fun In Hi Skule* (1910), *Mr. Green's Reception* (1912), *Home Again* (1914), as well as the school act on film with *Horse Feathers* (1932), in relationship to sociocultural inclusion and exclusion. How the Marx Brothers commented on and satirized progressive education reforms through their multiple versions of the school act, and the immigrant experience of being Americanized through public school education reforms, will be examined by looking at progressive reformers and their solutions to the rising tide of the underclass Eastern and Southern European immigrants arriving en masse during the early twentieth century. By revisiting and examining the Marx Brothers's school acts, I reevaluate and reclaim an undervalued moment in comedy theatrical history and popular entertainment studies, and its sociological implications and impacts on progressive education reforms during the modernist era.

[12] Gummo Marx states in an interview from *The Marx Bros. Scrapbook* that the core trio of Chico, Harpo, and Groucho were "unquestionably" the true comic soul of the Marx Brothers, and that he and Zeppo served as interchangeable straight men. Gummo and Zeppo were easily replaced by other actors, and were eventually superseded by a straight woman, Margaret Dumont, beginning with *The Cocoanuts* in 1925. In *The Marx Bros. Scrapbook*, 16.

Chapter 4, "The New Woman and the New Humor: The Female Comedian as Social Insurgent," explores the female comedic performer beginning in burlesque of the late nineteenth century, and their insurgency into modernist era vaudeville comedy. This chapter will focus on key female performers beginning in the 1880s with the introduction of the British burlesque star Lydia Thompson, and her legacy through Eva Tanguay, Marie Dressler, Kate Elinore, and culminating with Mae West and her 1926 Broadway *succès de scandale*, *Sex*.

I argue that the new humor in relationship to the new woman was a form of social rebellion that took the emphasis off of the sexuality and perceived promiscuity of female vaudevillians by refocusing on their work as comedians and social commentators through their humorous and offensive songs, dances, and comedy writing. Beginning with existing scholarship on female vaudevillians by Robert C. Allen, Andrew Erdman, Susan A. Glenn, Marybeth Hamilton, and M. Alison Kibler, and as a launching point, I show that women in comedy challenged not only the notion of the purity and the moral codes left over from the nineteenth century, but how, through comedy, the new woman rejected the imprimatur of being "wild women" and "bad girls" by adding the voice of the new woman through the new humor back into vaudeville. I examine how comic female vaudevillians were separated and categorized as either sexualized bodies or "burlesque" visions of "wild women" who were loud, brash, and unruly, or silent, statuesque American "beauties." I look at how female comic vaudevillians spurned and rejected progressive reformers who sought to suppress the female voice and body of comedy as being "rank," "wild," and "eccentric," by becoming social reactionaries like their male counterparts through the new humor.

The goal of this dissertation is to show how the new humor functioned as sociocultural commentary with regard to the role of class, ethnicity, and gender in the service of creating an American identity that was in conflict with middle-class attitudes toward morality and societal propriety. Toward this end, analyzing productions and performance details of the vaudeville era from 1880 to 1932, and the written vaudeville scenarios, play texts, and images of performances as well as advertisements, programs, and newspaper articles will be my main source of primary research.

The bulk of the archival research for this project was conducted at the Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks within the Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and the Performing Arts Archives at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. In addition, access to the ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database through the Long Island University Palmer Library's General Research Division was invaluable for archival research as well. I drew from newspapers, especially the dailies that featured vaudeville reviews and essays focusing on three of the most influential periodicals of the era, *Variety*, *New York Dramatic Mirror*, and the *New York Clipper*; in addition I looked at the *New York Times*, *Life* (humor magazine), journals, and magazines such as *Nineteenth Century*, *Theatre Arts*, *Vaudeville*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Critic*.

Albert F. McLean, Jr.'s comprehensive study *American Vaudeville as Ritual* provided a detailed and well-researched analysis of the rise of the new humor in United States vaudeville from the 1885 to 1930. In addition, Douglas Gilbert's *American Vaudeville*, vaudevillian Joe Laurie Jr.'s first-hand account *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace*, and Caroline Caffin's 1914 publication *Vaudeville*, offered thorough

portraits of early vaudeville acts and how they were received by critics and audiences alike. Another published resource for vaudeville era performance texts and scenarios was found in *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830-1910* (2003), edited by Robert M. Lewis, delivering an exceptional collection of primary source materials from live performances at the turn of the twentieth century. The website *Marxology*[13] yielded a great deal of the Library of Congress holdings from the vaudeville era archive focused primarily on the Marx Brothers and their contemporaries' vaudeville careers, and was an excellent supplement to these archival findings during my research trip to the Library of Congress. Two encyclopedic reference texts were of great assistance in defining popular entertainment terms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and contributed detailed production and biographical research on American vaudevillians: Anthony Slide's *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, and Frank Cullen's recent exhaustive two-volume study, *Vaudeville Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*.

From this research, I am able to examine the comic vaudevillians, from the Elinore Sisters and Weber and Fields in the late nineteenth century, to the Marx Brothers and Mae West in the early 1930s, and how they destabilized the domination of what it meant to be an American in the early twentieth century by confronting and ultimately reformulating the notion of Americanness out of the new humor of the comedic vaudeville stage.

[13] The most recent update for this site was in October 2011 at http://www.marx-brothers.org/marxology.

Chapter 1

The Legacy of Nineteenth-Century Popular Entertainments and the New Humor of the Modernist Era

"Not since sin laid its heavy hands on our spirit have we laughed so loud and so offensively,"[1] exuberantly exclaimed Robert Benchley in the humor magazine *Life*, referring to the Marx Brothers first Broadway revue, *I'll Say She Is* (1924). The implication of Benchley's observation is that audience response to comedians like the Marx Brothers, formed from early twentieth-century American sociocultural changes, produced a laughter so loud and offensive that it posed a threat to established Anglo-American cultural hegemony. This offensive laughter was brought about, according to playwright and librettist Edward Harrigan, by Southern and Eastern European immigrants "who always want to laugh not with you but at you."[2] Confirming Harrigan's xenophobia was Professor Ellwood Cubberley, whose *Changing Conceptions of Education* (1909) posited what made these same new immigrants inferior to the their northern and western European neighbors:

> About 1882, the character of our immigration changed in a very remarkable manner. … Illiterate, docile, lacking in self-reliance and initiation and not possessing Anglo-Teutonic conceptions of law, order, and government, their coming has served to dilute tremendously our national stock, and to corrupt our civic life.[3]

---

[1] Robert Benchley, "Review of the Marx Brothers in *I'll Say She Is*," *Life* (1924).
[2] Edward Harrigan quoted in Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 111.
[3] Ellwood Cubberley, *Changing Conceptions of Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909), 14-15.

The fear of the new immigrants and their corrupting laughter would become what will be termed in this dissertation the new humor.[4]

I contend that middle-class Anglo Americans feared that their values and ethics would be denigrated and devalued by comic vaudevillians of the early twentieth century. This new form of humor was perceived to be a product of Eastern and Southern European immigrant vaudeville comedy that "laughed at and not with you."[5] Edward Harrigan, the librettist of the popular *Mulligan Guard* series of turn-of-the-twentieth-century musicals, went on to clarify that "it isn't native, it isn't New York," by way of explaining the mocking of Americanness espoused by the new humor.[6] The contradiction that I would like to explore in this chapter is how the new humor of the vaudeville stage, which had its origins in nineteenth-century theatrical forms including the comic Yiddish theater, minstrelsy, medicine shows and burlesque comedy, created distinctly American forms of popular entertainment. Comic vaudeville would draw from these entertainments that were created primarily by the underclasses of ethnic immigrants, black Americans, and women.

Cultural critics, authorities, and reformers who wanted to define Americanness through middle-class Anglo traditions and morals came into direct conflict with these new Americans that were depicting an alternative definition of Americanness on the comic vaudeville stage. How the performance of the new humor in the vaudeville era came to be associated with the underclasses of these nineteenth-century popular entertainments is examined through the work of comic performers who incorporated

---

[4] Chapter 2 discusses the origins and uses of the new humor during the progressive era in the United States.

[5] Edward Harrigan quoted in Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 111.

[6] Ibid.

these forms into their acts, including Eddie Cantor, W.C. Fields, Buster Keaton, Groucho Marx, Sophie Tucker, and Bert Williams.

Buster Keaton through his 1921 silent film, *The Playhouse*, is examined as a case study on the comic vaudeville form at the end of this chapter. This film is a rare recorded document that depicts Keaton's stage humor as the apotheosis of the multiple forms of nineteenth-century comedy discussed here, coming together in one performance. *The Playhouse*, as the title indicates, provides a unique opportunity to see Buster Keaton, as well as his father Joe Keaton, at work in vaudeville and the multiplicity of acts that were created for the early twentieth-century comic stage.

I am adding to the current conversation on the historical and sociocultural significance of popular entertainments in the United States by examining these comic vaudevillians, among others that are discussed in subsequent chapters of this dissertation, who asserted a new vision of what it meant to be an American in the first two decades of the twentieth century during the progressive era. The evolution of American vaudeville comedy during the early twentieth century is traced by examining these distinct popular comic entertainments, and how the new humor of vaudeville emerged from the nineteenth-century American stage.

From the *Shtetls* of Eastern Europe to the American Vaudeville Stage

During a five-a-day[7] performance week, all it would take is one routine to "die" to send the act packing for good as management had a line-up of many alternatives to take the failed act's spot on the bill. The terms to "kill," "put it over," to "draw blood," or create "a laugh riot," indicated the immediate necessity, not only to entertain, but to do so

[7] Acts consisted of between two and ten performances on any given day. Five-a-day were an average number of performances.

in a big, bold, and directly effective way, that would "knock 'em dead" and leave no room for another act to follow up.[8] These intentional metaphors for the success of an act indicated an intensity tantamount to physical violence that happens without warning, hits its mark, and ends quickly and, if successful, with a massive response of cheers, clapping, and foot stamping from the audience.

The legitimate theater was perceived to promote a quiet and thoughtful response to a play of literary merit. The comic vaudeville stage conversely encouraged audience response and participation in a way that was to be discouraged according to critics and progressive reformers as it incited spectators to eschew polite and disciplined appreciation for the performing arts, as well as stimulated the violent outbursts and crude behaviors that had characterized the nineteenth-century burlesque and variety theaters. In 1914, drama critic Carolyn Caffin wrote a trenchant evaluation of the effect of vaudeville as a vital and attention-getting performance form:

> If humor be the medium, not a single line must misfire. If it be vulgarity, it will be grosser than the audience, as individuals, would stand for. If it be skill, it must be proved as you watch it. You could never amuse an audience by displaying to it a specimen of skillful and minute engraving, the result of many years of toil. … in every case the effect must be vivid, instantaneous, and unmistakable.[9]

For critics of the vaudeville stage like Caffin, extreme behavior that shocked and pleased with a "vulgarity" that would titillate and energize its spectators with its eccentricity was a way for the audience to show its appreciation while being a vital part of the

[8] Will M. Cressy, "Putting It Over," *The Green Book Magazine* (March 1916), 547-52, in *Selected Vaudeville Criticism,* Andrew Slide, ed. (Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1988), 218-22.

[9] Carolyn Caffin, *Vaudeville* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 15-16.

performance itself. One of the antecedents of this vulgar, “vivid, instantaneous, and unmistakable” humor can be found in the comic Yiddish theater.

The migration and subsequent immigration of Eastern European and Russian Jews brought with them a popular entertainment type that would become a part of comic entertainments in the resorts of upstate New York known colloquially as the Borscht Belt – that of the *tummler*. The *tummler* ridiculed and taunted guests at traditional Jewish weddings in the *shtetls* (small villages with large Jewish populations) and eventually became prominent in New York with the mass immigration of Slovak and Russian Jews in the late nineteenth century. *Tummler*[10] comes from the Yiddish meaning “one who makes a racket,” and *tummeln* “to go among the people, cavort.”[11] The *tummler* traveled with immigrants and found a place in the Yiddish theater of the Lower East Side and American vaudeville with comic solo-acts and monologists like Groucho Marx, Eddie Cantor, and Fanny Brice. *Tummlers* became a part of the early-twentieth-century new humor of cynicism, aggression, and humiliation that was a significant part of popular stage comedy. By 1900 the comic actors of the Yiddish theater were becoming as popular as their more mainstream rivals in the American vaudeville form of comedy, and, in 1905, settlement house movement scholars commented that saloons and dance halls were being converted at an alarming rate as “every important street on the Lower East Side has its glaring electric sign which announces ‘Jewish Vaudeville House’ or ‘Music Hall.’”[12] Sixty percent of the vaudeville audience in 1910 was working class, according to a settlement house survey, with only thirty-six percent comprised of the “clerical

---

[10] In Yiddish – *tumler*.

[11] John D. Donahue and Richard J. Zeckhauser, “The Tummler’s Task,” (Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University, 6 March 2012), 118.

[12] Paul Klapper, “The Yiddish Music Hall,” *University Settlement Studies* 2, no. 4 (1905): 20-1.

class." Yiddish vaudeville was more often than not located in the commercial entertainment areas, either within or at least bordering working-class neighborhoods. Theaters in Manhattan alone were founded in large numbers on such impoverished streets as 14th Street, 125th Street, Eighth Avenue, Grand Street, and the Bowery.[13]

The Yiddish theater, which was to produce many great comedy acts like Fanny Brice, Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson, Sophie Tucker, and Weber and Fields, would come under scrutiny as early as 1905. Ethnic performances were thought to be coded through foreign languages and stage traditions that encouraged the immigrant-friendly audiences to question their assimilation to the American middle class. Responding to the Yiddish music hall comic performers, one settlement worker observed, "The songs are suggestive of everything but what is proper, the choruses are full of double meanings, and the jokes have broad and unmistakable hints of things indecent."[14] The presumed collusion between performer and spectator by reform-minded Americans revealed a prejudiced distrust of ethnic vaudevillians – particularly those who made reference to a cultural heritage that they could not understand and consequently feared.

One of the many stage techniques that the Yiddish comic theater used that was perceived as suspect by authorities, yet would become a successful tool on the comic vaudeville stage, was performer/audience interaction. Unlike the legitimate literary theater, which relied on a quiet civilized respect for the fourth wall of emotional reality onstage, vaudeville comedy required the moment-to-moment improvisational element of surprise and awe, matched with a need to capture the attention of men, women, and

---

[13] Kathy Lee Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986),143.

[14] Klapper, "Yiddish Music Hall," 22. For audience responses to the Yiddish Theater, see Richard Butsch, *Making American Audiences*, 132-35.

children of the working and middle classes as well as some "slumming" upper classes, all during a five-to-ten minute act framework. If the act did not engage immediately and entice the desires and comic interests of the spectators directly in front of them, the comedians would be given "the hook" and it would be on to the next act.

For the *tummler*-influenced comedians of Eastern European heritage, the development from Yiddish theater and the language of the *shtetl*, and its Anglo-American confrontation, became the comic's battleground. As sociologist John Murray Cuddihy writes with regard to Jewish versus Gentile representations in American society in the early immigrant days of the twentieth century: "[T]he 'serious and restrained' words of your liberal-Reform Jews will 'pass,' but the mocking impudence of your *schlemiels* … will not pass."[15] An example of the humor of the *shtetl* can be observed in the vaudeville act of Groucho Marx captured in the Marx Brothers's 1932 film *Horse Feathers*.[16] In a scene when Groucho and Chico are pretending to give a young woman (Thelma Todd) a singing lesson, he is asked by a jealous boyfriend what purpose his presence at this event serves. He replies, "I'm the plumber. I'm just hanging around in case something goes wrong with her pipes." Groucho pauses and then acknowledges his bad joke by turning to the audience/camera in an aside and commenting, "That's the first time I've used that joke in twenty years." As Chico continues to play the piano, Groucho stands up and walks directly to the camera, and in another aside to the theatre's audience, says, "I've got to stay here. But there's no reason you folks shouldn't go out into the lobby until this

[15] John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974), 126.
[16] *Horse Feathers* is a Marx Brothers film that is an example of their vaudeville school act, and is discussed in Chapter 3 as part of discussion of the new humor.

thing blows over."[17] Groucho's self-deprecating commentary on his attempts at humor and the absurdity of the whole scene asks the audience not to take him seriously and, in fact, not to bother with sitting and watching the scene at all. These comic, self-denigrating, vaudevillian insults and asides were derived from the tradition of taunting and teasing audiences by the *tummlers* of the *shtetls*.

The Formation of American Vaudeville

Vaudeville comedy was also informed by early-nineteenth-century American popular entertainment forms. The vaudeville structure, format, and choice of acts had its origins in minstrelsy, medicine shows, and burlesque comedy. Foundational vaudeville historians examined here, including Robert C. Allen, Douglas Gilbert, Albert McLean Jr., David Nasaw, and Robert C. Toll, discuss the evolution of nineteenth-century popular entertainments, particularly minstrelsy, medicine shows, and burlesque comedy, as paramount in the development of the new humor of vaudeville comedy.[18] These popular performance scholars make the connection between class, ethnicity, and gender that I explore in relationship to the new humor of the comic vaudeville stage in this dissertation.

Minstrelsy emerged in the 1830s. It was structured as a semicircle of four or five (sometimes more) white male performers (there were very rarely female performers in the antebellum minstrel show) made up with racial "blacking-up" of greasepaint or burnt

---

[17] The Marx Brothers, *Horse Feathers*, screenplay by Burt Kalmar, Harry Ruby, and S.J. Perelman, director Norman McLeod (Paramount Pictures, 1932; Universal DVD, 2004).

[18] Seminal texts in popular entertainments of the nineteenth century and their influence on the early twentieth century comic vaudeville stage include, Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville: It's Life and Times* (New York: Dover Publications, 1940); Albert McLean Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Frankfort, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965); David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Robert C. Toll, *On With the Show: The First Century of Show Business in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

cork and adorned in absurdly oversized and/or ragged "Negro" costumes. The minstrel performers played a variety of instruments including banjo, fiddle, bone castanets, and tambourine. The show was divided into three parts, the first of which was a random selection of songs interconnected with stereotyped "Negro" jokes and foolishness; the second part (or "olio") featured performers that specialized in comedic dialogues, malapropism-laden "stump speeches," and cross-dressed "wench" routines. The third part was a scenario, usually set in the South, comprised of music, dance, and burlesque.[19] It is the structure of minstrel shows that most concerns the format that burlesque would retain and vaudeville would inherit and refine into the early twentieth century.

The minstrel show, according to theater historian Laurence Senelick, "was one of the few truly indigenous American entertainments, and made a profound impression worldwide. Its influence can be traced in much American popular music and theatre, and many outstanding performers, including Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson, and Bert Williams, owed a great deal to its traditions."[20] An example of minstrelsy and its legacy in vaudeville can be seen in the two-man act of Eddie Cantor and Bert Williams during a 1919 Ziegfeld *Follies* performance.[21] In this comic sketch, Cantor plays a recent college graduate and the son of a railway porter wearing white horn-rimmed glasses, affecting a mincing walk, and in blackface. The porter is played by the West Indian immigrant vaudevillian Bert Williams who also wears the burnt cork of the minstrel show. The hardened father is angry that his son has not turned into a football hero while away at

[19] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5-6.

[20] Laurence Senelick, "Minstrel Shows," in the *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, Second Edition, Don B. Wilmeth, ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 447.

[21] Herbert G. Goldman, *Banjo Eyes: Eddie Cantor and the Birth of Modern Stardom*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 59; Eddie Cantor, "Bert Williams – The Best Teacher I Ever Had," *Ebony* 13, no. 8 (June 1958): 103-06.

school, and is about to strike him when Cantor exclaims in a high-pitched whine, "Remember, Daddy, I have a temper," to which Williams replies, "I'll show you where you got it from!" The sketch ends with Williams placing his porter's cap on his son's head, saying, "Pick up them bags! This is my graduation and your commencement."[22] Several tropes of minstrelsy on the vaudeville stage are at work in this two-man blackface act between a Jew and a Bahamian. Comic acts like Cantor and Williams presented a fractured vision of the "American" born of the new humor through the lens of class, ethnicity, and gender. The class distinction between a working class father and his college-educated son; the macho patriarch and his effete, feminized progeny; ethnic comedy and interracial casting via blackface; the pragmatic and common sense older generation versus the intellectual and impractical younger generation, are all reflected in this conflict as performed by the new humorists. By juxtaposing opposite types and shattering them through comic satire, thereby re-envisioning what it means to be working class and middle class, masculine and feminine, Jewish and black, masculine and feminine, and ultimately redefining what it means to be American, these kinds of comic acts confront the notion of "the American" through vaudeville comedy and its techniques developed out of popular entertainments of the nineteenth century such as minstrel shows.

Eddie Cantor, a headliner with the Ziegfeld *Follies*, remembered the glory days of vaudeville: "Those never-to-be forgotten Ziegfeld nights … listening to the devastating, cheer-provoking lines of Will Rogers! – lines that would be just as big today …. The pantomime of Bert Williams, the robust humor of W.C. Fields, the songs of Fanny

---

[22] Anthony Slide, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 84; Camille F. Forbes, *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and the Story of America's First Black Star* (New York: Basic *Civitas* Books, 2008), 273.

Brice," and also included Mae West and the Marx Brothers in his who's-who of American vaudeville comedy.[23] Cantor's admittedly nostalgic reminiscences of comedic vaudeville acts recognize the importance of the legacy of popular nineteenth-century comic entertainments.

Another popular performance form that informed vaudeville was the medicine show. In his autobiography, Buster Keaton writes that during the early 1890s his father Joe Keaton and the escape artist Harry Houdini owned a traveling show called the "Mohawk Indian Medicine Company."[24] Medicine shows were an amalgamation of "entertainment, sermon, and doctor's house call," and included "[d]og-and-pony shows, magic tricks, pie-eating contests, mediums [spiritualism and séances being a fad of the era], and menageries [freak shows, and human oddities]" all meant to get audiences to purchase bogus cure-alls.[25] Keaton relates the nature of medicine shows, writing: "Pop did his [comic antics], dances and flip-flaps, Mom played her saxophone solos, and Houdini did a few card tricks and astonished the customers by getting out of the local sheriff's handcuffs with the greatest of ease."[26] The Mohawk Indian Medicine Company show featured a charlatan played by Houdini: "the 'doctor' who sold Kickapoo Elixir for a dollar a bottle, or six for five dollars. It was good, to hear Dr. Houdini tell it, for everything from the barber's itch to galloping consumption."[27]

Medicine shows were the offspring of the medieval European traveling shows that wooed spectators with exotic stories and comic interludes, and sold remedies in the

---

[23] Eddie Cantor with Jane Kesner Ardmore, *Take My Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957).

[24] Buster Keaton with Charles Samuels, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1982; 1960),18-19.

[25] Ann Anderson, *Snake Oil, Hustlers, and Hambones: The American Medicine Show* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2000),1.

[26] Keaton with Samuels, *Wonderful World of Slapstick*,19.

[27] Ibid.

village square. Laurence Senelick notes that in order "[t]o meet competition from vaudeville, the medicine show began to offer an idiosyncratic form of variety only occasionally broken by a commercial message."[28] These commercial messages were delivered by the charlatan disguised as a doctor or scientist in the tradition of the mountebank.

The mountebank was a performer who began in tandem with the *Commedia dell'Arte* players, and found his way across Renaissance Europe to the United States in the form of the medicine show charlatan – "a performer who trafficked in potions and dentistry – which literally means 'he who jumps on a bench.'"[29] Prevalent in medieval Europe (1350-1600) and particularly in Venice, the *zanni* (comic servant) would team with the mountebanks to sell their wares while the other *Commedia* maskers (like Pantalone, Capitano, and Columbina) entertained and diverted audiences. Charlatan – coming from the Italian *ciarlatano* or "one who sells salves or other drugs in public places, pulls teeth, and exhibits tricks of legerdemain"[30] – was reflected in the mask of *dottore* (doctor) – the pseudo-intellectual, pedantic lecturer. The charlatan made his way to the United States and further developed in the nineteenth century as a fast-talking con-artist who impersonated a "doctor" who knowingly sells counterfeit medicine. The charlatan ultimately became a central performer in the American medicine show.[31]

Beginning in the early nineteenth century and continuing well into the 1940s, the medicine-show charlatan was a pitchman who toured the United States with false promises of eternal youth and good health. Senelick notes that these "Northern American

---

[28] Laurence Senelick, "Medicine Shows," in *The Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, Second Edition, Don B. Wilmeth, ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 434.

[29] Grete de Francesco, *The Power of the Charlatan* (New Haven: Yale University, 1939), 1.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Anderson, *Snake Oil*, 2-3.

descendants of the mountebanks of Renaissance Europe" primarily functioned as "itinerant peddlers of patent medicines, working from caravan wagons, enlivened their sales pitch with variety acts, ranging from simple card tricks and banjo solos to the elaborate pow-wows and war dances of the turn-of-the-century Kickapoo shows."[32] At times the medicine show was the only entertainment provided to isolated towns and their "farmers, miners, loggers, and oil-field workers."[33] The American medicine show was "a hybrid of popular culture and confidence games" which provided entertainment as well as the mystery of remedies in a bottle.[34]

The influence of the medicine show charlatan can be witnessed in relationship to W.C. Fields's vaudeville and later film comedies. Fields began his vaudeville career at the turn of the twentieth century, according to a 1904 interview.[35] At the age of ten, after having seen a juggling act known as The Burns Brothers, Fields claims to have found some fruit on the ground on his way home, and began to learn how to juggle inspired by what he had just seen on the vaudeville stage. Fields would claim, "I had a fatal facility to juggle."[36] He developed a silent act, eventually with the assistance of his wife Hattie, calling himself "The World's Greatest Eccentric Juggler."[37] Fields, a consummate user of hyperbole – the mark of the mountebank – proves that, in this instance at least, he was not exaggerating as a recreation of his juggling act can be seen in *Sally of the Sawdust* (1925)[38] and again in *The Old Fashioned Way* (1934).[39] Fields moved from the silent

---

[32] Senelick, "Medicine Shows," 434.
[33] Ann Anderson, *Snake Oil*, 2.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Unidentified reviewer, "W.C. Fields: An Appreciation," in *The Theatre* (March 1904).
[36] *W.C. Fields Straight Up*, writ., Joe Adamson and Ronald J. Fields, dir., Joe Adamson, prod. Robert B. Weide and Whyaduck Productions, DVD, Direct Cinema Limited, 2004.
[37] Ronald J. Fields as quoted in Ibid.
[38] *Sally of the Sawdust*, Paramount Pictures, DW Griffith, director, writ. Forrest Hallsey from the play *Poppy* by Dorothy Donnelly, 1925.

"Eccentric Tramp Juggler," to the complex verbal exchanges of speeches and dialogue onstage, and in his later films that he often improvised from and/or wrote under various pseudonyms.[40]

The legacy of the nineteenth-century medicine show pitchman is ever-present with the master juggler, erudite wit, and carnival huckster.[41] Fields did his own vaudeville variation of the medicine show charlatan always looking to lure his audiences into overblown assurances that what they were seeing was skillful and knowledgeable – and not what it actually was – a fairground performer's trick of the eye and sleight of hand. Fields combined the manipulation of objects with his speech-making (otherwise known as the stump speech)[42] to great effect right from the beginning of his career, when one critic noted: "[I]n 1902 he appeared at Mr. Moss's Palace of amusing and interesting sights, he was pronounced not merely the quintessence of originality, but a fellow with an infinite zest – one who could make and see a joke when others were searching for it, and its solution."[43] This contradiction of what the eye sees and what the speech is actually commenting upon, and their seemingly divergent meanings and interpretations, was developed as Fields drew from the mountebanks of late-nineteenth-century medicine shows.

The interplay between the physical and the verbal was to distinguish Fields even further from other vaudevillians of the period. Fields introduced the "Pool Table" act in 1908, and was immediately praised by the *New York Star*:

---

[39] *The Old Fashioned Way*, Paramount Pictures, William Beaudine, dir., story by Charles Bogle – W.C. Fields, 1934.

[40] Pseudonyms including Charles Bogle, Mahatma Kane Jeeves, and Otis Criblecoblis.

[41] Ronald J. Fields, ed., *W.C. Fields by Himself: His Intended Autobiography with Hitherto Unpublished Letters, Notes, Scripts and Articles* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973),14-18.

[42] The stump speech act is discussed in Chapter 2.

[43] Unidentified author, "London Hippodrome" program (April 1904), 10.

> Mr. Fields does all kinds of things with all kinds of articles. What he can't do with billiard balls and billiard cues; with hats and cigars and other articles is scarcely worth doing. … Mr. Fields'[s] comedy is quaint, unforced and quite unique. No wonder managers pay him a big salary for making their patrons laugh. He does that all right, and some more besides."[44]

Fields's pool table act adopted comic asides and then full-fledged monologues in which he never actually achieves his goal of playing the game in question. Fields, an expert juggler and excellent athlete, made a career of making it look as if he were incompetent, and when he intentionally missed his shots, his gruff and mumbled asides became his trademark, as one of his favorite euphemisms for avoiding the censors – "Godfrey Daniel!" – depicts. As film comedy took hold, Fields worked his way into Mack Sennett shorts and finally Hollywood feature films (with Paramount Pictures, and then, Universal Pictures), where his signature rambling comic speeches and wise-cracking, under-the-breath insults made him the sixth highest paid entertainer in the United States in the mid-to-late 1930s.[45]

Fields's medicine show routines were first recorded in his silent film work, including *The Pool Sharks* (1918) and *Sally of the Sawdust* (1925 – directed by the legendary D.W. Griffith). Both of these silent films recreated his vaudeville acts, and *Sally of the Sawdust* shows Fields as comedic juggler and mountebank in a traveling medicine show that uses the swindling of an unsuspecting "rube" in order to survive. Fields has to protect the interests of his only family member, a daughter who is a dancer in the company and his assistant onstage. He used the charlatan's come-on pitch to

---

[44] Unidentified reviewer, "W.C. Fields Pool Table Act," *New York Star* 1, no. 12 (19 December 1908): 8.

[45] Fields, *Intended Autobiography*, xiii.

unsuspecting audiences through a baroque barrage of Victorian sounding words that were meant to mask his huckster intentions as well as deflect his lack of knowledge or wishing to avoid answering difficult and accusatory questions. Fields wrote most of the stories of his later films based on his vaudeville routines from the 1900s and 1910s, and his own dialogue (under pseudonyms) as well as being the master of the story that obfuscated his duplicitous intentions. An example of Fields as charlatan is witnessed when he is asked in *My Little Chickadee* (1940) during a hand of poker if it was "a game of chance," to which Fields replies, "Not the way I play it. No."

An early sound comedy that is a document of his stage work is *The Old Fashioned Way* (1934). Fields is the manager of a vaudeville troupe that also puts on melodramas (here the nineteenth-century temperance drama, *The Drunkard*). We see and hear Fields reenact these forms of vaudeville acts, ending with an amazing juggling sequence with cigar boxes. Fields brought the world of the medicine show to vaudeville and subsequently to his films, where he played two character types of the hen-pecked middle-class husband, and the medicine show charlatan that would "never give a sucker an even break."[46]

The third form of popular entertainment to inform vaudeville was burlesque. Burlesque in America was a product of the Victorian music hall beginning in the 1840s. It became popular when performer Lydia Thompson and her "British Blondes" came to the United States from England in 1868, merging the Victorian stage tradition with an American sensibility that would be quite successful with audiences all over the country until the 1890s. Beginning in the 1870s, the New York burlesque shows drew from other American popular entertainments such as minstrel shows with their three-part structure,

[46] Also the title of a 1941 W.C. Fields film.

which included songs and lewd comedy sketches; olios and male acrobats, singers, and magicians; parodies – burlesques – of politics (using the stump speech), or a current play. The "wow" finish was usually a male-oriented entertainment such as an erotic dancer, or a boxing or wrestling match. As Robert C. Allen points out: "[T]he takeoffs on venerated objects of high culture and punning rhymed couplets spoken by cross-dressed women were gradually eliminated as burlesque increasingly became centered around feminine sexual display – in the cooch dance of the 1890s; in its jazzed-up successor, the shimmy, in the 1910s."[47] The American form of burlesque flourished in the 1890s with an ever-increasing movement toward female nudity as the final act. For female burlesque comic dancers, like Lydia Thompson, the new trend toward the display of the female body began the separation of the voice (her comic commentary) from the body (her erotic dance that would become the "cooch" and the "shimmy"). Female burlesque performers who wanted to continue the success of their comic sketches and stump speeches, as well as the sexual innuendo of their songs and dances, would attempt to clean up their acts in order to move up to the more respectable vaudeville stage. By the early twentieth century, burlesque would tour on two national circuits (known as "wheels") in competition with, but separate from, the vaudeville circuit. In New York, burlesque houses like Minsky's at the Winter Garden would become the place for a mostly male working-class audience to see the sensual, and sometimes fully nude, cooch and shimmy dancing. Vaudeville would be performed at upscale venues like the Palace and Victoria Hammerstein theaters that catered to a lower and middle-class clientele of men, women, and even children.

[47] Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 30.

As vaudeville began to attract a more middle-class audience, burlesque began to change especially with regard to representations of womanhood onstage. Robert C. Allen states that "between 1870 and 1940, burlesque troupes toured every part of the United States and its territories – from New York to Klondike mining camps."[48] However, the early success of burlesque threatened moral Anglo middle-class sensibilities and caused it to be marginalized and condemned for its impertinency and mockery. The first season of American burlesque in particular was disruptive and threatening, because it represented a theatrical world without set limits, where any male-dominated institution or authority, was perceived to be under attack. Ultimately, Allen concludes, "the burlesque performer – showing herself, showing off, showing up the hapless male characters she took on in repartee – literally and figuratively embodied this world" where anything might happen.[49]

The more burlesque began to grow in popularity particularly with middle-class New York theater audiences, the more it unsettled critics and reformers: "[There was] something new and troubling in [burlesque's] power to entrance the spectator with displays of women in revealing costumes who were dangerously impertinent in their mocking male impersonations, streetwise language, and nonsensical humor."[50] The mockery of middle-class American values in burlesque was to find its way into vaudeville comedy in the form of comic commentary on class, ethnicity, and gender roles.

The popularity of burlesque in 1869 led critic Richard Grant White to comment, "The peculiar trait of burlesque is its defiance both of the natural and the conventional. … the result is absurdity and monstrosity. Its system is a defiance of system. It is out of

---

[48] Ibid, 29.
[49] Ibid, 28-29.
[50] Ibid, 28.

all keeping. … [B]urlesque casts down all the gods from their pedestals."[51] Grant's assessment of burlesque – and its "defiance" of social systems through laughter and satire of male dominated authority – as an affront to "the natural and the conventional" confirms the contention that burlesque humor posed a threat to the established order of Americanness.

The transition of the world of burlesque (and in this case minstrelsy as well) to vaudeville comedy can be observed in the comic vaudeville actor, singer, and dancer Sophie Tucker. Born of Russian-Jewish parents (née Kalish), Tucker immigrated to the United States in 1887 at only three months old. Sophie Tucker began as an amateur in New York City at the 125th Street Theatre in Harlem. Here she performed for the first time in blackface, and soon was billed as "The World-Renowned Coon Shouter." One of her first professional appearances was at Tony Pastor's 14th Street Theatre, and she was subsequently booked on the Manchester and Hills burlesque circuit.[52] In 1909 the *New York Dramatic Mirror* reviewed Tucker's act noting her connection to burlesque: "Sophie Tucker is another recruit from the lower rungs of the vaudeville and amusement ladder, who is about to find her own. She certainly deserves it! Seldom is such a vivacious, intense, and entertaining personality found in one body."[53] What Tucker brought from the "lower rungs" of burlesque was a comic voice along with bawdy humor in her songs and dances – all "in one body." The *Dramatic Mirror* anticipated that Tucker would not remain a comic vaudevillian for long, and she would be wooed away from "the variety stage and we will no longer hear her sing 'The Cubanola Glide' … and

[51] Richard Grant White, "The Age of Burlesque," *Galaxy* (August 1869): 256-66.
[52] Slide, ed., *Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, 508-9.
[53] Unidentified reviewer, "Sophie Tucker," *New York Dramatic Mirror* (11 September 1909).

'The Wild Cherry Rag,'"[54] both popular numbers in her burlesque act as well.

Sophie Tucker brought the excess of burlesque with its mocking portrayals of blacks, ethnic Jews and Irish, as well as incorporating a sexualized vamp into her numbers – she embraced the extremes of body and voice, as the appellation of "coon shouter" promised.[55] Tucker recognized her success in vaudeville owed a debt to her burlesque days, as she explained to the *New York Dramatic Mirror* in a 1919 interview: "When I was a coon shouter, I executed a Jazz and Shimmie [sic] rhythm with every song. As inventors of Jazz and Shimmie, these other birds are wonderful aviators – their imagination takes such long flights. But don't wake them up. Just let them dream …"[56] Sophie Tucker took full credit for bringing blackface minstrelsy and jazz along with burlesque songs and dances to the middle-class, family-oriented vaudeville circuit.

The burlesque influence on vaudeville offended the middle-class sensibilities of some critics and entertainment reformers. As Laurence Senelick notes: "the blatant double entendre in the dialogue between straight man and 'talking woman,' as well as runway interplay between strippers and audience, enraged moralists."[57] It was this notion of the "talking woman" that disturbed the aesthetics of vaudeville audiences.

The "talking woman," according to popular performance historian Andrew Davis, consisted of three burlesqued female types including the ingénue, the soubrette, and the prima donna. As Davis notes, "The ingénue was a parody or over-the-top depiction of the naïve young girl," and the "principal talking woman in a show … [She was the] equal

[54] Ibid.

[55] An excellent examination of Jewish performers using blackface in performance at the turn of the twentieth century can be found in Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

[56] Unidentified interviewer, "Interview with Sophie Tucker," *New York Dramatic Mirror* (1 February 1919).

[57] Senelick, "Burlesque Show," 135.

of the comic and straightman."[58] The soubrettes were characterized as "semicoquette-semitomboy free spirits who whooped out blues and 'pep' songs, and twitted the men along the ramp about their baldness and virility," as comedy historian Rowland Barber observes.[59] The power of the soubrettes lay in the "older, wiser women who were sexual teases even more inaccessible than the ingénues," as performance theory scholar Jill Dolan writes.[60] The final talking woman was the prima donna and the principal singer of the show. She represented women of authority often portraying the overbearing wife or wealthy society matron. This burlesque female character type is represented in W.C. Fields's films by Kathleen Howard in *It's a Gift* (1934), as well as Margaret Dumont in relationship to Groucho Marx in *Animal Crackers* (1928 Broadway; 1930 film). On the burlesque stage, the dominant authority is invariably the prima donna.[61]

It was one thing when burlesque comedy was relegated to the lowbrow theaters, but social commentators and progressive reformers became troubled by the popularity and influence that burlesque had over its male patrons as it crept into more respectable vaudeville acts. The focus of burlesque as it moved further into the twentieth century shifted to the sexualized female body, and was consigned to the touring "wheels" that catered primarily to working-class men. The "talking women" of burlesque comedy were lost.

For the Anglo-American middle classes, burlesque came to be associated with a distorted vision of female sexuality onstage. A grotesque combination of age, race,

---

[58] Andrew Davis, *Baggy Pants Comedy: Burlesque and the Oral Tradition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 65.

[59] Rowland Barber, *The Night They Raided Minsky's: A Fanciful Expedition to the Lost Atlantis of Show Business* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 201.

[60] Jill Dolan, "'What, No Beans?' Images of Women and Sexuality in Burlesque Comedy," *Journal of Popular Culture* (Winter 1984): 39.

[61] Davis, *Baggy Pants*, 66.

ethnicity, and excess of voice and body types was distasteful to the notion of the demure actresses of the generation that Mary Pickford would come to represent in early silent films as "the girl next door" and "America's sweetheart." Sexually aggressive performances of comic songs and dances that burlesqued white bourgeois classes – especially patriarchal authorities – posed a threat to respectable definitions of Americanness.

Comic Vaudevillians Putting It Over – From Nineteenth-Century Popular Entertainments to Vaudeville

As vaudeville's major influence was felt from approximately 1890 to just after the United States entered World War I in 1917, the October 1905 issue of *Midway*, a monthly periodical for amusement park professionals, claimed that vaudeville was "the acme of variegated theatrical entertainment"[62] and served as a superior model of good business practices for all performers. According to *Midway*, the success of vaudeville was derived from the "joyously, frankly absurd, it represents the almost universal longing for laughter, for melody, for color, for action and for wonder-provoking things." More importantly for this study:

> [Vaudeville] strikes directly at the heart interests and the foibles of the day. Vaudeville is creative and progressive. The mind of the vaudeville creator runs, lightning-like, ahead of the public craving for the ever "new"; and his voyage of discovery leads him into strange haunts. … [Where] human nature parades all her eccentricities and moods, at his beck, for the delectation of legions of pleasure seekers.[63]

---

[62] Unidentified reviewer, "In Vaudeville: A Short History of This Popular Character of Amusement," *Midway* 1 (October 1905): 27.

[63] Unidentified Reviewer, *Midway*, 27.

The "new" in all its manifestations was to be the watchword of the early twentieth century in America. With the new immigrants, the new middle class, the new women, and the new humor, the new was a harbinger of the industrial era where machines, factories, and automated assembly lines and offices with "white-collar" middle managers, began to dominate the quotidian – especially in major urban centers like New York, Boston, and Chicago – and new leisure time hours, along with the disposable income to devote to this newly created free time, became accessible to a vast majority of Americans.

This was an era of popular entertainment innovation as well as progressive reform. It was also the era of the new woman as a driving force both onstage and in the audience. In 1910 it was reported that working-class women and girls comprised one-third of the vaudeville audience. A Greenwich Village study noted that "some of the women go regularly every week all winter to Proctor's, Weber and Field's, or the Fourteenth Street Theatre, but rarely to an uptown theatre."[64]

The structure of episodic acts in vaudeville differed from these earlier forms of popular entertainments. Vaudeville, for example, would lose the ensemble numbers where all the performers on the bill would perform, particularly before the intermission and then again at the finale. In 1916 George A. Gottlieb, booking agent for the Palace Theatre in New York, described the coordination and arrangement of a standard vaudeville program, emphasizing the unique function within the whole of each act.[65] Since ensemble numbers and short playlets were no longer a part of the bill, a

---

[64] Louis Bolard More, *Wage-Earners' Budgets: A Study of Standards and Costs of Living in New York City* (New York, 1907), 142; Annie M. MacLean, *Wage-Earning Women* (New York, 1910), 72.

[65] George A. Gottlieb, "Psychology of the American Vaudeville Show From the Manager's Point of View," *Current Opinion* 60 (April 1916): 257.

consequence of this restructuring of vaudeville performances was to reduce the comic vaudevillian to the position of a "specialized agent within an industry," according to vaudeville historian Albert McLean, Jr.[66] In the modernist era of industrial production, vaudevillians were hired specifically because of their ability to specialize in an act with machine-like precision, upward of three times a day, six days a week, for as many weeks of the year they were booked on the vaudeville circuit. The pressure to be unique and make an act stand out from the rest of the bill was to make certain comic vaudevillians create acts that eschewed the decency and conventional middle-class morality that was expected of the "cleaned up" vaudeville that producer Benjamin Franklin Keith had promised his family-friendly audiences.

Vaudeville represented a discarding of self-consciousness and pretensions to a separation of artists from audiences through devices like the fourth wall, since vaudevillians were encouraged to develop an original and surprising relationship with their audiences. The comic's natural inclination was to be incendiary to get laughs in the moment through a direct communication with fans. Vaudeville comedy was sustained by the ever-increasing market for mass entertainment onstage, in silent films, and pre-code early sound comedies.

With a clear connection to the *lazzi* of *Commedia*, gags were the bread and butter of vaudeville comedians. A simple definition of the *lazzo* can be found in *Commedia* historian Giacomo Oreglia's description that, "the actor who plays the part of Pantalone must be good at ridiculous backfalls, his reaction to the receipt of bad news or startling

---

[66] Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Frankfort, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 17.

revelations."[67] These simple physical responses would give way to the virtuosity of the gags that had no necessary bearing on the stage action, and became the primary reason audiences would come to see certain vaudeville comics. Their gags defined and distinguished the comedians from one another. In fact, the refusal of straightforward storytelling and its intellectual sense and plot structure were eschewed for the enjoyment of the gags in and of themselves.

