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OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN I, 1895-1915: HIS CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF NEW YORK'S TIMES SQUARE THEATRE DISTRICT

by

JOHN F. CARROLL

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

1998

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

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ABSTRACT

OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN I, 1895 - 1915:
HIS CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF NEW YORK'S TIMES SQUARE THEATRE DISTRICT

by

JOHN F. CARROLL

Adviser: Dr. Jane Bowers

This dissertation discusses independent theatre entrepreneur Oscar Hammerstein I (1847 - 1919), whose accomplishments included the creation and development of New York City's new theatre district above Longacre Square. His theatrical career, from 1888 - 1915, was marked by a series of innovations demonstrating Hammerstein's pioneering influence on the transformation of New York's cultural landscape, leading to the city's recognition as the nation's center for legitimate theatre productions and for the era's most popular performing art, vaudeville.

After building three theatres in suburban Harlem, Hammerstein moved to New York's Rialto and opened his first Manhattan Opera House in 1892. A year later, the theatre became the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall and Hammerstein became the city's most innovative vaudeville manager. After terminating his partnership with Koster and Bial in 1895, Hammerstein built the Olympia. For forty years, this remarkable

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structure, housing four performance spaces capable of seating six thousand patrons, marked the origin of the Times Square theatre district.

In 1899, Hammerstein built the Victoria Theatre at Seventh Avenue and Forty-second Street. Victoria Theatre and its unique rooftop venue, the Paradise Gardens, became the "mecca" for "big time" vaudeville in the middle decade of vaudeville's fifty-year reign as the most popular performing art. Hammerstein's Theatre Republic, opened in 1900, was the first of the famed Forty-second Street playhouses. Unable to pursue his vision to make this venue America's first "national" theatre, Hammerstein advanced the cause of the commercial theatre's independents by leasing it to David Belasco. In 1904 Hammerstein built his second Forty-second Street playhouse and named it in honor of his first tenant, comedian Lew Fields, who used the theatre to launch his career as an independent producer and musical comedy star.

Just as the majority of Hammerstein's theatres redefined New York's cultural boundaries, his programming set new standards by utilizing all the performing arts to augment his presentations of entertainments designed primarily for nonelitist audiences.

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While I take full responsibility for this dissertation, I thank Dr. Jane Bowers, my Committee Chair, and Dr. Jill Dolan and Dr. Samuel Leiter, my Committee Members, for their unflagging interest in my study and for their perceptive and useful critiques of each chapter. I am honored that they chose to be my mentors.

During his lifetime, Oscar Hammerstein I was described as an entrepreneur who kept all his important papers under his famed silk hat. It is not surprising then that there is no single archive where one may learn about his remarkable career in New York City's commercial theatre from 1888 - 1915. The following organizations welcomed me and enabled me to pursue my research: Belknap Collection for the Performing Arts, University of Florida Library; Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library; Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University Library; Municipal Archives, City of New York; Shubert Archive, Shubert Foundation; Theatre Collection, Museum of the City of New York.

Oscar Hammerstein I transformed New York City's cultural landscape, but he was very much a man of his time. In addition to the archival resources so vital to this study, my research also required that I read the newspapers and trade journals published during his lengthy career. By doing so, I was better able to comprehend the significance of Hammerstein's positive influence on the development of New York City into a great international cultural center.

Lastly, I acknowledge the support of my parents, Joseph J. and Margaret M. Carroll. I am pleased to dedicate this study to them.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

On 11 December 1995, Oscar Hammerstein I (1847-1919) was the subject of a front page news story in the New York Times. The opening of the New Victory Theatre, which Hammerstein had built in 1900 as the Theatre Republic, provided tangible evidence of his career as one of New York's most important theatre entrepreneurs. Since Hammerstein's theatre was the first of the famed playhouses that once defined Forty-second street as the center of New York's commercial theatre world, it seemed appropriate that the "new" Forty-second Street would begin its life at the oldest legitimate theatre in New York's Times Square theatre district.

The Theatre Republic was actually one of five theatres Hammerstein built in the famed theatre district between 1895 and 1904, a fact that earned him the title of "The Father of Times Square." Yet the debut of the New Victory Theatre marked the first time in more than fifty years that Hammerstein was publicly honored as the pioneer who created and developed the present theatre district. There is no statute, such as the one erected in honor of George M. Cohan, nor is there a plaque to designate the "Broadway Block," between Forty-fourth and Forty-fifth Street, where Hammerstein built the magnificent Olympia in 1895. Until the New Victory Theatre's debut in 1995, the only tribute to Hammerstein's achievements had been hidden from view in order to transform a theatre into a television studio. Although he has never mentioned its origin, David

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Letterman, the present star attraction at the Ed Sullivan Theatre, located at Broadway and Fifty-third street, entertains both a live audience and millions of late night television viewers in a theatre originally built by producer Arthur Hammerstein in 1927 as a tribute to his father, Oscar Hammerstein I, and named Hammerstein's Theatre.

In its heyday, the interior of Hammerstein's Theatre was unlike that of any other Broadway playhouse. From its carpeted foyer, which contained a life-sized bronze statue of Oscar Hammerstein I, dressed in his signature costume of formal evening wear and his famed silk top hat, patrons entered the auditorium, which was modeled after the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe. Live organ music played as people were escorted to their seats in the orchestra or the theatre's single balcony. To further honor his father, Arthur Hammerstein had set ten huge stained glass windows in the auditorium's walls. Each of the windows represented a scene from an opera his father had first presented at his second Manhattan Opera House between 1906 and 1910. As Nicholas Van Hoogstraten states, "The overall effect was breathtaking."[1] As beautiful as the theatre was, however, its design brings two questions to mind.

Why would Arthur Hammerstein choose to honor his Jewish father with a theatre designed to emulate a Roman Catholic cathedral? Furthermore, why had Arthur Hammerstein omitted any visual references to his father's pioneering work in New York's commercial theatre, particularly his creation and development of the Times Square theatre district? There are studies that demonstrate why many of New York's Jewish residents in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries chose to camouflage their religious convictions in order to avoid anti-Semitism. Hammerstein's Theatre, with its overtly Christian decor, was a perfect example of this avoidance technique. In addition,

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by transforming the Gothic cathedral's traditional use of stained glass, the depiction of religious icons and symbols, into representations of his father's opera productions, Arthur Hammerstein reinforced the belief that his father's achievements in "highbrow" art were the summation of Hammerstein's cultural legacy. In his efforts to ensure that theatregoers would always remember Oscar Hammerstein I as a great opera impresario, Arthur Hammerstein designed a theatrical shrine which represented only four years of a career which extended over a quarter of a century from 1888 to 1915. In effect, the decor of Hammerstein's Theatre masked both the fact that Oscar Hammerstein I was Jewish and the fact that his innovative work in New York's commercial theatre made him one of the most-admired and imitated entrepreneurs of his time.

The only two books about Hammerstein also underplay his achievements in the commercial theatre by making his brief tenure as the most innovative opera manager of his era their central focus. In 1956, journalist Vincent Sheean, using Arthur Hammerstein's recollections as his primary source, published a lively, unannotated biography, Oscar Hammerstein I: The Life and Exploits of an Impresario. Approximately two-thirds of Sheean's book was devoted to the four years Hammerstein spent as the owner and manager of the Manhattan Opera Company. A decade later, John Frederick Cone's excellent scholarly study, Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera Company, appeared in print. Both works served to affirm Hammerstein's contributions to grand opera, but their cursory treatments of Hammerstein's lengthy career prior to 1906 and their even briefer discussions of his efforts after 1910, indicated that further investigation of his career was warranted.