The plotless accumulation of gags, sketch comedy, and pratfalls created a humor that – coupled with the influx of new immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century – had an immediate emotional impact on mass audiences. The popular theater was concerned with leaving an impression first and foremost, so that folks would come back for more. The lack of narrative structure served to reflect a world in flux with unexpected turns of events that either aided in upward mobility or left families struggling for survival. The chaos of the quotidian for vaudeville audiences, and the burgeoning middle class of Americans, was therefore mirrored on the vaudeville stage.

"[Vaudeville requires] accurately timed physical buffoonery," noted entertainment critic Mary Cass Canfield in 1922, going on to praise vaudeville comedians by saying that, "All art is exaggeration. But in the American exaggeration there is always self-criticism, an undertone of humor, which is an attempt at fire extinguishing that does not reduce but curiously discolors the flame."[68] This notion that vaudeville had deceptive "undertones" that could be subversive influenced many of the comments of progressive era critics and reformers. The father of the newly emerging field of modern psychology, Sigmund Freud, also noted the subliminal nature of laughter in his 1905 study, *Jokes and*

---

[67] Giacomo Oreglia. *The Commedia dell'Arte* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 80-1.

[68] Mary Cass Canfield, "The Great American Art," *The New Republic* (22 November 1922): 334-35.

Their Relation to the Unconscious: "The need for energetic redirection as the circumvention of internal prohibitions [were] put in place by the superego" unleashed a sense of humor that promoted what reformers feared was the offensive nature of laughing at and mocking oppressive and institutional authority. Joking through ethnic humor, according to Freud, was used as a way of making public statements about illicit subjects, providing "a purpose … whose satisfaction would otherwise not have taken place."[69] Comic vaudevillians were able to confront issues of class, ethnicity, and gender, where other forms of entertainment could not. The way comic vaudevillians did this was known as "putting it over."

Putting it over consisted of set and improvised acts – the life-blood of vaudeville. Like their ancestors the *lazzi* and *canovacci* of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, stage routines were developed from gags and sketches as an amalgamation of acts that were planned, rehearsed, and repeated over time through improvisation, at various performances throughout the United States. The *lazzi* of *Commedia* can be considered a reflection of how societal structures were beset by gags, especially its nonsense moments that destabilize the logic of daily life. Comic cinema historian and theorist Tom Gunning indicates the importance of the gag in the structure of the slapstick film scenario, which can also be applied to the vaudeville sketch, when he observes:

> A structural analysis of gags and jokes (and therefore not only visual gags) might best describe them as an unexpected undermining of an apparent purpose, a detouring, if not derailing, of a rational system of discourse or action. The gag

[69] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Standard Edition of the *Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed., James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 117.

> suddenly interrupts, or radically redefines, the apparent predictability of an action or system, leaving its original goals shattered and in tatters.[70]

Making nonsense out of authority was the primary function of the vaudeville gag: masters are thwarted by their servants as in the *Commedia dell'Arte*, and the societal power structure begins to be questioned and distressed. This upending of power structures through gags and slapstick physicality found its way onto the vaudeville stage and into silent film comedy of the 1900s and 1910s, as medicine show and burlesque comic performers sought more lucrative popular entertainments to make their living. The notion of upsetting authority from its early sources of Greek Old Comedy, through the medieval comics, to the nineteenth and early twentieth-century stage, finds its architecture in the gag and the sketch. The mockery of institutions, class hierarchies, and the irreverence to these authorities through gags and comic vaudeville sketches threatened the dominance of Anglo-American middle and upper classes by the underclasses represented by recent immigrants and women.

Buster Keaton: Vaudevillian

Buster Keaton was one of the acknowledged masters of silent film comedy. What is less known is that Keaton began his comedy apprenticeship on the vaudeville stage with his parents in an act called the Three Keatons.[71] By focusing on Keaton's stagecraft rather than his film work, I examine the influence of nineteenth-century popular entertainments on vaudeville comedy, showing that Keaton is the superlative example of

[70] Tom Gunning, "Mechanisms of Laughter" in *Slapstick Comedy* eds., Tom Paulus and Rob King (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 139.

[71] Robert Knopf provides one of the most complete examinations of Keaton's vaudeville years, although his primary focus in the end is Keaton's later film work: Robert Knopf, *The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 36-7.

the merging of minstrelsy, medicine shows, and burlesque comedy in vaudeville during the first two decades of the twentieth century.[72]

How Keaton became a "Buster" is a vaudeville legend in which Keaton himself claims that the famous escape artist Harry Houdini named him after watching the young boy go crashing offstage and then returning to the boards unscathed. "My, what a Buster!"[73] relates Keaton in his autobiography, *My Wonder World of Slapstick*.[74] The image of a five-year-old boy being thrown across and offstage by his father, and audiences of adults and children alike laughing as the boy bounces back onstage thwarting his father's efforts in controlling him, provides a window into the many aspects of nineteenth-century popular entertainments that survived into early-twentieth-century American vaudeville acts. Though many of The Three Keatons's routines had a simple format, Buster's father, Joe, encouraged them to switch up the act nightly and trained Buster to improvise right from the beginning of his apprenticeship. Keaton observed, "We never bothered to do the same routines twice in a row. We found it much more fun to surprise one another by pulling any crazy, wild stunt that came into our heads."[75] This kind of shock and awe surprise was the stock in trade of The Three Keatons, father (Joe), son (Buster), and mother (Myra), and at the heart of vaudeville comedy.

A scenario that encompasses the dynamics of father and son as two-man act is described by Keaton where, while traveling on the road and using the available stock scenery depicting a picturesque and tranquil lake scene, "[Joe sauntered] to the footlights

---

[72] Buster Keaton's evolution from The Three Keatons to his early comedy silent films is discussed in Chapter 2.

[73] A "buster" meaning here to bounce back from being thrown around on the stage and potentially "busted."

[74] Keaton with Samuels, *Wonderful World of Slapstick*, 20.

[75] Ibid., 33.

and, pretending it was the brass footrail of a saloon, put his foot on the curved metal guard over the footlights. I did the same thing. As we stood there, each resting an elbow on a knee, he would ask:

> JOE: What will you have, scotch?
>
> BUSTER: [Shakes his head, "no."]
>
> JOE: Rye?
>
> BUSTER: No.
>
> JOE: Gin?
>
> BUSTER: No!
>
> JOE: What do you want then?
>
> BUSTER: Water!
>
> Grabbing me by the back of the neck he [turned] me around and walk[ed] me toward the curtain, meanwhile grumbling, "So it is *water* you want?" Then he [hurled] me into the painted water scene. As I hit the curtain, it [gave] quite a bit. While sliding to the floor, the drop's wooden strip [flapped] up, and I [was] trapped in it. The stagehands then [pulled] up the curtain a few inches to help me free myself.[76]

All the while mother Myra would accompany these father and son battles improvising on the saxophone. The patter between performers, also improvised, did not necessarily have to make sense or drive a storyline forward. In fact, the mere fact of a young boy of five being chastised for not ordering a proper drink in a bar, by his own father no less, then being thrown into the scenery – or offstage, or into the audience, depending on the moment in question – as a way of reinforcing discipline, was surreal in its logic, and this

[76] Keaton with Samuels, *Wonderful World of Slapstick*, 28.

nonsensical cause and effect would follow Keaton into his later one-man acts and silent films.

Comic vaudevillians on the touring circuit would utilize whatever was at hand while on the road to create improvised physical gags in which the acrobatic skills of the given performers would be exploited for laughs. The scenarios involved reversals of power and authority, as in The Three Keatons's case where a father tries to discipline his son only to have the son come right back and undermine his authority, physical strength, and paternal dominance. The significance of the struggles between fathers and sons; the powerful and the powerless; masters and servants, is key to the comedy of Buster Keaton in vaudeville (and ultimately his slapstick silent pictures). It shows Keaton to be a descendent of touring performance forms like minstrelsy and medicine shows.[77]

Keaton's white-faced, impassive "deadpan" expression with "slap-shoes," and a crushed hat lying flat on his head, was created during his apprenticeship while playing small-time vaudeville houses. The legacy of slapstick, derived from the *Commedia* prop of two pieces of wood slapped together to create loud sharp sounds as if hitting someone and knocking them down, informed Keaton's stage career from a young age. Keaton worked from improvised scenarios that did not rely on plot or character development. Keaton's improvisations were created on the spot with his fellow performers using props, sets, and costumes as a basis for in-the-moment inspiration. These ensemble gags were held together with a tenuous plot, with young Buster almost always being disciplined and chased by his father. The endings concern the tiny Buster getting away unscathed from his father after a series of physically dangerous and near-death experiences.

[77] The term slapstick is derived from the Italian *batacchio* or the two pieces of wood that were slapped together to make a hitting sound from the sixteenth century *Commedia*.

An excellent example of Keaton as a stage performer that used nineteenth-century stage techniques has been recorded in the silent film *The Playhouse* (1921). *The Playhouse* shows Keaton as a trained stage vaudevillian who plays a multiplicity of roles both onstage and backstage. Keaton's vaudeville gags and scenarios can be traced by reading this early silent film text to see how popular comic stage entertainments came to dominate his film work through the vaudeville stage. All of the elements of the comic vaudeville stage, and its roots in minstrel shows, medicine shows, and comic burlesque, can be witnessed in *The Playhouse*.[78] Written, produced, and directed (with Eddie Kline) by Keaton, and featuring the star in multiple roles, *The Playhouse* is a microcosm of the vaudevillian's world both on and backstage. This comic silent film is an encapsulation of the vaudeville aesthetic as it embraces popular comic forms of the nineteenth-century stage.

Buster Keaton explores the struggle of the comic vaudevillian and comedic disruption via the gag through a series of vaudeville acts from his early years on tour with his family as The Three Keatons. This silent short is the dream-like reality of a working-class man who toils unrecognized backstage, yet fantasizes of his success onstage, while winning the girl, becoming the hero/savior of his fellow vaudevillians, and entertaining a paying audience of various classes. *The Playhouse* can be viewed as the American dream embodied by a comic vaudevillian whose fantasy becomes reality on the vaudeville stage. However Keaton's vision is a much more ambivalent landscape of the underclass at the beginning of the twentieth century as it is also a document of American illusion as delusion.

---

[78] All references to this film are from *The Playhouse* in the *Buster Keaton Collection*, DVD, written, directed and performed by Buster Keaton (1921; Joseph M. Schenck Productions: St. Clair Vision, 2007).

The Playhouse begins as a monodrama of a stagehand that keeps daydreaming of himself as the actors, musicians, and even audience he is performing for. The protean personae of the hallucinatory reality in which Keaton discovers himself metamorphose from one stage to another, whether onstage, backstage, in the audience, or even at the box office. Even Keaton's presumed safe haven of a bedroom becomes yet another stage set, and the prop room – filled with objects that presumably ground him in the reality, and serves as his refuge from the dream world – cannot be trusted as stable. Keaton's anxiety of being lost and disoriented in a theatrical world that has no foundation is reflected in this dreamscape where he must physically perform the roles of an entire minstrel show, and even a trained monkey, in order to keep up with the constant changes that present themselves to him. As an example, Keaton literally plays all the roles of minstrelsy including the interlocutor and endmen (Tambo and Bones), complete with blackface and tap dancing.

True to the vaudeville aesthetic, everything that can go wrong does go wrong with the various acts as backstage, onstage, and audience collide, bringing all three worlds together in a seemingly chaotic juxtaposition. The disruption of gags in and of themselves, side-tracked and derailed by other even more bizarre gags, is a comic innovation for the vaudeville stage and subsequently slapstick silent films. One example from *The Playhouse* depicts the working-class aggression of Keaton's character as put-upon stagehand. In a sequence that features his resentment of being a wage slave, he punches a time clock by actually hitting it with his fist. Another moment comes when Keaton, again as stagehand, sets the stage manager's – and Keaton's boss – beard on fire. To help his immediate superior, Keaton punches another object this time around – the

glass case that houses a fire axe – and uses the axe to knock out the stage manager, proceeding to "shave" his burning beard and potentially decapitating the literal and figurative head of this backstage world. The aggression of this descendent of Arlecchino is exposed by his actions, as he resists his working-class servant position and the bullying of those in authority over him in the backstage hierarchy.

Another gag sequence shows Keaton using the backdrop of a painted ocean and pierces this fantasy landscape by jumping through it as if swimming in an actual ocean. Then we go backstage to see him beat on the stage manager through the same opening in the backdrop. The fantasy ocean becomes a reality after Keaton smashes open a water tank during an escape act reminiscent of Houdini's medicine show routines with Keaton's father Joe. After the escape artist becomes trapped inside the "mermaid" tank, Keaton breaks the glass with a giant mallet and the water from the tank gushes into the orchestra pit as well as the audience. As the spectators flee from the flood, Keaton escapes from the bully/stage manger using a bass drum as a boat in the now flooded pit. The stage has now become a real ocean, and the audience as well as the onstage and backstage realities come together in a final act that collides and fuses the stage fantasy with reality. The film ends with the stagehand, after surviving a myriad of disasters, eluding the bully and marrying his dream girl – but not before marking her neck with an "X" in order to not get her confused with her twin sister – a routine straight out of burlesque.

The vaudeville stage that Keaton grew up on, as well as the minstrel and medicine shows in which his parents performed, are reflected in this montage of staged realities. In Keaton this produces a comic juxtaposition of acts that showcase his physical skills as he portrays a hapless stagehand who loses his bearings and identity in this parody of the

world as a stage that is barely under control. Walls that are actually stage flats drop away and certainties shift from one to another as in an anxiety dream.

As Keaton attempts to keep up with these unstable existences, the physical comedy comes from his desperation and apprehension of performing the various duties of actor, spectator, stagehand, trained orangutan, and bewildered lover. The perpetual motion of these vaudeville acts keeps Keaton in a state of constant problem-solving, and the speed with which his reality keeps changing, produces a desperation that creates comic physical distress, or what the Futurist Marinetti called the key to the variety stage, *fisicofollia* – body-madness.[79]

Keaton's *The Playhouse* combines the onstage disruption of narrative through a series of comic vaudeville gags that serve as an overarching structure without a logical narrative. As the vaudeville show Keaton performs onstage, and maintains backstage, moves from his imagination to reality, his control over the narrative dissolves into a series of disrupted and chaotic events. The entire performance is a comic burlesque of a professional vaudeville show gone wrong. What constitutes "the show" is the deliberate disruption of the performance that culminates in a theater full of water and an audience running for the exit to escape this fantasy world from literally and metaphorically engulfing them. Keaton's vision of the vaudeville act as gag-driven entertainment is a film record of what Buster Keaton's work was like on the comic vaudeville stage.

Buster Keaton is the moonfaced dreamer caught in the nightmare of the modernist age. His version of the honest and naïve American is constantly being confronted by a world of fast forward motion. The staging of slapstick comedy was a lucrative business

[79] F.T. Marinetti, "The Variety Stage" in *Critical Writings*, ed., Gunter Berghaus, trans., Doug Thompson (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2006), 185-92.

for Keaton, W.C. Fields, Marie Dressler, the Marx Brothers, and Mae West, among many other vaudevillians turned film comedians of the 1910s and 20s.

With the advent of the new immigrant and the new woman, the early-twentieth-century comedy was influenced by the paradoxical relationship of the excitement and intensity of the new machine age, while embracing the "looking backward" of nineteenth-century aesthetic theorist Edward Bellamy[80] to the folk culture and performance traditions of Eastern and Southern European immigrants with the comic Yiddish theater, as well as American nineteenth-century popular entertainments such as minstrel shows, medicine shows, and burlesque comedy.

This comedic legacy created a theatricality and tension between past and present that characterized vaudeville comedy of the modernist era.[81] The return to ensemble playing and improvisation showed the modern-era man as a protean mix of possibilities of slipping into roles that would not be possible to enact in the strict class and social structures of nineteenth-century Europe and the United States. Servants rebelling against their masters; children against their parents; workers against their bosses; lower classes against the upper classes, and the call for labor unions and women's suffrage in the United States during the first decades of the twentieth century became fodder for comic vaudevillians.

The social and aesthetic paradigm shifts are symptomatic of the advent of the new immigrants and the new women. Reaching as far back as the comedic class and role inversions of the *Commedia dell'Arte* of sixteenth-century Italy and its *lazzi* (gags),

---

[80] Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (New York: New American Library, 2009); 1888.

[81] Harold B. Segel, *Pinocchio's Progeny* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 34-41.

battichio (slapstick), and *canovachi* (comedic scenarios) and the *tummlers* of Eastern Europe, as well as the mass migration to the United States in the early twentieth century, sociocultural upheavals were reflected in the new humor. As observed in this chapter, the new humor was derived from the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe and Russia, as well as such U.S. popular theater forms such as, minstrelsy, medicine shows, and burlesque. The advent of the modernist era and sociocultural changes in class, family, and industry, in addition to progressive reform politics in the United States, and how they affected the new humor in vaudeville comedy, led to a conflict between these new humorists and progressive era reformers during the first two decades of the twentieth century in the United States. This is the subject of Chapter 2.

Chapter 2

The New Humor: Putting It Over in the Progressive Era

> PUTTING IT OVER: To speak a line, to sing a line, to do a piece of action in such a way as to cause an audience to see, understand, comprehend and appreciate the intention and meaning.
>
> – Will M. Cressy (1916)[1]

In 1921, a critic for the *Dramatic Mirror* simply known as "Rose" reported on vaudevillian Will Rogers's recent shift from trick-roper to comic social commentator:

> Most of [Will Rogers's] monologue is political and it certainly was well put over by him. Although his rope stunts added greatly to his turn, he could have omitted these for a few moments and just talked, for his dry rural way of delivery had the house roaring after every story he delivered. … He has come back stronger than ever, with one of the best talking singles in vaudeville to-day [sic].[2]

Rogers was perceived to reach "ordinary folks" by embracing his humble, native upbringing in the Oklahoma Territory, born of Cherokee Indian parents in the late nineteenth century. From the vaudeville stage, his brand of political humor combined with his trick-roping stunts challenged the amorphous definition of what it meant to be an American.

Will Rogers's comic confrontation with Americanness is illustrated in a vaudeville routine recreated in his 1930 film, *So This Is London*. Rogers attempts to get a passport without having the proof of a birth certificate that officially states he is a citizen

---

[1] Will M. Cressy, "Putting It Over," *The Green Book Magazine* (March 1916), 547-52.

[2] "Rose" in *Dramatic Mirror* (19 November 1921), 743.

of the United States. The complexity of defining what characteristics constitute this notion of the "American" can be witnessed in the following exchange:

> PASSPORT OFFICIAL: But you are an American citizen?
>
> WILL ROGERS: I think I am. My folks are Indian both my mother and father had Cherokee blood in 'em. Born and raised in Indian Territory. Of course I'm not one of these Americans whose ancestors come over on the Mayflower, but we met 'em at the boat when they landed. And it's always been to the everlasting discredit of the Indian race that we ever let 'em land.[3]

The notion that Rogers, as a Native American, would have to prove his citizenship is both a source for comedy and a harsh reality of life in the United States in the early twentieth century. Two major critics of popular entertainment, Mary Cass Canfield and Robert Benchley, wrote about Rogers and the importance of his brand of comedic vaudeville within a few months of each other. "Will Rogers, a superman of coordination, swinging his lasso, complicated whirls and emitting dry patter at the expense of cabbages and kings, was quite justly the idol of his public,"[4] said Canfield. Benchley wrote, as if in response: "Will Rogers is the only living person who can get away with timely material and he changes his every day. […] If there is any wiser more discerning satire for the ages than [his] that has been produced in the last ten years, we haven't heard it."[5]

Will Rogers's humor stemmed from the juxtaposition of self-identified "real" Americans whose self-righteous nationalistic authority is contrasted with Rogers's actual

---

[3] *The Story of Will Rogers*, writ., Richard Hanser and Rod Reed, dir., Donald B. Hyatt, DVD, Shanachie Studios, March 25, 2003, originally released by NBC *News Presents*, 1961.

[4] Mary Cass Canfield, "The Great American Art," *The New Republic* (22 November 1922), 334-35.

[5] Robert Benchley, *Life* (15 February 1923), n.p., clippings file, Will Rogers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Native American Indian roots. Rogers stands as an outsider in his own country and points out the hypocrisy of discrimination and the marginalization of perceived minorities who have to prove themselves as being as much of an American as their self-appointed betters. Rogers's humor, combining showmanship with political commentary, reinforced the melting-pot notion of Americans by rejecting the nationalistic jingoism of assimilationist Anglo-Americans and their Mayflower ancestors. Rogers would achieve success on the comic stage and later on film, radio, and journalism through what will be referred to in this study as the new humor.

This chapter will first define the new humor and how it was practiced by comic vaudevillians. Four vaudeville acts and the comedians who performed them will be examined here with the primary focus on the ethnic comedy team of Joe Weber and Lew Fields, the family act of the Three Keatons, and the medicine show-inspired stump speeches of W. C. Fields and Will Rogers. These performers will be examined in relationship to progressive-era reformers and attempts to control and regulate popular entertainments on the vaudeville stage. I will evaluate the new humorists with regard to their engagement and challenges to Americanness driven by progressive-era reformers such as Jane Addams, Elbridge Thomas Gerry, and Josiah Strong, and the divide between high and lowbrow American entertainments from the 1880s to the early 1920s. Three examples of vaudeville acts, including ethnic acts, family acts, and stump speeches, will serve to put forward the idea that the new humor of vaudeville comedy was intentionally disruptive to Anglo-American values through satire, broad physical behavior, and the mocking of propriety within the middle-class. Progressive reformers, who felt that the American family combined with nationalist patriotism and ethics were coming under

attack through popular entertainments, began to agitate for reforms in support of the Americanization of vaudeville spectators through moral, educational, and civic-minded diversions. Audience's responses to the new humor on the vaudeville stage bring us nearer to an understanding of how significant comedy became, as an art form that critiqued the divisions of class and ethnicity during the progressive era. This chapter focuses on these divides that progressives wanted to exploit in order to promote an Anglo-American agenda, and how impoverished ethnic immigrants and their progeny were often targeted as sullying the aesthetics and culture of the American middle class.

By expanding on the work of scholars in the field of early-twentieth-century United States performance history, culture, and theory like Robert C. Allen, Henry Jenkins, Lawrence Levine, Albert F. McLean, Jr., Kathy Peiss, Anthony Slide, and Robert Snyder, in addition to sociocultural studies by Patricia Bradley, Paul R. Gorman, Stuart Hall, Desmond King, Jackson Lears, Walter Lippmann, and Michael McGerr, I focus on class and ethnicity as the basis of the new humor in comic performance. I show how the new humor came to be associated with lowbrow/offensive humor perpetuated by comedians who were recently arrived immigrants (particularly Jewish, Irish, Italian, and Slovak), or Native Americans (like Will Rogers) whose parents had suffered bigotry and xenophobia by being classified as poor, foreign, and worst of all, lacking in what was perceived to be a proper cultural education.

Whereas some cultural scholars tend to see the new humor of ethnic comedians as being a mainstream concession to Anglo-American audiences by trading in physical and cultural stereotypes, the comedians examined here did not adhere to what progressive reformers recommended to attract a wider Anglo-family audience, or if they did, they

performed in such a way as to mask their underlying intent. These performers were successful at being both offensive and popular by satirizing the attempts to Americanize ethnic immigrants and lower-class Native Americans, through the moral and cultural pretentions of the Anglo, middle and upper, classes.

Vaudeville became one of the most significant and ubiquitous forms of popular entertainment from the 1880s until the early 1920s in the United States. It employed more than 25,000 performers across the country; its influence was universal at the turn of the twentieth century and could be felt from American small-town stages to the Hammerstein's Victoria Theater of New York City.[6] The real success of the new humorists was that they reached a wide variety of audiences from all social classes, and some became examples of achieving the American dream of economic and career advancement.

Popular stage and film historians such as Henry Jenkins, Lawrence Levine, Rob King, and Kathy Peiss have examined the controls and standards put in place by reformers in order to edify the underclasses.[7] Reformers simultaneously set artistic and cultural boundaries while popular stage performers increasingly offered aesthetic and moral alternatives as the lower classes were cordoned off from middle-class

---

[6] Much of vaudeville's history, including its performers and acts, were researched from multiple sources including, but not exclusive to, Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Andrew Erdman, *Queen of Vaudeville: The Story of Eva Tanguay* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2012) and *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004); Marybeth Hamilton, *"When I'm Bad, I'm Better:" Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Robert Snyder, *Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[7] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Rob King, *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 8-11; Kathy Lee Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986), 163-84.

entertainments and recreations. In order to further explore the notion and fixation on regulation and censorship of popular comic entertainments and how they affected vaudevillians, it is of particular interest to work from cultural theorist Stuart Hall's essay "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular.'" Hall promotes the idea that there has always been a need to both appropriate and police popular culture for sociological purposes:

> [T]here is a more or less continuous struggle over the culture of working people, the laboring classes and the poor. … The changing balance and relations of social forces throughout that history reveal themselves, time and again, in struggles over the forms of the culture, traditions and ways of life of the popular classes.[8]

The "struggle over the culture of working people" that Hall describes here, will be used to observe the juxtaposition of popular entertainments with legitimized performing arts by categorizing the culture of the working classes as lowbrow, and not to be considered anything more than sheer diversion from the drudgery of the quotidian. Hall also makes the distinction that popular entertainments were established in and formulated by what he terms the "excluded classes," as they exist as a "culture of the oppressed" in perpetual struggle against, and as divergent from, the culture of dominant authority.[9] The point I wish to emphasis is the notion of popular culture – and specifically comic vaudeville entertainments – is based on the structural relationship between class and artistic form. Therefore, "popular" is defined here by the material conditions of the lower classes and their new immigrant aesthetic and cultural heritages, as well as native and first generation American citizens of the working classes.

---

[8] Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'" in Raphael Samuel, ed. *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 227.

[9] Ibid., 227-40.

Expanding from Hall's theory, it is important to examine the refusal of comic vaudevillians to be kept in their place by progressive reformers through sociocultural censure. The control over popular entertainments that reformers sought to put in place caused comic performers to circumvent these confines, as well as use them as fodder for their acts in defiance of oppressive Anglo-American authority. Cheap amusements during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, as cultural historian Kathy Peiss points out, developed from sociological and material conditions brought on by the depression of 1873, in addition to the massive influx of immigrants.[10] These conditions, along with the striking contrasts with regard to American class and cultural hierarchies, exacerbated the awareness of the ethnic working classes to their sense of national alienation.

During the progressive era there was a need for creating a sharp division between lowbrow popular entertainment and highbrow aesthetics in the performing arts in order to establish a singular American sensibility. Once this separation was established by cultural forces during the industrial transformation of the United States, a need to distinguish between edifying entertainments and frivolous ones for pure pleasure focused on drawing a line between popular ethnic working-class and Anglo-American middle-class performances. According to reformers, this divide would improve the moral and aesthetic values for assimilation into the Anglo-American hierarchical dream of success through upward mobility. For aesthetes, this potential assimilation could be found in highbrow cultural institutions like the legitimate theater – Shakespeare being a primary example – and Western European performance forms like opera and classical symphonic

---

[10] Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 11-16.

music, all of which paradoxically began as popular entertainments themselves.[11] These European studies in art and culture were juxtaposed by reformers against the lowbrow new immigrant-driven, burlesque, folk music and dance, and vaudeville comedy, derived from popular amusements of the nineteenth century.

Historian and social theorist Michael McGerr states that "by [1912], Americans could clearly see the outlines of modern existence – binding, confining, constraining, limiting."[12] The strictures of the early-twentieth-century industrialized and modernist United States, created by rules, regulations, and a regimented life of conformity to middle-class values and life styles, were parodied and critiqued by certain comedians of the period. Progressive reformers, who were meant to be advocates for the subjugated underclasses who desired to be considered fully recognized citizens of the United States, were now dictating morals and behaviors to the lower classes. However, some comic vaudevillians rejected the notion of the progressive movement and its focus on entertainments that promoted the "sins" of those Americans who did not subscribe to middle-class cultural authority.

Reformers often sought the collusion of critics and journalists to promote their agenda. The popularity of vaudeville at the beginning of the twentieth century could be seen in newspapers, like the *New York Times*, *New York Clipper*, *the New York Dramatic Mirror*, and *Variety*, offering daily reviews and articles about the performers and their stage acts. The critics of vaudeville also became respected and influential. Founder and chief entertainment critic for *Variety*, Sime Silverman's reviews, for example, were often

---

[11] For a detailed examination of the highbrow/lowbrow divide in relationship to Shakespeare's plays, European opera, and classical music see, Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

[12] McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 223.

instrumental for the bookings of new acts on the vaudeville circuit. His tastes were well known to be extremely conservative. Silverman and his fellow critics often set the tone as to what was respectable and noteworthy stage fare, and what was only of interest to the lower classes who could not discern aesthetic values. Toward the end of the popularity of the vaudeville era, critic Rob Wagner offered an assessment of why vaudeville comedy was on the wane:

> [T]hat the great majority of those whose lives are gray love color, skill, and sheer beauty in preference to sophisticated smart-cracking and the jaded thrills of sex-perversion jokes. …[W]hen the hard-boiled, rough-neck critics of *Variety* are shocked at the very stuff they are supposed to celebrate [in comic vaudeville acts], perhaps there is a touch of Puritanical decency in the worst of us.[13]

Vaudevillians began to challenge through their comedy those reformers who wished to ban offensive popular entertainments that promoted the self-criticism of Americanness.

The sociocultural watchdogs of the progressive movement mounted campaigns to clean up popular entertainment in order to create an edifying and "American" cultural highbrow landscape that would compete with the cultural heritage and aesthetic values of Western Europe. Reformer Jane Addams set the tone for the conflict between entertainments that cultivate middle-class values and those of popular entertainments such as "vaudeville shows, and five-cent theaters [that] are full of the most blatant and vulgar songs." For Addams offensive behavior and language on the comic stage was a direct result of "trivial and obscene words, … meaningless and flippant airs" which combined "to incite that which should be controlled, to degrade that which should be

[13] Rob Wagner, "Smart-Crackers and Cheese," quoted in *Rob Wagner's Script*, 2, no. 5 (14 September 1929): 1-2, 32.

exalted, to make sensuous that which might be lifted into the realm of the higher imagination." The intensity and movement of urban life was reflected on the popular stage, and, according to Addams, "it is nothing short of cruelty to over-stimulate [the] senses as does the modern city."[14]

Popular entertainment historian and theorist Robert C. Allen has argued that "cleaned-up vaudeville" became homogenous and industrialized like the Fordist assembly lines that dominated American industry at the turn of the twentieth century. However, vaudeville scholar Robert Snyder contends that some comic performers remained disruptive and independent while "appearing" to be conventional, contesting the "cruelty" of industrialization on and off the stage. Comic vaudevillians produced acts that "sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly" contradicted and undermined middle-class American decorum and restraint. Although never acknowledged by the impresarios that booked these acts, nor by the spectators who kept coming back for more, comic vaudevillians had to mask their intent in order not to overtly offend unsuspecting audience members. Therefore many comic vaudeville acts produced a coded physical and vocal language that traded in double-entendre, and hidden meanings, that included references that only certain spectators from the lower classes could appreciate.[15]

I expand on Allen's notion that vaudeville would tailor itself to a middle-class sensibility adhering to acceptable tastes and values, as well as Snyder's scholarship, by exploring how comic vaudevillians were cultural insurgents excorporated from minstrelsy, medicine shows, and American burlesque. The outcomes of the confrontation

---

[14] Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1909), 18-19.

[15] Robert Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 131-32.

between comedians on the vaudeville stage who engaged in the new humor and progressive reformers – and their advocates in the press and political authority – will conclude this chapter.

The New Humor Comes to America

Cultural historian Jackson Lears notes, "the New Humor that first appeared in the 1890s was a departure from elaborate narratives, a brazenly burlesque style," as it was tailored for a new audience that "laughed at more aggressively physical forms of comedy."[16] Vaudeville historian Albert McLean, Jr. was one of the first to embrace the notion that the modernist era's "change in the sense of humor" came to be "referred to as the 'New Humor,'" because it "indicated a humor that was more excited, more aggressive, and less sympathetic than that to which the middle classes of the nineteenth century had been accustomed."[17] McLean finishes his assessment of the new humor and how it divided audiences by class and ethnicity:

> The lines of battle could not have been more clearly drawn. The New Humor spoke for the New Folk, and was the point of agreement upon which the new mass community might be founded. It drew its material from the main stream of native humor but also reached into the vast reservoirs of ethnic humor, particularly German and Jewish as they became translated into the American idiom.[18]

These "lines of battle" referred to by McLean were intentionally created by highbrow critics and aesthetes who wanted to discredit the lowbrow new humor by expressing a

[16] Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 249.

[17] Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Frankfort, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 107. McLean capitalizes "New Humor" in his study.

[18] Ibid., 109.

revulsion to its “folk” and “native” humor. It was feared that this new humor laughed at the audience, and was trying to displace the sophisticated wit of the stage as inherited from the European stage. The legitimate theater was a response to creating a literary performance format in the United States, “[t]hat carefully distinguished itself from rival and, it was repeatedly emphasized, lesser genres like musical comedy and vaudeville,” according to theater and cultural historian David Savran.[19] Critics and highbrow audiences alike would canonize the literary theater, represented by playwrights like Elmer Rice, Sophie Treadwell, Clifford Odets, and Eugene O’Neill, in order to confirm that Americans had created their own literature and performing art form that challenged that of Western Europeans. The new humor was found to be an offense to sophisticated artistic sensibilities that were believed to be debased by vaudeville comedy. These popular stage acts were to come under attack by social reformers in order to promote a standard for Anglo-American middle-class cultural identity in the United States.

The key to success in vaudeville was “putting an act over,” as Edwin Royle noted in 1899, “whatever or whoever can interest an audience for 30 minutes or less and has passed quarantine is welcome.”[20] The reference to quarantine pointedly referred to the new immigrants of the early twentieth century. Acts did not move to the professional stage because of parentage or national origin, but were truly democratic in that anyone with a talent – and the ability to put an act over – could make it in vaudeville. The popularity of vaudeville impresarios Joe Weber and Lew Fields, who began as a “Double Dutch” act; the Three Keatons and their faux-Irish family that trafficked in domestic

---

[19] David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 2-3.

[20] Edwin Milton Royle, “The Vaudeville Theatre,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 26 (October 1899), 489; cited in Lewis, *From Travelling Show to Vaudeville*, 322.

strife; and the comic juggler and monologist, W.C. Fields, and the Wild West show roper and raconteur, Will Rogers – both of whose single-acts would tour the world and bring them to the attention of Broadway and Hollywood – would all confront the notion of Americanness in their acts.

The success of the act was whether or not you could put over the exaggerated types that marked the ethic immigrant and the native folk humor of the disenfranchised. The new humor, which was considered an affront to the decency of the middle classes, was performed by comic entertainers who came from humble beginnings as outsiders from the underclasses. This social class consisted primarily of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, and Ireland, and the indigenous, marginalized populations of the United States and its working poor.

The control that comic performers had over the masks of ethnicity and nationality allowed performers to become anyone at anytime, and were perceived as a threat to the class stability of Americanness by progressive reformers. As vaudeville critic Mary Cass Canfield noted in 1922, "[Vaudeville] is American. One's brain reels at the thought of how many rehearsals have brought this Protean miracle into existence."[21] The fear of the comic actor portraying ethnic and native roles not their own often made Anglo-audiences uncomfortable. According to cultural historian Patricia Bradley, "Like the Chinese performer in a Scottish kilt, no performer in blackface, yellow face, or in any of the ethnic modes ever entirely disappeared into the impersonation."[22] However, such an approach was able to reach a wide variety of working and middle-class audiences that included both men and women, and set the stage for the mass market of consumers that

---

[21] Canfield, "The Great American Art", 334-35.
[22] Bradley, *Making American Culture*, 19.

would dominate popular entertainments for the remainder of the twentieth century. Vaudeville comics became quite successful in portraying the ethnic types that they brought with them from the "old country," and melded them with parodies of how immigrants and the native working classes attempted to assimilate to Anglo-American life.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the formation of the new middle class of Americans was precipitated by the expansion of a "non-manual" working class and the repurposing of manual labor under the increasing advances in industry away from agricultural and artisanal culture. This shift in the work force created many factory-related unskilled jobs that increased tedium in the workplace as well as leisure time and disposable income. Coupled with the unprecedented immigration of thirteen million new immigrants between 1886 and 1925, class divisions between the working and middle classes arose along with the social marginalization attributed to ethnic heritage. This restructuring of the American workplace, and the subsequent economic disparity, raised questions with regard to cultural inclusion and national belonging.[23] The one place this transformation of class and culture could be vividly seen was on the vaudeville stage.[24]

The New Ethnic Humor and Progressive Reformers

---

[23] For the relationship of the progressive era to the industrial revolution and American culture at the turn of the twentieth century see Bradley, *Making American Culture*; Richard Butsch, *The Making American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Steven J. Diner, *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998); Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008); Rob King, *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009); Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*; and McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*.

[24] Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 248-49.

Drawing from modernist era social critic and historian Walter Lippmann, the notion of constrained and confined social values were part of an Americanization promoted by progressive reformers. In 1922, Lippmann wrote:

> Americanization, for example, is superficially at least the substitution of American for European stereotypes. Thus the peasant who might see his landlord as if he were the lord of the manor, his employer as he saw the local magnate, is taught by Americanization to see the landlord and employer according to American standards. This constitutes a change of mind, which is, in effect, when the inoculation succeeds, a change of vision. His eye sees differently.[25]

Lippmann goes on to cite Edward Hale Bierstadt writing for the *New Republic* in 1921, referring to the threat that "average" middle-class, Anglo-American, citizens felt from recent European immigrants:

> One kindly gentlewoman has confessed that the stereotypes are of such overweening importance, that when hers are not indulged, she at least is unable to accept the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God: "we are strangely affected by the clothes we wear. Garments create a mental and social atmosphere. What can be hoped for the Americanism of a man who insists on employing a London tailor? One's very food affects his Americanism. What kind of American consciousness can grow in the atmosphere of sauerkraut and Limburger cheese? Or what can you expect of the Americanism of the man whose breath always reeks of garlic?"[26]

---

[25] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922), 85-86.
[26] Edward Hale Bierstadt, *New Republic* (1 June, 1921), 21.

The fear of ethnic immigrants is couched in their offensive appearance and strange distasteful behaviors, particularly those of the working classes who "reek of garlic," are unwashed, uncouth, and exotic food-eating foreigners, not fit even to be considered for the prospects of "Americanism."

More immigrants arrived in the United States during the progressive era than ever had before. Between 1890 and 1914, new immigrants coming disproportionately from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy, Russia, Greece, Romania, and Turkey were filed through Ellis Island, and by 1907, eighty-one percent had Southern and the Eastern European ancestry.[27] According to sociologist and immigrant historian Steven J. Diner, "A majority of the 'new' immigrants were not Protestants, and they spoke languages, such as Polish, Yiddish, Lithuanian, Czech, and Greek, that were completely unfamiliar to Americans."[28] It was this unfamiliarity with the new immigrants and the strangeness of their customs and languages that was vexing and created a xenophobic view latent in progressive reformers who sought to correct their foreign and un-American traditions.

Progressive reformers saw the need to stop the growing influence of the new immigrants, and consequently of the new humor, that playwright and librettist Edward Harrigan had warned about in 1900:

> There's been a great change in the sense of humor in New York," claimed Harrigan, "the great influx of Latins and Slavs – who always want to laugh not

[27] Many modernist historians have contributed to the data surrounding progressive era immigration, including Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*; Bradley, *The Making of American Culture*; King, *The Fun Factory*; Diner, *A Very Different Age*; McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*; and David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

[28] Diner, *A Very Different Age*, 77.

with you but at you - has brought about a different kind of humor. It isn't native, it isn't New York. It's Paris, or Vienna, or someplace."[29]

Reformers tried to relegate offensive ethnic humorists as appealing to the prurient interests of the lower classes that would infect and spread to middle-class Americans through their crude popular entertainments. They cast vaudeville comedians as lowbrow, ribald, and threatening to family values, as well as dangerous, immoral, and a hazard to the Americanization of immigrants and the lower classes who aspired to the dream of upward mobility, which was to be achieved through conformity of standards set by progressive reformers. Reformers felt their middle-class American ideals were coming under attack from the new humor.

The devaluation of vaudeville as cheap and empty entertainment became an attempt at class conflict between those audiences who enjoyed such lowbrow fare that catered to a working-class ethic of instant gratification, and the more refined and respectable entertainment offerings promoted by critics and reformers that were designed for the cultural enrichment of audiences for self-improvement on the road to Americanization. As vaudeville comedy began to take hold, flouting constrained and regimented middle-class values, vaudevillians came into conflict with progressive reformers who were attempting to create an aesthetic hierarchy between the civilizing and the lowbrow on the popular stage. These class conflicts perpetuated the fear that the new humor was leading to the collapse of categories and the rules that highbrow artists and critics had worked to put in place in order to promote the acculturation of middle-class Americans.

---

[29] Edward Harrigan quoted in Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 111.

Vaudeville historian and intimate of many vaudevillians, Joe Laurie, Jr., documents that:

> In early acts the material consisted of what [I] call "knick-knacks" – song and dance, cross-fire talk of unconnected gags, playing musical instruments, and acrobatics. They put everything they knew into their acts. Ninety-five per cent of them were Irish; later the Germans, Hebrews, and Italians came along; and still later the children of all of them, Americans, took over.[30]

The direct link to the Eastern and Southern European tradition from "ninety-five percent" of immigrants can be attributed to the acts that Laurie followed in his youth.

In order to raise the question of how and where this concern with Americanness began to influence comic vaudevillians, Patricia Bradley, referring to the comic mask of the early American stage, suggests, "We might consider that what gave racial, gender, and ethnic humor such a long life in vaudeville were complications that went beyond ideas of subordination."[31] Bradley's observation is a good place to begin with the notion of what made the new humor offensive to middle-class, Anglo-American audiences at the beginning of the twentieth century. The new humor and its reliance on ethnic immigrant types, interclass strife, and social mobility as reflected in American popular culture were witnessed in the work of vaudeville comedians. These new humorists drew from a response to the social paradigm shifts of the modernist era, particularly ethnicity in relationship to class divisions.

A staple of comedy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century on the vaudeville stage was therefore ethnic humor. These foreign masks were easily

---

[30] Joe Laurie, Jr., *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1953), 82.

[31] Bradley, *Making American Culture*, 23.

identifiable markers of oversimplified foreign stereotypes and were easily exaggerated onstage. In 1931, sociologist George Murdock noted the derogatory labeling of ethnic immigrants in Edwin A. Seligman's *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, that "Aliens are regarded as something less than men; they are styled 'barbarians' or are known by some derogatory term corresponding to such modern American ethnic tags as 'bohunk,' 'chink,' 'dago,' 'frog,' 'greaser,' 'nigger,' 'sheeny,' and 'wop.'"[32] The subversion of the new humor was that any role could be simply portrayed by any and all comic performers, and vaudevillians adopted these stage stereotypes in order to destabilize these bigoted and crude defamations of ethnic immigrants by Anglo Americans.