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More importantly, both authors mentioned Hammerstein's decision to operate as an independent at a time when the commercial theatre was becoming highly centralized by powerful monopolies, such as the Theatrical Syndicate and the United Booking Office. Sheean and Cone's somewhat abbreviated attention to this crucial detail raised one of the questions that formed the basis for this study: How had Hammerstein been able to survive and prosper in an era when most independents relinquished their autonomy for the economic security which the impersonal cartels seemed to offer? Furthermore, these earlier discussions of Hammerstein's career evoked but left unanswered two other questions: What impact had Hammerstein had on his own theatrical milieu? Had Hammerstein's work had any lasting influence on the commercial theatre?

Three dissertations written by theatre historians proved useful to my research into Hammerstein's career in the commercial theatre. The first dissertation, Byrne J. Blackwood's "The Theatres of J. B. McElfatrick and Sons, Architects, 1855-1922" (1966), contained data about five of Hammerstein's theatres. Byrne's study was significant because Hammerstein worked with the McElfatrick firm on eleven of the twelve theatres he constructed. The second dissertation, Margaret M. Knapp's "A Historical Study of the Legitimate Playhouses on West Forty-second Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues" (1982), provided information about Hammerstein's Theatre Republic and his efforts to make it a "national" theatre. Lastly, Stephen Burge Johnson's dissertation, The Roof Gardens of Broadway Theatres, 1883-1942, published by UMI Research Press in 1984, discussed the three unique "summer resorts" built and managed by Hammerstein. While these studies did not concentrate solely on

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Hammerstein, they persuaded me that Hammerstein's work as a theatre builder and as a manager of both legitimate and vaudeville attractions warranted a complete study.

As this dissertation will argue, Hammerstein was clearly a great visionary whose impact on New York's cultural landscape transformed the city into one of the world's leading urban centers. Between 1888 and 1914, he built ten theatres in Manhattan. While each was distinct in terms of design and purpose, only one of them, his first Manhattan Opera House (1892), was constructed in an already existing theatre district, the Rialto, New York's commercial theatre center in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In an era of rapid social and cultural change, fueled by the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economic base following the Civil War, New York became the nation's first great metropolis. Hammerstein's theatres not only reflected that greatness, they transformed the cityscape forever. Furthermore, his influence on New York's commercial theatre extended far beyond theatre construction. At a time when American culture was being divided into "highbrow" art forms and "lowbrow" popular entertainments, Hammerstein challenged these arbitrary divisions by presenting successful productions which sought to erase the boundaries between elitist and nonelitist genres.

Because his remarkable theatres and his unique programming appealed to highly diverse audiences, in themselves a fascinating cross-section of New York's ever-increasing population, Hammerstein, with the aid of New York's journalists, became the most celebrated theatre entrepreneur of his time. Furthermore, because of his determination to work independently in order to achieve his ambitions on his own terms, he became a modern-day folk hero to the thousands of immigrants who, like himself, had

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come to America believing that every man could create his own opportunities for advancement. Hammerstein's status as a folk hero was enhanced by the fact that, unlike the majority of his peers in the commercial theatre, he had achieved great success long before he began his theatrical career in 1888. Like most immigrants, Hammerstein first arrived in New York as one of the masses whose labor made the industrial revolution possible.

While some were crushed by the cruel working conditions of the factories and the equally severe living conditions of the tenements, Hammerstein used his technical skills and his ability to perceive unmet needs to raise himself above the harsh existence that most immigrants had to endure.

In his landmark study of New York's tenement dwellers, How the Other Half Lives, Jacob A. Riis provided a hopeful scenario in his otherwise devastating portrait of the squalid living conditions experienced by three-quarters of New York's residents:

> The wonder is that they are not all corrupted, and speedily, by their surroundings . . . . The reason is obvious. The poorest immigrant comes here with the purpose and ambition to better himself and, given half a chance, might be reasonably expected to make the most of it.[2]

Hammerstein's early career demonstrated that Riis's scenario was possible. A brief discussion of his first efforts also gives insight into his need to work independently, his understanding of the power of the press, and his remarkable ability to challenge the status quo in order to further his own ambitions.