You did not have to be Irish to have a "Mick" act or Asian to perform in "yellow face," as could be witnessed by burlesque performers turned vaudeville producers Weber and Fields. Joe Weber (born New York City, 1867) and Lew Fields (born New York City, 1867, as Moses Schoenfeld) were a comedy act who began in burlesque and brought their act to vaudeville and in 1896 became producers of their own Broadway house – the Weber and Fields Music Hall. Weber and Fields started performing in the 1870s in dime museums, circuses, and variety houses in New York City. They had a two-man "Dutch" (a corruption of the German *Deutsch*) act in which the duo portrayed recent German immigrants. This "dialect act" was a staple of ethnic immigrant humor in the late nineteenth century. The performers mangled the English language with their mispronunciations and malapropisms as they attempted to sound and behave "American." Their act featured two characters "Mike and Meyer" who, through ethnically stereotyped costuming and physical behaviors, attempted to assimilate. Many of their sketches

---

[32] George P. Murdock, "Ethnocentrism," in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed., Edwin A. Seligman and Alvin Johnson, 5 (New York: Macmillan, 1931): 613.

featured crafty schemes of "making it big" in America, or simple survival scenarios of urban life. Their routines, according to historian Douglas Gilbert, were based on being raised on the Lower East Side, "born in an Essex Street house that harbored a saloon," and were an exaggerated send-up of their actual life experiences as assimilating Eastern European Jews on the streets of New York City.[33]

Weber and Fields toured successfully for many years, becoming one of the most popular and profitable acts in vaudeville. From 1896 to 1904, the partners owned and operated the Weber and Fields Music Hall, where they produced very successful burlesques of popular Broadway shows. These burlesque shows were mainly about laughing at contemporary vogues or socially fashionable trends of middle-class Broadway audiences. A typical show was arranged in the tradition of a burlesque revue of songs, chorus girls, and tangentially connected satirical sketches. Casts featured popular performers and comedians of the American stage, including Lillian Russell, Fay Templeton, and DeWolf Hopper. The titles of some of their shows reveal the devil-may-care nature of their brand of burlesque humor like *Hurly Burly, Whirl-I-Gig, Fiddle-Dee-Dee, Hoity-Toity, Twirly Whirly*, and *Whoop-de-Doo.*[34] The team separated acrimoniously in 1904 as Joe Weber took over sole operation of the Music Hall. Lew Fields went on to produce many musicals that toured the United States, one of which featured soon-to-be vaudeville and film star, Marie Dressler.[35]

Weber and Fields's touring show of 1888 depicts the ethnic immigrant act, known as the Double Dutch, in action. This act is spoken in an exaggerated "German" dialect –

[33] Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 78.

[34] Armond Fields and L. Marc Fields, *From the Bowery to Broadway: Lew Fields and the Roots of American Popular Theater* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 36-53.

[35] Marie Dressler's relationship to the new humor is discussed in Chapter 4.

known in the business as the “Dutch” accent. Here we see Mike, the overweight and perpetually angry little man in a grotesquely padded fat suit of clashing colors and patterns with a ridiculously long watch chain that looks like a parade sash, complete with a goatee that appears to be more goat than human, trembling with fury as he confronts Meyer with, “Vhat kindt ov logick iss dot? Idt dondt make no sense, Meyer.” The tall, thin and ever-obsequious Meyer keeps his partner at arm’s length with his long fingers pressing into the overstuffed cotton batting of Mike’s costume. Mike leaning into Meyer’s long-fingers, balances himself against the lanky comic in a tense standoff. Meyer responds with, “Py gollies, idt’s as clear as der nose on your face,” and to make his point, he twists Mike’s nose viciously. Mike retaliates with flailing arms in an attempt to strike, but alas his arms are too short to reach Meyer, as he shouts "Idt dondt make no sense. You aindt no politickaler. Der ain’t no vay dot you could know idt dot Harrizon vould beadt Clevelandt in der elecgshion for prezident!” The two-man act continues with the following exchange:

> MEYER: Vhat no vay? Ass ve came acrossdt der coundtry, I kebpt dtelling you dot Harrizon vould vin. Evveryvhere ve schtopped, der vere der panners zaying Harrizon, Harrizon, Harrizon. Efferyvehere der panners - Harrizon.
>
> MIKE: Yah, der vere panners for Harrizon, Meyer; panners vere efferyvhere for him. Budt, panners dondt vote.
>
> MEYER: Shure, panners dondt vote. Budt, dey shure do show vhich vay der windt is plowing.

Meyer ends this Double Dutch act shoving Mike offstage with all his towering might, as Mike protests in vain, “Don’t poosh me, Meyer!” – this being their standard ending for

every confrontation, brought down the house.[36] Of note in this act is the political, if morbid, new humor with reference to President William Henry Harrison, who died after only serving one month in office from complications due to pneumonia which he had contracted standing in the severe cold "windt" during his swearing-in ceremony – and the importance of ethnic immigrants in the awareness of and participation in the democratic process. This kind of political commentary would become even more pronounced in the new humor of "native son" Will Rogers.

In 1916, Randolph Bourne's essay "Trans-National America" advocated for progressive reforms in ethnic-oriented popular entertainments. "We may thrill with dread at the aggressive hyphenate" who performs his native culture on the streets of urban centers, and the exaggeration of this same "aggressive hyphenate" on popular city stages, Bourne wrote, but "[j]ust so surely as we tend to disintegrate these nuclei of nationalistic culture do we tend to create hordes of men and women without a spiritual country, cultural outlaws, without taste, without standards but those of the mob." Bourne apparently assumed that ethnic immigrant performers defamed and degenerated their native character and culture, describing them as, "the flotsam and jetsam of American life," as well as "the cultural wreckage of our time." The result for audiences according to Bourne was "the absence of mind and sincere feeling which we see in our slovenly towns … and in the vacuous faces of crowds on the city streets."[37] While Bourne advocated for preserving ethnic singularity and difference, he reinforced progressive reformers' notions that when popular entertainments portrayed ethnic immigrants it

[36] This routine is recounted in Felix Isman, *Weber and Fields* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), 148.

[37] Randolph S. Bourne, "Trans-National America," *Atlantic Monthly* 118 (July 1916): 86-97, reprinted in Bourne, *War and the Intellectuals, Collected Essays 1915-1919*, ed. Carl Resek (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 107-23.

denigrated and debased the attempts by reformers to Americanize and improve the cultural and aesthetic landscape of the United States.

Humorist and journalist Robert Benchley noted a few years after Bourne that the significance of the ethnic new humor on the popular stage was exemplified by the Double-Dutch act of Weber and Fields. Benchley recognized their contribution to American culture as "the philosophy of the subconscious, the stirrings of a new American humor." Benchley embraced these new humorists in his reviews noting that in them "the American mind is being born, through the medium of the music hall, a consciousness of national social satire which bids fair to revolutionize thought on this side of the Atlantic."[38] He then provides a brief dialogue from Weber and Fields: "Mike (*referring to off-stage noises*): A soldier has been shot. Meyer: Vere vos he shot? Mike: In de eggcitement!"[39] Benchley writes in a retrospective fashion as if his article was dated in the 1890s: "[I]n these words, lies America. The America of to-day [sic], with its flaring gas lights, its thundering cable cars, the clatter of its hansoms, and the deafening whistle of its peanut stands. The young, vibrant spirit of America, locked in the message of two clowns!"[40] Benchley acknowledges with this review of Weber and Fields his own debt as a humorist to these turn-of-the-century vaudevillians. The new ethnic humor was redefining, not only comedy, but also sociocultural perceptions of what it meant to be an American at the turn-of-the twentieth century.

All in the Family Act

[38] Robert Benchley, *Life* (7 October 1926), 9.
[39] As quoted in Anthony Slide, ed., *Selected Vaudeville Criticism* (Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1988), 196.
[40] Benchley, *Life*, 9.

In order to ensure an American assimilation of sociocultural values, progressive reformers, under the aegis of legislative and legal authorities, especially with regard to public education, leisure time activities and entertainments, began to call for controls and reformations around the burgeoning city populations at the turn-of-the-century into the first two decades of the twentieth century. The new working and middle-class relationship to culture, and, for the purposes of this study, popular comic entertainment in particular, became a defining element in becoming an American. Self-appointed reform groups, like the Committee of Fourteen, the New York Society for the Prevention of the Cruelty to Children – known as the Gerry Society – and the League for Social Service, began campaigns to negotiate and develop social structures and laws that would adhere to the newly forming standards of middle-class Anglo-Americans.

Progressive reformers' fear of unsophisticated audience reception to comedic vaudeville acts, although extreme, was not entirely unwarranted. Comic vaudevillians courted audience response by working very close to the edge of the stage – if not in the auditorium itself – for maximum contact with spectators. As Robert Lytell of the *New Republic* noted in 1925, "They seize you and do pretty nearly anything they want with you and while it is going on, you sit with your mouth open and laugh and laugh again."[41] Early-twentieth-century popular entertainment historian, Richard Butsch, discusses the relationship between vaudevillians and their spectators as a "complicity between performer and audience."[42] The importance of vaudeville performers to reach their audiences in a visceral and direct way in order to distinguish themselves from their

[41] Robert Lytell, "Vaudeville Old and Young," *New Republic* (1 July 1925), 156.
[42] Butsch, *Making of American Audiences*, 117.

competition necessitated them to push the boundaries of middlebrow propriety, and overtly encourage youthful rebellion among their patrons.

Vaudeville's myriad performers and acts represented a larger sociocultural diversity that was symbolic of the ever-changing demographics of America at the turn of the twentieth century. Vaudeville's fusion of European performance forms such as the *Commedia dell'Arte*, puppet shows, the English Music Hall, and the fairground provided exposure to the immigrant influx of cultures and ethnicities that was in the process of redefining the notion of being American and, more significantly, the American family. For many Americans, this was their first contact with unfamiliar customs, languages, and ethics of people now living all around them. Not unlike European entertainments like the Yiddish theater and the circus, vaudeville relied on the family as many performers started very young, like the Marx Brothers and the Elinore Sisters, and for many vaudevillians in family acts this was a continuation of the traveling and migration that led them to America. The family act provided representations of behaviors and skills that were found throughout Europe and foreign to many Americans. It presented a comic look at ethnicity and class within the familial dynamic, from the confusions and trials of being an outsider in a new country, as well as highlighting skills learned from the old country.

One of the social institutions that progressives feared was under attack was the middle-class family. How vaudeville comedians chose to undermine the strictures that were being forced on them by progressive reformers and critics can be witnessed in the family act. Joe Laurie, Jr. describes the family act in his vaudeville history, writing that "The kids got tired waiting in the wings, and eventually Pop and Mom would take them out for a bow…." According to Laurie, this would lead to an itch to be part of the act of

their parents: “it was a short step from just taking a bow to letting the kid do a bit.” By being backstage and on the road for so many years, children began to know all the acts they came into contact with. Laurie goes on to say that they “could imitate anybody, so when they did something real good, the parents were kinda proud, and instead of standing ‘em up in a parlor to recite to the company, they would stick ‘em on the stage to do it in front of an audience, and if it was good, they’d keep it in the act (where there were no laws against it).”[43] Another reason for kids in the act was purely profit-motivation. As Laurie states with hyperbole, “Some of ‘em made more dough at the age of eight than most bank presidents.”[44] The family act called into question the values of the middle-class family and its Anglo-American restraint and civility, in comparison to the outspoken Jewish families of the Lower East Side of New York City, the boisterous Irish clans of the Five Points, and the Italian *la famiglia* of Little Italy.

A family act that confirmed the importance of the new humor featured Buster Keaton in the Three Keatons. Keaton was to become famous as a child and young adult star of vaudeville beginning with his first entrance on the vaudeville stage at the age of six months. He was soon to be a staple of the family act of father, mother, and son at the age of three, and from then on he became the star attraction. Keaton was ultimately catapulted into the world of silent film comedy that he dominated along with Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle during the 1910s and early 1920s. As Keaton’s career began overshadowing his parents’, eventually his mother retired, and his father would stay with him performing secondary roles in his films. Buster’s two siblings, Harry and Louise, also took to the stage as child performers, but they soon chose laymen lives, while Buster

[43] Laurie, *Vaudeville*, 144.
[44] Ibid., 145.

would become an international sensation.[45]

In this family act, Joe Keaton would don the garb of a stereotypical drunken Irish "Mick" from the old country, who gets intoxicated and flies off the handle ready to beat his disobedient son. Joe Keaton is quoted in his son's memoir, as saying, "… one day I got the idea of dressing [Buster] up like myself as a stage Irishman with a fright wig, slugger whiskers, fancy vest, and over-size pants. Soon [Buster] was imitating everything I did, and getting laughs."[46] This bizarre doppelganger, the Irish costume and drunken violence, brought a stereotyped image of the ethnic immigrant family to the comic vaudeville stage. As one reviewer noted in 1903:

> Keaton *père* comes on the stage in the full glory of red galways, a comic makeup, consisting of face white-plastered to the cheek bones, where a rosy flush forms a sharp angle, coming to a point just beneath the eyes. He wears loose, baggy trousers, no coat, and white spats. Baby Buster is made up and dressed exactly like his father, but his diminutive face and figure increase the ludicrous effect in his case.[47]

Buster Keaton and father Joe, as mirror images, parodied the Irish immigrant of the lower classes. Father and son as comic "foreigners" traded on the hunger for the new humor of ethnicity in America.

For those Anglo-Americans who did not comprehend the social satire, they could be amused by the lowbrow types for their simplistic surface pleasures. The culture clash

---

[45] Biographical and anecdotal background on Buster Keaton comes primarily from Keaton and Samuels, *Wonderful World of Slapstick*; Robert Knopf, *The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Edward McPherson, *Buster Keaton: Tempest in a Flat Hat* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2007).

[46] Ibid., 12.

[47] Unidentified reviewer, "In Vaudeville Houses" *New York Times* (21 May 1903).

of class and ethnicity between the lower and middle classes, both onstage and in the audience, reflected the difficulty of assimilation, but also the rejection by some comic vaudevillians of being easily mocked as ignorant and crude stereotypes. The hierarchy of authority of parents and children is also derided, as well as the notions of class and ethnicity that are being confronted and challenged. The success of the new humor was reinforced as acts like the Three Keatons "killed"[48] audiences from all backgrounds across the United States wherever they toured. In 1909, *The New York Dramatic Mirror* would reflect what many critics and audiences felt about this trio of comedians, and Buster in particular:

> [The Three Keatons] came on third, opening with the comedy tumbling done by Joe and the now quite manly Buster, who attained his sixteenth year on October fourth. The throws, falls and tumbles done by him are on a par with the best work of this sort that has been seen on any stage, and the laughter caused by the comedy business, facial [Irish] make-up, eccentric costumes and the clever clowning of both father and son, was incessant during the entire act.[49]

The Three Keatons serve as another example of the effectiveness of the new humor in ethnic immigrant acts, and how performers could put it over in vaudeville.

Ethnic humor-based comedians appeared to be well aware of the absurd aspiration to the American myth of success that was built on keeping immigrants and the native-born lower classes from achieving the status of "real" Americans. The new immigrant's need to assimilate to the proscribed Americanness was reflected in the satire of this

---

[48] The vaudevillians way of saying he had the audiences laughing so hard it "killed" them.

[49] Unidentified reviewer, "The Three Keatons," *New York Dramatic Mirror* (30 October 1909), 19.

aspiration of rejecting one's ethnic origins, which appeared to comic vaudevillians as a foolish attempt to seek middle-class upward mobility.

The danger that the Anglo-American middle classes perceived was the rise in popularity of these lowbrow comic entertainers that laughed at their desire to achieve the status of middlebrow respectability. In mocking the triumph of this fantasy image of Americanness over the socioeconomic realities of urban life, as well as being aware of how conflict between classes could produce satirical laughter, the family act was a reflection of the new wave of comedy that would begin to dominate not only the American stage, but migrate to silent and early sound comedy films well into the 1930s, thanks to the success of vaudevillians like the Three Keatons.[50]

Another form of progressive reform would threaten the well-being of the family act. Associations like the Committee of Fourteen and the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (later known as the Gerry Society) that barred child actors from the stage would, over the next ten years, attempt to shut down the Three Keatons and jail Buster's parents for the supposed abuses they were enacting onstage with their underage son. However, the popularity of the act ultimately overruled the objections of reformers. A typical review, when Buster was only eight years old, from the *New York Clipper* reads, "The tiny comedian is perfectly at ease in his work, natural, finished and artistic, and his specialties have proved a fetching addition to the favorite act of the Keatons, that is known all over the land by its title, 'The Man with the Table.'"[51] This act began when Buster Keaton was five years old, and included his parents and one prop: a battered kitchen table. As Buster describes it in his autobiography, "[The act]

---

[50] Silent and early sound comedy films is the subject of Chapter 5.
[51] Unidentified reviewer, "The Three Keatons," *New York Clipper* (20 July 1901), 438.

went on with our rage mounting until we were fighting wildly, blasting, kicking, punching, and throwing one another across the table and all over the stage. … With the audience shrieking, Mom placidly continued playing her saxophone."[52] This family act with the child Buster being chased and thrown around by his real life father can be viewed as a form of comic satire on the son who baits his father and rejects patriarchal authority. The father in turn becomes a violent despot determined to make his son behave by his rules, while the mother appears oblivious to this domestic violence. The kitchen table being used as a refuge and a playground by Buster to elude capture and hide from his abusive father is a symbol of the domestic world that has spun out of control.

The table chase was recreated in *The Taming of the Snood* a short sound comedy in 1940. The athleticism and stage violence that left Buster, as child and adult, unscathed is a testimony to his skill both physically and as social commentary. Keaton describes the early act in a pleasurable and proud way when he relates that:

> Even in my early days our turn established a reputation for being the roughest in vaudeville. … He began these by carrying me out on the stage and dropping me on the floor. Next he started wiping up the floor with me. When I gave no sign of minding this he began throwing me through the scenery, out into the wings, and dropping me down on the bass drum in the orchestra pit.[53]

The irony of audiences embracing the Three Keatons, while progressive censors tried to shut down these "harmful" performances, is witnessed by the fact that audiences clamored for more and critics praised their skills. In 1914, the *Syracuse Herald* recognized the early stage genius of Buster Keaton:

---

[52] Keaton with Samuels, *Wonderful World of Slapstick*, 34-35.
[53] Ibid.,12-13.

> For The Three Keatons, I feel an almost family interest. … How the Keatons ever managed to raise that boy I am sure I don't know. Beating a boy up and slinging him around the way Joe Keaton does twice daily would not be my method of raising, unless I wanted to plant the boy and raise him like a string bean. But Buster enjoys it and gets his share back at "the old man," and the unique knockabout fun of the Keaton family is just as funny as ever.[54]

As Keaton's career would attest, for the child Buster, one way out of the poverty of the working classes was through the entertainment industry and, in the particular case of the Three Keatons, the comedy circuit of vaudeville. Progressive reformers would continue to haunt The Three Keatons until Buster's coming of age in 1912.

W.C. Fields was another vaudevillian who used the family act as a way of redefining the image of this American institution that reformers were trying to promote as wholesome and integral to Americanness. William Claude Dukenfield was the eldest child of immigrant parents, his father, James Lydon Dukenfield being English by birth, and his mother, Kay Spangler (née Felton), German. As a first-generation American youth and aspiring stage performer, Fields often imitated his working-class, English-accented father and claims to have shared his mother's sardonic and cynical German sense of humor.[55] Fields built a career around the family man as desperate charlatan, always trying to come up with schemes in order to take advantage of the pretentious middle classes and their snobbery for his lowbrow working-class heritage.

Fellow Ziegfeld *Follies* performer and soon to be silent screen icon, Louise Brooks, wrote an essay recalling her time on the vaudeville stage, spending "every night

---

[54] C. McK, "The Keatons Again," The *Syracuse Herald* (6 January 1914).
[55] Fields, *W.C. Fields by Himself*, 18.

[during the 1925 season] at the *Follies*, standing in the wings" and watching Fields's "Picnic Sketch."[56] It is worth quoting Brooks at length, since it gives a firsthand account of Fields's vaudeville from someone who worked with him and had multiple opportunities to see this act played out:

> In the *Follies*, Bill [Fields], as the father, played "the Picnic Sketch" with Ray Dooley as his small daughter. At that time, although Ray was twenty-eight with two children of her own, she had the face of an infant monkey and a body that fitted nicely into a baby carriage. Her squalling brats from two to six were brilliant travesties. She was not the usual aggressive child of the theatre. Up to the moment of an outburst she was a passive child following Bill's operations, her eyes glazed with anxiety. Making no sound she watched him break in the door of the unoccupied house upon whose lawn was spread the litter of the picnic lunch. He burst into the house outraged to find the door locked against honest tax-paying Americans, and came out in triumph with a paper bag filled with stolen food. It was not until he opened the can of tomatoes with a hatchet, squirting the red juice in his face, that she set up the howls which made him flinch and recoil and grab at his hat.[57]

What makes the "Picnic Sketch" unique is the desperation that drives Fields's father character to commit a crime in order to feed his hungry child. This sketch was a commentary on the necessity of criminal behavior in order for the working-class poor to survive, as perhaps immoral, but necessary. The indignity and outrage that Fields shows upon being locked out of the house that he is burglarizing depicts the new humor and its

---

[56] Louise Brooks, *Lulu in Hollywood* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 79.

[57] Ibid. The picnic sequence appears in the W.C. Fields silent feature *It's the Old Army Game* (1926), and is recreated in another variation in the film *It's A Gift* (1934).

focus on the lower classes that cannot achieve middle-class respectability because of limited opportunities, low wages, and discrimination.

Onstage and later in his very successful Hollywood films,[58] Fields, as the patriarch of an American family, reversed all the reformer notions of how the family unit could establish middle-class values as a positive force for raising children in the "American" way. In his popular sound films of the 1930s and 40s, W. C. Fields portrayed the put-upon father and hen-pecked husband as always beneath the contempt of his neighbors and his own family for his lack of middle-class ambition. Inspired by the vaudevillian "Picnic Sketch," Fields created such luminaries as Ambrose Wolfinger, Harold Bissonette, and Egbert Sousé, who were perpetually under the thumb and in opposition to their families. The exception to this was his young daughter character that would always side with her father, the daughter that Fields never had in his own life. He made the character of the long-suffering husband his own by always seeming to be down and out, but eventually finding himself as the moral hero who has saved his child from trouble and heartbreak, and found fortune and the love of his child in the end. W.C. Fields was always quick to point out the hypocrisy of middle-class American self-righteousness on stage and film, and what he considered to be a bogus propriety that was merely for show, and not truly felt.

Comedians like Fields who commented and satirized middle-class values with regard to the family through the new humor, were seen by progressive reformers to be confirmation of their fears that popular entertainments were threatening the stability and strength of the American family. An official from New York's Child Welfare

[58] W.C. Fields would be the sixth highest-grossing performer for Paramount Pictures during the 1930s and 40s.

Committee, Michael M. Davis found in 1912 that the "hyper-stimulus" of popular vaudeville entertainments to be too overwhelming for parents and their children when coupled with the "kaleidoscopic stimuli" of progressive-era life in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Davis concluded that when vaudeville reflected the intensity of modern life it produced a "stimulating but disintegrating" effect on the American family.[59]

As the new humor commented on Anglo-American mores and class hierarchies, nothing was more vulnerable to comedians like Fields than the family. According to a reviewer of his reanimated stage show in 1930, "Low as the Fields brand of comedy is, it is not intended so far as we can see for the consumption of cheap audiences. Fields is almost a sure bet for a high-priced revue, yet it is not inconceivable that he would flop badly in an outlying family house."[60] This type of damning with faint praise insists on Fields's place as a "low" comedian who was too good for "cheap audiences" but would "flop badly" for the middle-class family audiences of the provinces.

Fear of the "Bogey" Man of the New Humor: W.C. Fields and Will Rogers On the Stump

The middle-class, Anglo-American fear of the new humor was instigated by its perceived refutation of social structures, institutions, and associations. By breaking away from Americanized reform organizations and societies, comedians challenged the authority and conformity that progressives wanted to promulgate. Popular comic entertainments were seen as a disruption of progressive reforms as vaudevillians in particular broke with conformity to middle-class values through their acts. The

---

[59] Michael M. Davis, *The Exploitation of Pleasure: A Study of Commercial Recreations in New York City* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1912), 33-36.
[60] Elias E. Sugerman, untitled W.C. Fields review, *The Billboard* (5 April 1930), 14.

progressive reformers vilified the vaudeville form of comedy by citing its vulgarity and its denigration of Anglo-American morals that led youth especially to drink, to have sex, to gamble, and to take on a life of irreversible criminal behaviors of all kinds. In 1907, reformer Josiah Strong wrote about the ills to be found on the vaudeville stage, citing "[t]he vaudeville or variety show which abounds and is largely patronized is generally poor and often vile. Coarse theatricals, promiscuous public dances, and drinking saloons prepare the way for easy ruin."[61] The social roles and strictures that came under scrutiny in the family act and the stump speech, for example, encouraged audiences to question how they were being asked to live, and what to believe in, by localized institutions like churches, public schools, family enclaves, and political interest groups from the left and right. The popular performing arts were thought to challenge the segregation and quarantine of the progressive movement's vision of the social order.

Critical reception of vaudevillians noted the aesthetic divisions between low and highbrow classes through popular entertainments. In 1910, *American Magazine* wrote that vaudeville, contrary to the claims of entrepreneurs like B. F. Keith and Marcus Loew as providing a "Sunday School Circuit" of entertainments, still trafficked in a similar vein as that of the late nineteenth-century variety theater, proclaiming "in the days before vaudeville had developed its present money-making capacities [it] was both wholesome and cheap. Those days are passed. Nowadays it is anything to get a laugh or a shock."[62] And two years later, the *Dramatic Mirror* admonished vaudevillians and their acts "where the impropriety and obscenity were no whit less offensive than they are at a so-

---

[61] Josiah Strong, *The Challenge of the City* (New York: Young People's Missionary Movement, 1907), 115.

[62] Unidentified reviewer, "Decay of Vaudeville" *American Magazine* (April 1910), 846.

called burlesque show."[63] *American Magazine* saw the effects of popular entertainments as being detrimental to the mental and physical health of Americans as well, noting that "[v]audeville in the last five or six years, has done more to corrupt, vitiate and degrade public tastes in matters relating to the stage than all other influences put together."[64]

Much of vaudeville comedy was constructed from the sociocultural types that had been inherited from nineteenth-century performance forms such as minstrelsy, medicine shows, burlesque, and variety theater. Popular entertainment historian and theorist Henry Jenkins explains that "[a]n elaborate system of typage developed: exaggerated costumes, facial characteristics, phrases, and accents were meant to reflect general personality traits viewed as emblematic of a particular class, region, ethnic group, or gender." Jenkins calls this the "vaudeville aesthetic."[65] Coupled with a recently revived fear of the lowbrow humor found in vaudeville's precursor, the variety theater, the newly forming Anglo-American middle classes were encouraged to be wary of, if not outright hostile to, this vaudeville aesthetic. Cultural historian Patricia Bradley notes that during the first two decades of the twentieth century, "Fear, perhaps, was the greatest sensation purveyed by the yellow press."[66] This included fear of the foreigner in the guise of the impoverished European immigrant, and the emerging liberation of women from the sexual and cultural strictures derived from Victorian values of the nineteenth century.[67]

What we would consider today as the ubiquitous tabloid press was new to modernist-era Americans with its focus on the dangers of the unchecked influences of the

---

[63] Unidentified reviewer, *Dramatic Mirror* (21 September 1910); Richard Butsch, *Making of American Audiences*, 113.
[64] Unidentified reviewer, "Decay of Vaudeville," 840.
[65] Jenkins, *Pistachio Nuts?*, 70.
[66] Bradley, *Making American Culture*, 7.
[67] The new woman and the new humor are the subject of Chapter 4.

non-white races and working-poor ethnic groups. This "yellow" press reinforced preexisting prejudices and stereotypes of lower-class Americans. Fear promoted nationalism as self-described decent middle-class values were being endangered by subversive foreigners, working-class ignorance, and selfish, willful women. Anglo-Americans reinforced ethnic types as offensive, backward, and vulgar in order to solidify what they claimed was antithetical to American integrity, its stringent work ethic, and family values.

Walter Lippmann was a prominent social critic during the era of Will Rogers's assent in vaudeville. Lippmann discussed the notion that fear of the "new" was driving Americans during the early twentieth century. He characterized what he called the "bogey" as a constant source of uneasiness, when he wrote, Americans "need authority: they need to be taken in charge; they cannot trust themselves."[68] The desire of Americans to be controlled and given rules by the fear-mongers of industry, culture, religion, and government, according to Lippmann, reinforced the absolutist power of those in authority. "There are those [Americans]," concluded Lippmann, "who cannot conceive of a nation not driven by fear."[69] Censorship groups whose presumed benevolent intent was to protect vulnerable new American citizens from exploitation by employers and politicians, ended up attempting to keep the lower classes in their place. Although some of these reforms like women's suffrage led to the 19th Amendment, others like Prohibition, under the auspices of the 18th Amendment, contributed to the reinforcement of ethnic stereotypes as subversive and downright criminal.

---

[68] Walter Lippmann, "Drift and Mastery," in *The Progressive Years*, ed. Otis Pease (New York: George Braziller, 1962), 450.

[69] Ibid., 451.

What began as genuine concern for the new immigrants became a condescending vision of "saving" poor newcomers from their regressive customs by rejecting their ethnic heritage and cultural traditions, and by imposing a middle-class Anglo-American morality devised for them by reformers. Ultimately this would lead to self-censorship in the entertainment industry with B.F. Keith in vaudeville and the Hays Code in early sound films. This double-edged progressive sword could be wielded for its well-meaning values with regard to women's right to the vote, equal access to education, and unionization of worker's conditions, but rejected by performers when it came to dictating cultural traditions and morals.

Literary and cultural critic H.L. Mencken, in an essay entitled "A Plea for Comedy," attempted to move the conversation in another direction. He agreed that the literary theater should be of the highest quality, and often praised the erudition and significance of the drama of George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen. However, Mencken saw the need for comedy, particularly on the vaudeville stage and slapstick films of the 1910s and 20s, as an antidote to the self-serious rules and moral codes of progressive era reformers and their sympathetic audiences. In 1910 he wrote, "I have no desire to weep, to think or even to sleep when I go to a vaudeville show, but only a strong, animal yearning to guffaw."[70] It is worth quoting Mencken at length here as he hits on key elements for explaining the offensive nature of the new humor and its necessity in early twentieth-century America. He discusses an act that was developed by the comedy duo and impresarios Joe Weber and Lew Fields, whom he praised: "The device of fighting a duel with billiard cues, now so common on the burlesque stage, is

---

[70] H. L. Mencken, "A Plea for Comedy," in *The Collected Drama of H. L. Mencken: Plays and Criticism*, ed. S.T. Joshi (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 179.

another of their delightful inventions." Why, asks Mencken, "do we laugh so heartily when the slapstick comes down upon the assistant comedian's skull?" It was certainly not that the comedy was lowbrow and for lower-class audiences, as he claimed to have attended burlesque houses "where genuine vaudeville is still nourished and acclaimed." They are "certainly not made up of newsboys and criminals" but have "plenty of both classes, true enough, upstairs," and on the first floor "fully half of the [audience] are of the eminently respectable type." Mencken claims to have been part of audiences that comprised a diverse mixture of "doctors, lawyers, and business men, including not a few members of the Merchants and Manufacturers' Association."[71] The class divides of audiences of "upstairs" in comparison to those "downstairs" are clearly demarcated by social and economic standing, but the enjoyment and necessity of vaudeville comedy – and Mencken makes clear that he is referring to first-tier vaudeville of a high standard – but the need for such rowdy, raucous and offensive (to middle-class reformers at least) laughter is necessary and bridges all social and economic boundaries.

Other critics also understood the significance of lowbrow comedy, even placing it alongside so-called highbrow fare. As vaudeville critic and commentator Will M. Cressy stated in his 1916 account of "putting acts over" for the comic vaudeville stage, "Our vaudeville entertainers of to-day [sic] come from every class. I believe there is not a nationality in the world that is not represented. And our own American artists are recruited from every class and every trade and every profession."[72] Mary Cass Canfield goes even further to praise the artistry of the vaudevillian: "Vaudeville as our most vital

[71] Ibid., 181.
[72] Cressy, "Putting it Over," 547-52.

art center, is a treasure house of individuality."[73] The threat of this individuality, and the aggressive rejection of the guidelines of the highbrow performing arts, promoted by the comic vaudevillian to self-described Americanized Anglos, was just what reformers had feared, and what they began to fight against through progressive-era reforms.

For progressive reformers, the basic categories of human existence, the patterns of thought and belief that structured that existence appeared to be collapsing in the 1910s. The architect Frank Lloyd Wright was to reinforce this collapse and set about what he termed "the destruction of the box" that had been the Victorian house. Artists like Edward Steichen and Georgia O'Keefe would begin experiments in abstract art all of which encouraged the deconstruction of boundaries of the "box" in painting, photography, and sculpture. The syncopation of jazz music, and its popular cousin, ragtime, would grow up in tandem with vaudeville, and embrace the fusion of classical, blues, and improvisation, along with non-traditional rhythms and chord structures, by musicians like W. C. Handy, Jelly Roll Morton, and Louis Armstrong.

These notions of breaking the boundaries of the box would find their way onto the comic vaudeville stage as well. Vaudeville promoted acts that eschewed narrative structures for the short, fast shock of the moment while discarding the rules of the legitimate theater. As noted in Chapter 1, it also drew from popular forms of the nineteenth century like minstrelsy, burlesque, and the medicine show and sought to combine these various entertainments in an amalgamation that would run parallel with the innovations of other art forms during the early twentieth century as discussed in Chapter 1. Popular comic performing art forms would bring new ideas and the rejection

---

[73] Canfield, "The Great American Art," 334-35.

of conformity to middle-class audiences who had been sheltered from new concepts, cultures, and ethnicities at the beginning of twentieth-century America.

The new humor exposed fear as an emotional motivator, letting the audience in on the political and clerical charlatan's game of anxiety mongering and character assassination, by revealing the falsely constructed logic of authority through the stump speech act. The stump speech is a passionate prompting that relies on satirizing bigotry and xenophobia rather than reasoned understanding through rhetorical argument. It developed into a series of instigating talking points that mocked the fearful, and became a source of the new humor for vaudevillians such as W.C. Fields and Will Rogers.

Popular entertainment historian Lewis A. Erenberg discusses the shifting dynamics of performing artists during the early twentieth century when he writes that "by the teens [the] urban market spurred comics to express the rebellion of outsiders."[74] W.C. Fields and Will Rogers entered the arena of popular comedy during this time of social and cultural upheaval. The nature of performance was also experiencing a paradigm shift as watershed examples of the comedian being indistinguishable from the person performing can be witnessed in the stump speeches of the characters "W.C. Fields" and "Will Rogers."[75]

The history of the stump speech and its resurgence in vaudeville comedy can be traced to the comic tradition of the medicine show mountebank of the nineteenth century. This act represented a send-up of the "come on" in the sideshow charlatan's sales pitch. The new humor reflected in the stump speech at the turn of the twentieth century will

---

[74] Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1981), 15.

[75] When referring to Will Rogers as his onstage persona, I will refer to him as "Will Rogers" and with reference to W. C. Fields's onstage persona, I will refer to him as "W. C. Fields."

further serve to inform how the new humor, through its unique interpreters, reflected the turbulence and rebellion for this period of political and cultural change.

Joe Laurie, Jr.'s history of vaudeville cites a typical stump speech as an act that mocks and insults the politician and preacher as self-determined arbiters of American moral authority who use language as obfuscation for their hypocrisy and double standards. A prototypical speech begins, "Brethern and Sistern, I have decided to divide my sermon in three parts. The first part I'll understand and you won't. The second part you will understand and I won't. The third part nobody will understand."[76] Comic vaudevillians were associated with the rise of a new humor that "I'll understand and you won't," or that "you'll understand and I won't," and finally acts and gags that were so new and strange that "nobody will understand" them. The stump speech juxtaposed the narrative clarity of understanding, conventional wisdom, and propriety with the new humor of ethnic vaudevillians as independent from and potentially threatening to the self-perceptions of the established middle and upper classes of Anglo Americans. W.C. Fields and Will Rogers would become two of the masters of the stump speech by melding their real life and fictional personas.

W.C. Fields, who would eventually star alongside Will Rogers in the 1916 edition of the Ziegfeld *Follies*, created a foolish, selfish, and dissolute character in his act that was a counter to Rogers's decent everyman and would be exactly the kind of character that Rogers jokingly referred to in his act. Fields combined the physical comedy of juggling, golfing, or pool hustling, with the patter of the medicine show huckster. This combination is caught on film in a recreation of his vaudeville pool act in the film *Six of a Kind* (1934). The act begins with Fields choosing a pool cue (the least crooked one since

[76] Laurie, *Vaudeville*, 438.

according to Fields "Everything is crooked in this place.") and spending the rest of the scene with a favorite character actor and foil to Fields, Tammany Young. Fields inevitably dupes the near silent mark through a discourse about why people call him "Honest John." As Fields attempts to make a break with the cue ball, he begins his stump speech:

> The time of which I speak, I'm tending bar at Medicine Hat … (*trying to line up a shot*) … a guy come in there with a glass eye … I used to wait on him … waddn't a bad guy … (*long pause in speech as Fields attempts to cue up and chalk*) … used to take this glass eye out and put in a tumbler of water … better break these balls … (*long pause in the speech as Fields again attempts to cue up, chalk, and get the cue stick steady*) … he comes in one … comes in one day, and he forgets the glass eye … (*long pause, business again of missing the cue ball*) … don't stand so near the table will ya? … (*pause*) As I was saying, one day he forgot his glass eye, I found it, next morning when he come in, I says, young man here's your glass eye … (*more business with cue stick*) … ever since that time … (*Finally the cue stick goes through the table itself, the cue ball never hitting the other balls. Then after putting a basket over the hole in the table and walking away he finishes the monologue.*) … ever since that day, I've been known as Honest John ….[77]

On the surface the nonsensical "Legend of Honest John" coupled with the false starts of the pool table act, which Fields developed and revised over many years on the road in vaudeville, reinforces the connection of the stump speech in which it becomes a way of

[77] From Fields's Ziegfeld *Follies* Act,1915-1925. The pool table routine was recreated for the Fields film *Six of a Kind*, writ. Keene Thompson, dir. Leo McCarey, DVD, Universal Studios, 2002; original film released in 1934.

distracting his fellow players and tricking them out of their money, as happens in this case when Fields's challenger is distracted to lose the game (and not even getting to play) by the build-up and unexpectedness of his nonlinear speech. Fields's gags and stump speeches mask the character of "W.C. Fields" as an arrogant pool shark who ends up appearing incompetent but still wins the game through a barrage of words and impressive physical feats. As Fields takes advantage of unsuspecting targets, his dishonesty is contradicted by his being named Honest John, and his skillful performance of the mountebank allows him to con the self-important and condescending middle and upper classes that dare look down on him.

Comic vaudevillians like W.C. Fields and Will Rogers were forced to balance the theater manager's restrictions in order not to offend, while playing to the audience's desire for the new, the transgressive, and the collusion between themselves and the stage performer. Performance scholar Richard Butsch concludes that "[t]he shift in control and content produced a version of 'knowingness' between [the patrons and comedians] and a means to maintain the balance performers depended upon."[78] Nowhere could the collusion between new humorists and audiences be seen more clearly than with the trick-roper-turned stump speaker, Will Rogers.

Will Rogers toured the United States, first in third-tier vaudeville in small towns as far flung as Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and Peoria, Illinois. Here rural audiences demanded their money's worth, or the performers were "given the hook" – literally pulled off stage with a bentwood cane to make way for another act. Will Rogers and other vaudevillians had only a few minutes to establish their act and put it over. Moving through the ranks of first-tier vaudeville and ultimately Broadway revues like the Ziegfeld *Follies* was

[78] Butsch, *Making of American Audiences*, 117.

impossible if you could not get an act to go over, and second chances were rare if ever. The development of the stump speech in the stage performances of Rogers from vaudeville to becoming a political journalist, until his untimely death in 1935, exemplifies how a humorist can enter the real world of United States government as performer and politicized public figure in his own right while simultaneously confronting sociopolitical reformers with the new humor.

Will Rogers charmed his way into the hearts of audiences all over the country through his cowboy persona and trick-roping act first seen in Wild West and medicine shows at the turn of the twentieth century. He eventually joined the Ziegfeld *Follies* in 1915. However, what really put it over was his self-deprecating humor when a trick went wrong. Rogers would quip, "Swinging a rope is all right as long as your neck ain't in it."[79] His sly nod to the very real dangers of lynching – still very much a problem in segregated America – coupled with his humble and self-deprecating attitude, became a signature of his act, as he began to "throw the tricks" in order to get to the "mistakes" and the subsequent laugh lines. Rogers knew how to put it over. As *Variety* commented in 1911, "Rogers is doing an act quite different from his former offering, even though the rope is still the main feature. It is Rogers though who is liked. His personality, careless manner and broad grin are worth more than the most intricate tricks that could be figured out."[80]

In 1918, Rogers's career moved in a new direction as he appeared before President Woodrow Wilson during the Washington D.C. run of the Ziegfeld *Follies*. With President Wilson in attendance, "Will Rogers" criticized his administration's

---

[79] P.J. O'Brien, *Will Rogers: Ambassador of Good Will, Prince of Wit and Wisdom* (Chicago: John C. Winston, Co., 1935), 268.

[80] "Dash," *Variety* (14 January 1911), 17.

policies on the American intervention in world politics particularly with regard to World War I. He knew his observations might be dangerous and potentially offensive to the president; however, what he did not bargain for was how the public would receive his satirical act. "How was I to know but what the audience would rise up in mass and resent it," Rogers later wrote. "I had never heard, and I don't think anyone else had ever heard of a president being joked personally in a public theater about the policies of his administration."[81] "Will Rogers" criticized Wilson for entering World War I, after having professed an isolationist stance with regard to international conflicts, saying "it seems we may have to have two more wars to find out who won the last one."[82] Rogers would also confront the subject and strategy of his stump speeches by coming back on for the curtain call and sitting on the edge of the stage and talking with his audience like he was a patriarch dispatching his troubles to his family:

> You folks know I never mean anything by the cracks I make here on politics. I generally hit the fellow that's on top because it isn't fair to hit a fellow that's down. I played here five times during the Wilson administration and every time Mr. Wilson came and laughed at the cracks I made at him more than he did at those made against the other fellow. It makes a fellow feel good and sort of at home to find a man like that. If a big man laughs at jokes on him, he's all right.[83]

As the 1920s began, Will Rogers observed that "everything is changing … People are taking their comedians seriously and the politicians as a joke, when it used to be visa

[81] Will Rogers, *New York Times* (17 February 1924), quoted *Will Rogers' Weekly Articles* 1, *The Harding/Coolidge Years: 1922-1925*, eds., James M. Smallwood and Steven K. Gragert (Stillwater: Oklahoma State University Press, 1980), 192.

[82] Will Rogers, *New York Times* (21 January 1923).

[83] Will Rogers, *Will Rogers at the Ziegfeld Follies*, ed., Arthur Frank Wertheim (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 150.

versa."[84] The character of "Will Rogers" was put over to his audiences in the form of the stump speech. Rogers used the mask of "Will" to enter the real world of politics by exposing the charlatans – such as W.C. Fields portrayed – who govern and preach moral superiority. Breaking new ground, Rogers went on to constructively critique Wilson and subsequent presidents, including Calvin Coolidge, Warren G. Harding, Herbert Hoover, and even the admired Franklin Delano Roosevelt,[85] in his many stage and radio performances. Bringing this character of the humble everyman onstage to confront and challenge the policies of world leaders would be the hallmark and legacy of Rogers's career from that time forward. What was unique was his confrontation of these powerful figures onstage through the prism of the comic persona of "Will Rogers." Rogers appeared to offend simply by questioning the decisions of the United States government and the American values they were meant to represent, and marveled at how incompetent, greedy, dishonest fools could get elected time and again.

By the mid-1920s, Rogers's asides and comments focused more on what was happening in local, and then national, sociopolitical events. In 1925 the vaudeville aesthetic in relationship to political debate was perfected by Rogers through the stump speech after he had spent almost twenty years touring in vaudeville and performing for the Ziegfeld *Follies*. Rogers left the *Follies* in order to pursue his brand of "stumping" and toured the United States. He ended the tour after eleven weeks on the road and seventy appearances, creating his unique humor by culling from local political and civic

[84] Will Rogers, *New York Times* (23 November 1932), quoted in *Will Rogers' Daily Telegrams* 3, *The Hoover Years: 1931-1933*, eds., James M. Smallwood and Steven K. Gragert (Stillwater: Oklahoma State University Press, 1979), 241.

[85] It must be noted that Will Rogers was a staunch supporter of FDR, who was not without his stump critiques when Rogers disagreed with the president's policies.

events at various "whistle stops." Rogers buttonholed anyone he could find in order to get the latest political news and then tailored his speeches for the local audience.[86]

As Rogers described his process, "I talked with every Editor in each town, all the writers on the papers, Hotel Managers, Ranchmen, Farmers, Politicians, Head Waiters, Barbers, Newsboys, Bootblacks. Everybody I met I would try to get their angle."[87] By identifying with his audience and discussing their personal concerns directly, Rogers worked in local jokes and names of authorities whom he wished to parody and expose as fools that ordinary citizens should not have to suffer.

Will Rogers focused on how average Americans were being potentially conned by local, legitimized authority, as well as those who claimed to be national representatives of the American people. He spread the word by touring the United States. If a town had a "railroad and a hall," Rogers guaranteed, "we'll be there sooner or later."[88] One of his earliest stump speeches, as recorded in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* (11 November 1925), witnesses him being introduced to his audience by the current mayor of New Orleans and reveals Rogers's skill in delivering a seemingly humble yet satirical indictment of local politics and politicians:

> I thank you, Mayor Behrman, for your wonderful welcome to New Orleans. I want to thank you with all my heart – if a Comedian has a heart. I don't think ever was a mere Comedian welcomed to a city by full page ads in all your newspapers, and I appreciate it – I appreciate it just as much as if I didn't know that you were using me just as a means of getting someone to tell the benefits of

[86] Richard D. White Jr., *Will Rogers: A Political Life* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2011), 75.

[87] Unidentified interviewer, *Tulsa Daily World* (13 December 1925); Betty Rogers, *Will Rogers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 186.

[88] Betty Rogers, *Will Rogers*, 185.

> your city to. It was a wonderful thought on the part of the newspapers who had the page and couldn't sell it, but, knowing you had an appropriation to spend on boosting, decided to relieve you of some of it.[89]

Rogers did not stop at pointing out how the mayor and his newspapermen were taking advantage of the public trust by bankrolling their own interests in exploiting Rogers's fame. He went on to critique how Louisiana felt superior to Oklahoma (Rogers's birthplace) stating, "You say Oklahoma was 'a part of the Louisiana Purchase' – a part. It was the part they purchased, your end of it was thrown in."[90] Rogers placed himself in collusion with his disenfranchised, working-class audiences over representatives of American authority and the power-elite who had control over their lives but whom he found to be petty and corrupt at best.

The evolution of comic performance in the stump speeches of Will Rogers serves to examine comedy as political bellwether as well as political engagement and its potential influence at a national level on the United States government and its representatives. With the stump speech Rogers created political commentary through his acts in order to challenge the authority of national leaders, while at the same time reinforcing the need for critical debate within the American electorate.

Rogers did the seemingly impossible by pointing out Anglo-Saxon middle-and upper-class exclusion, and exposing the deep hostility toward the elite by average citizens. An example of Rogers's lowbrow comic observation of the upper classes and their manipulation of the American narrative can be seen in his critique of how wealth

---

[89] Will Rogers, *The Papers of Will Rogers* 4, *From the Broadway Stage to the National Stage: September 1915-July1928*, eds. Steven K. Gragert and M. Jane Johansson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 17 October 2005), 395.

[90] Unidentified interviewer, New Orleans *Times-Picayune* (11 November 1925).

and power were controlled by the Anglo-American moneyed hierarchy. Rogers openly criticized the ruling class, and their culpability in the causes of the Great Depression in 1934, observing that "there was not a millionaire in the country whose fortune did not come from the labor of others, we need to arrange it so that a man that wants work can get it, and give him more equal division of the wealth the country produces."[91] The contemporaneity of Rogers's statement is arresting in its accuracy and truthfulness. Rogers traded on his Cherokee heritage to modernize American democracy to include the urban and rural disenfranchised classes in stump speeches that used popular comic entertainment for real progressive reform.

W.C. Fields performed the role of the charlatan that Rogers would satirize: the carnival huckster and carpetbagger that middle-class Americans should be wary of as unscrupulous and always out to take advantage of honest people. Fields's form of stump speech was developed from the touring tent and medicine show, upgrading it with a sophistication that could be discerned by his critics. However, unlike their response to Will Rogers, reviewers saw this as a drawback to the success of Fields putting it over:

> To appreciate his mechanized humor one must think along with him; not too much, but with more intellectual effort and a finer sense of the ludicrous than is required of the average vaudeville patron. Maybe that's why Fields made the grade all right but never threatened to knock them dead at the Palace.[92]

Contrary to this reviewer's assessment, W.C. Fields was to distinguish himself through the "intellectual effort" with which he challenged his audiences, becoming one of the most successful vaudeville and film performers of his era. The carnival hucksterism of

---

[91] Will Rogers, Columbia Network, 11 November 1934, in O'Brien, *Will Rogers*, 147.
[92] Elias E. Sugerman, *The Billboard* (5 April 1930), 14.

W.C. Fields evolved in an age of hyperbolic advertising that promoted fear of the foreign in American society. The subversive nature of vaudeville comedy was reflected in the influence of immigrant values – Fields being the progeny of German and English immigrants – and most of all the freedom to express this with the new humor.

Will Rogers was a new humorist who dispelled fear and exposed the laziness born of the expectation that authorities who make life-altering decisions without our questioning their motives and competency in their capabilities. Progressive-era public intellectual and political commentator Walter Lippmann extolled citizens "who hold life lightly [and] are the real masters of it."[93] Making light of self-fulfilling, fear-inducing prophesies through comic satire can potentially dispel unnecessary social anxieties and curb destructive decision-making in the process. Therefore we can look to comedians like Rogers to displace and examine the insecurity of American life by getting audiences to laugh at their own willful ignorance and misinformation in thought and action, thereby lessening the power of authoritarians who control American sociocultural institutions through fear and intimidation.

Will Rogers would, eventually, through his humble "ordinary man" persona, become a cultural critic as he dropped the roping-act entirely and officially became a humorist in the tradition of Mark Twain. He would find his way into the United States Congress as a serious journalist and spokesman for important social and political causes of the 1920s and early 30s. His criticism of the gridlock and petty politicized world of Washington D.C. that ignored the needs of its citizens for self-aggrandizement and enrichment, eventually leading to the Great Depression, gave Rogers the opportunity to critique government with his stump speeches, and then in print through his newspaper

[93] Lippmann, "Drift and Mastery," 451.

columns. Will Rogers would eventually find himself stumping for presidents, especially Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as well as being a reporter and critic on international affairs.

As a youth, W.C. Fields learned the hard way that in order to make ends meet as a carny, being a fast-talker and a huckster were necessary to stay one step ahead of the law, and more importantly to stave off starvation as a child of ethnic immigrants in a society dominated by Anglo-American authority. Fields's later work also featured carnival conmen that showed he had learned his lessons well, and could turn his earlier experiences into lucrative characterizations. In silent films like *Sally of the Sawdust* (1925) and the Broadway incarnation of the play *Poppy* (1923, and a 1935 film version), to the "old army game" of *The Old Fashioned Way* (1934), and ultimately in *Never Give A Sucker an Even Break* (1941), Fields would make himself internationally famous for his observations of life through stump speech acts under tents and in vaudeville houses both in the United States and on international tours. However famous and wealthy Fields became, he could never escape the lowbrow imprimatur of the carny and the stump speech. Elias Sugarman's review in *Billboard* as late as 1930, after Fields had spent over twenty years on the vaudeville stage, wrote, "No matter what else the literary highbrows might eventually discover (or probably have already perceived) in the burly comedian with a wisp of a mustache, Fields is a low comedian."[94]

W.C. Fields and Will Rogers serve as case studies for the successful use of the stump speech and its disruptive humor in progressive era comedy. The new humor as they practiced it openly questioned the notion of what constituted a real American, defying the progressive reformers' push to move Americans to the Anglo-American middle-class center. They disrupted assumed narratives of political power and

---

[94] Sugarman, *The Billboard*, 14.

undermined by questioning authority through the new humor. The critiques and policies of those who claim to have been well educated through highbrow culture were debunked through the stump speech. W.C. Fields and Will Rogers, with their lowbrow vaudeville acts, challenged normative values and the self-serving logic of authoritative forthrightness.

The lower classes and what they enjoyed by way of popular comic entertainments as described here, implied an unsophisticated aesthetic sensibility that was defined as the new humor. However, as a result, sociopolitical knowledge was being disseminated to those classes that were typically left out of the conversation. The stump speeches of new humorists like W. C. Fields and Will Rogers created a dialectic between stage performers and their audiences that mocked the machinations of the cultural and moral leadership of the United States.

The new humor revealed the ways that vaudeville comedy capitalized on a fragmented, gag-driven humor reflecting a world in social turmoil and its restructuring of values with its significant emphasis on the new, the unique, and the protean. Vaudevillians like Joe Weber and Lew Fields, Buster and the Three Keatons, W.C. Fields, and Will Rogers reflected these social changes that threatened to destabilize the cultural hierarchies of middle-class Anglo-Americans. In order to combat this influx of the new humor and its perceived offensiveness to middle-class audiences and appeal to more patrons with disposable income for their new-found leisure time, the formidable entrepreneur B. F. Keith dominated the vaudeville circuit in 1898 with his pronouncement to a middle-class magazine audience that "the state show must be free from all vulgarisms and coarseness of any kind, so that the house and entertainment

would directly appeal to the support ladies and children – in fact that my playhouse must be as 'homelike' an amusement resort as it was possible to make."[95] Keith's proclamation to bring decency – and more audiences that included middle-class women and their children – often took issue with the acts he promoted, particularly the comedians. The pressures from progressive reformers, like the Committee of Fourteen, the New York Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and the League of Social Service, forced the comic vaudevillians to either go underground or work around the parameters of their restrictions with the new humor. Progressives exploited class divisions in their attempts to Americanize citizens. Lower-class ethnic immigrants were targeted for bringing their lowbrow values and culture from Eastern and Southern Europe as well as Ireland and Germany, in order to infiltrate, denigrate, and laugh at the American middle classes from the vaudeville stage. The fear of America's underclasses having sociocultural values that were opposed to, and even contradicted, the practices of the genteel middle classes, provided progressive reformers with the initiative to censure popular entertainments. Popular comic entertainment came to represent the continuous struggle against the "culture of the power-bloc,"[96] which at the turn of the century was represented by the Anglo-American middle and upper classes. The new humor, through ethnic acts, family acts, and stump speeches, questioned these values and began to blur the boundaries of American culture and morality.

The ethnic "Double Dutch" act of Joe Weber and Lew Fields, the family act "Table and Bar Sketch" of Buster and the Three Keatons, and the challenge to Americanization in the "Stump Speech" acts of W.C. Fields and Will Rogers, serve as

---

[95] B. F. Keith, "The Vogue of Vaudeville," in *American Vaudeville As Seen by Its Contemporaries*, ed. Charles W. Stein (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 17.
[96] Hall, "Deconstructing the 'Popular,'" 227-40.

examples of the new humor that progressive reformers attempted to curb and shield from middle-class Anglo-American audiences. After having examined the techniques and skills of these comic vaudeville performers, we can reclaim the significance of popular comic vaudevillians of the progressive era.

The social and industrial paradigm shifts of the early twentieth century were confronted and challenged by the new humorists who had grown up on the road selling their unique and individualized gags, sketches, and acts across the United States. The talents of comic performers, like Weber and Fields, Buster Keaton, W.C. Fields, and Will Rogers, that were seen on the vaudeville stage contradicted the respectable, codified, and moral American way of life advocated by progressive reformers.

The notions of class hierarchies, ethnicity, and the American family were all under scrutiny by these comic vaudevillians. The battle between lowbrow and highbrow aesthetics became necessary to promote logic, morals, and social behaviors that conformed to the notion of what Americans were meant to represent. Weber and Fields's sending-up of ethnicity and cultural stereotypes; Buster Keaton's contestation of middle-class domestic values and decorum in his family act of the Three Keatons; comic stage artist W.C. Fields's confrontation of the gullibility, pretentions, and bourgeois aspirations of Anglo-Americans; Will Rogers's questioning of the authority of United States leadership and corruption in his stump speeches, all used comic portrayals of the American class system whose aesthetic and social priorities rested with their cultural and economic notions of upward mobility to Americanness. The new humor confronted and mocked these pretensions to sociocultural superiority. Comic vaudevillians exposed the myth of American success and assimilation for the many, while paradoxically creating it

for a select few of its own performers. Through its lasting notoriety and enjoyment, the new humor debunked the notion that it could only appeal to the prurient and vulgar working-class masses, by continuing to entertain and enlighten audiences of all ethnicities, classes, and political convictions at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States.

Chapter 3

The Family Act Goes to School – The Marx Brothers

Professor Ellwood Cubberley put forward a strategy for education reform, writing in 1909, "Our task is to break up [Southern and Eastern European ethnic immigrant] groups or settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as part of our American race and to implant in their children, so far as it can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of law and order and popular government."[1] The assimilation of the underclasses into the "American race" was to begin in public schools. The extent to which education reform was to be used to Americanize students was extolled by none other than President Woodrow Wilson, who in 1916 praised the "self-examination, a process of purification, a process of rededication to the things which America represents and is proud to represent," through public school reforms.[2]

In the early 1900s progressive reformers, such as Jane Addams, John Dewey, Elbridge Thomas Gerry, and Edgar Gardner Murphy, had taken on the reform of public education and child labor and welfare. For example, through the auspices of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (the Gerry Society), minors on the vaudeville stage were required to be sixteen years or older before they could perform legally. Although this law was meant to keep children out of the sweatshops and factories and in schools, it would have adverse effects on the working-poor classes that depended on a daily income in order to survive. Buster Keaton's father, Joe, noted the hypocrisy of the Gerry Society that ended up contradicting its benevolent ideals by

---

[1] Cubberley, *Changing Conceptions of Education*, 14-15.

[2] Woodrow Wilson, "Americanism," address to the Citizenship Convention, Washington, D.C., 13 July 1916, included in W. Talbot, ed., *Americanization* (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1920), 28-31.

ignoring the real issues of child welfare. During the 1910s, according to Joe Keaton, there were thousands of homeless, hungry, and abandoned children roving the streets of New York, "selling newspapers, shining shoes, playing the fiddle on the Hudson River ferryboats, and thousands of other small children working with their parents in the tenement sweatshops on the Lower East Side." Joe Keaton could not understand "why the S.P.C.C.[3] people didn't devote all of their time, energy, and money to helping them."[4] The conflict between progressive education reformers and ethnic immigrant vaudevillians can be witnessed in the Marx Brothers and their school act.

The Marx Brothers are a case in point of children of Eastern European immigrants who satirized the American public school education system during the progressive era through popular vaudeville entertainment. Born of Eastern European Jewish immigrant parents and growing up in New York City's then Upper East Side ghetto at the end of the nineteenth century, the Marx Brothers – Leonard (born 1887), Arthur (born Adolph, 1888), and Julius (born 1890) – spent twenty years in vaudeville before their international success in Hollywood films. Their formative years of vaudeville comedy took many forms and multiple variations of acts, until they formed the now ubiquitous characterizations known as Chico, Harpo, and Groucho.[5] The brothers' first successful vaudeville routine was the school act. The title of this act was *Fun In Hi Skule* (1910) – the intentional misspelling of the title informed how poorly public school had educated this trio of comedians. Of the three brothers, only Julius spent more than two years in

[3] The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

[4] Keaton with Samuels, *Wonderful World of Slapstick*, 33.

[5] Gummo Marx states in an interview from *The Marx Bros. Scrapbook* that the core trio of Chico, Harpo and Groucho were "unquestionably" the true comic soul of the Marx Brothers, and that he and Zeppo served as interchangeable straight men. Gummo and Zeppo were easily replaced by other actors, and were eventually superseded by a straight woman, Margaret Dumont, beginning with *The Cocoanuts* in 1925. In Richard J. Anobile, *The Marx Bros. Scrapbook* (New York: Darien House, Inc.), 16.

grammar school – he attended until he was twelve years old. Chico spent two years in school and Harpo only for a year and a half.[6] The failure of the public schools for these children, and the Marx Brothers's resistance to the American formal education system, paved the way for their school act. *Fun In Hi Skule* and its later incarnations with *Mr. Green's Reception* (1912), *Home Again* (1914), and the film *Horse Feathers* (1932), demonstrates how this popular vaudeville entertainment form through the new humor satirized and critiqued progressive era education reform at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Marx Brothers, and their beginnings in the third-tier vaudeville circuit where they formed the core comedic trio of Chico, Harpo, and Groucho and the relationship to their later commercial work on screen, will be explored through an evaluation of the ethnic, class, and comic social commentary in their various school acts. I bookend the vaudeville performances of the Marx Brothers beginning in 1910 with *Fun In Hi Skule* and ending with their 1932 film *Horse Feathers* – their final incarnation of the school act,[7] in order to trace the development of their unique interpretation of this vaudeville routine. I examine the three Marx Brothers, Chico, Harpo, and Groucho, individually and collectively, in order to show how they destabilized the traditions of vaudeville by breaking with the binary of insider and outsider.

The Marx Brothers's vaudeville work is often overlooked because of its ephemeral nature with only a few surviving photographs, scripts, and song lyrics. More

[6] Wes D. Gehring, *The Marx Brothers: A Bio-Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 12.

[7] For my analysis of the Marx Brothers's vaudeville performances, I am working from Groucho and Harpo's memoirs as well as reviews of their acts from the period. The anecdotal citations are admittedly potentially unreliable, but I have made every effort to corroborate any anecdotal citations with Joe Adamson's thoroughly researched biography, *Groucho, Harpo, Chico, and Sometimes Zeppo: A History of the Marx Brothers and a Satire on the Rest of the World*, which utilizes extensive interviews with Marx Brothers's collaborators and witnesses to their live performances in the 1910s and 20s.

importantly it could not be defined easily as high or lowbrow; sense or nonsense; nor part or not of the standard fare of vaudeville acts from the period. By revisiting and examining the Marx Brothers's two-decade long vaudeville career, I also wish to reevaluate and reclaim an undervalued moment in theatrical history and popular entertainment studies.

Although Henry Jenkins discusses the Marx Brothers at length, he sees them as one of a series of acts that employed the vaudeville aesthetic and focuses exclusively on their films. He does not engage with the Marx Brothers's actual vaudeville performances. This study adds to Jenkins's scholarship by evaluating the Marx Brothers's stage work, particularly their unique vision of the school act. The two outsiders, Chico and Harpo, worked with Groucho, who moved from insider to outsider and back again by inhabiting the liminal space between this binary opposition. The vaudeville aesthetic aided the Marx Brothers in their determination to reach a broad audience of various classes and cultural perspectives across the United States.[8]

The Show Biz "Three Rs" of Education – Gags, Singing, and the Time Step

Vaudeville historian Joe Laurie, Jr. notes that young people did not require any formal public schooling since "kids were weaned on applause and educated on the show biz Three Rs [of readin' writin', and 'rithmetic], gags, singing, and a time step!"[9] Public education became an attempt by progressive reformers to Americanize through school reforms. What made comic vaudevillians an affront to progressive reformers who wished

[8] The Marx Brothers's rural itinerary on the small-time vaudeville circuit for the 1910 season was as follows: Gadsden, Alabama; Little Rock, Arkansas; St. Joseph, Missouri; Muskogee, Oklahoma; Laredo, Texas; Youngstown, Ohio; somewhere north of Mobile, Alabama; Mobile, Alabama; Rockford, Illinois; Butte, Montana; Elko, Nevada; San Francisco, California; Fargo, North Dakota; and finally back to Chicago, Illinois. In Harpo Marx, *Harpo Speaks!* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2008), 124-34.

[9] Laurie, *Vaudeville*, 145.

to maintain an ethical and cultural middle-class value system through a focus on the performing arts, can be witnessed by looking at progressive education reforms alongside the school acts of the Marx Brothers.

The focus of education reformers was on reinforcing the insider status of Anglo-Americans by making sure that the outsider status of ethnic immigrants and their children would remain if they did not assimilate and embrace Anglo authority. The Marx Brothers in the school act represented the insider/outsider conflict of class and ethnicity. Harpo relates a childhood anecdote in his autobiography that shows how the public school system treated the underclasses, when he writes that "my formal schooling ended halfway through my second crack at the second grade." Harpo attributes this unceremonious ending to his formal schooling with "two causes," one being "a big Irish kid, and the other was a bigger Irish kid," and "I was the only Jewish boy in the room."[10] In addition to the anti-Semitic bullying, Harpo's second grade teacher, Miss Flatto, "had pretty much given up on teaching me anything. Miss Flatto liked to predict, in front of the class, that I would come to no good end." He was constantly harassed by his "Irisher" classmates who "would pick me up and throw me out the window and into the street" from an eight-foot drop. Miss Flatto, who scolded him for leaving the room without permission, saying, "'Some day you will *realize*, young man, you will *realize*!' I didn't know what she meant, but I never forgot her words." After months of this treatment, "one sunny day when Miss Flatto left the room and I was promptly heaved into the street, I picked myself up, turned my back on P.S. 86 and walked straight home, and that was the end of my formal education."[11] This childhood incident would be recreated

---

[10] Harpo Marx, *Harpo Speaks!*, 17.
[11] Ibid., 18-19.

in the school act, with Groucho as Herr Teacher, berating Harpo with “can’t you get *noddings* [sic] through your thick head?” Harpo, portraying Patsy Brannigan, the ignorant, trouble-making, “Irisher,” proved Herr Teacher right, becoming a street tough who survived by being a thief, a gambler, a liar, and a fighter. He reappears in *Mr. Green’s Reception* after twenty years as a garbage man who has amounted to no good, because of the poor schooling he received at the hands of Herr Teacher.

Chico and Harpo undermined the power of those in authority by exposing the insider’s desire to dominate and control outsiders. Their comic reversals satirized the power struggle and inverted the dominance of those without a place on the inside, therefore leaving a space for the final disruptive force: Groucho. I examine the Marx Brothers’s school acts as a reaction to and rejection of progressive education reform.

All three brothers in their collective as well as individual performances rejected their own personal schooling and reflected their disdain for the hypocrisy of educators and reformers who, in their estimation, only wanted to gain control over the behaviors and values of the lower classes. Reformers focused primarily on those children who were immigrants and/or the progeny of recent immigrants to the United States. The Marx Brothers, being first generation Jewish-American sons of Eastern European immigrants, had first-hand experience with the discrimination and humiliation that drove them from public schooling at an early age, based on attacks on their class and ethnicity.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, progressive education reformers were trying to promote a way of life as to how immigrants were to adapt in order to become model American citizens from an early age. In 1903, southern child labor reformer, Edgar Gardner Murphy, created a platform in order to reach the youth

population as soon as possible in order to get them on the road to a progressive agenda of Americanization before they had a chance of being corrupted by modernist sociocultural changes. Murphy thought schools should teach four key "disciplines" including "punctuality, order, and silence," and most importantly, "association."[12] The notion of association referred to whom an individual was to mix with and which collective he or she was to become part of by blending in, and ultimately how that association would reflect on the person. Institutions known as "Associations" would become popular tools for reformers to spread their message, as well as Lodges, Social Groups, Boys' and Girls' Clubs, and Guilds.[13]

The remaking of the new immigrant class into Anglo-Americans was to begin in childhood. Progressive education reformers such as Addams, Dewey, Gardner, and Ross would champion public schooling as a path to American assimilation. The Americanizing of public school students was important in influencing and reinforcing Anglo-American, middle-class heritage, morality, and nationalism. By instituting the "Pledge of Allegiance" to insure loyalty to America, eradicating accented English and silencing native languages, and erasing cultural markers in order not to appear or sound foreign, early childhood education emphasized and insisted upon an American ethos beginning at the earliest possible age.

For progressive reformers in the first two decades of the twentieth century, public school was to become a place for children to become assimilated Americans by losing their ethnic immigrant traditions, culture, and native languages along with their telltale

[12] Edgar Gardner Murphy, *Problems of the Present South: A Discussion of Certain of the Educational, Industrial and Political Issues in the Southern States* (New York: 1904), 72-74.

[13] An example of this would be the Theater Guild that Groucho Marx would satirize in the 1928 stage and 1930 film version of *Animal Crackers*.

accents, in order to fully be integrated into the progressive notion of Americanism. "A far-sighted policy, such as the training of the young is," as early twentieth-century American sociologist, E. A. Ross, remarked, "preferable to the summary regulation of the adult."[14] Social molding and control of children was to begin as soon as possible in public school education in order to combat the individualism of the ethnic immigrant who could not yet fully comprehend nor appreciate the values of already established Anglo-Americans. Concerns arose about such individualism being permitted and perhaps encouraged by parents of children newly arrived to the United States. Establishing the patriarchal middle-class family in early childhood education would ensure an Americanized citizenry once these children reached maturity, according to reformers. In 1904 Colorado education reformer Anna Garlin Spencer speculated whether immigrant mothers and fathers allowed their children too much freedom, writing: "We have removed from the single pair and their children all the props and discipline of the patriarchal family, and now we are rapidly democratizing the family. [W]e are even afraid of controlling effectively our own children lest we check their growth toward self-government."[15] The solution, according to progressive reform historian Joseph F. Kett, was public school education, as it was "the period of childhood when character is plastic and can be moulded [sic] for good or evil as clay in the potter's hands."[16] E. A. Ross referred to this process as "breaking in the colt to the harness."[17] In an effort to "break" the willful and unruly habits of the ethnic immigrant child, reformers advocated for the

---

[14] Edward Alsworth Ross, *Social Control: A Survey of the Foundations of Order* (Cleveland, 1969; 1901), 428.

[15] Anna Garlin Spencer in American Sociological Society, *Papers and Proceedings, Third Annual Meeting*, 198; Juvenile Court of the City and County of Denver, *The Problem of the Children and How Colorado Cares for Them* (Denver, 1904), 22.

[16] Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America: 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 215-44.

[17] Ross, *Social Control*, 166.

increased centralization of control over the upbringing of American youth through teachers and school boards. The intent was to lose the "old country" influences, languages, and traditions, in order to create an Anglo-Americanness. Reformers assumed a cultural illiteracy simply because immigrant students spoke in accented English, and were from working-poor backgrounds. It was assumed that because children were impoverished, or spoke broken English, that they were ignorant and had to be trained and tamed like an unbroken wild animal in order to transform students into loyal and dutiful Americans.[18]

Education reformer and philosopher John Dewey, who ran an experimental "Laboratory" School at the University of Chicago, and was the author of such books as *School and Society* and *The Child and the Curriculum*, helped launch what would become known as "progressive" education. Dewey, although advocating the learning of "individuality" by the respective child, did not think that students should develop arbitrarily as the spirit moved them, but had to be shepherded. He warned that "the danger of the 'new education' [is] that it regards the child's present powers and interests as something finally significant in themselves."[19] Therefore, while at the same time advocating for the education of students as individuals and opposing generic group learning that treated every child in the same way, Dewey, and other education reformers, pressed for their middle-class, Anglo-American version of culture and literacy. Education reform was meant to encourage the development of students by moving them away from their eastern and southern European immigrant cultural values and heritage.

The Americanization of immigrant children was often rejected by their parents,

---

[18] McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 110.

[19] John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum and The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956; 1906), 15.

who looked to private schools for educational needs or simply had their children go to work in family-run shops and labor-intensive jobs, providing an apprenticeship for the child alongside adults with similar backgrounds, languages, and ethics. Progressive reformers like Addams, Dewey, and Ross had a profound impact on education reform. According to social historian, Hal S. Barron, "from 1900 to 1909, the enrollment rate for children aged 5 to 19 in all types of schools rose from 50.5 per to 100 to 59.2; public secondary-school enrollments grew from 519,000 to 841,000; expenditures per pupil in public schools increased from $14 to $24; and the average public school term lengthened from 144.3 days in 1900 to 155.3 days in 1909."[20] The shift in higher enrollment was primarily due to reformers and the pressure they put on parents and school boards alike, according to Rose Cohen's 1905 biography of a Russian Jewish family (the Golubs) who immigrated to the United States in 1900. "Obviously education was crucial to any effort to reshape young Americans," notes Cohen. She then goes on to quote a young daughter of the family, named Rahel: "'A child that came to this country and began to go to school had taken the first step into the New World,' Rahel Golub affirmed. 'But the child that was put into the shop remained in the old environment with the old people, held back by the old traditions, held back by illiteracy.'"[21]

Ultimately, the progressives supported the child's individuality because it served their interests in regulating, if not outright eradicating, the behavior of other classes – especially the working underclasses. When they encouraged "the young creature's assertion that he is unlike any other human being," they were really hoping that the child

---

[20] Quotation from Hal S. Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 71.

[21] Rahel Golub as quoted in Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995; New York: Doran, 1918), 246.

would reject their parents' way of life, and embrace an Americanness born of the Anglo-middle classes.[22]

The image of vaudeville comedy and its perceived artlessness and lowbrow nature was perpetuated by the press and progressive reformers alike in the first decades of the twentieth century, particularly with regard to ethnic comedy acts. Reformers and critics alike saw a need to combat immigrant popular entertainments by diverting the attentions of the younger generation in particular, with leisure time that produced more edifying pleasures and "wholesome" divertissements that could be strictly monitored by adults who shared their same progressive values. In the early 1900s, reformers like Jane Addams noted what she called, "the insatiable desire for play."[23] She felt the need to deter young people from dance halls, saloons, and brothels, which she thought inevitably led to criminal and sexual experimentation. "To fail to provide for the recreation of youth," according to Addams, "is not only to deprive all of them of their natural form of expression, but is certain to subject some of them to the overwhelming temptation of illicit and soul-destroying pleasures."[24] This would lead to the promotion of "girls work" and "boys work" from 1900 to 1910. Children were meant to play in carefully monitored environments, in addition to being separated by gender, in this effort to Americanize.

Marion Lawrence, an upper-class Boston "concerned citizen," touted the North Bennet Street Boys' Club for the "underprivileged" – mainly Irish and Italian, adolescent boys – that would ensure that immigrant boys adhere to the club rules and that they

---

[22] Dewey, *Child and the Curriculum*, 15.
[23] Addams, *Spirit of Youth*, 102-3.
[24] Ibid.

"mustn't get excited, chew gum, spit, swear, cheat or talk Italian."[25] These clubs were meant to reinforce American values, according to Lawrence and other members of her social circle who saw these young immigrants as an affront to Americanness.

The playground and club movements were encouraged by progressives who wanted professional supervisors to schedule and regulate children's leisure activities. The notion of the playground would expand to young adults who, having just graduated high school or were already in the workplace, now had time to add to their leisure hours, as well as the disposable income for entertainment. Addams and her fellow progressives felt that the influence of stage performers would encourage these same young people to explore immoral behaviors in addition to encouraging the rejection of authority of familial, religious, and political leaders, as modeled by comedic vaudeville acts. One of the acts that would directly confront and satirize the education reformers agenda was the school act.

The Marx Brothers On the Road to the School Act

Tracking how Julius, Leonard, and Arthur became the three central Marx Brothers allows for an examination of how they used the school act during their stage career. Before the brothers became a family vaudeville act, the youngest of the three, Groucho (but long before he was called by his stage name) set them on the road to stardom. Groucho was the first Marx brother to work in vaudeville, and he began his career in 1905 at the age of fifteen when he joined an act called the Leroy Trio.[26] According to Groucho's autobiography, *Groucho and Me*, he discovered an ad in the

---

[25] Eric C. Schneider, *In the Web of Class: Delinquents and Reformers in Boston, 1810s-1930s* (New York: 1992), 132-38.

[26] Groucho Marx in his autobiography quotes the act's name as "the Larong Trio." Groucho Marx, *Groucho and Me:* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1959), 57.

New York Morning World stating: "Boy singer wanted for star vaudeville act. Room and board and four dollars a week."[27] Robin Leroy, a middle-aged singer/dancer, and self-proclaimed vaudeville star, hired the fifteen-year old Groucho as a singer, along with a teenaged male dancer named Johnny Morris, to complete the trio. Groucho observes his youthful exuberance for his newfound profession in his autobiography: "I was in show business, even if it was only two weeks. … I felt for the first time in my life I wasn't a nonentity. I was part of the Larong [sic] Trio. I was an actor. My dream had come true."[28] To give a taste of what the quality of this small-time act was like, Groucho describes the end of his first vaudeville tour in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where, "Larong [sic] closed the act dressed as the Statue of Liberty and holding a torch in his hand. Morton [sic] and I were decked out as Continental soldiers, guarding Miss Liberty from her unseen enemies. The unseen enemies turned out to be the audience, and only the fact that the theatre was almost empty by this time saved us from being stoned."[29] The reality of show business became clear to Groucho when they played their final engagement in Cripple Creek, Colorado, and found that Leroy had skipped town with the act and Groucho's pay. "I don't know where dire straits is," reflects Groucho, "but I certainly was now in that neighborhood. No money, no job, a minimum of talent and far, far from home. It was no use writing my mother and father for money. They didn't have any, either."[30]

Soon after his ignominious return from the road, Groucho's development as a vaudevillian would become closely aligned with his early collaboration with his brothers

[27] Ibid., 57; see also, Adamson, *Groucho … Sometimes Zeppo*, 43-48; Kyle Samuel Crichton, *The Marx Brothers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1950), 55-77.
[28] Ibid., 55.
[29] Ibid., 59.
[30] Ibid., 60.

and their act put together by his mother, Minnie, in 1907. Minnie Marx, seeing no prospects for her public school drop-out sons, and seeing the success of Groucho's vaudevillian uncle, Al Shean (who would become partners in a successful duo act with Edward Gallagher), decided that a show business career was a way out of poverty for her family. Minnie created an act out of a conventional group of singers and dancers first known as the Three Nightingales. This trio consisted of Groucho, his brother Milton (the future Gummo), and a young female singer named Mabel O'Donnell.[31] As the act progressed, it would become the Four Nightingales, adding Arthur (the future Harpo) as a fourth nightingale. Eventually Minnie's marketing plan for the act would include her adding more performers and renaming the act the Six Mascots – regardless of how many actual performers there were in the act at any given time. Faced with stages that often were not stages at all, but unstable benches at one end of an open hall, dressing rooms that were really backyards, and pay that they more often than not never received, the Nightingales and/or Mascots, ultimately became the Four Marx Brothers by adding Herbert (the future Zeppo) in 1917, when Gummo left the act to enlist in the army during World War I. The Marx Brothers ultimately distanced themselves from their Jewish immigrant roots by renaming themselves: Julius became Groucho; Leonard became Chico; Adolph (aka Arthur) became Harpo.

The pressure of pleasing audiences through improvisational and nonsensical comedy only improved the Marx Brothers's craft of disruptive humor. For the Marx Brothers, according to Groucho, the intensity of a diverse vaudeville-touring schedule was the key to their success: "We played three days in Burlington, Iowa, caught the train

[31] The Three Nightingales went on to include additional performers, replacing Mabel O'Donnell, like Lou Levy and Janie O'Riley, as the third nightingale, see Gehring, *Marx Brothers: A Bio-Bibliography*, 13-18.

overnight and played the following four days in Waterloo. This was very hard work: four-a-day[32] for five days equals twenty shows; five-a-day for two days equals ten more shows, for a total of thirty shows per week."[33] A review from this period comments on the importance of their far-reaching appeal: "the Marx Brothers introduce a variety of amusements, indeed it is hard to find a theatrical accomplishment they do not excel in that is not incorporated in their performance."[34] How the mixture of the three brothers developed can be witnessed in tracking the Marxes and their unique version of the school act from vaudeville to their later film work.

The School Act

Standard vaudeville acts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were composed of a series of specialty turns. These acts included a wide range of comic routines such as, the school act; the stump speech; the straight and the Jew; the single, double, or triple "Dutch," "Irish" or "Wop" act; the black face act; the ironic songster; the family act.[35] The Marx Brothers became well known by distinguishing themselves from these typical vaudeville acts, beginning with the school act.

According to vaudeville historian Joe Laurie, Jr., the school acts popular in the early 1900s "followed a pattern of our immigration." These ethnic immigrant acts were combinations of Irish, Italian, German, and Jewish character types, derived from variety theater and minstrel shows[36] of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Ethnic humor was not necessarily considered offensive in and of itself, and if we can believe Laurie's account,

---

[32] Four shows in one day.
[33] Groucho Marx, *The Groucho Phile* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 32.
[34] Anonymous review, qtd. in *Groucho Phile*, 39.
[35] Laurie, *Vaudeville*, 20-170.
[36] The "Negro" act was a holdover from minstrelsy with blackface routines for both white and black performers alike.

the performers were aware of the stereotypes that they were perpetuating and commenting upon, by sending up these outrageous types:

> And let me tell you right now that in early variety and vaude [sic] nobody took exception to the billings of the different character acts, like "The Sport and the Jew," "Irish by Name but Coons by Birth," "The Mick and the Policeman," "The Merry Wop," "Two Funny Sauerkrauts." It was taken in good humor by the audience, because that is what everyone called each other in everyday life. There were no pressure groups and no third generation to feel ashamed of immigrant origins.[37]

In order to see how they utilized the school act by moving away from its traditional structure and tropes, we must first look at a typical school act. As described by former vaudevillian, Joe Laurie, Jr., in his memoir, the standard school act featured a teacher ("a Dutchman with chin piece") and a cast of students representing ethnic and physical types ("Tony – Italian; Abey Maloney Goldstein – Jewish Boy; and Jesse James – Tough").[38] In the school act, an authoritarian primary school teacher led a class of ethnically stereotyped students. The perceived ignorance of the typically European immigrant students, and the overbearing teacher's frustration with them, were the sources of the comedy. The focus of the act was the frustration of the teacher with the stereotypical ignorance of the students. The institution of school was represented by a teacher who demanded that the students correctly answer his relentless and arbitrary questions. Ultimately the teacher sought a rote answer that his students should have parroted back to him. A series of "wrong" answers would come from the uncomprehending students.

---

[37] Laurie, *Vaudeville*, 81.
[38] Ibid., 427.

Some students deliberately misunderstood while others simply did not know the required answers. Each time a student gave a wrong answer, he was hit "on the head with an umbrella," among other objects readily at hand.[39] Henry Jenkins states that, "Perhaps why 'school acts' were so popular with audiences had to do with the nature of comedy and its relationship to the defiance of authority."[40] The Marx Brothers took and further disturbed the act's authority by being insiders and outsiders at the same time.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, vaudeville featured many popular school acts, including Gus Edwards, Herman Timberg, and the Marx Brothers. In 1908 Herman Timberg was the star of Gus Edwards's *School Days* that played at the Circle Theater. Edwards had developed an act featuring vaudeville comedian Timberg, creating a success with what would become the popular school act.

According to the Brooklyn-based newspaper *The Citizen*:

> One of vaudeville's keenest comedy noses, [and] not a bad looking one at that, arrives with the person of Herman Timberg, music hall impresario, at the E. F. Albee Theatre this week. Herman and his brother Sammy, two of the smartest young Jewish boys from New York's East Side has produced, which is saying something, are offering a sportive and diverting concoction which they have named, appropriately enough, "The Laugh Factory."[41]

Timberg and his "Laugh Factory" had established an excellent reputation by producing one of the most accomplished school acts in vaudeville during the turn of the twentieth century. As Timberg himself told *The Citizen*, "it was his dependable sleuthing that unearthed the Four Marx Brothers, who lately starred in: *The Cocoanuts* [written with

---

[39] Ibid., 428.
[40] Jenkins, *Pistachio Nuts?*, 42.
[41] Unidentified reviewer, "*School Days*," *The Citizen* (Brooklyn, NY, 16 October 1927).

Herman Timberg] and supplied them with much of the comedy material which brought them recognition, first in a Timberg production in vaudeville [known as *School Days*.]"[42]

Whether or not this was hyperbole on Timberg's part, in 1910 the Marx Brothers changed the course of their careers with their own school act, *Fun In Hi Skule*. The title of the act was deliberately misspelled and was meant to signal the student's lack of ability to be educated. The Marx Brothers created their own variation of this act that would guide their unique anarchic comedy. The school act featured Chico – after replacing Gummo – bringing with him what would become his signature character of the "eye-talian-accented" peasant immigrant, known by many pseudonyms including Signor Ravelli, Baravelli-the-Iceman, Fiorello, and Chicolini, Harpo and his fighting Irish persona of "Patsy Brannigan;" and Groucho as the German-dialect "Herr Teacher." Eventually the school act established the Marx Brothers in the personae that singled them out as unique, eccentric, and one of the most popular family acts in vaudeville. Their school act characters were Irish, Eastern and Southern European immigrant comedic types, which Edward Harrigan had warned would spread the "new humor" by "laughing *at* and not *with*" Anglo-American audiences at the beginning of the twentieth century.[43]

With the advent of Herr Teacher in *Fun In Hi Skule* (1910), to *Mr. Green's Reception* (1912) and *Home Again* (1914), to the 1932 film *Horse Feathers*, Groucho became famous for his "eccentric" comedy in the role of a teacher. The school act was an early example of what the Marx Brothers did best destabilizing rigid institutional settings. Groucho's authoritarian perpetually wheedles his way into positions of power only to undermine his own authority through his intentional ineptitude and indulgence in

---

[42] Ibid.
[43] Harrigan's comments are discussed in Chapter 1 when defining the new humor.

his abuses of power. Groucho countered the democratic explosions of Chico and Harpo by institutionalizing and fusing the role of outsider with that of the insider.

Fun In Hi Skule

The Broadway version of a school act called *School Days* opened at the Circle Theatre in New York City on 14 September 1908. With lyrics by Will Cobb and music by Gus Edwards, the song "School Days" was the featured number of the show and by 1910 vaudeville was full of imitations of the successful act. The then-unknown comedy team of the Marx Brothers followed the trend of the school act that had assured fellow comedians of financial and artistic rewards and led them to create their own adaptation of *School Days – Fun In Hi Skule*. The success of this Marx Brothers's school act lasted two years, beginning in the summer of 1910, and ending in September of 1912 when they switched to a sequel to this show entitled, *Mr. Green's Reception*. *Fun In Hi Skule* was the Marx Brothers's first show in which comedy was the featured attraction and not the songs or dances. Their first variation of the school act became the Marx Brothers first real success with the idiosyncratic characters that made them famous and wealthy stage, film, and television performers.

The Marx Brothers would bring their own unique take on this school act in recognition of their own failed attempts at being educated through the New York City public schools. An early review of the brothers reinforces how they were moving away from the standard fare of shows like *School Days*. *Variety* found the tour of *Fun In Hi Skule*[44] to be unique and singular, featuring:

> [Harpo] a natural comedian. Also he is a harpist, and a good one .... [H]e scored an unusually large success, deservedly so, too .... [T]he teacher [Groucho] does

[44] The misspelling of "Hi Skule" was meant to signal the student's lack of ability to be educated.

well as a "Dutchman," and makes quite something out of [his role] as worked by him ... will be liked on almost any bill, playing differently from the usual run. It is the best "school act" seen ... since Herman Timberg well known for his school act.[45]

The Marx Brothers had scored a victory over the popular school act of vaudevillian Herman Timberg by "playing differently." The highly respected and commercially successful Timberg was so impressed by the Marx Brothers that he offered to co-write their vaudeville show *On the Mezzanine* (1921) and their second Broadway success, *The Cocoanuts* (1925), with George S. Kaufman.[46]

The success of the Marx Brothers in the school act and its quality and distinctiveness was observed directly by *Variety* in 1912:

> When Gus Edwards' "School Boys and Girls" recently appeared at Hammerstein's, it was mentioned in a criticism in this paper that there were "school acts" on the "small time" much better than Mr. Edwards' played out turn. The act arrived sooner than expected. It is the Marx Brothers, from the west, with seven people [in *Fun In Hi Skule*]. They make the Edwards number look foolish.[47]

The differences in the Marx Brothers's school act were exemplified by the construct of their vaudeville performances was quite calculated to reach a wide-ranging audience, and the unique interplay between their three diverse comic skills.[48] In an interview for the

---

[45] It is worth noting that the Marx Brothers had no real formal education except a few years of grammar school between them. Unsigned *Variety* review, qtd. in *Marx Bros. Scrapbook*, 33.

[46] Gehring, *Marx Brothers: A Bio-Bibliography*, 26.

[47] Sime Silverstein, "*Fun In Hi Skule*," *Variety* (24 February 1912), 17.

[48] Originally they were billed as "The Four Marx Brothers" which included Gummo who was then replaced by Zeppo.