In 1863, at the age of sixteen, Hammerstein renounced his privileged position as the eldest son in a middle-class German Jewish family and emigrated alone to New York. He found work as a cigar-maker, an industry then dominated by German immigrants.

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Although he began his new life as one of the masses in lower New York's kleindeutschland, he quickly created his own "half a chance" by inventing a series of patented machines to ease the tedious process of hand-rolling tobacco leaves. In 1874, aware that the tobacco industry lacked a unifying voice, he created the United States Tobacco Journal and soon made his one-man operation the industry's most influential trade publication. Using his profits, Hammerstein created another successful business in residential real estate, constructing homes and apartment buildings in suburban Harlem designed to appeal to newly-affluent immigrants, like himself, who understood that a move up to Harlem was a positive reflection of their hard-earned status as fully assimilated members of New York's burgeoning middle-class. By age forty, Hammerstein's success as an independent entrepreneur in two different industries made him a role model for the next generation of immigrants now crowded into the tenements so vividly described by Riis. Hammerstein's ambitions, however, far exceeded those of his fellow Harlem residents. Using the wealth and business skills he had acquired over a quarter of a century, he proceeded to create an entirely different career in the much more risk-prone world of the commercial theatre. He began this new enterprise in what appeared to be a most unlikely location, a short walk from his home on 120th Street.

According to social historian Lloyd Morris, "Harlem . . . impressed you as being a city in itself . . . . Apartment houses were beginning to rise . . . . But, mainly, it was a community of . . . middle-class homes impeccably respectable, conservative and prosperous." [1] As New York's first suburb, Harlem became the prototype for future communities which were planned to provide New York's residents with the opportunity to isolate their private lives from their daily work routines. In addition to demonstrating

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their improved social position, Harlem also gave its residents a respite from the increasingly crowded, noisy, and dirty conditions of the city proper. This made it particularly attractive to those immigrants who had grown up in small towns or on farms. The extension of the elevated mass transit lines into northern Manhattan allowed the suburb to expand fairly rapidly, but living in Harlem had some disadvantages. Chief among them was its dearth of cultural resources. Hammerstein, who had been raised in the culturally sophisticated city of Berlin, Germany, realized this problem and rectified it by building theatres which quickly became highly sought-after venues for the many "combination" companies which were touring the country.

"Combination" companies were the first step toward the centralization of the commercial theatre. Thanks to improved rail transportation in the latter half of the nineteenth century, these fully-equipped production units were able to travel to theatres throughout the United States. Since most "combination" companies were formed in New York following an engagement at a Rialto theatre, they affirmed the public's perception of New York as the nation's cultural center. The "combination" company's performance schedule, eagerly touted by each unit's advance man as "direct from New York," soon replaced all but a few permanent dramatic stock companies as the most popular, and profitable, method of theatrical presentation.

The financial success of "combination" companies led six leading managers to ask, "Since we own the 'product,' why shouldn't we own the 'shop' where it is sold as well?" Although begun as individual enterprises, the system of ownership of large numbers of theatres ultimately resulted in the formation of the Theatrical Syndicate in 1896. The Syndicate's stated purpose was to gain control of all the first-class theatres in

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North America, thus creating a monopoly which would give its founders the exclusive right to determine which productions, and which theatres, would survive in the newly centralized commercial theatre. Some influential members of the theatre community, such as Harrison Grey Fiske, editor of the widely-read New York Dramatic Mirror, and actor-manager James A. Herne, condemned the inherently predatory nature of the Syndicate. Nevertheless, at a time when the commercial theatre's expansion had led to increasing fragmentation, the vast majority of theatre owners embraced this centralized system, despite the fact that it reduced their roles to that of middle managers. Although eagerly courted by the Theatrical Syndicate, Hammerstein, whose entire life was marked by his determination to operate independently, never joined the majority.