Utah Democrat, the Marx Brothers revealed their performance strategy to an unidentified reporter, who wrote:

> Since some people like one style of comedy and don't care for another, it behooved the Marx boys, if they wanted to stick to their agreement, to offer every style of comedy known to the stage; if one of the brothers did not please, one of the other three would be sure to; and thus the four brothers, individually and collectively, would be credited with being a "hit." Accordingly, they divided up the field of comedy among themselves thus: Julius [Groucho] took up eccentric comedy; […] Arthur [Harpo], nut comedy; and Leonard [Chico], boob comedy.[49]

How these three forms of comedy came to create a distinctive style when fused together can be seen in the following scene from *Fun In Hi Skule*. In his autobiography, Harpo describes how Groucho as Herr Teacher tried to show off his classical singing voice during a class music lesson with his tenor's aria, and how he and Chico built an act around this set piece. Groucho suddenly stopped singing and turned to Chico who was providing the piano accompaniment, "I don't like your key, Giuseppe." Chico responded with, "How about this key, boss?," and transposed the key to C-minor. "Worse," Groucho criticized. Then according to Harpo:

> I ran onstage and bumped Chico off the stool and began to play "The Holy City," the quickstep-march variation. Groucho knocked me off. Chico knocked Groucho off. I knocked Chico off. Through the whole wacky round-robin the piano kept being played and Groucho kept singing "*La donna e mobile*"[50] – in double-talk Italian.

[49] Unsigned review of *Home Again* by Al Shean, *Utah Democrat* (9 March 1917).
[50] From Verdi's opera, *Rigoletto*, 1850.

The now-frenzied opera turn devolved into “a six-hand, three-key version of ‘Waltz Me Around Again, Willie.’” This popular Tin Pan Alley song was played with, “Chico on the stool, me sitting on Chico’s shoulders, and Groucho behind us, reaching his arms around Chico like tentacles, and all of us singing.” The number ended with the brothers collapsing into a heap onstage, then they sprung back into action, and “grabbed […] mandolins, and sailed into ‘Pease Weasie.’”[51] The willful destruction of highbrow opera that became a popular vaudeville song, and then erupted into a chaotic and surreal manic physical comedy sketch, made the Marx Brothers school act a singular experience. The escalating violence and surreal accretion of absurdity and chaos in the classroom, showed a disregard for public education with its insistence on exposing high art to students, while depicting the inability of school reforms to serve the children from the ethnic underclasses. The school act was what made the Marx Brothers – the Marx Brothers. As Groucho states in his autobiography, *Fun In Hi Skule* would mark “the first time in our career we realized that we could succeed as an act without any outside help. [...] We were now a unit. We were the Marx Brothers.”[52]

This scene also shows how the Marx Brothers mocked Americanization simply through deconstructing the regimented music lessons of the public school classroom. The singing of pro-America songs was thought to aide in the socialization of immigrant children through public schooling. How this was achieved can be observed in a letter dated 1911, from a young immigrant to his mother:

> [T]he really impressive sight was the presentation and oath of allegiance to the American flag which [sic] takes place at 9 o’clock every morning. First they sang

[51] Marx, *Harpo Speaks*!, 117-18.
[52] Ibid., 154.

a number of American songs and some of the children recited and then came this ceremony to an end, every child stretching out its hand towards the flag. It really made one feel that America was a land of freedom."[53]

The Marx Brothers destabilized the authority of the classroom, aesthetic hierarchies, and loyalty to American nationalism, through their version of the school act.

Mr. Green's Reception

Fun In Hi Skule was constantly being reinvented, as the show responded to a variety of audiences during the brothers' tour of the United States. The school concert that was featured in the second act took the form of a reunion twenty years later, entitled *Mr. Green's Reception*. Initially the two acts played as a double bill but by September 1912, *Mr. Green's Reception* was being performed on its own. *Mr. Green's Reception* was another version of the school act that was a major success for the Marx Brothers. It toured for two years until September 1914, when this most recent version of the school act was reinvented yet again with new sketches and songs by their uncle and vaudeville star, Al Shean, as *Home Again*.

The setting of *Mr. Green's Reception* was a garden party reception given by the old "Dear Teacher" (an Anglo-German wordplay on "der Teacher"). "Mr. Green was the new name we gave to the Teacher," wrote Harpo:

> On the anniversary of his retirement, he invites his old pupils to a reception at his vine-covered cottage in the country. Patsy, Giuseppe, Izzy and Mama's Boy are grown men now. They have become, it so happens, singers of songs, players of

[53] Letter from Alfred Zimmern to his Mother, 20 October 1911 in Zimmern Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, quoted in Desmond King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of Diverse Democracy* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 89.

> the piano, pluckers of the mandolin, and fun-loving comedians. They give their old teacher a gala entertainment.[54]

Mr. Green's Reception was a larger-scale, extravagant piece with an on-stage crew of twenty-one: four Marx Brothers,[55] Paul Yale, George Lee, and fifteen female chorus members, enthusiastically advertised as "[girls] with short skirts, yaller hair and pink stockings,"[56] including Vera Bright, Dot Davidson, and Saba Shephard, who toured with show for many years including its sequel, *Home Again*.

Harpo would wear his now famous red wig and played harp, while Gummo played the juvenile straight man that Zeppo later inherited. When Chico joined the act, he was already the self-possessed and willfully misunderstanding "Eye-talian," here named "Leo the Wop" from his own double act with partner George Lee. This new version of the school act, which highlighted the students from *Fun In Hi Skule* twenty-years later, began straight off by featuring Harpo as the mute Patsy Brannigan, as Groucho was later to recount: "[We] had a bowl on the stage with lemonade, and Harpo would stick his whole head in the bowl. Harpo liked lemonade."[57] Harpo delivers the class conflict right away by disrupting this fashionable garden party overlooking the Hudson River Valley with his crass behavior. *Mr. Green's Reception* was a commentary on the result of public schooling advocated so vociferously by reformers, as none of the students appeared to have any education to speak of twenty years on. Harpo as Patsy still had the same ratty red wig – although with two decades of wear – turtleneck sweater, and

---

[54] Marx, *Harpo Speaks!*, 121.
[55] The fourth brother referred to would be Gummo later replaced by Zeppo.
[56] Dean Cornwell cartoon for performances at the Colonial Theater in 1914.
[57] Groucho interviewed by Charlotte Chandler in *Hello, I Must Be Going* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1978).

now blacked-out teeth. He arrives to the party carrying a trashcan, and Mr. Green having no recognition of this rag picker asks:

> MR. GREEN (GROUCHO): And who might you be, my good fellow?
>
> PATSY (HARPO): Why, Patsy Brannigan, the Garbage Man.
>
> MR. GREEN: Sorry, but we don't need any.

Herr Teacher's lack of recognition of his own student that has come to honor him, coupled with Patsy's lack of propriety and any kind of socialization, reveals the futility and resistance of ethnic immigrant students – like Patsy Brannigan – with public school education. School reform from the point of view of this school act had clearly failed. The irony was that the Marx Brothers, by refusing the education offered by the public school system, were on their way to becoming one of the most successful, wealthy, and well-known comedy teams of the twentieth century. A 1913 review observes:

> *Mr. Green's Reception* is in three acts and is described as a "modern mixture of mirth, melody and motion." In it are an unusually large number of tuneful melodies … Among the special features introduced are the lazy levee slide, the spectacular ship scene, the big cabaret entertainment and fun in a country school, each of which is a winner as a pleasing musical comedy contribution.[58]

The nod to the modernist era and the new humor, in this review, and the spirit of speed and perpetual motion into the future, shows how in tune the Marx Brothers were to the changes in American life in the early twentieth century, and a tribute to the success of their school acts. In 1914, the Marx Brothers would capitalize once again on this act in its final incarnation for the vaudeville stage with *Home Again*.

[58] Unidentified reviewer, "*Mr. Green's Reception*," *Kalamazoo Gazette* (12 January 1913).

***Home Again*: The Third Incarnation of the School Act**

Fun In Hi Skule and *Mr. Green's Reception* had one more stage variation two years later with *Home Again*. Once the Marx Brothers returned from honing this show on the road, they presented it in "big time" New York City vaudeville houses like the Royal and the Palace. *Home Again*, co-authored by their vaudevillian uncle Al, of the comedy team, Gallagher and Shean, opened in September of 1914 and would run in New York and on tour for the next four years. A 1919 review of the Marx Brothers in the "New Acts" section of *Variety* reveals some interesting clues as to the development of the Marx Brothers's school acts that made them unique from other vaudeville acts of the time, and which would ensure their future Broadway and Hollywood successes:

> Julius (Groucho) Marx is developing into an actor. … His asides are more funny than the set lines. He is a confirmed ad-libber and claims he has a right to interpolate, he having written the material for the act. Arthur Marx, known as "Harpo," because of his adeptness with the harp, is the sole survivor on the American vaudeville stage of the school of pantomime. Without saying a word he draws most of the laughs of the act, and that not by virtue of mere mugging, but by the utility of props, gestures, and psychological situations. Leonard (Chico) in the character of the "wop," backed by his nifty piano playing and ingenious "fingering …"[59]

Home Again, a reworking of *Mr. Green's Reception*, featured Groucho still playing the now-retired Herr Teacher in the guise of Mr. Green – now called Mr. Hammer – who is visited by his former pupils. Among those students are Chico and Harpo who portray petty criminals who work along the docks. They are anti-social characters who as

[59] Unidentified reviewer, "New Acts," *Variety* (7 February 1919).

outsiders are a product of Mr. Green's teaching. Chico and Harpo had begun a series of petty criminal characters in the guise of working-class roles that would appear in their later stage and film work. Harpo had also begun in earnest his "mute" characterization with the character of Patsy, since Shean had written only a few lines for him, and as a result, he decided to go silent. Not only is Harpo a poor Irish immigrant with no education and no prospects, but he is rendered completely inarticulate (save for the honking of a horn), and is only understood by his partner/brother Chico via gestures and facial expressions. *Home Again* marks Harpo's life-long career as a mute comedian who communicates perfectly in the world of those who are outsiders, and renders authoritarian insiders helpless by playing the part of a harmless and bumbling clown, who can operate under their radar. Chico (as the small-time gambler that he really was off stage as well), and Harpo, as they invariably did, portrayed marginalized working-class roles. These background characters were on the outside of any given narrative, and came to the foreground with their subversion of those in authority as represented by Groucho.

The success of their work in third-tier vaudeville circuits in front of audiences in far-flung and remote regions of the United States is reflected in their *Variety* reviews, which concluded that *Home Again* was "the best tab[loid] New York has ever seen … an act big time could depend upon for a future."[60]

Home Again was the show that linked the previous Marx Brothers's school acts together. Although no surviving scripts have been located, a structure in three parts can be pieced together from the memoirs of Groucho, Harpo, one of the Marx Brothers's script collaborators, S.J. Perelman – who saw the show in 1916 as a twelve-year-old – and newspaper reviews. *Home Again* would run in various guises from 1914 to 1920, as

[60] Unidentified reviewer, "*Home Again*," 16.

The Four Marx Brothers Revue opening on 7 February 1919, and was quickly renamed *N'Everything*, and ran for another year. After four years of playing *Home Again*, in October 1918 the Marx Brothers wanted to change to another show to further their careers, but when the new vehicle, *Street Cinderella*, flopped, they revived *Home Again* and played it until December 1920.

The first part of *Home Again* takes place on the docks and piers – suggested by four battered satchels and a grim backdrop representing the gangway – of the Cunard Line in New York. As a group of diverse ethnic immigrants get off the *Britannic*, Groucho in the guise of Mr. Green,[61] with swallowtail coat, spectacles, and an unlit cigar, is accompanied by his wife sporting a feather boa, on their return from a European voyage. The festive air filled with streamers and confetti was immediately disrupted with Groucho's complaints about seasickness: "Well friends, next time I cross the ocean, I'll take a train. I'm certainly glad to set my feet on terra firma. Now I know that when I eat something, I won't see it again."[62]

In *Home Again* the Marx Brothers were still honing their ethnic immigrant characterizations. Groucho in his "Dutch" accent – which he would drop during the 1917-18 season when the United States entered World War I – declares, "This must be the Far Rockaway boat." His wife asks, "How do you know?" Groucho sniffs the air and bluntly notes, "I can smell the herring," Groucho answers. The stereotypical ethnic joke refers to Far Rockaway and its large Jewish population, and their diet of cheap herring. While on the dock, Gummo – replaced by Zeppo when he entered the army in

[61] Groucho initially still appeared as Mr. Green in the show, but pretty soon he was renamed Henry Schneider. After the sinking of *Lusitania* on 7 May 1915, all German allusions disappeared over night and thus Groucho's character became Henry Jones.

[62] Al Shean, *Home Again*, from the "Marxology" website at http://www.marx-brothers.org/marxology/home.htm, (accessed 17 December 2012).

1917 – heckled Groucho, who responded with an aside to the audience, "Nowadays you don't know how much you know until your children grow up and tell you how much you don't know."[63] This antagonistic relationship between a teacher-father and his student-son is featured in the film *Horse Feathers* almost fifteen years later. Harpo and Chico are hucksters and gamblers who roam the docks and happen to be Mr. Green's former students. A policeman comes on and explains that some of the ship's silverware is missing. Harpo notes that "Being a full-time pantomimist [sic] now, I worked hard thinking up stage business that didn't require spoken lines."[64] Harpo is discovered with over thirty pieces of silverware that are hidden in his expansive sleeve, and is summarily arrested. "I swiped a bulb-type horn off a taxicab and stuck it under my belt before going on in *Home Again*," writes Harpo, "When Chico and I started our fight and the cop clomped on and yanked me off Chico, the horn went whonk! and we got a hell of a big new laugh." The horn honking would become Harpo's new form of communication for the rest of his career that only Chico can interpret. This secret language between Harpo and Chico distinguishes them as outsiders, who develop an underground code to undermine the authorities like Groucho's Mr. Green.

The second part of *Home Again* takes place a few weeks later. The setting is now a painted backdrop of the lawn at Groucho's (presumably he has married rich) villa overlooking the Hudson River. Groucho now sports a plaid-trimmed smoking jacket. Much of the second act consists of musical performances in honor of their former teacher, Mr. Green. This becomes a vaudeville show in and of itself, with its various unconnected acts featuring singers, dancers, and musicians. Harpo is introduced at the

---

[63] Ibid.
[64] Marx, *Harpo Speaks!*, 122.

party by the “garbage man-joke” from *Mr. Green’s Reception*, and begins guzzling the water out of the goldfish bowl and then swallows the goldfish. Another theft provided Harpo with an excuse to search two of the girls. Eventually Groucho gets tired of being annoyed by these two rambunctious guests, and when they start chasing a girl around the room he gives up and joins them. The third and last part of the show has the former students all get into a papier-mâché boat mounted on wheels. They move off the stage with a rousing chorus. All the lights except on the deck go out while the boat is seen going down the river in the distance. Harpo usually added a gag in the end, like tugging on a rope and sending the passengers tumbling, or some other improvised business of missing the boat and pretending to swim after it while spewing water. Harpo has once again missed the boat.

Home Again and its various scenes found its way into the Brothers’s Broadway shows (*The Cocoanuts* and *Animal Crackers*) and Hollywood films (*Monkey Business*, *Horse Feathers*, and *Duck Soup*), defying and destabilizing progressive reformers’ attempts at implementing an Anglo-American, middle-class agenda with ethnic, working-class immigrants, through public schooling. By using the vaudevillian school act the Marx Brothers were able to satirize the futility and bigotry in this process of forced Americanization. The Marx Brothers point to the fact that as sons of underclass immigrants, they were able to mock the stereotypes of the culturally deficient, ignorant, and indigent, working-poor Jews. They were able to become an American success story themselves in spite of their refusal to assimilate to progressive era school reforms. The Marx Brothers, as ethnic-American Jewish outsiders, became American iconic stars and cultural touchstones that still have contemporary relevance with their ubiquitous personas

of Chico, Harpo, and Groucho – or simply The Marx Brothers.

A 1925 sociology textbook, using a social survey of Cleveland residents in 1920, came to the conclusion that juvenile delinquents and offenders spend most of their free time in "empty leisure and desultory activities" including "loafing on the streets, in pool halls, and bowling alleys. In contrast to the leisure activities of "wholesome" citizens who engaged in "a widely extended and richly diversified range of activities." By following "the guidance of parents, teachers, relatives, and friends," young people avoided the "inevitable" connection between popular entertainments and juvenile delinquency. According to the director of the Chicago Crime Commission, "the young delinquent has, in the majority of instances, grown up in the atmosphere of the saloon, the poolroom and similar hang-outs."[65] All three of the Marx Brothers, both onscreen and off, were to be found in any of these pleasure-seeking venues from early childhood onward. Chico and Harpo portrayed these characters on the vaudeville stage, and reformers were concerned that this would influence the underclasses to indulge in similar "degenerate" behavior. The glorification of the socially resistant outsider seen on the popular stage was to be curbed at all costs according to reformers like Jane Addams in her book *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (1909), and in sociologist's evaluations of the 1910s and 20s reform issues, with Arthur Evans Wood in *Community Problems* (1928), and Maurice R. Davie in *Problems of City Life* (1932). How the Marx Brothers combined to create sociocultural "problems" can be seen through the lens of their "boob," "nut," and "eccentric," versions of the new humor.

ONE: CHICO

---

[65] Henry B. Chamberlain, "Recreation and Crime," *New York Times* (28 May 1922), quoted in Arthur Evans Wood, *Community Problems* (New York: The Century Co., 1928), 280.

CHICO: Who are you going to believe? Me?
Or your own eyes? – *Duck Soup*, (1933)[66]

Chico was a master of disruption through his "boob" comedy. Chico played the Italian-accented immigrant who pretended to misunderstand, using puns and malapropisms in order to obfuscate his true intent: hustling his mark. There was never a card game, a chance to cheat someone out of a bit of money, or an attempt to get a "chick"[67] into bed that he would avoid. Chico performed the charming, but seemingly doltish immigrant peasant, who plays the fool in order to get what he wants from those in authority. Chico created his brand of comedy by taking advantage of insiders who had the power he could not access save through his outsider's deception.

Chico employed the most basic trope of ethnic humor: the accented immigrant. This "type" appeared on the U.S. vaudeville stage as early as the 1880s.[68] According to S.J. Perelman, Chico appeared in *Home Again* as "Leo the Wop" although most sources name him "Toni Saroni." This can be compared with his persona in the stage version of *The Cocoanuts*, "Willie the Wop." Moving away from simply making a joke out of the malapropisms and ignorance of the uneducated immigrant, Chico embodied the persona of a street-smart gambler who could take advantage of any situation in his run-ins with authority. Chico simply pretended not to understand the more "sophisticated" authoritarian figure. In the case of *Fun In Hi Skule*, Chico rejected the notion of classroom education through his deliberate misunderstanding. Chico is seen in one of two modes during the school act – in the first part of *Home Again* he enters and starts climbing over couches to sit in women's laps. In the second part of the show, Chico

[66] The Marx Brothers, *Duck Soup*, DVD. Dir. Leo McCarey. Writ. Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby (Paramount Studios, 1933: Universal Home Video, Silver Screen Collection, 2004).
[67] Chico received his nickname from "chasing the chickens" [women].
[68] Adamson, *Groucho … and Sometimes Zeppo*, 17.

begins another scene by stealing lingerie from the female passengers. Both routines involve anti-social behavior and the pursuit of women. Chico – as a petty thief and gambler – was often assisted by Harpo but Chico was always the instigator and the one with the plan to rob the upper classes or seduce a woman. Harpo was along for the thrill of the adventure and the joy of the sheer anarchy he was causing. Chico enjoys disrupting bourgeois society and its conventions, and in the spirit of the poor immigrant who in order to survive uses all means available to him, whether legal or not, necessary to get food, money, and sex, in a world where his outsider status denies him these essentials that middle-class Anglos can readily acquire with little effort.

Chico made his first entrance to this school act by coming through the orchestra pit to stop the action onstage. He therefore began his stage career by being neither offstage nor onstage. When Chico first joined the cast of *Mr. Green's Reception*, he is said to have unexpectedly entered from the orchestra pit as the pianist instigating a comic battle with his brothers.[69] Harpo claimed that he was taken by surprise when:

> I happened to look into the orchestra pit. I couldn't believe my eyes. Instead of giving the orange to Teacher, I let out a whoop, wound up like a baseball pitcher and heaved the orange at the piano player in the pit. The piano player caught it and threw it back. When Groucho and Gummo saw what was going on they started whooping too. We heaved everything we could get our hand on into the orchestra pit – hats, books, chalk, erasers, stilettos. The piano player surrendered. He climbed up onto the stage, sat at one of the school desks, and joined the act. It

[69] Gehring, *Marx Brothers: A Bio-Bibliography*, 20; Crichton, *Marx Brothers*, 130.

> was Chico. I don't remember much about the rest of the performance that night, except that Chico adlibbed a hilarious part as an Italian boy….[70]

Chico's surprise entrance from the orchestra was such a success with audiences that it was kept as part of the act, and has been recreated in various forms in their films. As this scenario suggests, Chico appears as the fast talking "Italian" who improvises both physically and verbally as a way of taking the other performers by surprise while at the same time resisting stage conventions like entering as a musician through the audience. Chico played in that bridged space between audience and performer which he would occupy both literally and metaphorically throughout the rest of his career. Always on the outside of the main narrative of the act, he plays the mysterious foreigner who is loyal to no one unless it serves his own interests. In reality, Chico loved the solitude of the gambler and the pianist who lives in his own world where he can lose himself in the task at hand.

TWO: HARPO

HERR TEACHER: What is the shape of the earth?
HARPO: Square on weekdays and round on weekends!
– *Fun In Hi Skule*, 1910

Turning to Harpo, we can see that he represents the outsider in the guise of a silent satyr who disrupts scenes and defies authority through his use of props, sounds, and the surreal transposition of what is seen and how it can be reinterpreted. Harpo capitalized on the perception that he is "nuts" and confounds authority through the disruption of his inscrutable silence. Harpo creates disruption as Patsy in *Fun In Hi Skule* through the traditional role of the ignorant/fighting Irishman as class clown. Harpo discovers that the use of silent gesture and props will distinguish him from the highly

[70] Marx, *Harpo Speaks!*, 116-17.

verbal Chico and Groucho. Harpo uses his skills as a musician in his comedy as noted in a 1913 review:

> [The] comedy harp playing by Arthur Marx is a winning card. He is not only a really good performer on this instrument, but he can make it do some laughable stunts, too. It's worth hearing and seeing, especially the way he hypnotizes the members of the company to do all sorts of freak movements to his accompaniment.[71]

One of Harpo's skills as noted in this review was to get the other performers to embrace his "nutty" and surreal physical humor. In order to disarm the insiders of authority like Groucho's Herr Teacher, as Patsy, and later in almost all his stage and film performances, he hooked his leg in the crook of the arm of an unsuspecting performer, as a bizarre form of handshake. Simultaneously playful and aggressive, Harpo is able to disarm and confuse characters who are attempting to bully or berate him. This defense of using disarming humor was a way of surviving on the streets of New York City as a child. Being "the patsy" or the victim who takes the rap for others, Harpo could not physically fight back but he could use humor and strange physical actions to throw off his tormenter long enough to get away.[72]

Before Harpo's silence, he still engaged in dialogues with Groucho as standard examples of the inability for the poor immigrant to learn in the public school classroom. A typical sequence from *Fun In Hi Skule* involved a geography lesson as taught by Herr Teacher to Patsy Brannigan, as remembered in an interview with Groucho:

---

[71] Unidentified reviewer, "*Mr. Green's Reception*," *Kalamazoo Gazette* (12 January 1913).
[72] Marx, *Harpo Speaks!*, 27-34.

> I'd ask Harpo, "What is the shape of the earth?" And he'd say he didn't know so I'd try to help him. I pointed to my cufflinks and said, "What shape are these?" He'd say "Square." And I'd say, "No, not these. The ones I wear on Sundays." He'd say, "Round." "Now, then," I'd say, "what is the shape of the earth?" And he'd answer, "Square on weekdays and round on weekends!"[73]

However, when Harpo went silent beginning in *Home Again*, he was able to respond to any kind of questioning, with a sweet childlike smile, and then "leg hook" an authority figure like Groucho, which would defuse the tension and defer any kind of schooling, interrogation, or fight with this simple act. It became so popular it would follow him throughout his career, and become a trademark of Harpo's former street defenses against insiders who wanted to abuse this wily and crafty outsider.

Harpo's unique transition into a "pantomime act" is described in the "Silencing of Patsy Brannigan" chapter of his memoir, *Harpo Speaks!*, and with it a telling name change. Harpo, although still playing the character of Patsy Brannigan, was soon to be billed as "The Nondescript," dressed in striped shirt, torn raincoat, battered hat and red fright wig, a costume that would remain with him for the rest of his career. The description of an Irish working-class product of public schooling being called "The Nondescript" adds a further class and ethnic dimension to the social commentary of the school act. The attempt by reformers to eradicate ethnicity by creating a uniform Anglo-American pupil is mocked by Harpo's character, which is anything but nondescript. His horn-honking and clown's costume combined with his silent rejection of conformity – as witnessed in the "leg hook" – created an iconoclastic character that remains internationally well known.

[73] Interview with Groucho Marx in *The Marx Bros. Scrapbook*, 16.

Harpo added a new dimension to his stage persona when he went silent as a result of a bad review that denigrated his verbal acuity and praised his pantomime skills. Harpo's silence became a nonverbal resistance to authority. As a result of going silent, Harpo points out that as early as 1914 he created for the first time his "silverware drop from the coat sleeve" during the tour of *Home Again*:

> He [A hotel detective] turns to me and says, "You've got an honest face. You don't want to be a crook, do you?" I nod my head yes. "You just stay away from these other two guys [Groucho and Chico]," he says. "They'll only get you into trouble." I make a contrite face, stick out my lower lip, and shake my head. Impressed by sparing me from a life of crime, the detective shakes my hand. A knife falls out of my sleeve and bounces on the floor. The detective shakes harder. Three more knives fall out. Intrigued, he shakes my other hand. Half a dozen knives clatter to the stage. He shakes both hands, and still more silver comes spilling out.[74]

Harpo developed the bit over time and "eventually worked up to dropping three hundred knives, with a silver coffeepot," for the big finish.[75] This gag disrupts the logic of the narrative; how can three hundred knives and a coffeepot possibly come from a coat sleeve? The gag also disturbs the authority of the detective who believes in Harpo's "honest face" and is betrayed by his own misreading of logic and honesty. The "silverware drop" and the ownership of its meaning, and who has the capacity to understand the joke, sets up the outsider as a disruptive force that destabilizes the authority of the insiders.

---

[74] This act is repeated in his Broadway and film performance in *Animal Crackers*; Broadway, 1928; film version, 1930. In *Harpo Speaks!*, 142.

[75] Ibid., 142.

Harpo, a grade-school dropout – after a little over two years of New York City public schooling – had to develop a new language to survive on the streets of working-class New York City. He ended up creating his comedy through verbal communication and its accepted meanings by developing a silent language that only he and his brothers could understand. In other words, only those on the outside can infiltrate those on the inside by creating their own capacity to know, comprehend, and interpret the outsider communication of Harpo's silence.

THREE: GROUCHO

GROUCHO: We three would make a beautiful couple!
– *Animal Crackers*, 1928[76]

Groucho Marx came into his own in vaudeville by playing figures of authority. On the surface Groucho was an insider confounded by Chico and Harpo. However, Groucho was neither insider nor outsider, but a free agent that could not be defined, as he had no allegiance to being either an outsider or an insider. Whereas Chico and Harpo were clearly outsiders thwarting authority, Groucho occupied an ever-shifting position of being both insider and outsider simultaneously. His seemingly irrational and illogical monologues and adlibbed dialogue were meant to keep both performers and spectators in a state of constant confusion as to his meaning and place as outsider/insider. Groucho exemplified the independence of the outlaw, as someone who stood outside of the law while remaining its ultimate representative.

As Herr Teacher, Groucho lives between the two worlds of outsider and insider. He appears to be the ultimate insider with the authority that goes along with his role.

[76] George S. Kaufman, *Animal Crackers* in *Kaufman & Co.: Broadway Comedies*, ed., Laurence Maslon (New York: Library of the Americas, 2004), 172. The text of *Animal Crackers* found in this Kaufman anthology, and cited here, is a combination of Sam Harris's 1928 Princeton University archival version, and the 1929 version found in Groucho Marx papers at the Library of Congress.

However, even in the scenes between the teacher/Groucho and students/Chico and Harpo, we see that the parts of insider and outsider are connected when Groucho breaks the character of Herr Teacher to comment on the act itself. Groucho, as teacher, joins the fray in the battle of wits by engaging with Chico and Harpo as equals. A running gag from *Fun In Hi Skule* provides an example of this collusion of insider and outsider. Groucho would repeatedly tell Harpo to take his hat off, only for Harpo to offer a token gesture of tipping it from behind, allowing the hat to fall back in place. Groucho says that he "hollered at Harpo about his hat. [Harpo] usually had an orange under it and when he finally took it off the orange would roll onto the floor and all the students would dive for the orange. That was considered a pretty classy piece of comedy."[77] Harpo adds that, "We got a big laugh one night when the Teacher made me take my hat off and an orange fell out. I gave the orange to the Teacher, and he told me to put my hat back on because he'd like another one for later."[78] When Groucho acknowledged that he was in on the joke, in this case by asking Harpo to save him the orange for later, and joined Chico and Harpo in their gags, he crossed the line from insider to outsider. Running gags like "the orange under the hat" afforded a chance for Groucho to step outside of the authoritarian character. They allowed him to comment on his position of power and align himself momentarily with his unruly students. Groucho's joining in on the anarchy of his disrupted classroom allows us to see him toggling back and forth in the role of insider and outsider, as he is consistently inconsistent.

---

[77] Marx, *Groucho and Me*, 139.
[78] Harpo Marx, *Harpo Speaks!*, 111-12.

In *Home Again*, Groucho would perpetuate the character of Herr Teacher in a variation of *Fun In Hi Skule* and *Mr. Green's Reception*.[79] Groucho plays the now-retired Herr Teacher in the guise of Mr. Green, who is visited by his former pupils. Among those students are Chico and Harpo, who portray petty criminals working along the docks. The students have clearly learned nothing from their school days as they are now professional cheats, gamblers, and spies. Groucho's Herr Teacher has in fact taught them how to be better at undermining institutional authority.

Groucho's teaching methods were clearly incompetent and his ever-increasing frustration with his students was self-inflicted. A typical spelling lesson from *Fun In Hi Skule*, shows Groucho and Harpo in confrontation: Groucho begins each lesson by "whacking his slapstick" made of "a pair of barrel staves," then announcing in a pronounced German accent, "Patsy Brannigan, no more shenanigans! You will stand up and give the alphabet." Harpo, as Pasty, clearly needs help and asks for a hint. Groucho, "glares at Harpo," and comes "nose-to-nose" with him. Groucho berates Harpo, saying "All right, dumkopf, I'll give you a start. Ah – ah – ah …." Harpo repeats back to the teacher, "Ah! … That's the alphabet," and heads back to his seat. Groucho tells him to stop and go to the next letter, but Harpo needs another hint. As Groucho and Harpo repeat "Buh," and "Buh?" back and forth "they have sunk, nose-to-nose, nearly to the floor." Then Groucho calls him "Dumkopf!" again. Harpo finally gets that the next letter is "Bee! That's the alphabet – A, B." and "heads for his seat" once more. Groucho asks Harpo to continue again:

HARPO: There's more? Gimme a hint what comes after B.

[79] It should be noted that *Mr. Green's Reception* was a transition school act between *Fun In Hi Skule* and *Home Again*.

GROUCHO: What's the first thing you do when you wake up in the morning? Sssssssss –

(*Harpo gives Groucho a shocked, pop-eyed look.*)

GROUCHO: "C," dumkopf! The first thing you do in the morning when you wake up is "see."

HARPO: That's not the first thing I *do* in the morning.

Groucho "ends the hopeless lesson with a crack of the slapstick."[80] The futility of an ethnic immigrant being schooled in English by another ethnic immigrant that results in threats of corporal punishment, was a result of the Marx Brothers's public school experiences of the oppression of the poor outsider by an ineffectual and cruel insider authoritarian. The new humor is used here to laugh at the representatives of Anglo-American assimilation. The disrespect of students toward their teachers was not to be condoned and encouraged by comic vaudevillians, no matter how justified they might have been. Reformers did not take into consideration that this process of Americanizing children could not be achieved by the dictates of good intentions. Groucho portrayed the failed representative of school reform in the guise of Herr Teacher.

A 1919 unsigned review of the Marx Brothers of *Home Again*, in the "New Acts" section of *Variety*, reveals Groucho's role in this version of the school act. Groucho was different from other vaudevillians of the period, as the anonymous reviewer makes evident: "[Groucho] Marx is developing into an actor. … His asides are more funny than the set lines. He is a confirmed ad-libber and claims he has a right to interpolate, he having written the material for the act."[81] Here, Groucho is considered an actor and

[80] As recounted by Harpo in *Harpo Speaks!*, 110.
[81] Unidentified reviewer, "*Home Again* by Al Shean," *Variety*, "New Acts" (7 February 1919).

author rather than just a comedian. Although uncredited, he had begun a career-long penchant for rewriting the scripted act in performance. Groucho, as writer, actor, and "interpolator" of his own performance, approached his role from multiple and unexpected perspectives. Groucho was neither authority figure, nor on the outside of authority, as he created chaos out of the binary of insider and outsider. He exemplified characters who stood outside of the law while remaining its ultimate representative.

Groucho, by joining forces with Chico and Harpo, steps out of his assigned part as authoritarian, and now as the three Marx Brothers, they collectively break through the boundaries of outsiders and insiders. Through this destabilization of the outsider/insider construct, the Marx Brothers were able to transcend ethnicity and class paradigms.

The School Act on Film: "Whatever it is, I'm against it!"

The school act comes full circle for the Marx Brothers in the second to last of their Paramount era films, and arguably the pinnacle of their careers, with *Monkey Business* (1931), *Horse Feathers* (1932), and *Duck Soup* (1933). *Horse Feathers* brings the school act to Hollywood, and embraces the vaudeville aesthetic – including musical numbers and satirical sketches of teachers and criminals both in the school administration and in the criminal underworld – as a series of loosely related vaudevillian acts, that eschews logical linear narrative for an accretion of comic gags.

As Groucho/Professor Wagstaff sings in *Horse Feathers*, "Whatever it is ... I'm against it."[82] Groucho's declaration knows no binary taking no side of any given argument. He is able to be insider and outsider simultaneously by transforming back and forth across these borders, embracing both, and showing allegiance to neither. This

[82] The Marx Brothers, *Horse Feathers*, screenplay by Burt Kalmar, Harry Ruby, and S.J. Perelman, director Norman McLeod (Paramount Pictures, 1932; Universal DVD, 2004).

rejection of taking sides leaves him in a perpetual state of being "against it." Whatever consensus of insider authority is being proposed by either side is destabilized by Groucho. Through the school act, the Marx Brothers force a dissension that opens up a space for an alternative way for interaction between classes and ethnicities.

Horse Feathers was released by Paramount Pictures on August 10, 1932. Directed by Norman Z. McLeod, hired because of his previous success with the Marx Brothers on *Monkey Business* (1931), and co-written by Bert Kalmar (*Animal Crackers*, *Duck Soup*) and Harry Ruby (*Animal Crackers*, *Duck Soup*) with additional material by S.J. Perelman (*Monkey Business*) and Will B. Johnstone (*Monkey Business*), *Horse Feathers* was another smash success for the Marx Brothers, landing them on the cover of *Time* magazine (August 15, 1932).[83] The loose narrative structure revolved around Groucho as the new president of Huxley College, Quincy Adams Wagstaff, and Zeppo as the perpetual college student and Wagstaff's son, Frank. Chico is cast as another faux-Italian, this time an "Iceman" (who doubles as a bootlegger) named Baravelli, and Harpo, as Chico's partner and part-time dog-catcher named Pinky. Baravelli and Pinky are mistaken for football "ringers" and recruited as college students and football players to help Huxley College win the big-game against rival college, Darwin. Huxley College is named after Thomas Henry Huxley, a fervent defender of Darwin's theory of evolution, and Darwin College named after the famous proponent of natural selection, Charles Darwin. The cast is rounded out with Thelma Todd, as the "College Widow," Connie Bailey, a woman who has remained at the college in order to find a husband long after her graduation, and is courted by all four Marx Brothers throughout the film. *Horse Feathers* ends in a bizarre marriage between all the brothers and the college widow.

[83] Gehring, *Marx Brothers: A Bio-Bibliography*, 63.

Educational institutions, like Huxley College in *Horse Feathers*, are invariably led by characters portrayed by Groucho. Groucho's authority figure perpetually wheedles his way into positions of power and undermines his own authority through his intentional ineptitude and indulgence of his abuses of power. Here, Groucho has melded the role of insider with that of outsider through his role of "Herr Teacher/Professor Wagstaff."

Groucho reinforces the authority figure as someone who takes no side but whose ambivalent acts are purely self-serving. By crossing the line of insider and outsider, he shows how the President of Huxley College is openly in collusion with the underworld through a series of cons including gambling fixes, check kiting, and consorting with bootleggers. A typical vaudevillian scene from *Horse Feathers* shows Groucho, after entering the speakeasy by saying the password "swordfish," presenting himself to Chico, whom he assumes to be a professional football player but is really a rumrunner. A series of illegal transactions occur seconds apart from each other. Before Groucho has even attempted to "buy" football players for the college, he is drinking at an illegal bar that has to be entered with a secret password. He then confronts Chico assuming him to be a professional football "ringer." Groucho denigrates his position and insider status as the top official of a university, which is of little significance to the outsiders as played by Chico and Harpo, whom he engages to break the law. As Groucho introduces himself to Chico in a speakeasy, he presents him with a "business card" by holding out his empty clenched fingers as if there is something there, stating:

GROUCHO: (Offering the "invisible" business card.) I am Professor Wagstaff of Huxley College.

CHICO: That means nothing to me.

GROUCHO: Well, it doesn't mean anything to me either ….[84]

Groucho bribes Chico into pretending to register illegally as a college student, so he and his partner, played by Harpo, can play in the big game. Then Groucho "pays" for the contraband drinks by tricking the bartender into cashing a non-existent check, and as the bartender gives Groucho the money, he promises that "as soon as I get a check for $15.22, I'll send it to you. Swordfish!," as he and Chico run for the door, making their illicit escape. In just a few moments, Groucho has broken several laws and has tricked Chico, Harpo, a bartender, and ultimately, himself, since Chico is not really a football player at all but a con-artist just like Groucho. The conman has been conned with his own con-game. This two-man act, influenced by the Marx Brothers's school act routines almost twenty-five years earlier, puts over an act that brings together insiders with outsiders.

Groucho uses his insider status to subvert authority by collaborating with these outsiders. The ethical and social boundaries that Groucho crosses, creates chaos out of sociocultural systems meant to promote integrity, fairness, and respect for knowledge and the law. Groucho is a character that is able to be all things to all people without changing his persona possessing the protean ability to be a doctor, lawyer, professor, or policeman, as required. Those on the inside who take Groucho at face value as a qualified president of a college are seeing a business card that is not there.

The defiance of authority and the blurring of boundaries can also be seen when Groucho, giving a lecture in anatomy after he has literally thrown the professor of the class out on his ear, ends up in a childish fight with his students. Chico and Harpo, in order to interrupt Groucho's pompous pontification on a subject he clearly knows nothing

[84] Marx Brothers, *Horse Feathers*, DVD.

about, surreptitiously shoot peas at him while he is lecturing. Groucho, having been hit in the neck three times by the peashooters, suddenly pulls out his own and fights back. The scene ends in a chaotic conflict, with Groucho tapping Morse code signals on his desk mock-dying and moaning, "They got me!"[85] The classroom has been rendered a battlefield through the professor's collusion with his defiant students.

The climax of the school act for the Marx Brothers comes in a scene that was considered by Paramount Pictures to be too risky and pessimistic for a middle-class comedy audience. The ending originally was shot and scripted for *Horse Feathers*, dated 11 February 1932.[86] The original conclusion was to come after the football victory of Huxley over Darwin College, and a subsequent bonfire celebration was to ensue. However Harpo, echoing the book-burning he performed in a brief earlier interlude, instead of starting the campus bonfire, ignites a campus building.[87] Rather than the brief comic wedding, *Horse Feathers* was tentatively scripted to end with the complete destruction by fire of Huxley College. According to the press book for the film, the Huxley students, in riot mode, tear apart the town to fuel the fire. It also includes a still from this finale depicting the Marx Brothers complacently playing cards while the chaos of an apocalyptic fire they have created rages around them. A cross-like burning of two beams in the still's background suggests that the burning down of Huxley College was a willful destruction of culture and learning that would anticipate and lead to the horrors of the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi Party. Another scene excised from the tentative script

---

[85] Marx Brothers, *Horse Feathers*, DVD.

[86] This ending was shot but not used in *Horse Feathers*, but does not appear in the Final Script, only in the Tentative Script (11 February 1932), in Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverley Hills, California; as noted in Gehring, *Marx Brothers: A Bio-Bibliography*, 64-5,103; Mikael Uhlin, from the "Marxology" website at http://www.marx-brothers.org/marxology/horse.htm, (accessed 1 December 2011).

[87] Harry Ruby and Bert Kalmar, *Horse Feathers*, Tentative Script (11 February 1932), L9.

was to feature Groucho entering a burning building seemingly to save Jennings, the leader of the rival Darwin College. Instead, Groucho exits with a diploma and hands it to his son, played by Zeppo,[88] perhaps an allusion to Groucho's embrace of the Darwinian approach of survival of the fittest against the villain that has been plotting his destruction throughout the film. Groucho's final line mocks the death by fire of his nemesis, "I'll bet that'll burn Jennings up," as he plants his ubiquitous cigar in his mouth.[89] Book-burning, cross-burning, and the intentional death by incineration of Groucho's enemy, was too grim for the studio to agree to release such a nihilistic conclusion to a comic film about college life.

The Marx Brothers's school act had reached epic proportions by 1932. In *Horse Feathers*, as an extension of school acts like *Fun In Hi Skule*, the new humor had become a sophisticated attack on American institutions, particularly to education, that allowed corruption and political agendas to marginalize and disenfranchise the new immigrants of eastern and southern Europe.

The Marx Brothers were to reach their apotheosis in 1933 with the film *Duck Soup*. By this point they were rich, famous, and internationally renowned for their comic satire that has continued to be a part of American culture since their recognition in vaudeville and on Broadway since the early twentieth century. Chico, Harpo, and Groucho (the brother with the most formal education by making it to the seventh grade) were able to achieve success through the new humor and the vaudeville aesthetic. Literally going from rags to riches, outsiders to insiders, the Marx Brothers were able to

---

[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.

satirize and critique Anglo-American institutions, while becoming one of its most famous examples of the American success story.

"Coming to You from the House of David:"[90] From Vaudeville to Hollywood

This chapter has focused on the family act of Chico, Harpo, and Groucho and their early vaudeville career that allowed them to emerge as the iconic stage and film stars the Marx Brothers. The purpose of revisiting and examining their vaudeville career is to uncover and reclaim an often overlooked part of popular entertainment history. This examination of the Marx Brothers's vaudeville aesthetic, beginning in 1910 with *Fun In Hi Skule* to their 1932 film *Horse Feathers*, bares witness to how the school act was put over as it was developed into the medium of sound film comedy, challenging the pressures of progressive education reformers.

As sons of Jewish immigrants that became vaudeville and Broadway stars by creating stage names and personas that essentially erased their former status of having no authority, the Marx Brothers move from Leonard, Arthur, and Julius to Chico, Harpo, and Groucho, acknowledging that they are not who they say they are. In their new-found stardom, they are no longer the outsiders, nor are they insiders. It is this reversal of background/foreground, unseen/seen that ultimately liberates the Marx Brothers's act from this binary, leaving space for their destabilizing of progressive era reforms through the school act.

[90] George S. Kaufman, *Animal Crackers* in *Kaufman & Co.: Broadway Comedies*, ed., Laurence Maslon (New York: Library of the Americas, 2004), 182; Note (on p. 875) that the text of *Animal Crackers* found in this Kaufman anthology, and cited here, is a combination of Sam Harris's 1928 Princeton University archival version, and the 1929 version found in Groucho Marx's papers at the Library of Congress; The Marx Brothers, *Animal Crackers* (1930), *Animal Crackers*, DVD (Dir. Victor Sheekman. Writ. Morrie Ryskind) Paramount Studios: Universal Home Video, Silver Screen Collection, 2004.

The Marx Brothers, being the impoverished children of ethnic immigrants from Eastern Europe, deploy a comic derailing of narrative, first of America as the land of opportunity, and the paradoxical, Anglo-American notion of embracing individuality through Americanization. Sociocultural historian Patricia Bradley writes in *Making American Culture: A Social History, 1900-1920*, that "there was something subversive about vaudeville – too much flesh, too many immigrants, and a bit too much freedom."[91] The new immigrant and their ethnic roots from the *shtetls* of eastern Europe to the new humor of the vaudeville-inspired films of the Marx Brothers, reinforced the fears of progressive reformers that the freedom and subversive nature of the new humor was a threat and a danger to Anglo-American dominance and authority.

In the final scene of the stage and film versions of *Animal Crackers*,[92] Groucho and his brothers come on singing "My Old Kentucky Home" as a barbershop quartet. When they finish, Groucho remarks in the style of a radio commentator, "This program is coming to you from the House of David."[93] Four Jews singing a Southern Christian homesick homage to Kentucky creates the perfect irony of language that breaks the easy identification of ethnicity brought to the audience courtesy of these descendants of the House of David. This vaudevillian Marx Brothers's moment uses the language of obfuscation of identity through the conflation of Jewish and Christian, as well as Northern and Southern, for their satire. The Marx Brothers's House of David is the point of origin for these infamous social assassins.

The main weapon for social assassins Groucho and Chico was spoken language, and for Harpo, body language. For these *tummler*-influenced comedians of Eastern

[91] Bradley, *Making American Culture*, 12.
[92] *Animal Crackers* was staged on Broadway in 1928 and the film version released in 1930.
[93] Kaufman, *Animal Crackers* in *Kaufman & Co.*, 182.

European heritage, the movement from Yiddish and the language of the *shtetl*, and its Anglo-American confrontation, becomes the comic's battleground weapon of choice. As sociologist John Murray Cuddihy writes with regard to Jewish versus Gentile representations in American society in the early immigrant days of the twentieth-century, "[t]he 'serious and restrained' words of your liberal-Reform Jews will 'pass,' but the mocking impudence of your *schlemiels* … will not pass."[94] Managing the "mocking impudence" of language in their comedy arms the Marx Brothers in going on the offensive with the new humor.

The ethnic component is key to the misunderstandings that are perpetuated in the comic language derived from the *shtetl*. Not understanding, and even willfully misunderstanding, words and meanings that are communicated both verbally and physically, is the key to this form of humor represented in the gag derived from vaudeville. The gag therefore becomes the site of confrontation between three characters who present various sides of perceived stereotypes and who use those types as subterfuge to comment on the behavior and understanding of ethnic types in order to get laughs.

The new humor of the Marx Brothers captures their "whatever it is, I'm against it" philosophy. Their vaudeville acts challenged progressive reformers whose aggressive attempt to control the authority of education, as well as popular stage entertainment they were consistently destabilizing. Beginning with their vaudeville school acts in 1910, the Marx Brothers spent the next twenty-five years being against anything that goes along with an authoritarian, Anglo-American consensus. The resistance to the "can't you get *noddings* [sic] through your thick head?" exhortation of the primary school teacher in

[94] John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974), 126.

Fun In Hi Skule had found its way into the student's adult consciousness: not only am I not able to get anything through my head, I simply do not want to. The Marx Brothers's rejection of being "Americanized" by progressive reformers would influence other comic vaudevillians in the early decades of the twentieth century, as well as comedy film, radio, and television performers later in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Chapter 4

The New Woman and the New Humor: the Female Comedian as Social Insurgent

In 1913 the periodical *Current Opinion* stated that "'Sex O' Clock' had struck in America."[1] Twenty-two years earlier, a warning that "sex o' clock" was about to strike appeared in the periodical *Nineteenth Century*, entitled "The Wild Woman as Social Insurgent."[2] The article characterizes the reaction of the diminishing authority of nineteenth-century Victorian values to the offensive behavior of female vaudevillians. The notion of a social insurgency signaled a cultural conflict that would not end until vaudeville's popularity began to wane. The decline of the vaudeville form would begin with the advent of Hollywood's absorption of its performers into the burgeoning film industry that began in earnest during the late 1910s.

Proof positive that "sex o'clock" had struck in America can be witnessed in January of 1912, when Mae West put together an act with two dancers, Bobby O'Neill and Harry Laughlin, calling themselves "Mae West and Her Boys." West was the main attraction, and the act's dancers, donned in elegant evening dress, served merely as background. West, accompanied by ragtime music, soloed with a cooch dance, described by one observer as an "enchanting, seductive, sin-promising wiggle" made more brazen by wearing a dress with a breakaway shoulder strap.[3] Their big finish was a ragtime song and unusual dance routine while seated in chairs. *Variety* editor Sime Silverman found the act vulgar, commenting that for West "the burlesque stage is her place and she can

---

[1] Jeffrey P. Moran, "'Modernism Gone Mad': Sex Education Comes to Chicago, 1913," *Journal of American History, 83* (September 1996): 481-513.

[2] Lynn Linton, "The Wild Woman as Social Insurgent," *Nineteenth Century* (October 1891): 596.

[3] Jill Watts, *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 36.

make a name there." Silverman declared the chair routine to be "a peach and funny," although he qualified his judgment adding that West was a "rough soubrette" – in other words, a working-class woman whose songs, dances, and jokes were more properly suited for the coarser world of the burlesque stage.[4]

The threat of lowbrow vaudeville and the rise of the new woman as comic entertainer were summed up in 1902 by a theater critic: "The day of the comic actress has dawned. She is now the essential thing." This unidentified author labeled these newcomers as "'comedian' girls" who had "jump[ed]" to the front" and created "a New Sphere for Stage Women" in vaudeville.[5] The demand for these female comic acts, and the wealth that was generated by their performances both for themselves and their producers, was so great that reformers feared it would threaten an insurgency that adversely affected their attempts to Americanize the underclasses.

I am adding to the current scholarship on female vaudeville comedians by focusing on their work in the era of the new humor and taking into consideration the notion of the new women as social insurgents. This chapter looks at the new women on the comic vaudeville stage in relationship to class, ethnicity, and body image. Examples of female comic performers considered here include Eva Tanguay, whose comically wild and unruly sexualized singing and dancing made her the "Queen of Vaudeville;"[6] Kate Elinore and her ethnic working-class characterizations of the new woman through her acts, which were juxtaposed with her sister, May, and the class and ethnic conflicts

---

[4] Ibid.

[5] Unidentified author, "'Comedian' Girls Jump to the Front," no publication given, 8 June 1902, Tanguay, vol. 450, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center.

[6] Andrew L. Erdman, *Queen of Vaudeville: The Story of Eva Tanguay* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012), 8.

between sisters in May's middle and upper middle class characters; Marie Dressler, whose unconventional body image and attractiveness, and her "Big Girl" portrayals, led to her being described as a female grotesque comedian, and later a dowager comic film star. The chapter will conclude with Mae West, who embodied all of these characterizations – the sexual wild woman, the working-class "tough girl," and the glorified image of the "all-American girl" of Florenz Ziegfeld. These combined to create the new woman as social insurgent in her early comic performances in burlesque, vaudeville, and eventually commercial world of Broadway and Hollywood. All of the comedians discussed here shared an affinity with issues of class simply because of their chosen profession, which challenged class-based notions of womanhood, especially as they related to ethnicity, immigration, and sexual permissiveness. Progressive reformers who advocated for the equality and civil rights of women were soon to object to images of the new women that did not conform to their image of the Anglo-American middle-class women whose cultural and aesthetic appreciation was to be promoted in popular entertainment. Women who did not adhere to this image of the new woman became labeled as social insurgents out to defy and undermine the expected morality and social behaviors established by progressive reformers.

These comedians began in the era of vaudeville's popularity, spanning from the 1890s at the height of burlesque entertainments and the beginning of women's comic acts in vaudeville, to 1928, when Mae West found success on Broadway.[7] The class, ethnic,

---

[7] *Diamond Lil*'s stage success, opening at the Royale Theatre on 9 April 1928, and running for 323 performances, as well as having many revivals throughout West's career – including a 1949 Broadway revival starring Mae West twenty-one years after its initial production – was to lead to her writing the screenplay and starring in what was to become her first sound film hit, *She Done Him Wrong*, in 1933; Slide, *Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, 546.

and sexual mores of insurgent female comics came into conflict with middle-class reformers during this forty-year period. The female comic vaudevillians examined here challenged reformers who saw their acts as proof that they should be reined in and not allowed to influence audiences that patronized vaudeville houses. These performers all had very successful careers and spent as many as twenty years on the stage. In addition, Marie Dressler and Mae West were also able to make a successful transition to early sound-film comedy. These comic vaudevillians would reinforce the new women onstage in four different forms of performance, but all are linked by their humble beginnings in impoverished economic conditions that led them to address class conflicts in their vaudeville acts.

The new women at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States was a reaction to and rejection of the Victorian values associated with American women of the nineteenth century. The image of women as mothers and wives and caretakers of their families began to fragment during the 1880s and 90s. As the industrial revolution created a new middle class of managers, clerks, and secretaries, women left the confines of their homes for the workplace. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the new women soon became characterized by their refusal to be constrained by the socio-sexual principles of a repressive nineteenth-century moral authority. Modernism also changed the role of women in society as progressive reform – led by self-appointed "concerned citizens" such as Jane Addams, Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, and Albion Small – became a significant force in the reform movement that would affect notions of family, public education, sexual mores, and codes of behavior.

Jane Addams condemned popular entertainments the focused on "vaudeville shows" and "the five-cent theaters … full of the most blatant and vulgar songs."[8] Addams took it upon herself to advocate for an art theater movement in the United States, by refocusing the Hull House Theatre in 1907 to present plays by Ibsen, Galsworthy, Shaw, Synge, and many other well-established Western European playwrights.[9] The little theater movement was intended to create a middle-class appreciation of the legitimate stage that adhered to the rules of the Western theatrical canon. In 1917, Thomas H. Dickinson, in his book *The Insurgent Theatre*, would extol the virtues of the moral and aesthetic uplift of plays that would improve the standards of middle-class audiences, and enlighten and educate the underclasses: "[T]he encouragement and support of an American drama, the giving voice and tongue to a neighborhood, the production of great masterpieces of the world, the elevation of taste of the community" should become the goals of stage reforms.[10] Progressive reformers focused on an Anglo-American, middle-class image of propriety and morality as served by proposed reforms in popular culture, particularly leisure-time recreations and entertainments, while condemning vaudeville and other popular entertainments as creating a counter social insurgency to the "masterpieces" of the art theater.

Progressive reformers in the first decades of the new century began as advocates for a woman's rights to education and political participation in the voting booth, and set out to curb the moral decay that they perceived as leading Americans, particularly of the lower and working classes, to ethical ruin. However, reformers, in addition to the their

---

[8] Jane Addams, quoted in Paul R. Gorman, *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 45.

[9] Thomas H. Dickinson, *The Insurgent Theatre* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1972; first printing, 1917), 228.

[10] Ibid., 83.

positive commitment to women's suffrage, soon began to advocate for the regulation of the sociocultural behaviors of the new women. Progressive reformers objected to women being openly sexual and bawdy, and were often perceived as crude and unsophisticated in society, or as having lowbrow tastes. They were seen as shirking the responsibilities of motherhood and their role as moral barometer for their children. According to these self-appointed crusaders, nowhere was this need for control and clean up more necessary than in popular entertainments – especially the vaudeville stage.

As comic performers, the new women recognized female autonomy, including individual rights outside of marriage and personal control over their bodies and behaviors. These self-determined rights will be examined in relationship to middle-class opposition advanced by progressive reformers at the beginning of the twentieth century. I look at how progressive reformers attempted to restrain, censor, and even eliminate the new women from the comic vaudeville stage. The new women were perceived by reformers as social insurgents who were devaluing and undermining the standards of middle-class Anglo-Americans. By enforcing moral codes that rejected the open display of women's sexuality, forthrightness, and strength of character that threatened to rival their male counterparts, the place of the new women was complicated and challenged even further by female comedians. Songs, dances, comic improvisation, and sketches that underscored class divisions and the forced assimilation of Americanness all questioned the very notion of how American values were meant to be defined, as well as their supposed value to the new women.

Restraint of "unfeminine" behaviors of the lower classes and the snobbery and excesses of women from the upper classes created a false binary that projected middle-

class American women as the moral center of respectability and decency. Married, middle-class women were viewed by some progressive reformers to be models of American womanhood, who would curtail the excesses of the sociocultural extremes of the new women. The reaction of the new middle class to the presumed offenses of female comic vaudevillians signaled a cultural conflict that would only end when female comedians migrated to the sound-film industry. Film censorship would take hold for these performers as well with the advent of the Hays Code in 1930 and its strict enforcement beginning in 1934.

The new women of vaudeville comedy, whose roots were planted in nineteenth-century performance forms such as medicine shows, minstrelsy, and especially burlesque, came into their own at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States. The late-nineteenth-century burlesque-era acts by female performers like Lydia Thompson and May Irwin set the stage for performers examined here including Tanguay, Dressler, Elinore, and West. These female comic performers led the way in rejecting social conformity and self-restraint by inducing the ire of progressive reformers, who saw these new women as tearing apart the fabric of Anglo-American gender roles.

The excorporation of the female comic vaudevillian from the burlesque shows of the late nineteenth century was thought to move the new women away from middle-class culture and reform the representation of American feminine behavior. Burlesque, associated with its three-part structure of the minstrel shows of the 1870s, and its satires of the personages and values of high culture, "increasingly became centered around feminine sexual display – in the cooch dance of the 1890s; in its jazzed-up successor, the

shimmy, in the 1910s; and the striptease of the late 1920s and 1930s."[11] The new women of the vaudeville stage were still associated with the burlesque world of the 1880s-90s, and were attacked for bringing the degenerate aesthetics of this popular entertainment with them into the supposedly more respectable form of vaudeville. These new female performers were seen as insurgents who infiltrated the family-oriented vaudeville stage in order to corrupt and denigrate it with its lowbrow physical and burlesque new humor.

Working from the notion of "the wild woman as social insurgent," I argue that the new humor in relationship to the new woman was a form of sociocultural mutiny. Female comedians began to remove the emphasis from their sexuality and perceived promiscuity by refocusing attention on their comedic skills and social commentary through humorous, and often offensive, songs, dances, improvisations, and sketches. Beginning with existing scholarship on these rebellious vaudevillians by Robert C. Allen, Andrew Erdmann, Marybeth Hamilton, M. Alison Kibler, and Kathy Peiss, this chapter adds to the current scholarship by examining how women in comedy challenged not only the notion of purity and the moral codes left over from the nineteenth century but also the imprimatur of being "wild women" and "tough girls," becoming socially independent and culturally significant performing artists as a consequence.[12] The female comedians examined here used the new humor to critique and challenge standard Anglo-American middle-class notions of womanhood. As a consequence, the new women as comic performers often found themselves in conflict with middle-class progressive reformers in the first three decades of the twentieth century. I contend that female comic vaudevillians as new humorists returned the comic voice to the body, from which it had

---

[11] Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 30.

[12] Marybeth Hamilton, *"When I'm Bad, I'm Better: Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 13-5.

been separated in popular performance during the burlesque era of the late nineteenth and turn of the twentieth centuries.

Burlesque and the New Women

The new women presented both a challenge and a warning to the anxieties of nonconformance with middle-class gender roles, as they were subject to the pressures of being pejoratively described as "rank ladies" and "unruly women."[13] Female performers were perceived as making their fortunes from openly sexual innuendos and suggestive dancing, coupled with a disregard for social conventions.

According to popular entertainment historian Robert C. Allen, burlesque was imported from England during the early 1860s and first introduced to American audiences by Lydia Thompson and her "British Blondes."[14] As the form evolved at the turn of the twentieth century, the tropes of the sexualized chorus girl and the ethnic comic were closely related and even crossed over in the case of Thompson, which was later to be emulated by Eva Tanguay and Mae West in much more integrated sensual/comic performances. It is worth quoting entertainment journalist John B. Kennedy for *Collier's* magazine at length in order to convey this admixture of sex and comedy:

> The pattern of the old shows was always the same. Opening chorus in which the girls appeared in knee-skirts. Then the comedians – an Irishman with a red nose, a Dutch comic with an enormous stomach and a Semite with an apostolic beard. These gentlemen immediately embroiled in a love tangle with a lady, usually an hour-glass soubrette referred to as "the lady widow." Each schemed to marry her. Each wore baggy clothes in contrast to the smart attire of the wise-guy or straight

[13] M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 23.

[14] Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 28.

man who also paid court to the lady widow. The racial roughnecks punctuated their wooings with kicks fore and aft and course gibes, and were, in turn, punctuated by the ladies of the chorus who gamboled on in gradually minimized costumes, bawling popular songs ….[15]

Early burlesque was dominated by producers like Tony Pastor, and Weber and Fields, who sought to capitalize on the humor found in sexual behavior and innuendo on the vaudeville stage. In the 1890s most of the singer/dancers were women, and most of the comedians, men. However, Eva Tanguay, and later Mae West, discovered that the sexualized body and the comic voice when combined by the female vaudevillian was a potent combination that pleased a wide variety of patrons both male and female, providing something for everyone. That combination of body and voice came under attack by progressive reformers and social censors who were determined to remove the comic voice from female performers, and, by the 1920s, burlesque turned into nothing more than elaborate striptease acts. Comic interludes were retained between the disrobing women, but they were often crude and sexually oriented jokes to keep the now mostly male audience's attention during the transition between the strippers. Women onstage were therefore bifurcated into two groups – the lowbrow burlesque strip-teasers and the highbrow Ziegfeld Girls, reduced to silent and statuesque models for the *Follies*.[16]

This separation of feminine beauty and comic masculine grotesque was a target of progressive reformers to blunt the influences of tough girls on the vaudeville stage. Popular comic entertainments, particularly vaudeville, produced by mostly male

---

[15] John B. Kennedy, "Revised Version," *Collier's* 90.20 (12 November 1932): 45-47.
[16] Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 221-32.

entrepreneurs, attempted to remove the voice from comic female performers by focusing exclusively on the display of their bodies. The separation of the voice from the body produced silent females that would "Glorify the American Girl"[17] as witnessed in the choruses of the Ziegfeld *Follies*.[18]

Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr. was born into a middle-class German family in Chicago in 1868. As a young man he promoted performers like the strongman and bodybuilder Eugene Sandow for the 1892-93 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. After a stint touring Europe looking for more talent to promote, Ziegfeld was introduced to Anna Held, a Parisian singer.[19] Held had middling talents as a performer, but, because of her exotic French background and beauty, Ziegfeld promoted her as "the epitome of Gallic spice and naughtiness" – even though she was actually from a humble Polish Jewish heritage. Ziegfeld promoted her personality and sensuality rather than her stage skills by focusing on her "Parisian" mystique.[20] He created the *Follies* beginning in 1907, starring Anna Held, with opulent sets and costumes and a chorus of women that would "glorify the American girl." Using the famous Parisian format for the *Folies Bergères* in combination with an American vaudeville model, the Ziegfeld *Follies* consisted of a series of scenes and interludes that featured singers, dancers, and comedians. However, to justify the higher ticket prices and distinguish the *Follies* from other Keith/Albee big-time vaudeville shows, Ziegfeld spared no expense when it came to spectacle; and one of the chief spectacles became the chorus girls. Ziegfeld would run his *Follies* until 1931 with

---

[17] Bradley, *Making American Culture*, 25.

[18] Mack Sennett with Cameron Shipp, *King of Comedy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954), 165.

[19] Slide, *Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, 571-73.

[20] Kathy Lee Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 98; Erdman, *Queen of Vaudeville*, 138; Slide, *Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, 571.

such vaudeville headliners leading the bill as Fanny Brice, Eddie Cantor, W. C. Fields, Will Rogers, Sophie Tucker, and Bert Williams. The 1909 *Follies* would even star comedian/singer/dancer Eva Tanguay.[21] With impresarios like Ziegfeld, female comedians were intentionally presented as either overly sexualized bodies and burlesqued visions of ribald "broads" who were loud, brash, and unruly, or, conversely, as silent, pale, statuesque, and all-American mannequins used to decorate the stage.

Female performers like Tanguay, Dressler, Elinore, and West defied progressive reformers and producers like Ziegfeld, who sought to suppress women's voices as distinct from their bodies, through the characterization of their acts as "unruly," "wild," and "eccentric" new women of the comic vaudeville stage.[22] The rise of the new woman and the female comic vaudevillian, as evidenced by their stage performances and reviews, showed the growing conflict between progressive reformers and the new woman onstage during vaudeville's peak beginning from 1902 to 1917, with the advent of World War I, in urban centers like New York City, Chicago, and Boston.

The role of women in the United States during the 1880s and 90s was being redefined, particularly for working and middle-class women looking to combine family and household care with work and pleasure outside the home. According to sociocultural historian Kathy Peiss, "The roles of bourgeois women had extended far beyond the home, to include philanthropy and reform, political activity, and professional work. This 'New Woman' questioned the 'natural' division of women and men's lives into separate spheres of social activity."[23] However, nineteenth-century Victorian values still informed many of the attitudes toward women. The virtues of chastity and proper social behavior,

---

[21] Erdman, *Queen of Vaudeville*, 137-39.
[22] Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 12-14; Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 327-31.
[23] Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 163.

and the importance of marriage and motherhood, still informed the dominant view of a woman's position in the first decades of the twentieth century. Progressive era reformers, troubled by the sexual freedom, particularly of working-class youth whom they deemed as being influenced and exploited by the commercially popular entertainment industry, advocated for the regulation and creation of alternative amusements. Reformers attempted to censor popular entertainments like vaudeville that were thought to encourage the devaluation of middle-class, Anglo-American moral authority. Class conflicts between working-and middle-class women, as well as interclass tensions, arose as the appropriateness of leisure was being contested. One of the principal sites of social divisions between progressive reformers and the new women was the comic vaudeville stage. The divisions of vaudeville acts that were thought to be offensive and destructive by progressive reformers were explored through acts performed by female comedians, including, but not exclusive to, performances of the new women as comic grotesques and class-conflict acts.

The New Women and Progressive Reformers in Conflict

1902 ushered in an era, not only of the new woman, but the new woman as comic stage performer. As one theater critic put it, "The girl shows are more so than ever, but to the singing girls, the dancing girls, the posing girls, the revealing girls, the alluring girls, there has been added the comedian girls."[24] Vaudeville was a fusion of opposites and contrasts that included a variety of acts combining the traditions of the popular theater with new and eccentric performers who captured the spirit of the American modernist era. An anonymous theater critic pointed out that:

---

[24] Unidentified reviewer, "'Comedian' Girls Jump to the Front," n.p., 8 June 1902, Tanguay, vol. 450, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

> Vaudeville, the namesake of to-day [sic], retains the spirit of [the] early troubadours, entertainers of the passing moment. Joyously, frankly absurd, it represents the almost universal longing for laughter, for melody, for color, for action and for wonder-provoking things. It strikes directly at the heart of interests and foibles of the day. Vaudeville is creative and progressive.[25]

With this nod to the progressive era and its innovations and wonders in the arts and sciences, vaudeville could be considered a home for the new humor in popular entertainment and, in particular to this study, the new vision of women on the comic stage.

Ironically, progressive reformers, who embraced women's suffrage and the unionization of workers, could not reconcile the independence of the new women as new humorists. Female stage comedians were seen as a threat to the advancement of women's ideas and achievements being taken seriously and given respect by the American public at large. The new women as comic performers were judged at one and the same time as culturally advancing the position of women and their self-reliance in American society, but also insulting the image of the respectable and cultured middle-class women that the progressive reformers wished to promote.

Progressive reformers concerned themselves with strengthening Anglo-American tenets and Americanizing ethnic immigrants with a shared value system. Progressives rarely regarded middle-class, Anglo-Americans as the source of social problems. Rather the issues being raised were emblematic of the "wealthy, workers, and farmers" from other classes.[26] The concern over the upper and lower classes and their unruly behaviors

---

[25] Ibid.
[26] McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 94.

– from servants as well as masters – is reflected in reformer Josiah Strong's comment that, "[I]n the city, the home is disappearing at both social extremes."[27] Early twentieth-century sociologist Albion Small confirmed this perspective, noting, "The American family is out of gear in two strata, in both of which pretty much everything else is out of gear."[28] The concern over the home, with its nuclear family of husband, wife, and children, represented the American ideal of a middle class that focused primarily on home, family, and the morals instilled in their progeny. For Small, protecting middle-class youth from social extremes of "the stratum of the over-wealthed [sic], over-leisured, over-stimulated, under-worked, under-controlled," in comparison with "the stratum of the over-worked, under-fed, under-housed, under-clothed, under-hygiened [sic], physically and morally, under-leisured, under-stimulated except by the elemental desires," was the goal of sociocultural progressive reforms.[29] The wealthy upper classes and the poor working classes were considered by progressives to share a common ground in that both were corrupt and fed off each other: one because they had too much, and the other because they had too little.

According to a 1915 *Billboard* article, working women could find employment on the vaudeville circuit since "Here genius not birth your rank insures." Stage "genius" was meant to include gender as well as class ranking in vaudeville.[30] Vaudeville provided working-class and immigrant women with the opportunity of an independent career and income that were virtually closed to them in other professions. However, the

---

[27] Josiah Strong, *Religious Movements for Social Betterment* (New York, 1900), 48.

[28] Albion Small "The Relations of Social Diseases to the Family," in American Sociological Society, *Papers and Proceedings, Third Annual Meeting* (Chicago, 1909), 192.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Unidentified reviewer, *Billboard Magazine* (1915); cited in Robert M. Lewis, ed., *From Travelling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America 1830-1910* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 328; quoted in Snyder, *Voice of the City*, 42.

new woman on the comic vaudeville stage represented an uncontrollable flouting of the codified social status, while at the same time being rewarded for this with wealth and fame. By examining successful examples of the new woman as vaudeville comedian, the conflict between performer and reformer can be more clearly witnessed.

Female comic performers and their fragmented gag-driven comedy of transformation and eccentricity, which mocked the class and gender roles played by both women and men, potentially served as models for transgressive and subversive behavior. Of particular interest were the women spectators who purchased tickets for these female comic acts. Without a codification of female behavior, no control over civilizing women could be put in place. An anxiety over prescribed rank in society was of concern outside the home of these same women, who could refuse class hierarchy and their place in it. In her 1914 book on vaudeville, Caroline Caffin mentions the ambivalent reactions of women in a vaudeville audience with regard to female acts: "I sat next to two dear little old Brooklyn ladies who were delighted with the audacities of Gertrude Vanderbilt because she 'looked so like dear Eloise.' On the other hand, she declares a visiting English singer to be a 'perfectly odious person. She distorts herself in such an unwomanly way.'"[31]

This apprehension was already in evidence in the vaudeville audience as the more refined acts that focused on the middle classes were becoming less and less popular than acts that appealed to the cheap seats of the gallery. Caffin's remark about audience response to female acts is telling of how vaudeville – especially comedy – had to verge on the edge of being offensive even when trying to appeal to a diverse audience. Referencing the "little old Brooklyn ladies again" Caffin writes:

[31] Caroline Caffin, *Vaudeville*, 17-18.

> Now betwixt these contrasting elements – and the extremes are even greater than the [one] I have named – the programme must fill in the breach. There must be something for every one and, though the fastidious may be a little shocked (the fastidious rather like to be shocked sometimes), they must not be offended, while the seeker for thrills must on no account be bored by too much mildness.[32]

Discussing vaudeville comedy, popular entertainment historian Henry Jenkins notes a conflict between the improvisation and freedom of the comic fool's outbursts and intrusions into polite society as represented by the "dupes, killjoys, and counterfeits"[33] that are the models for "civilization [for] all that is stifling or corrupt in the social order."[34] Rather than merely being crude, lewd, and loud, performances by the likes of Eva Tanguay attracted audiences who desired release and relief from the civilized restraints of bourgeois American society.

Comic acts that capitalized on the new humor, reflected a world in social turmoil and a restructuring of values with significant emphasis on the vibrant, the fast, and the protean. As popular entertainment historian M. Alison Kibler writes, "With women cheering on boxing matches, 'hoi polloi' paying attention to literature, and the box patrons occasionally immersed in 'riots,' vaudeville theaters were sites in which [female] patrons could test new freedoms and cross social boundaries."[35] Female comedians in particular reflected these sociocultural changes onstage. Attempting to combat the dangers associated with the new humor as coupled with the new woman, and to appeal to more patrons with disposable income from their new-found leisure time, the formidable

---

[32] Ibid., 18.
[33] Henry Jenkins, *Pistachio Nuts?*, 232.
[34] Ibid., 221-22.
[35] Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 54.

entrepreneur B. F. Keith dominated the vaudeville circuit in the early 1900s. Keith pronounced that, "In many instances, indeed, [variety theaters] were offensive to the essentially wholesome and clean-minded American majority. I have endeavored to reform abuses at which I hint, by eliminating from my bills everything savoring of vulgarity or salaciousness."[36] Keith's battle to court decency – and audiences that included middle-class women and their children – often clashed with his very own acts, particularly the women comedians.

The controversy of the new woman as female comedian raised questions concerning what constituted a woman's sense of humor. The debate over the new woman and comic appreciation and appropriateness in the early twentieth century confronted the conventional wisdom that the enjoyment of lowbrow slapstick humor and ethnic immigrant routines in vaudeville contradicted women's supposed natural proclivity toward reserved and respectable behavior. A 1901 column for *Harper's Bazaar* quoted French comic performer Constant Coquelin's article entitled "Have Women A Sense of Humor?" Coquelin commented that, "[t]he lighter, the more fantastic, the daintier the humorous fancy, the quicker it appeals to a woman."[37] In a similar *Harper's* article one year later Robert Burdette, an American humorist and clergyman, reaffirmed Coquelin's pronouncement regarding women's sense of humor, writing that "[t]he sense in her is delicate, sympathetic, refined to the highest culture. True humor delights her, while buffoonery, if it be brutal, shocks her."[38] Women's humor was meant to be defined as witty, light, and sensitive. The new women, by

[36] B. F. Keith quoted in Edwin Milton Royle, "The Vaudeville Theatre," *Scribner's Magazine* 26 (October 1899), in Stein, *American Vaudeville*, 24.
[37] Constant Coquelin, "Have Women a Sense of Humor?," in *Harper's Bazaar* (January 1901), 67.
[38] Robert Burdette, "Have Women a Sense of Humor?," in *Harper's Bazaar* (July 1902), 598.

imitating the lowbrow male comedians found in concert saloons and variety theaters of the Bowery and the Lower East Side, were thought to have lacked an ethical and moral center. These perceptions of the new women provide an indication of the judgment and condemnation of female comic vaudevillians that was coming from all sides, from journalists, cultural watchdogs, politicians, and fellow performers alike. The fear of the uncontrollable new women onstage was palpable.

However, the more pressure progressive reformers placed on female vaudevillians, the more their popularity grew within marginalized social classes of both genders. Reformer Jane Addams, in an attempt to save lower-class single women from their supposed vulnerability to lurid pleasure, argued:

> Apparently the modern city sees in these girls only two possibilities, both of them commercial: first, a chance to utilize by day their new and tender labor power in its factories and shops, and then another chance in the evening to extract from them their petty wages by pandering to their love of pleasure.[39]

During the mid-to-late 1910s, multiple regulations at the state and municipal level took aim at New York's inexpensive popular entertainments. Progressive reformers demanded regulations, guidelines, and strict policies that would lead to suitable divertissements for the working classes. Vaudeville with its improvisational nature was especially difficult to regulate, as it relied on audience interaction and participation that changed with every performance. However, by 1918 the moral reformers had achieved a partial victory in closing down "combination houses" that featured inexpensive small-time vaudevillians with short silent motion pictures. Since films could be more easily censored, not being live or improvisational in nature, the reformers paid particular

[39] Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York: MacMillan, 1912), 99.

attention to cheap live amusements that ensnared spectators with their promise of surprise, shock, potential immorality, and especially "dirty" comedians.[40]

In 1905 reform groups began to put pressure on city governments to deal with women whose behavior, styles of dress, and attendance at popular entertainments had marked them as "loose" women. In tandem with reformers, city officials set up vice commissions to create censorship laws so that police could enforce rules and regulations for popular entertainments like dance halls and vaudeville theaters. Of particular interest for reformers were the comedy acts performed by women that encouraged imitation for its female audience members.

The advent of the new immigrant and the new woman created a perceived need for censorship by progressive era reform organizations like the Committee of Fourteen. As a result of the manipulations of business and politics by the committee, reform organizations were sanctioned in cities all over the United States by politicians and law enforcement alike, dedicated to changing the moral character of urban centers in the United States. Social reformers had a powerful influence over popular entertainments. For example, many concert saloons in the late nineteenth century had been rowdy gathering places where prostitutes openly solicited sex and proprietors frequently ignored the one o'clock closing time, were, by contrast in 1919, on the eve of national prohibition, forcibly concentrated in commercial districts, as prostitution went underground. Many drinking establishments stopped admitting women entirely to curb the sexual solicitation and corruption that saloons were perceived as encouraging. The places that did admit

---

[40] Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982), 46-7.

women only allowed them to stay without a male escort until nine or ten o'clock; this was a direct result of the efforts of the Committee of Fourteen.[41]

Barrooms and concert saloons were home to burlesque performers in the last decades of the nineteenth century. From this world came female performers like Eva Tanguay and Mae West, who were now under attack by reformers for promoting sexual promiscuity and solicitation from the stage. Also, women who were in attendance at these lowbrow entertainments were categorized in the same fashion and condemned for lewdness in part because they were not under the supervision of men. Progressive reformers, regardless of gender, attributed the moral decay of New York City in particular primarily to women who resisted the middle-class values of family life by attending popular entertainments.

Female comedians on the vaudeville stage were rebuked for burlesquing the image of respectable women. Women as comic vaudevillians were singled out for their sinful ways and lusts by flaunting them through innuendo and crude jokes about sex that enticed single and married men with their "naughty" performances. Presumably these acts gave female audiences similar encouragement toward unscrupulous behavior, and open sexual display.

For reformers, middle-class propriety for reformers meant adhering increasingly to the ideal of the married female running a household with two or more children, in which the wife would not have to work because of the success of her husband and father of her children. A wife who did not have to work, and could devote her time to the raising of her young, became the ideal that marked one's movement from the lower

[41] Mara L. Keire, "The Committee of Saloon Reform in New York City, 1905-1920," *Business and Economic History* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 573.

classes to the middle classes for men and women alike. Even a woman's right to vote served different purposes among these two classes. According to reformers, the middle classes needed a woman's right to vote in order to secure the values of "decent" married women who represented the American ideal of marriage and motherhood. She would become a role model for other women of her class and vote accordingly to support her husband's middle-class values as well.

However, for single working-class women, suffrage became a way to exercise freedom from the bonds of marriage and motherhood and assert their own needs, desires, and opinions. The working woman's need to have access to her own rights without being married was reflected in what she could do with her leisure time. Her free time was earned by entering the work force and having a disposable income not tied to family, but for her own disposal and pleasure. Therefore, popular entertainments became a destination for single working-class women who began to enjoy dance halls, amusement parks, and vaudeville. The attendance at these "cheap amusements,"[42] as reformers pejoratively called them, either in groups of like-minded women or on dates with various men and groups of friends both male and female, posed a threat to the conventions and pursuit of family life. These working-class amusements led to perceived decadent behaviors of public drunkenness (therefore the need for another reform crusade with prohibition), carousing with the opposite sex, and worst of all engaging in promiscuous sex before settling down to marriage, if they married at all. According to progressive

[42] "Cheap amusements" refers to the title of Kathy Peiss's study of working women and leisure in turn-of-the-century New York, and how working-class women were stigmatized by encouraging, participating in, and being able to only afford, a degraded form of popular entertainment; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 1986.

reformers, the stage performances of the so-called wild women would lead to an epidemic of the devaluation of the Anglo-American way of life.

The upending of the social order was the ultimate fear of progressive reformers as female comedians began to incorporate ethnic immigrant sketches, slapstick gags, and eccentric songs and dances. The performance of desire through "racy" and innuendo-based humor appealed to patrons who wanted to appear "sophisticated" enough to appreciate the jokes being put over. The appropriateness of women in comic vaudeville routines revealed a concern that the tastes of the lower classes that populated the cheap seats of the gallery were setting the tone and creating a demand even among audiences in the higher-priced seats. The increasing awareness of class divisions in the audience and between reformers and producers of vaudeville were being played out in theaters by the comic acts.

The resistance of the new woman on the vaudeville stage was reflected in theatrical publications of the time, as an unidentified theater critic noted in 1902: "While heretofore the women in the casts of farcical productions have had to look prim and pretty and be satisfied with that, … nowadays they … furnish food for risibility."[43] The desire for comic female vaudevillians became a lucrative profession with some popular performers making between $3,500 and $5,000 a-week during the height of their careers, and, as this same critic concludes, "with the demand came the supply. The funny girl has arrived."[44] Funny women onstage, like the new women offstage, provoked cultural discussions about the feminine especially with regard to appropriate sociocultural female

[43] Unidentified critic, "The Day of the Lady Comedian," n.p., 1902, Tanguay, vol. 450, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center.

[44] Ibid.

behaviors. The issue that the new women presented, as another reviewer put it, was their "insinuating appeals to the senses": [these] "clever women do not hesitate to sacrifice all of the vanities of their sex – looks and grace – to evoke laughter from their audience."[45] This "sacrifice" on behalf of female vaudevillians was seen as an insult to attractive and refined womanhood by reformers.

Progressive reformers like Jane Addams wished to reinforce highbrow entertainment as a way to civilize and educate the working classes. For example, Addams remarked on the enthusiasm of working-class children for Shakespeare and Molière plays put on for their benefit, writing that "every settlement in which dramatics have been systematically fostered can also testify to a surprisingly quick response to this form of art on the part of young people … children whose tastes have supposedly been debased by constant vaudeville, are pathetically eager to come again and again."[46] Addams's ironic praise of Shakespeare and Molière ignores the fact that their theater was the popular entertainment of its time – much like vaudeville was for the early twentieth century. The highbrow designation of the literary theater as art, and lowbrow characterization of "constant vaudeville" as debasing the sensibilities of young Americans, became an aesthetic judgment of edifying art versus corrupting popular entertainment that would lead to the censorship of live performances into the 1930s.

The Women Who Made Vaudeville Famous: Eva Tanguay, Marie Dressler, Kate Elinore, and Mae West

Eva Tanguay

Whatever obstacles working-class or immigrant men faced, women confronted all of these plus sex discrimination. However, in vaudeville, women could potentially begin

[45] Unidentified critic, "'Comedian' Girls Jump to the Front," n.p., 8.
[46] Addams, *Spirit of Youth*, 89.

an independent career and be paid wages that were often unattainable to them in other professions.[47] A case in point was the singer/dancer/comedian, Eva Tanguay, born in 1878 and raised in rural poverty in the province of Québec. By 1884, Tanguay's family immigrated to the United States and the industrial factory township of Holyoke, Massachusetts. It was there that she was introduced to the popular stage, winning first prize during an amateur night at the age of eight. Tanguay's mother, unable to afford a proper dress for her performance, made one out of the fabric of an old umbrella.[48] Two years later she was cast in a touring production of *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, performing the leading role. In 1901, Tanguay landed a minor role in the musical, *My Lady*, and her next featured role in *The Chaperon* in 1904 would mark the beginning of her stage success in New York City.[49] Her solo vaudeville act appeared in 1905, and by 1910 Eva Tanguay was reported to be making $3,500 a week from her stage appearances.[50]

Tanguay chose a path in vaudeville in order to break free of her social and economic standing and in doing so achieved great wealth and fame. A turn-of-the-century newspaper featured an article on vaudeville that touted Eva Tanguay as "[a] woman [who] is as free and independent as a man. Generally she needs no protector, for she is usually able to take care of herself."[51] Vaudeville historian Douglas Gilbert's report of Eva Tanguay's act in Pittsburgh, in which "a bit of comedy introduced (a short 'blue' monologue about a chicken) was tossed out by the authorities," is telling of how some female performers defied social and cultural conventions of the day, becoming

---

[47] Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 34-41.
[48] Erdman, *Queen of Vaudeville*, 30-32.
[49] Ibid., 47.
[50] McLean, *Vaudeville as Ritual*, 54.
[51] Unidentified author, "Vaudeville and Variety Miscellaneous" file, no publication cited, 1900, Harvard Theatre Collection.

successful for their audacity. Tanguay purportedly responded to this criticism of her act being too "blue" in a subsequent performance, as she "gaily continued to shake her torso and wriggle her thighs, explosively shrieking 'I Love to Be Crazy.'"[52] Her performances signaled the new, both on and off stage, reflecting the spirit of the day as female vaudevillians became associated with the new women.

Eva Tanguay serves as a significant example of the class conflict of the new woman with middle-class reformers of the early twentieth century. Tanguay went from being a French-Canadian immigrant to making her mark at Hammerstein's Victoria Theater in *My Lady* in 1901, and by 1905 Tanguay had become the "Queen of Vaudeville" all in just a few short years.[53] Florenz Ziegfeld featured Tanguay as his star attraction in the 1909 edition of the *Follies*, replacing the husband-and-wife team of Jack Norworth and Nora Bayes, who had been Ziegfeld's top audience draws until that point.[54] For the next twenty-five years Tanguay remained one of the biggest stars, and most highly paid, as an "eccentric comedienne,"[55] all through sheer force of will and a unique performance style. As she declared in her signature song, "It's All Been Done Before but Not the Way I Do It." Eva Tanguay spent most of her subsequent career in vaudeville, starring in two silent films, *Energetic Eva* (1916) and *The Wild Girl* (1917).[56] Her financial success and her extravagant stage persona can be witnessed in 1910, one year after the Lincoln penny was issued, in which she appeared onstage in a coat covered with one-cent coins.[57] Another stage costume boasted a two-thousand-dollar dress encrusted

---

[52] Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 328.
[53] Ibid., 329.
[54] Erdman, *Queen of Vaudeville*, 140-45.
[55] Ibid.; also in Slide, *Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, 146-48; in Hamilton, *"Bad Better,"* 38.
[56] Erdman, *Queen of Vaudeville*, 198-99.
[57] Sime Silverman, "Eva Tanguay," *Variety* (24 September 1910).

with coral weighing forty-five pounds. These outfits were a far cry from the old umbrella that Tanguay's mother had fashioned into a stage dress for her twenty-four years earlier.[58]

Vaudeville historian and Tanguay contemporary Douglas Gilbert writes, "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 was characterized as mad, crazy, "the Cyclonic Comedienne," the "Evangelist of Joy," and, the most elusive title of all, an "eccentric" act. Breaking with B. F. Keith's Sunday School Circuit morality, Gilbert contends that she "got more sex into her shouted numbers than could be found in a crib street in a mining town."[59] According to the vaudevillian memoirs of Joe Laurie, Jr., Tanguay, more than any other performer "represented the true spirit of vaudeville."[60] "In Vaudeville," Tanguay pronounced that she was "second to none" and made sure that she was billed as "The Girl Who Made Vaudeville Famous."[61] At the height of her popularity, with little to recommend her save her dynamic personality, Eva Tanguay is quoted as saying about her own act, "[A]s a matter of fact, I am not beautiful, I can't sing, I don't know how to dance. I am not even graceful."[62] Regardless of her perceived talents, Tanguay defied the conventional description of the female voice and body using her unusual and "unfeminine" looks, singing, and movements in order to establish and

---

[58] Although Tanguay was a wealthy woman by the 1920s, she reportedly lost $2,000,000 in the Wall Street crash of 1929. In 1947, relatively broke, although aided by friends like fellow vaudevillian Sophie Tucker, Tanguay died in Hollywood while working on her autobiography. Three excerpts of which appeared in Hearst newspapers which was to be entitled *Up and Down the Ladder*; Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville*, 128.

[59] Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 327.

[60] Laurie, *Vaudeville*, 58.

[61] Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 329.

[62] Ibid.

redefine the notion of the new woman through her comic performances. As Douglas Gilbert further observes:

> It is virtually impossible to overestimate Tanguay's personality, or her influence in vaudeville. In the years she was tops this incredible woman alone jolted the maudlin period of the early 1900's away from its eye-dabbing with the vigor of unashamed sex. Precisely when the vaudeville public was listening to such treacle as "You'll Be Sorry Just Too Late," Tanguay was screaming "I Want Someone to Go Wild with Me."[63]

Describing "'The Queen of Perpetual Motion,'" popular entertainment historian Robert M. Lewis writes that "[Tanguay's] untamed nature, her wild extravagant, physical gestures, and her off-stage reputation for tempestuous love affairs" as essential to her success. And most significantly he concludes, "[Tanguay's] eccentricity made her the quintessential vaudeville star – the individual as the primary creative force, the performer as personality."[64] The nature of Eva Tanguay's eccentric act emphasizes the desire to be unique and indefinable in order to make a name in vaudeville. It also points to the need for the female performer of the modernist era to make a mark in a period where mass production of entertainment, and the industrialization of the worker, promoted the homogenous values and virtues of the newly minted middle class.