The positive critical and public reception to his Harlem theatres confirmed Hammerstein's skills as a builder and a manager. Because they functioned as venues for "combination" companies, however, they could not satisfy his ambition to be recognized as one of New York's innovative cultural leaders. To achieve that goal, he had no alternative but to leave his "out of town" theatres and establish his presence in New York's commercial theatre district, the Rialto. Because the Rialto's patrons came from every section of the city, Hammerstein faced the dual challenge of building theatres and presenting productions which could compete successfully with a variety of attractions. Yet, despite the fact that he was a new member of the theatrical community, New York's journalists, always on the alert for stories that would increase their newspapers' circulation, had already made Hammerstein a celebrity whose achievements had particular significance for the city's growing immigrant population.

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As editor and publisher of the United States Tobacco Journal, Hammerstein had used his influence to shape opinion in the tobacco industry. Therefore, when he began to work on the larger canvas of the commercial theatre, he was more than willing to cooperate with the press in order to promote his efforts. This tactic proved to be of vital importance because newspapers, once the province of the educated few, had become the major source of communication for the masses. In 1885, Ottmar Merganthaler's new linotype machine had revolutionized the printing industry by transforming it from a hand-operated to a machine-operated process. The newspaper industry, no longer hampered by an inefficient technology, experienced an incredible proliferation of competing daily journals, particularly in the major cities. Social historian Arthur Meier Schlesinger describes the elements of the new journalism:

> The character of metropolitan journalism was determined in part by the rapid pace and high tension everywhere manifest in the city life and in part by the vast multitudes who had but freshly mastered the art of reading. To command a large circulation the presentation of news must be terse, colorful, entertaining, dramatic. It must interest . . . and, withal, afford the reader a respite from the daily grind.[4]

Hammerstein's decision to promote himself in order to publicize his theatrical endeavors foreshadowed the more sophisticated techniques employed by the theatrical entrepreneurs such as Sol Hurok and Joseph Papp in this century. Furthermore, by creating an easily identifiable persona for himself, characterized by his decision to wear formal evening attire at all times, Hammerstein set himself apart from his peers.

A number of Jewish men, including the six founding members of the Theatrical Syndicate, became successful in the highly competitive arena of the commercial theatre.

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They carefully avoided the threat of anti-Semitism, however, by adopting the dress and demeanor of ordinary businessmen. Hammerstein's willingness to draw attention to himself proved to be a well-calculated risk, which greatly enhanced New York's newspaper readers' perception of him as a folk hero. Taking full advantage of the paradoxical nature of his persona, Hammerstein, costumed as a man in perpetual anticipation of his next opening night, used the press to foster his image as the independent "little man," the fiesty immigrant whose ambitious plans would make New York an internationally renowned entertainment center. Hammerstein might have been dismissed as a mere wealthy eccentric had he not actually succeeded in transforming New York's cultural landscape. By the 1890s, that task had become increasingly complex.

A cultural hierarchy, dividing audiences into elitist and nonelitist factions, replaced the more democratic assemblies of earlier generations. Cultural historian Lawrence W. Levine describes this division:

> At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the theatre was a microcosm; it housed both the entire spectrum of population and the complete range of entertainment from tragedy to farce, juggling to ballet, opera to minstrelsy.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, a codification process, which Levine terms "sacralization," gradually reshaped American culture so that once popular entertainments, such as productions of Shakespeare's plays and operatic presentations, became art forms to be performed only for elitist audiences who supposedly "understood" them. This "sacralization" of culture, because it was undemocratic, had great appeal for those members of society who wished to disassociate themselves from the middle- nd

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working-classes. Yet while "sacralization" seems to clearly define "highbrow" art, Levine provides no comparable methods of codification to distinguish among the options available for audiences seeking nonelitist entertainments. By the end of the nineteenth century, a number of these formerly "lowbrow" genres had been refined in order to appeal to the steadily increasing middle-class, particularly middle-class women. These women, because of the invention of labor saving devices for their homes, now had time to pursue a wide spectrum of cultural interests.