Eva Tanguay was one of the first female comedians to be condemned by progressive reformers. However she employed a self-deprecating model to reach her audience. As a reviewer noted in 1919, after having seen her ten years earlier in a

---

[63] Ibid., 328.
[64] Lewis, *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville*, 319.

"second class little theater tucked away almost behind a church,"[65] she mocked her own lack of singing, dancing, and acting skills. By this admission she stumped the critics by going against the traditional early twentieth-century notions of refined female sex appeal and stage presence, making this the hallmark of her act. Tanguay's appeal, according to the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, was that:

> She thought out something different. Who ever heard an actress knock herself on the stage? She had been knocked by a great many critics so she said good bye to the legitimate and framed up a vaudeville act and beat the knocking critics at their own game. She has made out of herself the biggest theatrical novelty the theater has ever known in the world.[66]

And as one of her most popular routines declared:

> Some people say I think I'm it,
>
> But I don't care,
>
> They say they don't like me a bit,
>
> But I don't care;
>
> 'Cos my good nature effervescing,
>
> In one, there is no distressing,
>
> My spirit there is no oppressing,
>
> Just 'cos I don't care![67]

---

[65] "Higgins," *The Dramatic Mirror* (29 April 1919), 636.
[66] Ibid.
[67] References to the script of *The Sambo Girl* are based on a manuscript in the Eva Tanguay Collection, Benson Ford Research Center; "West End – The Sambo Girl," Tanguay, vol. 450, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York. The song "I Don't Care!" is from the musical *The Sambo Girl*, Book and Lyrics, Harry B. Smith, Music, Gustav Kerker (Broadway premiere, 16 October 1905).

In 1905 Eva Tanguay appeared in a musical called *The Sambo Girl* that featured the song "I Don't Care." The narrative of the musical was really a series of vaudeville highlights of songs and dances for Tanguay. This song marked a turning point in her career that was to launch Tanguay into instant vaudeville fame. "I Don't Care" was a tour de force of outrageous fun and nonconformity. It was an ideal number for her emerging talents. The song was coupled with others as well as comic sketches appearing in her 1905 vaudeville touring repertoire. Another popular part of her act, "I Want to Go Wild with Someone," depicted a woman who was liberated, sexually open, and in control of her own desires and needs. The perceived danger of her offensive onstage behavior came to the attention of the Keith circuit managers, who, in attempting to "clean up" her act, were met with a very strong willed performer who had the right to perform her act as she saw fit, as her popularity and paycheck boasted. As Tanguay herself sang to much notoriety and fame, "I don't care, what they may think of me!"[68] As a cultural critic for the *Atlantic* wrote of Eva Tanguay at the time, the blame could not necessarily be laid on "the 'unquiet women' [of] to-day," but rather on "the unquiet world."[69] The "unquiet world" that produced performers like Tanguay was a veiled reference to the shifting demographic of the United States with the advent of the immigrant underclass. Eva Tanguay and other "unquiet women" were thought to be a negative influence on the rise of the new women as evidenced by their lowbrow, burlesque-based performances that boasted that they did not care what anyone thought of them.

Eva Tanguay embraced the portrayal of the new woman who did not have to conform to the standards of innocence and attractiveness that characterized the

---

[68] Ibid.

[69] Earl Barnes, "The Economic Independence of Women," *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1912), 262-63.

nineteenth-century female. Her originality fused the allure of the female form and the promise of forbidden sensuality, while contrasting this with an unfeminine, braying voice and frenzied movements, complete with over-tight costumes, and an untamable mane of hair. These visual markers embodied and professed her lack of confinement, refinement, and social decorum. The contour of the new woman as female wild woman, who uses ribald humor, sexual innuendo, and manic, uncontrollable stage behavior, confirmed what the progressive reformer feared most – that a woman's middle-class image of propriety, dignity, and social status was being contested and mocked in comic vaudeville routines.

The New Woman as Comic Grotesque

Reformers observed the social insurgency of the new humor in the non-traditional image of women displaying confrontational attitudes with regard to self-determination in their careers, sexual desires, and bombastic performances on the vaudeville stage. Because of their large bodies, plain looks, and ribald humor, they were perceived by middle-class reformers as grotesque versions of idealized American femininity and morality. These comic grotesques were seen as an affront to the serious place that women were trying to establish for themselves in American society. The new humor, coupled with the new women, created an insurgency that undermined the efforts of reformers like Jane Addams and Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch.

Comic vaudevillians like Eva Tanguay, Marie Dressler, Kate Elinore, and Mae West, because of their size and perceived masculine features and body types, portrayed tough and boisterous ethnic immigrant characters that were neither traditional stage beauties nor respectable middle-class "ladies." They created a comedy category of "newcomers in grotesquerie," according to feminist performance scholar Susan A.

Glenn.[70] As a vaudeville theater critic affirms, with their "insinuating appeal to the senses, [these] clever women do not hesitate to sacrifice all of the vanities of their sex – looks and grace – to evoke laughter from their audience."[71] The merger of the female/male persona for working class immigrant women was itself a comic vision of womanhood produced from stage techniques of the new humor. As popular entertainment historians Robert C. Allen, Susan A. Glenn, and M. Alison Kibler have observed, female performers in the first decades of the twentieth century were considered to represent "low others" through their association with prostitution, the lower body, or the working classes, and gained comic license largely because they were disenfranchised from middle-class society.

Theatrical reviewers and progressive reformers pointed out the crude, lewd, and vulgar behaviors of the comic grotesque woman as a freakish and unsettling image that was to be condemned for its damaging influences, particularly with young female audience members who were presumably the most impressionable of all.

The notion of bourgeois respectability meant a regulation and erasure of the ethnic heritage of recent immigrants and their American-born children. The female comic stage depicted women who were overbearing, brash, intelligent, and funny. Rejecting the refinements of the middle-class notions of the American family, with its harmonious clan where each member knew their place, was an impossibility given the realities of daily survival for new immigrants and their families. Kate Elinore's resistance to being a refined woman, by distancing herself from an unfeminine appearance, became the essence of her comedy on the vaudeville stage. Kate Elinore's

---

[70] Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 46.

[71] Unidentified author, "Comedian' Girls Jump to the Front."

forte was the upending of traditional attractiveness and power structures through performing characters of the underclass as self-assured, untamable, and unable to be Americanized. Her embrace of the traditional male role in comedy double acts reinforced the success of gender transgressions by female vaudevillians. Elinore's insults, fistfights, unruly behavior with regard to social conventions, and penchant for speaking her mind in the face of punishment by her betters, all reinforced the new woman as a force of nature that would become central to the female comedian's advancement in the profession of stage comedy.

The shock for audiences and reformers alike was not the reversal of servant/master roles but rather the fact that a female comedian played the traditional role of the male eccentric comedian, as well as depicted characters of both lower and upper classes alike as having a questionable moral code, that left spectators either offended or intrigued. The ambivalent reception to the new woman as stage comedian would continue as the new woman, in the guise of the female comedian, was now becoming more acceptable for other female comic acts like Marie Dressler and Kate Elinore. An analysis of Marie Dressler and Kate Elinore as female comic vaudevillians points to the resistance of an overly simplistic division of the sensual feminized – demur, petite, and pretty – and the comic grotesque – manly, fat, and homely – body and voice.

Marie Dressler

Wild and unruly female performers were abided so long as their stage personas were filtered and diffused through a grotesque lens. For example, in 1913, one of producer B. F. Keith's managers described Marie Dressler's comedy in terms of the transgressive grotesque, reporting, "One hesitates to contemplate what would become of

Miss Dressler's vocation if she ever lost her weight. She is just the same big, boisterous gross clown of yore and always bordering over the line. Nevertheless, she stirred up a riot of laughter and applause."[72] Equating Dressler's success as a "riot" of the audience, responding to her "big boisterous gross clown of yore," connects the notion of the grotesque created by and causing riotous behavior both onstage and in the audience.

Born Leila Koerber in Cobourg, Canada, on 9 November 1869, Dressler was the daughter of an itinerant musician who moved his family regularly from town to town. At the age of fourteen, she joined the Nevada Stock Company against the wishes of her parents and took the name of Marie Dressler from a favorite aunt. She moved from stock company to stock company, eventually arriving in New York, and singing at the Atlantic Garden on the Bowery, and Koster and Bial's Twenty-Third Street Theatre. Her first major stage achievement came with her role as Flo Honeydew of the Music Halls in an operatic comedy titled *The Lady Slavey*, which opened in Washington, D.C., in September 1896. Dressler introduced her character Tillie Blobbs, a comic inversion of the *Cinderella* character, in *Tillie's Nightmare*, at New York's Herald Square Theatre, 5 May 1910. As a result of an enormous success with the character of Tillie, she was hired by Mack Sennett to star in a 1914 feature-length comedy for Keystone Pictures in Hollywood. The film was to be titled *Tillie's Punctured Romance*, co-starring a novice film comedian, Charlie Chaplin, and the comedy film star, Mabel Normand. Dressler also appeared in two less successful sequels, *Tillie's Tomato* (1915) and *Tillie Wakes Up* (1917). But Marie Dressler's real triumph would be on the vaudeville stage, headlining in April 1919 at New York's Palace Theater, at $1,500 per week. Her career stalled in

---

[72] Report Book 15, 161, Keith/Albee Collection, Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, Iowa; reprinted in Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 282.

the 1920s as the popularity of vaudeville waned and she could not get any traction in silent films either. However, with the coming of sound pictures, Marie Dressler proved herself an accomplished actor working opposite Greta Garbo in Eugene O'Neill's screen adaptation of *Anna Christie* (1930), and receiving the Academy Award for best actress in that same year for her performance in *Min and Bill*. She died shortly after in Santa Barbara, California, on 28 July 1934.[73]

In 1904, Marie Dressler joined up with vaudeville impresario and performer, Joe Weber, touring with him for a number of years with the ignominious title of "Weber's Amazon."[74] Dressler starred in a successful Weber and Fields musical comedy, *Higgledy-Piggledy*. The musical was composed of a simplistic narrative as an excuse to feature vaudevillian episodes that included comic songs, dances, acrobatic routines, and sketches of humorous dialogue. The show featured "Weber's Amazon" singing what would become her signature number, "A Great Big Girl Like Me":

> A great big girl like very truly yours
>
> Has very little cause for glee.
>
> They always make a pet
>
> Of some stingy-faced soubrette;
>
> Not a great big girl like me.
>
> "A Great Big Girl Like Me!"[75]

[73] Victoria Sturtevant, *A Great Big Girl Like Me: The Films of Marie Dressler* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 1-29; Slide, *Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, 141-43.

[74] Adelda Rogers St. Johns, "The Private Life of Marie Dressler: Part One – The Ugly Duckling," *Liberty* 10.19 (13 May 1933): 20-25.

[75] Quoted in Sturtevant, *A Great Big Girl*, 5. The song "A Great Big Girl Like Me!" is from the Weber and Fields Music Hall production of *Higgledy-Piggledy*, Book and Lyrics, Edgar Smith, Music, Maurice Levi (Broadway premiere, 20 October 1904).

Marie Dressler went on to a successful vaudeville career, and ultimately a sound film career beginning in the 1930s, although unemployed for most of the 1920s, as silent film would not accommodate a comic grotesque without a voice. One of her first successful vaudeville appearances was at New York's Colonial Theatre in January 1907. This performance offered impersonations of Mrs. Leslie Carter and Blanche Bates, actresses from the legitimate stage, and Dressler's theme song from *Higgledy-Piggledy*. She returned to the Colonial in April 1908 sending up an ample-chested elocutionist as well as a highbrow prima donna from the opera world; two of her many staple impersonations of highbrow pretensions. *Variety* commented on her Colonial performance, saying, "There is just enough accuracy and truth in her burlesques to make the picture ridiculously plain."[76] Dressler's mocking impersonations of the upper classes, combined with her Irish immigrant servants mocking social hierarchies, in addition to her defiance of the notion of classic female stage beauty and decorum, made her a household name during the 1910s. Dressler often made sport of the audiences and producers who "always make a pet/Of some stingy-faced soubrette;/Not a great big girl like me."[77]

However, Dressler's success can also be attributed to her comic commentary capturing what a *Variety* critic noted as "the essence of her humor is its satire on insincerity and affectation."[78] Her act, according to the same review, consisted of "a howling travesty of the chesty elocutionist," and "an exquisite lampoon on the 'classy' prima donna;" the "beauty of her method" requiring "just enough accuracy and truth in her burlesques to make the picture ridiculously plain."[79] Ultimately, this at times canny

---

[76] Unidentified reviewer, "Marie Dressler at the Colonial," *Variety* (25 April 1908).
[77] Ibid.
[78] Alfred Greason - "Rush," *Variety* (25 April 1908):14.
[79] Ibid.

review falls into the objectification of the grotesque female comedian, ending with the conclusion that "the Joe Weber amazon is a great big vaudeville hit."[80] Reduced to being Joe Weber's "amazon" the paradox of the truth of her performance is confronted with the suggestion that the real success of Dressler's comedy is her being tall, overweight, loud, and mannish. As another critic of the period observed, "[Marie Dressler] frankly abandons any ambition to be pretty or even attractive. The ludicrous is her aim, and in that object there is no sacrifice too great for her."[81] Descriptions of stage performances of many female comics during the early twentieth century reinforce the notion of how relative attractiveness and perceptions of the grotesque defined what was funny – and unnerving to reformers – about the new woman as female comedian.

Marie Dressler represented another vision of the new woman as comic vaudevillian. Through her skillful shifting back and forth from tough uncouth maid to immigrant "Big Mama," Dressler was able to comment on the stereotyped image of matronly working-class women as simple, soft-spoken caretakers, mothers, and servants who were only to serve their betters and not be heard from. Marie Dressler would score her biggest stage success in *Tillie's Nightmare*, a 1910 musical send-up of *Cinderella*. She portrayed Tillie Blobbs, the overworked daughter of a boardinghouse matron. After falling asleep from a long of day of housework, while her mother and pretty sister have a night out on the town, Tillie has a dream about marrying a millionaire, moving to Paris, riding in an airship, and other fantasy sequences that would feature Dressler's comic talents. This dream sequence was a vehicle for a loose narrative structure for the Weber and Fields comedy. Tillie Blobbs became a working girl's fantasy of freedom from a life

[80] Ibid.

[81] Quoted in Roberta Ann Raider, "A Descriptive Study of the Acting of Marie Dressler," Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1970, 117.

of drudgery with the ultimate dream of escape. The most popular song in the show, which continued into her future vaudeville solo act, was "Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl," which featured the lyrics:

> The city is a wicked place, as anyone can see,
> And cruel dangers round your path may hurl;
> So ev'ry week you'd better send your wages back to me,
> For Heaven will protect the working girl.
> You may tempt the upper classes
> With your villainous demi-tasses
> But Heaven will protect the working girl.[82]

This song also became linked with Dressler, and her comedy frequently championed a populist emphasis of the needs and concerns of the working classes and marginalized female citizens. Dressler would become a staunch defender of working class women, particularly those of the vaudeville and Broadway stages. She personally led Broadway's chorus girls in the Actor's Equity strike of 1919, becoming the first president of the Chorus Equity Association, which demanded that Broadway's lowest-ranked women performers should share in the benefits of unionization. On and off the vaudeville stage, Dressler did her part to protect the "working girl."[83] However, she would have nothing to do with the progressive reformers whom she felt merely wanted to dictate morals and be the judge of the lower classes, and in particular, of working-poor women.

---

[82] References to the script of *Tillie's Nightmare* from Tams-Witmark Collection, Mills Music Library, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 14-15. The song "Heaven Protect the Working Girl" is from *Tillie's Nightmare*, Book and Lyrics, Edgar Smith, Music, A. Baldwin Sloane (Broadway premiere, 5 May 1910).

[83] Adelda Rogers St. Johns, "The Private Life of Marie Dressler: Part Two – The Rising Star" *Liberty* 10, no. 20 (20 May 1933): 10-15.

Another concern for reformers was the popularity and high-profile of comic female performers like Marie Dressler. By 1919, after almost two decades of vaudeville success, Dressler was being touted as a comedy legend by the New York *Dramatic Mirror*:

> Marie Dressler, one of the greatest institutions of burlesque on the American stage – not of the ten-twenty-thirty standard, but of the strata that demands talent and brains – has returned to vaudeville. … She was in all her cut-up glory, exactly like the old days of Weber and Fields. She satisfied everyone. … the reason [for her success is] that she has always some[thing] to say that even college professors can understand as well as servant girls. … Miss Dressler is a household name and she will be a big card for the two-a-day [first-tier vaudeville circuit] from the Atlantic to the Pacific.[84]

The female vaudevillian as comic grotesque was to take her rightful place as an institution of American popular entertainment with the likes of Marie Dressler and Mae West.

In contrast to the male assessment of women in comedy, Chicago critic Amy Leslie, who found Dressler's aggressive physicality "irresistible" and "amazing," claimed that this "rowdy [comic] knows nothing of delicacy or taste; she calls a spade a spade with the courage of a bad boy."[85] Marie Dressler herself is quoted in a 1910 interview, where she argued that women were "natural comediennes." Several women currently performing in New York "could get right to the top in the comedy line if they would only

---

[84] "Higgins," *The Dramatic Mirror* (8 April 1919), 531.

[85] *Chicago News*, April 1905, Dressler, vol. 163, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

stop trying to look pretty and to act funny at the same time," she espoused, but "dignity and comedy cannot go hand in hand."[86] When Dressler returned to vaudeville at the Palace in 1919 after her success in Hollywood, she was greeted by audiences and critics alike as a beloved star and stage talent.

Marie Dressler's comic grotesque appeal was a product of her talents developed in "burlesque" and the "cut-up glory" of the vaudevillian that was accessible to various classes and levels of education and culture. The "ten-twenty-thirty standard" audiences – meaning patrons of the third-tier vaudeville houses who charged ten, twenty, or thirty cents maximum – as well as the well-healed audiences of the Palace Theater, could appreciate Marie Dressler's unique comic voice and body equally.

Kate Elinore

Kate and May Elinore worked as a comic vaudeville duo from 1894 to 1909. Kate portrayed the wild and masculine Irish, immigrant, working-class servant to May's Anglo-American feminine authority figure. Kate Elinore, born in 1876 and raised in Brooklyn, New York, made her first appearance with her sister, May, in an "eccentric act" in Atlantic City, 30 July 1894. According to the *Who's Who in Music and Drama* from 1914, the Elinore Sisters were "reputed to be the first act of the kind to be shown."[87] The Elinore Sisters joined Tony Pastor's Company, New York City in 1896, and subsequently joined Harry William's Own Company and Hopkins's Trans-Atlantics. Kate and May's last recorded performance as a sister act was at Fifth Avenue Theater,

---

[86] *Leslie's Weekly*, 23 June 1910, Dressler, vol. 164, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

[87] Harry Prescott Hanaford and Dixie Hines, eds., *Who's Who in Music and Drama: An Encyclopedia of Biography of Notable Men and Women in Music and the Drama*. (New York: H.P. Hanaford Publishing, 1914), 108.

New York, June 1909.[88] She went on to star as a musical comedy actress, most notably in the 1910 Victor Herbert comic opera, *Naughty Marietta*. She married Sam Williams, a musical composer, working together in vaudeville from 1909 to 1924. Elinore worked right up until her death in 1924, playing the Palace Theater in New York and the Los Angeles Orpheum Theater that same year.[89]

The conflict between servants and their masters in the American class system was critiqued and satirized in Kate Elinore's sketch comedy acts. The Irish immigrant in conflict with her Anglo-American master was depicted in the routines of the Elinore Sisters. Kate Elinore mocked and exaggerated traits associated with the Irish underclass, while also commenting on the ethnic immigrant's ability to outwit and undermine the supposedly more civilized Anglo-American women of authority. Kate and sister May portrayed contrasting American characters: women divided by culture, class, and ethnic identity. The many misunderstandings between Kate Elinore's rude, tough, and rebellious immigrant characters, and May Elinore's refined, American-born, middle and upper-class ladies, were the primary source of this comedy team's many routines and sketches.

A 1906 interview with Elinore noted that "[she] had determined to carve out a new pathway for herself, one which women had never before trodden. 'I'm going to do something different, something grotesque,' she said."[90] This notion of the grotesque is recalled again in 1909 when one reviewer was shocked but pleasantly pleased by Kate Elinore's lowbrow and "masculine" comedy. "She is one of those marvels Heaven

---

[88] Ibid.

[89] Slide, *Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, 158.

[90] "The Elinore Sisters," 20 December 1906, clipping, vol. 444, 61, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Clippings, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

seldom sends us – a truly funny woman," he explained. She "is a low comedienne who does not mind making herself look ugly or ridiculous in order to make her audience laugh."[91] In her 1914 history of vaudeville, Caroline Caffin writes about Elinore's onstage persona, saying, "Never was a woman less troubled with self-consciousness. Her face is one broad, expansive smile which seems to radiate from the top of her little nob of hair … and from every angle of her square built frame."[92] Describing Elinore in a sketch from *The Adventures of Bridget McGuire*, one critic wrote, "No woman ever made such a persistent attempt to look ugly,"[93] and still another reviewer noted, "Her make-up is a nightmare of milliner's art. Her voice makes a fog horn sound like an echo."[94] The supposed grotesqueness of Kate Elinore, and her various stage characters, was formed from traditions associated with two immigrant types: the Irish maid and the "old maid." As Elinore discussed in one interview, "It's quite a common thing with us to have the daily papers insist that I am a man for reasons all their own, and many is the letter received asking us to settle a dispute or wager."[95]

Elinore is a prime example of the female slapstick clown who ran counter to male-driven ethnic comedy in vaudeville. One of the principal objections to female comic vaudevillians by reformers and theatrical producers was not only their lowbrow humor, but also their usurpation of the male comedian's purview of ethnic immigrant

---

[91] "Kate Elinore Without a Sister at the American," *New York Star*, 11 September 1909, clipping, vol. 444, 67, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

[92] Caroline Caffin, *Vaudeville* (New York: M. Kennerie, 1914), 211.

[93] Elinore Sisters's Vaudeville Act Papers, *New Orleans Item*, n.d., clipping, box 3, vol. 3, 10, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York.

[94] Elinore Sisters's Vaudeville Act Papers, clipping, n.p., n.d., box 3, vol. 3, 9, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York.

[95] Elinore Sisters' Vaudeville Act Papers, "The Theater: Breezy Kate Elinore; She Discusses Her Unique Rigs; Wagers Made as to Whether She Is Man or Woman," n.d., clipping, box 3, vol. 3, 4, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York.

new humor. Elinore was an early anomaly that could portray characters and use language usually reserved for men onstage. In 1908, theater reviewer Robert Speare objected to the new woman on the comic stage, describing Elinore and sister May as an "absolutely novel woman act. … [T]he idea is that of the straight comedian and the rough comedian, only instead of its being two men now it is two women."[96] However, not all theater producers rejected the notion of female vaudevillians, and some even found them to be a welcome relief and a lucrative asset to old and tired acts. Vaudeville theater manager Charles Lovenberg, referring to Kate Elinore during another 1908 sketch with a male partner, writes:

> This act was a great surprise for in it was found a woman who is actually funny almost as much so as the comedienne of the Elinore sisters. She makes up as an eccentric country girl and has a very funny line of talk, and the novelty of the woman doing the comedy and the man, the straight work, is very acceptable.[97]

The reversal of the female/male double act was to play a significant part in Kate Elinore's success. As early as 1897, she began playing tough soubrettes, as in *The Irish 400*, where she portrayed Mrs. Murphy, who torments and embarrasses her daughter, played by sister May. Mrs. Murphy's daughter is overwhelmed by her mother's crudeness, her over-indulgent and nostalgic reverence for Ireland, and her lack of femininity. As recorded in the Elinore Sister's vaudeville archives, in one scene, "May admonishes her mother for spitting on the floor of the streetcar. Mrs. Murphy then spits into the conductor's pocket,

[96] Robert Speare, "Plenty Doing at the Alhambra," *New Jersey Telegraph*, 28 May 1908, vol. 444, 65, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Clippings, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

[97] Keith/Albee Collection, Report Book (1902-3), 324, Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, Iowa.

and they are kicked out of the car."[98] In another part of the act, May is visibly upset when her mother interrupts a concert by a famous Polish pianist, Ignacy Paderewski, to ask her during a very quiet moment, "Phwat county in Ireland did Paddy Roosky come from?"[99] Not only is Kate Elinore portraying a loud and abrasive Irish immigrant mother, she plays it with a masculine crudeness that had been associated exclusively with male character comedians up until this point in time.

Kate Elinore also took on issues of class disparity and servant/master relationships. The Elinore Sisters appeared in a series of maid/employer sketches entitled *The Adventures of Bridget McGuire*. Featuring the relationship between an Anglo-American employer and her Irish immigrant housekeeper, the sketches toured on the Keith circuit in 1902. Bridget McGuire, played by Kate Elinore, has large appetites for both food and alcohol that upset her employer, Mrs. Rapps, portrayed by May. A typical sketch involves Mrs. Rapps discovering Bridget as she reaches for a decanter of whiskey, and Bridget braying at her, saying, "That's not the first time whiskey has been the downfall of Ireland."[100] The subsequent scenes highlight Bridget's brazen forthrightness and Mrs. Rapp's pretensions and aspirations to the upper classes. When Mrs. Rapps mistakes Bridget for her wealthy, eccentric aunt and flatters her in hopes of winning an inheritance, she offers Bridget some "refreshment," which Bridget initially declines, assuming the manner of what she believes to be a wealthy dowager saying, "No thank you I never drink anything." However, Bridget "grabs a glass" from her "hostess" and

[98] Maurice E. McLaughlin, *The Irish 400* (1897), box 1, folder 11, Elinore Sisters's Vaudeville Act Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Eugene Ellsworth, *The Adventures of Bridget McGuire*, box 1, folder 10, 101-116, Elinore Sisters's Vaudeville Act Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York.

then begins to drink straight from the decanter, explaining, "If you insist – I don't mind if I take a little drop."[101] Bridget continues drinking throughout the sketch and this allows her to openly defy and insult her employer. Mrs. Rapps professes a belief in the fashionable "spiritualism" of the time, cagily asking, "Are you afraid of spirits, Auntie?," to which Bridget responds, "Not when I can get them by the neck," as she holds up a bottle of whiskey.[102] Ultimately, this simple mistaken identity scenario reinforces Bridget's immigrant toughness and crudeness, as she raises her status over that of her employer by exposing her posturing.[103] The gender transgressors portrayed by Kate Elinore in sketches like *The Adventures of Bridget McGuire* depicted various defiant female characters placed in direct opposition to society ladies, portrayed by her sister, for whom she was in service. As performed by Kate, the Irish maid – with her fighting spirit, insults, sexual curiosity, and outrageous bluntness – challenged and mocked the definition of the female so central to the reformer's notion of appropriate women's social behaviors. The resistance of working-class women characters in positions of submission showed a rejection of upward mobility on Anglo-American, middle-class terms. Comic performers like Kate Elinore refused the notion that the working poor, and in particular the women of the working class, should stay in their place both in terms of their prescribed class and gender roles.

Caroline Caffin remarks that "[Kate Elinore] is the most familiar of friends with her audience, not only as a whole but individually and separately."[104] Elinore's influence over the audience was witnessed when she used "a gesture," writes Caffin, "to mark

---

[101] Ibid., 115.
[102] Ibid., 116.
[103] Keith/Albee Collection, Report Book 1, 65, Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, Iowa.
[104] Caffin, *Vaudeville*, 211-12.

when she thinks her points have hit the mark." This gesture between Elinore and her audience acknowledged a collusion between performer and spectator when "[s]he points her finger, as though it were a pistol, at some individual in the audience, screws up one eye as though to sight and clicks with her mouth to make the sound of a shot."[105] Elinore's control over her audience, and her attitude that she shares a personal relationship with her fans, broke the aesthetic distance that highbrow stage shows encouraged, as if to say that "we are the same, you and I," and like friends we share a special coded language of solidarity. As Caffin concludes, "Her audience is speedily engulfed in laughter like a rock at high tide. And how she responds to and gloats over their mirth, and reabsorbs it to radiate it on them again."[106] The audience is acknowledged by her performances as fellow outsiders, laughing together at the class divides suffered on both sides of the footlights. By undermining the power and authority of established Americans by ethnic immigrants who were meant to be their inferiors, performers like Kate Elinore exposed the sociocultural divisions embraced by middle-class progressive reformers.

Mae West

Mae West, the formidable manipulator of comic innuendo, was an infamous social insurgent and transgressor as well as target of progressive era censorship. West combines all of the elements of the other female comedians examined here. With the wild cavalier attitude of Eva Tanguay, the grotesque outrageousness of Marie Dressler, and the self-possessed toughness of the lower-class outsider Kate Elinore, West was the apotheosis of the new woman on the vaudeville stage. West, beginning in third-tier

[105] Ibid., 212.
[106] Ibid.

burlesque houses, became a comic insurgent into the middle-class world of the Broadway theater during her stage career.

West, now considered a popular and famous cultural touchstone of the female comedic performer, was born in 1893, the daughter of Matilda, an Austrian immigrant, and Jack West, an Irish immigrant who had settled in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn. Her mother was a "refined" corset model and father a small-time boxer known as "Battlin' Jack." Mae was a streetwise "tough girl" who grew up in a part of New York City where the working poor – including a mix of Irish, Italians, Germans, and Poles – were in constant conflict for survival in a new country with limited prospects for immigrants, especially unmarried women. In order to provide for her family after her husband's alcoholism rendered him unemployable, West's mother put Mae on the stage when she was six years old in an attempt to escape their volatile and dangerous Brooklyn neighborhood.[107]

Early in her career, Mae West progressed from the burlesque houses of Brooklyn to the transitional world of vaudeville at Hammerstein's Victoria Theater in Manhattan. The Victoria was not exactly the big-time, but it was popular and attracted sensational if not notorious acts. As Sime Silverman of *Variety* notes about West's 1912 act at Hammerstein's Victoria:

> Mae West is a "single" [solo act] now. She has been about everything else, from a chorus girl in the *Follies Bergere* [sic] and head of a "three-act" to principal in a

[107] For further biographical background on Mae West, see Hamilton, *"I'm Bad, I'm Better,"* 6-9; *Three Plays of Mae West*, 3; for reminiscences of Mae West in Greenpoint see *New York Daily News* (Brooklyn section), 26 November 1980, held in Mae West file, in Brooklyn History Collection, Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn, New York.

Ziegfeld show; that she escaped from the latter evidences some strength of character and this becomes apparent in a way during the act at Hammerstein's.[108]

Although West appeared to be rising through the ranks of vaudeville performers, her critics cautioned her that, "Unless Miss West can tone down her stage presence in every way, she just as well might hop right out of vaudeville [back] into burlesque."[109] Again Silverman's review, written four years after his first evaluation of her stage act at Hammerstein's Victoria, points out her need to "tone down" not her act, but her "stage *presence*." Another *New York Times* reviewer noticed that West was an unknown "with a snappy way of singing and dancing," but Silverman still wondered if the tough girl out of Brooklyn, who danced the Turkey Trot, as well as, the Fox Trot, the Monkey Rag, the Grizzly Bear, and the Shimmy, was not "just a bit too coarse for this $2.00 audience."[110]

Silverman was correct in his assessment, and audiences did not take to Mae West onstage like they did to the "Queen of Vaudeville," Eva Tanguay. West's vulgar and sexually aggressive stage persona would, however, eventually become the signature of her film persona that would propel her into a major Hollywood career beginning with the 1933 film *She Done Him Wrong*, based on her 1928 stage play, *Diamond 'Lil*, to *My Little Chickadee*, co-starring with stage and screen legend, W. C. Fields, in 1940. However, West's act did not find success in first-tier vaudeville, and from the mid-1910s to her Broadway debut with her original play, *Sex*, in 1926, West was all but silent, playing third-tier vaudeville, and ultimately returning, as Silverman had predicted, to burlesque houses.[111]

---

[108] Sime Silverman, "Mae West at Hammerstein's Victory," *Variety* (25 May 1912), 16.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Hamilton, "*I'm Bad, I'm Better*," 42-45; Watts, *Mae West*, 70-72.

Unlike Tanguay, West's use of her body and voice revealed her presumed intentions about how her double entendre statements were to be received by audiences. Her detractors however could have just as easily taken them to be more innocent in their meaning. West claimed that she was influenced by the sexually suggestive acts of black jazz performers. According to her autobiography, she first saw the "shimmy shawabble" in 1911 in a club for "spades" on Chicago's South Side and she did the dance the same night in her act calling it a "muscle dance."[112] Performance scholar Sandra Leib noted that she identified with songs associated with black singer/songwriters which became part of her stage repertoire, like "A Guy What Takes His Time," "Easy Rider," and W. C. Handy's "Memphis Blues," and intentionally equated the black sources of popular entertainment with her musical, dance, and comedy style.[113] Her alignment with black performers, and jazz musicians in particular, painted her as an outsider whose sensual behavior onstage was perceived as a threat to Anglo-American single and married women who aspired to middle-class propriety and decency. An undercurrent of racism accompanied reviews of West's stage style with pejorative references to black performers and their "wild" behavior. Later in West's career, critic George Jean Nathan in a racially charged rant referred to "the West woman" as a talentless barbarian that knew "absolutely no more about playwriting than the colored piano professor in a bawdy house."[114] Mae West used her sexualized body and voice to expose and mock the hidden desires of the middle and upper classes, and the reformers and critics who attacked her

[112] Mae West, *Goodness Had Nothing To Do With It* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1959), 64.

[113] Sandra Leib, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 133.

[114] George Jean Nathan, "Mae West," *American Mercury* 15 (December 1928), 501; for further discussion of Mae West and her relationship to black stage performers, see Hamilton's, *"I'm Bad, I'm Better,"* 153-72.

supposed immorality were at the same time hypocritically enjoying West's allusions to forbidden pleasures.

In big-time vaudeville during the progressive era, Mae West's conspicuous tough girl roughness limited her stage success. To appeal to a broader audience who attended the first-tier theaters, West would need a subtler style. Eva Tanguay's eccentric and wild act was so indefinable as to defy categorization, unlike West's that was clearly salacious in nature. Attempting to recast her act, she shamelessly imitated Tanguay, as the reviews for her new stage show indicated, "She dresses her hair a la Tanguay and affects costumes just as startling as the effervescent Eva," wrote a Philadelphia critic,[115] and as the *Columbus Journal* observed, "She talks to the audience, makes them her confidants and otherwise follows the giddy footsteps of the Tanguay."[116] A more hostile review from a Detroit critic put it bluntly, "Mae West is plainly vulgar," after she appeared at a local Loew theater. *Variety* concurred: "This woman is all that is coarse in Eva Tanguay without that player's ability."[117] As Sime Silverman saw it, the issue was not West's ability but her openly offensive indecency so ingrained in her nature as to be unmaskable. Nothing could detract from her rawness as a review of a 1916 New York performance by Mae and her sister Beverly, in their short-lived double act, declared:

> Mae West in big-time vaudeville may only be admired for her persistency in believing she is a big-time act and trying to make vaudeville accept her as such.

---

[115] *Philadelphia Times*, 11 November 1913, vol. 2541, West, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

[116] *Columbus Journal*, 4 November 1913, vol. 2541, West, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

[117] *Detroit News*, 26 August 1914, vol. 2541, West, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

> After trying out several brands of turns, Miss West is with us again, this time with a "Sister" tacked onto the billing and the stage. "Sister"'s hair looks very much like Mae's and there the family resemblance ceases in looks as well as work, for "Sister" isn't quite as rough as Mae West can't help but being…. This working out new acts, buying new wardrobe and worrying will get to Miss West's nerve in time (but it will probably be a long time).[118]

By 1917 Mae West had indeed ceased in her efforts as a touring vaudevillian and abandoned her aspiration to break into the big time. Her working-class, unruly, promiscuous persona was seemingly impossible to shake. Expected as a child to make a name for herself in a sensationalized theatrical market, West was constantly being asked to remake herself as a more acceptable female comic performer by taming her lower-class body and voice in order to accommodate an easily offended – outwardly at least – middle-class public.

However, in 1926, Mae West found her place in the most unexpected world of all – not in the popular entertainment of vaudeville but in the legitimate theater of Broadway – with a play of her own devising, entitled simply and directly as *Sex*. West's insurgency as a woman, a comedian, and as a cultural force shattered the boundaries between popular lowbrow entertainments, and the bourgeois middlebrow world of the Broadway stage.

Sex, written by and starring West, was to have 375 performances before the New York Police Department raided and arrested her company in February 1927. Despite the fact that over 325,000 people had already seen *Sex*, including members of the New York City police department and their wives, judges of the criminal courts and their wives, and seven members of the District Attorney's staff and *their* wives, Mae West was denounced

[118] Sime Silverman, "Mae West Double-Act," *Variety* (7 July 1916), 12.

by progressive reformers. She was subsequently prosecuted and sentenced to ten days in a workhouse on Roosevelt Island – known as "Welfare Island" – and fined five hundred dollars. The resulting publicity for West only served to increase her public profile, and to bring her to the attention of Hollywood producers.[119] The very reformers who were trying to rid American middle-class spectators of acts like West's merely served as a catalyst for her career. Where Mae West faltered as a comic vaudevillian, she thrived as a soon-to-become sound film star, using the same tough girl act that she had originated over twenty years earlier.

The famous line of Mae West's from her autobiography, "It isn't what you do, it's how you do it,"[120] is echoed in an early career vaudeville review from the *New York Telegraph*: "Miss West can't sing a bit but she can dance like George Cohan, and personality just permeates the air every minute she is on stage. In other words, it isn't what Miss West does, but the way she does it that assures her a brilliant career on the stage."[121] Not only was Mae West a purveyor of ribald humor, she knew how to make a name for herself. Instead of censoring her actions and language onstage, she let her behavior create the truth in performance by allowing her body and voice to be interpreted as innocent, obscene, or simply a statement of fact, depending on how the audience member chose to construe her actions. To accuse West of being crude, lewd, or offensive would be to expose one's own "dirty" mindedness. It's not what you hear and see, but how you hear and see it.

The sublime irony of Mae West's career can be observed in her difficulties finding an audience for her act on the third-tier comic vaudeville stage, and only when

---

[119] Hamilton, *"I'm Bad, I'm Better,"* 70-75.
[120] West, *Goodness Had Nothing*, 50.
[121] Unidentified reviewer, "Mae West," *New York Morning Telegraph* (11 October 1913).

she entered the legitimate mainstream of Broadway and Hollywood would she outshine many of her contemporaries. Mae West appealed to the wider audience of the New York Broadway stage and the film industry that reached a national audience. While other female vaudevillians like Eva Tanguay, Marie Dressler, and Kate Elinore found enormous success onstage, they were much less effective in highbrow theater or films.[122] Mae West, by directly confronting the hypocrisy of middle-class reformers who wanted to make the image of American women more respectable and more respected, belied their intentions by defining their reforms in terms that only applied to middle-class Anglo Americans, and those who stood outside of this national and class-based hierarchy needed to conform to the standards set by reformers. Mae West flew in the face of social propriety and the surface display of modesty and forthrightness, just by being "herself" onstage: the tough girl born of working-class Brooklyn immigrants, who refused to submerge her persona in order to conform to the standards set by Broadway and Hollywood.

Mae West's Broadway stage success with her play, *Diamond Lil* (1928), was reinforced by multiple revivals, including one in 1949 with West still starring at the age of fifty-six. A *New York Times* reviewer attempted to fathom the mystery of Mae West's popularity in this stage vehicle after so many years, writing:

> "Diamond Lil" is a play about the world of sex, but there is very little sex in it. Like an old dime novel, it is full of crime, drink and iniquity. After beating about the bush for two sluggish acts, it settles down hospitably into an old-fashioned vaudeville show in the last act; and Miss West, billowy and swaying at the piano,

[122] It is worth noting that Marie Dressler was able to revive her career toward the end of her life in sound films from 1930-33, winning the 1930-31 Academy Award for her performance in *Min and Bill*.

> sings a few sinful ballads in a small voice but with plenty of style. It is performing in the grand manner. … After thoughtfully studying her performance twice in a little over two months, this reviewer is still puzzled over one thing. Is Miss West serious or is she kidding?[123]

It could be argued that sex had nothing to do with it. The new humor, as practiced by Mae West, appeared to be mocking the hypocrisy of censors with regard to the proper place of women and their relationship to sex on the stage. The point that this reviewer makes about West's play being about sex but having very little sex in it is revealing. Mae West's treatment of sexuality could be received both as a serious affront to middle-class reformers as well as a satire of how this behavior was being viewed as offensive to those middle-class audiences that did not understand her brand of the new humor.

Missing the irony of performers like Mae West, progressive reformers, like the Committee of Fourteen led by Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, determined that censorship of female comedians on the vaudeville stage was a panacea for the plague of immorality, and worked in collaboration with police and politicians in order to bring these entertainers and their offensive humor to a halt. Reformers also embraced the condemnation of the press with regard to popular entertainments. Critics of the period showed concern for female vaudevillians not demure enough or too raucous and raunchy, considering them to be rough acts that belonged in front of working-class burlesque audiences – Mae West was one of these women. Sime Silverman, editor of entertainment at *Variety*, more often than not praised the performance of traditional gender roles and also had fervent class biases. Typical of male critics of the era, Silverman favored male stage comics and pretty women who sang sweet and sentimental songs and knew their

[123] Unidentified reviewer, "Mae West in *Diamond Lil*," *New York Times* (7 February 1949).

place. A prime example of the perceived bad influence of the lower-class tough girl comedian can be seen in an early act of West's. As *Variety* characterized a 1912 performance:

> [For the song] "Rap, Rap, Rap," Miss West "ragging" this while seated upon a chair, closing the turn without a wait with a "loose dance." There's enough to the act just now for it to pass, if Miss West can be taught how to "get" an audience. She's one of the many freak persons on the vaudeville stage, where freakishness often carries more weight than talent, but Miss West should be coached to derive the full value from her personality.[124]

The "ragging" referred to in Sime Silverman's review, was a reference, both to the ragtime (early jazz) music, and the suggestive movements that followed along with the song. Also of potential offense by being seated in a chair, West afforded audience members a glimpse of her ankles and perhaps more, as her legs moved in "rag" time. The focus of Silverman's review however is the "many freak persons," as vaudevillians were often characterized, especially female comedians. Silverman, through his megaphone of *Variety*, insisted that first-tier vaudeville and Broadway musicals were the sole domain of discerning popular entertainments that would draw middle and highbrow patrons, as he tried to suppress the female "freaks" with his critiques.[125]

Mae West and other female comic performers focused on sexual innuendo in their stage work, but perhaps not for the reasons that reformers and conservative reviewers had judged them for. Putting over an act was relative to how the routine could by interpreted through body and voice, and when these two parts of the performer are in conflict in an

---

[124] Silverman, "Mae West," 16.
[125] Watts, *Mae West*, 36.

actor's performance, this produces the contradictions needed to create comedy. These comic physical and spoken signals were perceived as a double-edged entertainment form that had the hint of the salacious, as well as the burlesque mockery of bourgeois prudery. Mae West and her fellow comic performers mocked the self-seriousness moralizing of progressive reformers and the middle classes that took these social conventions to heart by returning the voice of the new woman back to her body. Mae West and her contemporaries discussed here challenged and broke through the boundaries of class and the relationship to gender as set by middle-class reform standards of the performance of the new woman on and off stage.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, female comedians were causing laugh riots at vaudeville shows. The success of these new women as comic vaudevillians and social insurgents provides an interesting conundrum in that audiences, reformers, and authorities, simultaneously embraced and rejected these female performers during the progressive era in America.

The new women on the comic vaudeville stage reflected the spirit of the day at the turn of the twentieth century. The openness and unruliness of female comic performers became associated with the insurgency of the new women.[126] For progressive reformers, the new women served as a warning by reinforcing the anxieties of women who were not fulfilling the traditional roles of middle-class propriety. The notion of the new women being free from the constraints of marriage, motherhood, and moral authority of the family created an ambivalence from female spectators and their enjoyment and/or disdain for the eccentric and wild acts of female comedians.

---

[126] Bradley, *Making American Culture*, 17.

Male entertainment entrepreneurs attempted to remove the comic voice from the body of their silenced and still female performers, thereby creating a dichotomy between the abrasive, humorous female voice and the graceful, statuesque, female body. The conventionally attractive and dignified female performer was not expected to be heard from, especially in the male province of comedy, but was to remain inscrutable and provocatively sensual. The female vaudeville comedian established a place for women that would soon challenge the male-dominated world of stage comedy as they became popular and wealthy stars.

The new women as comic vaudevillians, including Eva Tanguay, Marie Dressler, Kate Elinore, and Mae West, resisted and flouted the censorship of progressive reformers during the first decades of the twentieth century by creating acts that took on the subjects of class, ethnicity, and body image, and disturbed preconceived definitions of the feminine. Their comedy came about during an era when the new women began to redefine gender roles and their place in American society. By reinventing the female image onstage through comedy and social commentary, the new female humorists, with their songs, dances, improvisations, and sketches, were able to successfully challenge the Anglo-American middle-class definitions of women's place in the modernist era. By creating performances that defied progressive reformers through their perceived offensive performances, these new humorists were able to destabilize the confinement of being labeled "wild women" and "tough girls," and created a social insurgency on the professional stage. Female comedians, as discussed here, worked to reunite the voice and body of the new women performers through their vaudeville acts. Over a twenty-year period, the rising fame and popularity of these women in vaudeville was proof that they

had successfully challenged and unseated the attempted control through censorship that progressive reformers had advocated. Finding themselves in conflict with reformers, authorities, and the press, female comic vaudevillians would create new perceptions of women's voices and bodies in performance for future generations through the new humor.

The new women's onstage comedic energy and vitality often could not translate onto film, as evidenced by Eva Tanguay and Kate Elinore, as their relationship to audiences through their infectious vibrancy was muted and flattened onscreen. With the demise of vaudeville, some female comedians disappeared from the stage, while others like Marie Dressler and Mae West, through their experiences in the legitimate theater of Broadway were able to capitalize on their skills as actresses, and in West's case, as writers as well. However by 1933, self-imposed Hollywood censorship in the guise of the Hays Code would curb performers like West as well, and as her film career progressed, her voice would be silenced as well. Today only Mae West has left a lasting impression through her successful film comedies, particularly of the early 1930s before the Hays Code took its full toll on the film industry.

The legacy of these social insurgents and the striking of "sex-o-clock" with regard to female comedians can be seen in the contemporary acts of Roseanne Barr, Ellen Degeneres, Tina Fey, Chelsea Handler, Rosie O'Donnell, Bette Midler, Amy Poehler, Sarah Silverman, and Julia Sweeney. These new women of the comic stage owe a large debt to their forebears, Eva Tanguay, Marie Dressler, Kate Elinore, and Mae West for opening the doors to the new women of future generations.

Epilogue

Francis Bellamy, Christian socialist and author of the "Pledge of Allegiance," made the following xenophobic and bigoted remarks in an editorial for the *Illustrated American* in 1892, not long after writing the jingoistic pledge of American loyalty:

> A democracy like ours cannot afford to throw itself open to the world …. Where all classes of society merge insensibly into one another and every alien immigrant of inferior race may bring corruption to the stock. There are races more or less akin to our own whom we may admit freely and get nothing but advantage by the infusion of their wholesome blood. But there are other races, which we cannot assimilate without lowering our racial standard, which should be as sacred to us as the sanctity of our homes.[1]

It is the contention of this dissertation that the new humor, as practiced by comic vaudevillians from 1880 to 1932, confronted and destabilized the ethnic and racial intolerance that began to permeate the notion of Americanness during this era of progressive "reform," as evidenced by Bellamy's "pledge."[2]

Albert McLean Jr.'s concept of the new humor, as examined through this project, was used to challenge and redefine the notion of what it meant to be an American in relationship to class, ethnicity, and gender during the progressive era. This turn-of-the-twentieth-century brand of humor, with its emphasis on acts that exaggerated sociocultural behaviors, confronted and questioned set preconceptions about working and middle-class immigrant Americans. The new humor and its variety of acts from

---

[1] Francis Bellamy, "The Pledge of Allegiance," *Illustrated American* (October 1892).

[2] Bellamy's "Pledge" is still used in public schools in the United States as of the writing of this dissertation.

disenfranchised underclasses of new immigrants and new women served to disrupt the shibboleths of Anglo-America. Ethnic acts, family acts, stump speeches, and burlesque-inspired comedians questioned fixed identities and mores of authority, class conflicts, and cultural institutions, especially as these were influenced by the new middle class and new industries, machines, and technologies that were increasing the speed, intensity, and breakdowns in sociocultural constructs of the modernist era.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century with the Elinore Sisters and Weber and Fields, to W.C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, and Mae West in the early 1930s, comic vaudevillians destabilized the perceived hierarchy of Americanness through the new humor of vaudeville. I have argued by analysis of productions and performance details from the era of the popular vaudeville stage that sociocultural paradigm shifts influenced the work of comic performers from the beginnings of vaudeville in the 1880s to its transition from the stage to early-sound film comedies by 1932. Whereas previous studies have asserted the significance of the new immigrants and the new women to the United States with regard to stage and film, my contribution to the current scholarship in this field has focused on comedic performance and production and how popular comic entertainers used the new humor to redefine what it meant to be an American by negotiating and confronting progressive era censorship.

Today's legacy of the new humor of comedic vaudevillians is discovered through the shift in popularity of vaudeville to radio and film and ultimately television. By the early 1920s, the new humor of vaudeville was being successfully absorbed into silent film comedy and radio. The demise of vaudeville, beginning in the mid-to-late 1920s, was concurrent with the birth of early sound film comedy effectively ending this "golden

era" of the new humor as it had existed on the vaudeville stage. As the Great Depression took hold and the Hollywood self-censorship of the Hays (Production) Code attempted to tame former stage comedians, FDR-era optimism began to eclipse the voices of American comedic dissent, the new humor was being transformed into a new kind of film comedy. According to Depression-era cultural historian Morris Dickstein: "Culturally, 1934 was a key year for Hollywood" as the Hays Code "replaced direct eroticism with explosive verbal and cultural energy and made the war between the sexes an unexpected metaphor for social conflict and concord" with the advent of screwball comedy.[3] This new form of film comedy, with its emphasis on sexual tensions portrayed through dialogue-driven sparring between highly attractive Anglo-American actors, "replaced" and lessened the overt confrontation and commentary of ethnicity, class, gender, and the hegemony of Anglo-American sociocultural values – that the comic vaudevillians explored in this project – created for the vaudeville stage.

The legacy of the new humor in television began with the transition from stage to silence to sound – before the strict enforcement of the Hays Code in 1933-34. It is evidenced by the freedom of experimentation and improvisation of comic vaudevillians, as it was translated into motion pictures, as stage comedians became screenwriters, directors, and producers, in addition to being performers. This transition began – as examined in Chapter 2 – with Buster Keaton's 1921 *The Playhouse*, to the arguable end of pre-Hays Code comedy film with Mae West's *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), and the Marx Brothers apocalyptic government and war satire, *Duck Soup* (1933). The effects of censorship in film comedy culminated with the 1940 collaboration of Mae West and

[3] Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 441-42.

W.C. Fields in *My Little Chickadee* where the new humor became neutralized by being "cleaned up" through Hollywood self-censorship and the Hays Code. West and Field's struggle with being neutered in this fashion can be seen in relationship to the success and/or failure of other comedic performers, directors, and writers such as Buster Keaton and The Marx Brothers, as they attempted to bridge the vaudeville aesthetic from the stage to silent and ultimately sound film comedy.

Film comedy was initially in competition with comedic radio shows which were especially popular in the immigrant-mixed urban centers during the 1930s and 40s. Many comic vaudevillians could work after the demise of vaudeville and away from Hollywood in radio: like Groucho Marx (*You Bet Your Life*, 1947), W.C. Fields (with Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy on *The Chase and Sanborn Hour*, 1936), and Will Rogers (*The Gulf Headliners*, 1930). Groucho's radio show was the most successful of these as *You Bet Your Life* debuted on ABC Radio in October 1947, then moved to CBS Radio in September 1949 before making the transition to NBC-TV in October 1950. Because of its simple format, it was possible to broadcast the show simultaneously on radio and television. In 1960, the show was renamed *The Groucho Show* and ran for another year. Television comedy, for a short period in the early 1950s, would ultimately subsume film and radio performers with an unregulated and sophisticated critique of American society. They included, Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows* (1950-54), Jackie Gleason's *The Honeymooners* (1955-56), and *The Phil Silvers Show* (1955-59).[4]

Beginning in the early 1950s television became the new career medium for former vaudevillians. Television's primary target audience was the educated and upper-middle

[4] Many of the references to television history cited in the conclusion come from: Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003).

class who could afford a television set. But as the price of television sets dropped and middle-class affluence rose, television reached a less "sophisticated" audience of lower, middle, and working classes in the U.S. By the late 1950s, the new middle class had moved to the suburbs and the dream of the middle-class family success was transferred to sitcom families. The ethnic families that had been quite successful on radio comedies, however, were now short-lived and then non-existent as the Cold War era took hold and a homogenized Anglo-American middle-class was represented on television by *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*. These programs replaced former radio transfers like *Amos and Andy* (the only sitcom to be set in Harlem); *the Goldbergs* which was renamed *Molly* to obscure the ethnic family name, and then canceled altogether; *Life with Luigi*; *I Remember Mama*, among others. All were short lived as comic representations of ethnicity and race and replaced with Anglo-American middle-class fantasies.[5]

Ethnic diversity had been prominent on shows that starred comic performers like Sid Caesar and Milton Berle (who was given the title of "Mr. Television"), but such shows were considered too ethnic and replaced by shows that focused on Anglo-American middle classes, and the foibles and tribulations of "middle" America. As far as television was concerned, ethnic middle and working class America was on the wane, and the vaudeville format of *Your Show of Shows* and Groucho Marx's *You Bet Your Life* was replaced by the narratives of sitcom families. *The Honeymooners*, culled from the variety format of *The Jackie Gleason Show* (1951-54), would also suffer a similar fate. Television historian David Marc writes that: "*The Honeymooners* was one of the first U.S. television shows to portray working-class married couples in a grittier non-idyllic

[5] David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, Second Edition (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1997), 44-5.

manner living in a run down Brooklyn apartment complex."[6] The fate of this watershed sitcom of a New York City bus driver and his wife was that it lasted only two seasons and thirty-nine episodes, and was unceremoniously cancelled at the height of its popularity. *The Phil Silvers Show*, another ethnic comedy featuring Silvers as a Jewish army staff sergeant who is a modern-day mountebank, would receive the same treatment as production was halted during its successful run in 1959 with little explanation, but an implied distaste for its ethnic and disreputable central character of Sgt. Bilko, as performed by Silvers.

Another issue the new humorists faced was television and its advertisers with their marketing agendas. As Marc notes: "With the television audience now roughly equivalent to the population at large … [t]he ad agencies became increasingly anxious to assert quality control over the TV product." Television comedy replaced the "spontaneity and uniqueness of individual occasion and performance" of comic vaudevillians and their uncontrollable live, improvisational, and self-scripted acts, and "those qualities that were potentially most satisfying in a comedy-variety show – came to be viewed as liabilities."[7] As Marc makes clear, television was now turning a corner toward a conservatism that would not be broken until later in the 1960s with *The Smothers Brothers Show* (1965-1966) and *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* (1968-1973). By 1975, Lorne Michaels's *Saturday Night Live* would come to dominate live vaudeville-style comedy for the next four decades.

The legacy of the new humor lives on in the myriad of media platforms in contemporary comic popular entertainment. Will Rogers provides an excellent example

[6] Ibid., 73.
[7] Ibid.

of one of the first links in the chain of comic vaudevillians to current vaudeville-inspired comedians. Rogers, who was able to make the transition from the vaudeville stage to film and radio during the late 1920s and early 1930s, created a legacy as a new humorist that lives on – first with stage performers of the 1950s and 60s like Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce – in the twenty-first century comedy of Stephen Colbert, Bill Maher, and Jon Stewart. Trick-roper, Ziegfeld comedian, political commentator, and new humorist, Rogers was a key figure in combating the rigid and misinformed definition of what constituted being an American, as discussed in Chapter 2. The comic vaudeville aesthetic that Rogers honed in his early stage shows began to evolve into comic commentary on the "mistakes" and self-important pronouncements of politicians and cultural authorities. Rogers's understated critique was couched in the new humor. As an editorial in *The Nation* observed, "Mr. Rogers['s] … caustic observations are wrapped in humor. If they were delivered without the funny tags, his audience would set the dogs on him."[8] Rogers's appeal was his Okie persona and the aura of the honest, salt-of-the-earth, "ordinary" American. It was his vaudeville aesthetic, developed from his many years in Wild West Shows and Medicine Shows and subsequently on the vaudeville circuit touring the United States and abroad, that allowed Rogers to relate to his audiences as a fellow working-class "man of the people." Rogers portrayed a simple, plainspoken, native of the Midwest who saw through the machinations of the snake oil salesmen of American authoritarians with the comedy of informed observation born of the new humor.

The evolution of comic performance from Will Rogers to contemporary sociopolitical satirist Stephen Colbert reveals comedy as political bellwether as well as

[8] Betty Rogers, *Will Rogers*, 157.

political engagement and its potential influence at a national level on the United States government and its representatives. Using the stump speech, Stephen Colbert – in the tradition of Will Rogers – uses political commentary through his comedy/variety show, *The Colbert Report* (2005-present), in order to challenge the authority of national and world leaders, while at the same time reinforcing the critical thinking of the American electorate.

Will Rogers and Stephen Colbert in their early stage careers, one literally in vaudeville, the other a member of Chicago's *Second City*, focused on live improvisation and creating characters that were inventions of iconic American personae. Will Rogers, by portraying the image of the cowboy's humble but salt-of-the-earth wisdom, created a comic mask of his intelligence and trenchant critique, by appearing to be just a regular guy. Stephen Colbert, taking the opposite tack, exposes the hypocrisy and abuse of power by political partisans, by assuming the persona of "a conservative authority" and embraces the divisive and self-important language and performance of the smug political pundit. Rogers's comments expose the hypocrisy of those in power by his own self-deprecation, with his "I-only-know-what-I read-in-the-papers" brand of humor, as does Colbert with his self-righteous and self-important appeal to his assumed "Nation" of like-minded followers.

Disrupting assumed narratives of political power and authority through comedy is the signature of both Will Rogers and Stephen Colbert. By responding to politicians, pundits, and journalists that go along with and reinforce the authority of those in charge, they comment and critique those who claim to "know" by repeating their pronouncements sometimes verbatim. Instead of creating jokes per se, they speak the

language of authority and use its devices in addition to the stump speech, political punditry, and the assumption of an archetypal all-American pose that assumes a knowledge that comes from "the gut." Both comedians question normative values and the self-serving logic of authoritative forthrightness. Will Rogers as comic commentator honed his craft through the vaudeville aesthetic and the new humor, while Stephen Colbert serves as his living legacy.

Other comedians and sociocultural critics who owe a debt to the new humorists of the progressive era include comic performer and writer Larry David, whose work has been influenced by Groucho Marx and Phil Silvers. David's significantly successful career as a contemporary new humorist has been as the co-creator and writer of television's *Seinfeld* (1989-98) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-present). The legacy of burlesque comedy performers and writers like Mae West can be observed through transitional figures like Lucille Ball (*I Love Lucy*, 1951-57) to contemporary comedian/writers like Amy Poehler (*Upright Citizens Brigade*, *Parks and Recreation*), Kristen Wiig (*Empty Stage Comedy Theatre*, *The Bridesmaids*), Julia Sweeney (stage shows including, *God Said Ha!*, *In the Family Way*, and *Letting Go of God*), and Tina Fey (*Second City*, *30 Rock*) – all *Saturday Night Live* alumni with their own popular and flourishing solo careers on stage and in television and film.

The purpose of this dissertation has been to show how the new humor became sociocultural commentary with regard to the role of class, ethnicity, and gender in the service of creating an American identity that was in conflict with middle-class attitudes toward morality and societal propriety. The trajectory of Will Rogers's career and his humble beginnings – his Oklahoma Territory upbringing in the late nineteenth century by

a Cherokee mother and Midwestern farmer father from wild-west shows of the nineteenth century to the an influential Congressional advisor in the 1930s during the FDR administration – serves as a testament to the importance and value of looking at Americanness through the lens of popular comic entertainers. The cultural importance of U.S. vaudeville comedians such as W.C. Fields, Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers, and Mae West, makes clear that comic vaudevillians helped redefine the notion of what constitutes being an "American." The attempted reform and outright censorship of the new humor served to create a catalyst for these comic vaudevillians to defy efforts to Americanize their acts by progressive era reformers, legal and political authorities, and cultural aesthetes and critics. The legacy of the new humor found in Stephen Colbert, Tina Fey, and Larry David, to name only a small sample of current comedians, serves as a reminder of the significance of blurring the line between laughing with and laughing at perceptions of Americanness from one generation to the next.

Bibliography

Manuscripts and Archives

Brooklyn History Collection, Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn, New York
    Mae West clippings file
Library of Congress, Rare Book and Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C.
    Groucho Marx papers and manuscripts special collection
New York Public Library Rare Book and Manuscript Division, New York City
Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York City
    Eddie Cantor clippings file
    Marie Dressler clippings file
    The Elinore Sisters clippings file
    W.C. Fields clippings file
    Buster Keaton clippings file
    The Marx Brothers clippings file
    Will Rogers, clippings file
    Eva Tanguay clippings file
    Joe Weber and Lew Fields clippings file
    Mae West clippings file
Will Rogers Memorial Museums, Claremore, Oklahoma
University of Rochester Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rochester, New York
    The Elinore Sisters's Vaudeville Act Papers

Newspapers and Periodicals

Atlantic Monthly, 1912-1916
Billboard, 1915-1932
Harper's Bazaar, 1901-1932
Life Humor Magazine, 1923-1926
New Republic, 1921-1925
New York Clipper, 1901-1932
New York Dramatic Mirror, 1909-1919
New York Times, 1903-1949
Variety, 1907-1919

Primary Sources

Addams, Jane. *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets*. New York: Macmillan and Company, 1909.

Artaud, Antonin. *The Theater and its Double*. Trans. Mary Caroline Richards. New

York: Grove Press, 1958.

Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*. New York: New American Library, 2009; 1888.

Bellamy, Francis. "The Pledge of Allegiance." *Illustrated American* (October 1892).

Braun, Edward, trans. and ed. *Meyerhold on Theatre*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1969.

Brooks, Louise. *Lulu in Hollywood*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Cantor, Eddie. "Bert Williams – The Best Teacher I Ever Had." *Ebony* 13, no. 8 (June 1958): n.p., clippings file, Eddie Cantor, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

---. "I Remember the Ziegfeld Follies." *Esquire* (July 1947): n.p., clippings file, Eddie Cantor, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

---. *World's Book of Best Jokes*. Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1943.

---, with Jane Kesner Ardmore. *Take My Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957.

---, and David Freedman. *Ziegfeld: The Great Glorifier*. New York: Alfred H. King, 1934.

Chaplin, Charles. *My Autobiography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964.

Copeau, Jacques. *Copeau: Texts on Theatre*. Eds. and trans. John Rudlin and Norman H. Paul. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.

Day, Donald, ed. *The Autobiography of Will Rogers*. New York: Avon Books, 1975.

Elinore Sisters's Vaudeville Act Papers, *New Orleans Item*, n.d., clipping, box 3, vol. 3, 10, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York.

---, "The Theater: Breezy Kate Elinore; She Discusses Her Unique Rigs; Wagers Made as to Whether She Is Man or Woman," n.d., clipping, box 3, vol. 3, 4, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York.

Ellsworth, Eugene. *The Adventures of Bridget McGuire*, box 1, folder 10, 101-16, Elinore Sisters's Vaudeville Act Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York.

Fields, Ronald J, ed. *W.C. Fields by Himself: His Intended Autobiography with Hitherto Unpublished Letters, Notes, Scripts and Articles*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973.

Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. James Strachey. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960.

Gragert, Steven K., ed. *Radio Broadcasts of Will Rogers*. Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma State University Press, 1983.

---, and M. Jane Johansson, eds. *The Papers of Will Rogers: From the Broadway Stage to the National Stage, Volume Four, September 1915 - July 1928*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005.

Kaufman, George S. *Animal Crackers* in *Kaufman & Co.: Broadway Comedies*, ed., Laurence Maslon. New York: Library of the Americas, 2004.

Keaton, Buster. *The Playhouse* in the *Buster Keaton Collection*, DVD, written, directed and performed by Buster Keaton, 1921; Joseph M. Schenck Productions: St. Clair Vision, 2007.

---, with Charles Samuels. *My Wonderful World of Slapstick*. New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1982; 1960.

Keith/Albee Collection, Report Book, 1902-3, 324, Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, Iowa.

---, Report Book 1, 65, Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, Iowa.

Keith, Benjamin Franklin. "The Vogue of Vaudeville." *American Vaudeville As Seen by Its Contemporaries*, ed., Charles W. Stein, 15. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.

---. "What Pleases in Vaudeville." *Criterion* (September 1900), Report Book, 1900-1, Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, Iowa.

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

Lewis, Robert M., ed. *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in*

America, 1830-1910. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

Marinetti, F.T. *Critical Writings*, ed., Gunter Berghaus, trans., Doug Thompson. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2006.

Marx Brothers, The (1933), *Duck Soup*, DVD (Dir. Leo McCarey. Writ. Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby), Paramount Studios: Universal Home Video, Silver Screen Collection, 2004.

---. *Fun In Hi Skule* (from the Library of Congress manuscript, 1921) on the "Marxology" website. Accessed 23 December 2009. http://www.marx-brothers.org/marxology/balcony.htm.

---. (1932), *Horse Feathers*, DVD (Dir. Norman Z. McLeod. Writ. Bert Kalmar, Harry Ruby, S.J. Perelman, Will B. Johnstone), Paramount Studios: Universal Home Video, Silver Screen Collection, 2004.

---. (1935), *A Night at the Opera*, DVD (Dir. Sam Wood. Writ. George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind), MGM Studios: Warner Home Video, 2004.

---, and Johnstone, Tom, *I'll Say She Is* (from the Library of Congress manuscript, 1923). Accessed 17 May 2011. http://www.marx-brothers.org/marxology/home.htm.

Marx, Groucho. *Groucho and Me*. New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1959.

---. *The Groucho Phile*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977.

---, and Richard J. Anobile. *The Marx Bros. Scrapbook*. New York: Darien House, Inc., 1973.

Marx, Harpo. *Harpo Speaks!* New York: Limelight Editions, 2008; New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1961.

McLaughlin, Maurice E. *The Irish 400*, 1897, box 1, folder 11, Elinore Sisters's Vaudeville Act Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York.

Meyerhold, Vsevolod. "The Fairground Booth (1912)," in *Theatre/Theory/Theatre*, ed., Daniel Gerould, 408-418. New York: Applause Books, 2000.

Murphy, Edgar Gardner. *Problems of the Present South: A Discussion of Certain of the Educational, Industrial and Political Issues in the Southern States*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1904.

Old Fashioned Way, The. Paramount Pictures, dir., story. William Beaudine, Charles Bogle – W.C. Fields, 1934.

Rogers, Betty. *Will Rogers*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979.

Rogers, Will. *New York Times* (21 January 1923): n.p., clippings file, Will Rogers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

---. *New York Times*, 17 February 1924: n.p., clippings file, Will Rogers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

---. *New York Times*, 23 November 1932: n.p., clippings file, Will Rogers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

---. *The Papers of Will Rogers*, Vol. 4, *From the Broadway Stage to the National Stage: September 1915-July1928*, eds., Steven K. Gragert and M. Jane Johansson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005.

---. "The Pilgrims" (14 April 1935), in *Radio Broadcasts of Will Rogers*, ed., Steven K. Gragert. Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma State University Press, 1983.

---. *Will Rogers at the Ziegfeld Follies*, ed. Arthur Frank Wertheim. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.

Ross, Edward Alsworth. *Social Control: A Survey of the Foundations of Order*. Cleveland, 1969; 1901.

Ruby, Harry, and Bert Kalmar. *Horse Feathers*, Tentative Script, 11 February 1932, Groucho Marx papers and manuscripts special collection, Library of Congress Library of Congress, Rare Book and Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C.

Sally of the Sawdust, Paramount Pictures, DW Griffith, dir., writ. Forrest Hallsey from the play *Poppy* by Dorothy Donnelly, 1925.

Schlissel, Lillian. *Three Plays by Mae West: Sex, The Drag, The Pleasure Man*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Sennett, Mack with Cameron Shipp. *King of Comedy*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954.

Shean, Al. *Home Again*. "Marxology" website. Accessed 17 December 2012. http://www.marx-brothers.org/marxology/home.htm.

Six of a Kind, writ. Walter DeLeon and Harry Ruskin, dir. Leo McCarey, DVD,

Universal Studios, 2002; original film released in 1934.

Small, Albion. “The Relations of Social Diseases to the Family” in American Sociological Society, *Papers and Proceedings, Third Annual Meeting*, 192. Chicago, 1909.

Smallwood, James M., and Steven K. Gragert, eds. *Will Rogers' Weekly Articles*, Vol. 1, *The Harding/Coolidge Years: 1922-1925*. Stillwater: Oklahoma State University Press, 1980.

---, eds. *Will Rogers' Daily Telegrams*, Vol. 3, *The Hoover Years: 1931-1933*. Stillwater: Oklahoma State University Press, 1979.

Smith, Edgar, book and lyrics; music, Maurice Levi. *Higgledy-Piggledy*, Broadway premiere, 20 October 1904.

---, book and lyrics; music, A. Baldwin Sloane. *Tillie's Nightmare* in Tams-Witmark Collection, Mills Music Library, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Broadway premiere, 5 May 1910.

Smith, Harry B., book and lyrics; music, Gustav Kerker, “I Don't Care!” from the musical *The Sambo Girl*, Broadway premiere, 16 October 1905.

Stein, Charles W., ed. *American Vaudeville As Seen by Its Contemporaries*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.

Strong, Josiah. *The Challenge of the City*. New York: Young People's Missionary Movement, 1907.

---. *Religious Movements for Social Betterment*. New York, 1900.

W.C. Fields Straight Up, writ., Joe Adamson and Ronald J. Fields, dir., Joe Adamson, prod. Robert B. Weide and Whyaduck Productions, DVD, Direct Cinema Limited, 2004.

West, Mae. *Goodness Had Nothing To Do With It*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1959.

---. “Interview with Mae West.” *New York Daily News* (Brooklyn section), 26 November 1980, held in Mae West file, in Brooklyn History Collection, Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn, New York.

Wilson, Woodrow. “Americanism,” address to the Citizenship Convention, Washington, D.C., 13 July 1916. *Americanization*, ed. W. Talbot. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1920.

Wood, Arthur Evans. *Community Problems*. New York: The Century Co., 1928.

Secondary Sources

Adamson, Joe. *Groucho, Harpo, Chico, and Sometimes Zeppo: A History of the Marx Brothers and a Satire on the Rest of the World*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983.

Allen, Robert C. *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

Anderson, Ann. *Snake Oil, Hustlers, and Hambones: The American Medicine Show*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2000.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Barber, Rowland. *The Night They Raided Minsky's: A Fanciful Expedition to the Lost Atlantis of Show Business*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960.

Barnes, Earl. "The Economic Independence of Women." *Atlantic Monthly* 1, no. 10 (August 1912): 160-65.

Barron, Hal S. *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Benchley, Robert. "Review of the Marx Brothers in *I'll Say She Is*." *Life* (1924), n.p., clippings file, Marx Brothers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

---. Untitled Review of Weber and Fields. *Life* (7 October 1926), 9, clippings file, Weber and Fields, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

---. Untitled Review of Will Rogers. *Life* (15 February 1923), n.p., clippings file, Will Rogers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version" in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, 19-55. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Bierstadt, Edward Hale. Untitled Review. *The New Republic* (1 June 1921): 21.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Bourne, Randolph S. "Trans-National America." *Atlantic Monthly* 118 (July 1916): 86-97. Reprinted in Bourne. *War and the Intellectuals, Collected Essays 1915-1919*, ed. Carl Resek, 107-23. New York: Harper and Row, 1964.

Bradley, Patricia. *Making American Culture: A Social History, 1900-1920*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Burdette, Robert. "Have Women a Sense of Humor?" *Harper's Bazaar* (July 1902): 598.

Butsch, Richard. *The Making American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990*. Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Caffin, Caroline. *Vaudeville*. New York: M. Kennerie, 1914.

Canfield, Mary Cass. "The Great American Art." *The New Republic* (22 November 1922): 334-35.

Chamberlain, Henry B. "Recreation and Crime." *New York Times* (28 May 1922): n.p.

Chandler, Charlotte. *Hello, I Must Be Going*. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1978.

Chicago News, April 1905, Marie Dressler, vol. 163, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Clayton, J. Douglas. *Pierrot in Petrograd: The Commedia dell'Arte/Balagan in Twentieth-Century Russian Theatre and Drama*. Montréal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1993.

Cohen, Rose. *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995; New York: Doran, 1918.

Columbus Journal, 4 November 1913, vol. 2541, Mae West, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

"'Comedian' Girls Jump to the Front," n.p., 8 June 1902, Eva Tanguay, vol. 450, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Coquelin, Constant. “Have Women a Sense of Humor?” *Harper’s Bazaar* (January 1901): 67.

Cosdon, Mark. *The Hanlon Brothers: From Daredevil Acrobatics to Spectacle Pantomime, 1833-1931*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010.

Cressy, Will M. “Putting it Over.” *Green Book Magazine* (March 1916): 547-52.

Critchley, Simon. *On Humour*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Crichton, Kyle Samuel. *The Marx Brothers*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1950.

Cubberley, Ellwood. *Changing Conceptions of Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909.

Cuddihy, John Murray. *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974.

Czitrom, Daniel J. *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan*. Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982.

Dale, Alan. *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

“Dash.” Untitled Review. *Variety* (14 January 1911): 17.

Davis, Andrew. *Baggy Pants Comedy: Burlesque and the Oral Tradition*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Davis, Michael M. *The Exploitation of Pleasure: A Study of Commercial Recreations in New York City*. New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1912.

Day, Donald. *Will Rogers: A Biography*. New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1962.

“The Day of the Lady Comedian,” n.p., 1902, Eva Tanguay, vol. 450, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

“Decay of Vaudeville.” *American Magazine* (April 1910): 840-46.

de Francesco, Grete. *The Power of the Charlatan*. New Haven: Yale University, 1939.

Detroit News, 26 August 1914, vol. 2541, Mae West, Robinson Locke Collection of

Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Dewey, John. *The Child and the Curriculum and The School and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956; 1906.

Dickinson, Thomas H. *The Insurgent Theatre*. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1972; first printing, 1917.

Dickstein, Morris. *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009.

DiMaggio, Paul. "Cultural Boundaries and Structural Change: The Extension of the High Culture Model to Theater, Opera, and the Dance, 1900-1940," in *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*, eds. Michele Lamont and Marcel Fournier, 21-57. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Dimeglio, John E. *Vaudeville U.S.A.* Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973.

Diner, Steven J. *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1998.

Dolan, Jill. "'What, No Beans?' Images of Women and Sexuality in Burlesque Comedy." *Journal of Popular Culture* 18, no. 3 (Winter 1984): 37-47.

Donahue, John D., and Richard Zeckhauser. "The Tummler's Task: A Collaborative Conception of Port Protection." *Ports in a Storm: Public Management in a Turbulent World*, ed. John D. Donahue and Mark H. Moore, 116-32. Brookings Institution Press, 2012.

Duchartre, Pierre Louis. *The Italian Comedy*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 1966.

Elinore Sisters's Vaudeville Act Papers, 20 December 1906, clipping, vol. 444, 61, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Clippings, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

---, clipping, n.p., n.d., box 3, vol. 3, 9, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York.

Erdman, Andrew L. *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004.

---. *Queen of Vaudeville: The Story of Eva Tanguay*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2012.

Erdman, Harley. *Staging the Jew: The Performance of an American Ethnicity, 1860 1920*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

Erenberg, Lewis. *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*. Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1981.

Eyles, Allen. *The Marx Brothers Their World of Comedy*. New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1969.

Fields, Armond and L. Marc Fields. *From the Bowery to Broadway: Lew Fields and the Roots of American Popular Theater*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Flanagan, Maureen A. *America Reformed: Progressives and the Progressivisms, 1890s – 1920s.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Forbes, Camille F. *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and the Story of America's First Black Star*. New York: Basic *Civitas* Books, 2008.

Gay, Peter. *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008.

Gehring, Wes D. *The Marx Brothers: A Bio-Bibliography*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.

Gerould, Daniel. *Quick Change: Theatre Essays and Translations*. New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, 2010.

---, ed. *Symbolist Drama: An International Collection*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1985.

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

Greason, Alfred – "Rush." *Variety* (25 April 1908): 14.

Glenn, Susan A. *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Goldman, Herbert G. *Banjo Eyes: Eddie Cantor and the Birth of Modern Stardom*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Gorman, Paul R. *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Gottlieb, George A. "Psychology of the American Vaudeville Show From the Manager's Point of View." *Current Opinion* 60 (April 1916): 257.

Gould, William. "Vaude vs. Musical Comedy." *Variety* (14 December 1907): n.p.

Green, Martin Burgess, and John C. Swan. *The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell'Arte and the Modern Imagination*. New York: Macmillan, 1986.

Gunning, Tom. "Mechanisms of Laughter" *Slapstick Comedy*, eds., Tom Paulus and Rob King, 137-151. New York and London: Routledge, 2010.

Hall, Stuart. "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular.'" In *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel, 227-40. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.

Hamilton, Marybeth. "*When I'm Bad, I'm Better": Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996.

Hanaford, Harry Prescott and Dixie Hines, eds. *Who's Who in Music and Drama: An Encyclopedia of Biography of Notable Men and Women in Music and the Drama*. New York: H.P. Hanaford Publishing, 1914.

Higham, John. *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*. East Rutherford, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

"Higgins." *The Dramatic Mirror* (8 April 1919): 531.

---. *The Dramatic Mirror* (29 April 1919): 636.

"*Home Again* by Al Shean." *Utah Democrat* (9 March 1917), n.p., clippings file, Marx Brothers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

"*Home Again* by Al Shean, Royal Theatre, New York." *Variety* (12 February 1915), 16, clippings file, Marx Brothers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986.

"In Vaudeville: A Short History of This Popular Character of Amusement." *Midway* 1 (October 1905): 27.

"In Vaudeville Houses." *New York Times* (21 May 1903), n.p, clippings file, Buster Keaton, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

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

"Kate Elinore Without a Sister at the American," *New York Star*, 11 September 1909, clipping, vol. 444, 67, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Keire, Mara L. "The Committee of Saloon Reform in New York City, 1905-1920." *Business and Economic History* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 573.

Kennedy, John B. "Revised Version." *Collier's* 90, no. 20 (12 November 1932): 45-47.

Kett, Joseph F. *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America: 1790 to the Present*. New York, Basic Books, 1977.

Kibler, M. Alison. *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

King, Desmond. *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of Diverse Democracy*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000.

King, Rob. *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009.

---, and Tom Paulus, eds. *Slapstick Comedy*. New York and London: Routledge, 2010.

Klapper, Paul. "The Yiddish Music Hall." *University Settlement Studies* 2, no. 4 (1905): 20-1.

Knopf, Robert. *The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Krasner, David. *Resistance, Parody and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997.

Lears, Jackson. *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009.

Leslie's Weekly, 23 June 1910, Marie Dressler, vol. 164, Robinson Locke Collection of

Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Levin, Harry. *Playboys and Killjoys: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Comedy*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Leib, Sandra. *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981.

Linton, Lynn. "The Wild Woman as Social Insurgent." *Nineteenth Century* (October 1891): 596.

Lippmann, Walter. "Drift and Mastery." *The Progressive Years*, ed., Otis Pease, 431-479. New York: George Braziller, 1962.

---. *Public Opinion*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922.

"London Hippodrome" program (April 1904): 10.

Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Lynd, Robert S., and Helen Merrell. *Middletown: A Study in American Culture*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1929.

Lytell, Robert. "Vaudeville Old and Young." *New Republic* (1 July 1925): 156.

"Mae West," *New York Morning Telegraph* (11 October 1913), n.p., clippings file, Mae West, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

"Mae West in *Diamond Lil*." *New York Times* (7 February 1949), n.p., clippings file, Mae West, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

MacLean, Annie M. *Wage-Earning Women*. New York, 1910.

Make 'Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America, Episode Three: The Knockabouts. Public Broadcasting Service, DVD, Ghost Light Films; Thirteen/WNET.org; Rhino Entertainment, 2008.

Marc, David. *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, Second Edition. Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1997.

"Marie Dressler at the Colonial." *Variety* (25 April 1908), n.p., clippings file, Marie Dressler, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

"Marie Dressler at the Palace." *New York Dramatic Mirror* (8 April 1919), n.p., clippings file, Marie Dressler, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

"The Marx Brothers in *School Days*." *The Citizen* (16 October 1927), n.p., clippings file, Marx Brothers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

May, Lary. *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

---. *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

McGerr, Michael E. *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

---. *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*. New York: Free Press, 2003.

McK, C. "The Keatons Again." *Syracuse Herald* (6 January, 1914), n.p., clippings file, Buster Keaton, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

McLean, Jr., Albert F. *American Vaudeville as Ritual*. Frankfort, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965.

McNamara, Brooks. *The New York Concert Saloon*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

---. *Step Right Up*, revised edition. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995.

McPherson, Edward. *Buster Keaton: Tempest in a Flat Hat*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2007.

Mencken, H.L. "A Plea for Comedy." *The Collected Drama of H.L. Mencken: Plays and Criticism*, ed., S.T. Joshi, 179-182. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012.

Mintz, Lawrence E. "Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque." *MELUS* 21, no. 4, Ethnic Humor (Winter 1996): 19-28.

Moran, Jeffrey P. "'Modernism Gone Mad': Sex Education Comes to Chicago, 1913." *Journal of American History* 83 (September 1996): 481-513.

Mordden, Ethan. *Ziegfeld: The Man Who Invented Show Business*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008.

More, Louis Bolard. *Wage-Earners' Budgets: A Study of Standards and Costs of Living in New York City*. New York, 1907.

"*Mr. Green's Reception*." *Kalamazoo Gazette* (12 January 1913), n.p., clippings file, Marx Brothers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Murdock, Edward P. "Ethnocentrism," in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, eds., Edwin A. Seligman and Alvin Johnson, vol. 5, 613. New York: Macmillan, 1931.

Nachman, Gerald. *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2003.

Nasaw, David. *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements*. New York: Basic Books, 1990.

Nathan, George Jean. "Mae West," *American Mercury* 15 (December 1928): 501.

Nelson, T.G.A. *Comedy: An Introduction to Comedy in Literature, Drama, and Cinema*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

"New Acts." *Variety* (7 February 1919), n.p., clippings file, Marx Brothers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

New Orleans Times-Picayune (11 November 1925), n.p, clippings file, Will Rogers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

New York Dramatic Mirror (21 September 1910), n.p., Eva Tanguay, vol. 450, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

New York Times (28 November 1932), n.p, clippings file, Will Rogers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Nicoll, Allardyce. *Masks, Mimes, and Miracles: Studies in the Popular Theatre*. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1963.

---. *The World of Harlequin: A Critical Study of the Commedia dell'Arte.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1963.

O'Brien, P.J. *Will Rogers: Ambassador of Good Will, Prince of Wit and Wisdom*. Chicago: John C. Winston, Co., 1935.

Oreglia, Giacomo. *The Commedia dell'Arte*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.

Painter, Nell Irvin. *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987.

Pease, Otis, ed. *The Progressive Years*. New York: George Braziller, 1962.

Peiss, Kathy Lee. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986.

---. *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998.

Philadelphia Times, 11 November 1913, vol. 2541, Mae West, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Piott, Steven L. *American Reformers, 1870-1920: Progressives in Word and Deed*. Lanham, MD and New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006.

Riis, Thomas. *Just Before Jazz: Musical Theater in New York, 1890-1915*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1989.

Roediger, David. *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White*, New York: Basic Books, 2005.

Rogin, Michael. *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996.

"Rose." *Dramatic Mirror* (19 November 1921): 743.

Royle, Edwin Milton. "The Vaudeville Theatre." *Scribner's Magazine* 26 (October

1899): 489.

Rudlin, John. *The Commedia dell'arte in the Twentieth-Century*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Savran, David. *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009.

Schechter, Joel, ed. *Popular Theatre: A Sourcebook.* London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

Schneider, Eric C. *In the Web of Class: Delinquents and Reformers in Boston, 1810s-1930s*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1992.

Segel, Erich. *The Death of Comedy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Segel, Harold B. *Pinocchio's Progeny*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Seldes, Gilbert. *The 7 Lively Arts*. New York: Sagamore Press, Inc., 1957.

Senelick, Lawrence. "Variety into Vaudeville: The Process Observed in Two Manuscript Gagbooks," *Theatre Survey* (May 1978): 1-15.

Silverman, Sime. "Eva Tanguay," *Variety* (24 September 1910): n.p.

---. "*Fun In Hi Skule*." *Variety* (24 February 1912): 17.

---. "Mae West." *Variety* (25 May 1912): 16.

---. "Mae West Double-Act." *Variety* (7 July 1916): 12.

---. "Mae West at Hammerstein's Victory." *Variety* (25 May 1912): 16.

Slide, Anthony, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994.

---, ed. *Selected Vaudeville Criticism*. Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1988.

Snyder, Robert. *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Speare, Robert. “Plenty Doing at the Alhambra,” *New Jersey Telegraph*, 28 May 1908, vol. 444, 65, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Clippings, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Spencer, Anna Garlin. In American Sociological Society, *Papers and Proceedings, Third Annual Meeting*, 198; Juvenile Court of the City and County of Denver, *The Problem of the Children and How Colorado Cares for Them*. Denver, 1904.

Staples, Shirley. *Male-Female Comedy Teams in American Vaudeville, 1865-1932*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1984.

St. Johns, Adelda Rogers. “The Private Life of Marie Dressler: Part One – The Ugly Duckling.” *Liberty* 10, no. 19 (13 May 1933): 20-25.

---. “The Private Life of Marie Dressler: Part Two – The Rising Star.” *Liberty* 10, no. 20 (20 May 1933): 10-15.

Stott, Andrew. *Comedy*. New York and London: Routledge, 2005.

Sturtevant, Victoria. *A Great Big Girl Like Me: The Films of Marie Dressler*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

Sugerman, Elias E. Untitled Review of W.C. Fields. *The Billboard* (5 April 1930): 14.

Sypher, Wylie, ed. *Comedy: “An Essay on Comedy” by George Meredith and “Laughter” by Henri Bergson*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956.

“The Three Keatons.” *New York Clipper* (20 July 1901), 438, clippings file, Buster Keaton, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

“The Three Keatons.” *New York Dramatic Mirror* (30 October 1909), 19, clippings file, Buster Keaton, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Toll, Robert C. *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

---. *On With the Show: The First Century of Show Business in America*. NewYork: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Tulsa Daily World (13 December 1925), n.p., clippings file, Will Rogers, Robinson

Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

"Vaudeville and Variety Miscellaneous" file, n.p., 1900, Harvard Theatre Collection.

Wagner, Rob. "Smart-Crackers and Cheese." *Rob Wagner's Script* 2, no. 5 (14 September 1929): 1-2 and 32.

Watts, Jill. *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

"W.C. Fields: An Appreciation." *The Theatre* (March 1904), n.p., clippings file, W.C. Fields, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

"W.C. Fields Pool Table Act." *New York Star* 1, no. 12 (19 December 1908), 8, clippings file, W.C. Fields, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

"West End – *The Sambo Girl*," Eva Tanguay, vol. 450, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

White, Jr., Richard D. *Will Rogers: A Political Life*. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2011.

Williams, Raymond. *The Sociology of Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Wilson, James. *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.

Woollcott, Alexander. "Hilarious Antics Spread Good Cheer at the Casino." *New York World* (19 May 1924), n.p., clippings file, Marx Brothers, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

Yagoda, Ben. *Will Rogers: A Biography*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.