Variety shows, once the province of male-dominated audiences at neighborhood saloons and beer gardens, had been transformed into family entertainments known as vaudeville by entrepreneurs like Tony Pastor and B. F. Keith. Although vaudeville was still in its infancy, its popular appeal posed a clear threat to the growth of the legitimate theatre. While many immigrants still preferred to attend productions given in their native language, as evidenced by the continuing success of the Yiddish theatre, those who were more assimilated could now choose between legitimate theatres where they could see productions performed in their new language, or the more informal, and less expensive, vaudeville houses, whose fast-paced, eclectic programming presented fewer language barriers and often, because of the proliferation of ethnic comedians, provided them with the opportunity to laugh at caricatures of themselves and other immigrants. Even the minstrel show, whose great popularity had originally been based on its comic depiction of blacks as inferiors, had been forced to change in order to accommodate these new audiences. In Blacking Up, Robert C. Toll summarizes the effect of this transformation on the nation's first indigenous art form:

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> This approach brought Primrose and West such success that they were known as "The Millionaires of Minstrelsy." But they brought minstrelsy to a stage where it was distinguished from other entertainment only by its name. "They have refined all the fun out of it," lamented Lew Dockstader.

Along with this new emphasis on more refined entertainments came the demand for novelty. While heavily subsidized institutions, such as the Metropolitan Opera House and Carnegie Hall, exemplified Levine's concept of "sacralization" for the "highbrow" art forms of grand opera and symphonic music, the popular art forms, whose survival depended on their ability to attract ever-increasing middle- and working-class patrons, underwent a process of cross-fertilization.

Following John Philip Sousa's lead, band directors added classical pieces into their concerts of popular tunes and patriotic marches. Vaudeville managers, while still employing the genre's three guiding principles, economy, brevity, and simplicity, began to add "playlets," simply staged one-act plays written to suit the specific talents of a well-known actor from the legitimate stage, to their programming. In order to compete, legitimate managers, aided by the "star system" endorsed by the Theatrical Syndicate, began to present an increasing number of plays adapted from best-selling novels. In addition, the unprecedented success of The Black Crook in 1866 had served to establish a new legitimate genre. While that production's combination of ballet, melodrama, spectacle, and music had been assembled in a rather elementary fashion, its long run at Niblo's Garden had assured legitimate managers that the musical play would continue to attract large audiences. As the genre developed, its creators reshaped this new form into categories such as musical comedy, comic opera, "variety farce," and musical burlesque.

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Because of the success of the dual processes of gentrification and experimentation, the commercial theatre, for so long a cottage industry, became a powerful national industry, with the Rialto serving as the central hub of operations. As more and more managers banded together in order to protect their business interests, their concern for the continuing development of popular art forms was superseded by their concern for profits. In The City and the Theatre, Mary C. Henderson describes how this change altered theatre owners' perceptions of their venues:

> The insidious--and far less visible--effect of this system was to transform the New York theatre structure into a mere parcel of real estate, a building that could be rented for the length of the run of the play booked into it. The day was not far off when theatres would be built on Broadway as speculative ventures and looked on like hotel rooms which could be rented casually to the next Broadway transient.

Henderson's description accurately portrays the "business first" attitudes of the members of the Theatrical Syndicate and the owners of large vaudeville "circuits," such as B. F. Keith and Martin Beck, regarding the primary purpose of their theatres.

As grand as some of their venues were, they functioned as "shops" designed to enhance the sale of their latest "product." In contrast, Hammerstein designed and built his theatres to serve far loftier goals. While he intended that they profit him financially, he also wanted them to be praised as cultural landmarks where he could realize his ambitions to be recognized for his managerial skill and his artistic talent. Although the implicit contradictions of Hammerstein's grandiose ambitions seemed to doom his endeavors from the start, his determination to change New York's cultural landscape on his own terms enabled him to persist in his efforts. The fact that he employed a distinctly populist

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strategy to obtain his goals made his accomplishments all the more remarkable. Rather than confine his efforts to the construction of theatres intended to house "highbrow" art forms, Hammerstein chose instead to create theatres which would augment popular entertainments.

Hammerstein's Olympia, which he built north of Longacre Square in 1895, was only one example of his transformation of New York's cultural landscape. Its presence marked the beginning of the Times Square theatre district. There are some theatre historians, such as Margaret N. Knapp, who claim that theatre construction north of Longacre Square was "seemingly inevitable."[5] Nevertheless, this mammoth structure, with its four performance spaces, was without precedent in America. The fact that this forerunner of the great performing arts centers, which would appear in every major American city in the latter half of the twentieth century, was built and managed by one individual made it incomparable. Even more noteworthy was Hammerstein's plan to make the Olympia economically accessible to all New Yorkers. This egalitarian pricing policy reflected Hammerstein's desire to provide middle- and working-class patrons with first-class entertainment in an unparalleled setting and further enhanced his reputation as a folk hero.

Yet despite the fact that the Olympia brought him international acclaim as a theatre builder and as New York's most innovative vaudeville manager, Hammerstein lost his magnificent building by allowing his personal artistic ambitions to overrule his uncanny business acumen. Undaunted by the loss of his unique "palace of amusement," Hammerstein continued to build north of Longacre Square. The financial success of his theatres and roof gardens was the catalyst which motivated other entrepreneurs to

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construct new playhouses in what would become New York's Times Square theatre district. Hammerstein's success, however, also made him an ideal candidate for a takeover by the Theatrical Syndicate in its relentless drive to acquire the theatrical real estate it needed to display its star vehicles.

Hammerstein actually benefited from a short-term alliance with two of the Syndicate's founding members, Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger. The unique music hall/theatre ambiance of his Victoria Theatre (1899) proved to be the ideal setting for three "variety farces" starring Gus and Max Rogers, Klaw and Erlanger's most popular comedy team. However, Hammerstein had no intention of allowing his Theatre Republic (1900) to become a Syndicate booking house. He envisioned his jewel-like playhouse as a "national" theatre which, like the great, subsidized theatres of Europe, would be hailed as America's showcase for its finest drama. To accomplish this goal, he formed an alliance with Liebler and Company, the major independent producers of legitimate drama of the time. His idealistic plan proved unfeasible, however, in the profit-driven commercial theatre. Rather than capitulate to the Theatrical Syndicate, Hammerstein preserved his independence by leasing his theatre to another independent, David Belasco.

Hammerstein faced yet another threat to his independence when he changed his Victoria Theatre from a legitimate house to a vaudeville theatre in 1904. This shrewd business decision enabled him to build another theatre on Forty-second Street, which he leased to another independent, Lew Fields. Like the legitimate theatre, however, vaudeville had become a centralized industry, run by businessmen who controlled large numbers of theatres in which only those artists who paid them a booking fee, usually ten to fifteen percent of their weekly salary, could perform. Hammerstein finally contracted

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with the United Booking Office in 1907. By then, however, the Victoria Theatre of Varieties, together with its unique rooftop "resort," the Paradise Gardens, had already become the nation's premier vaudeville showplace, a position it would maintain until Hammerstein sold his exclusive booking rights to B.F. Keith in 1913.

While the sale of the Victoria's exclusive booking rights marked the end of one era in American popular entertainment, Hammerstein's sale of the theatre itself in 1915 marked the emergence of a new era of entertainment designed to appeal to the masses--the motion picture. Just as many of the nation's theatres had been transformed from legitimate to vaudeville houses in response to public demand, the motion picture had outgrown its infancy as a nickelodeon entertainment for the working poor. The new moguls of the rapidly growing film industry, a number of whom began their theatrical careers in vaudeville, understood that respectable middle-class patrons demanded first-class theatres. The Rialto Theatre, managed by S. F. "Roxy" Rothapfel, replaced the Victoria in 1916. "Roxy," sure of the new theatre's success as a movie "palace," ordered it to be built without a stage.

By the time of his death on 1 August 1919, Hammerstein had already become a legendary but ephemeral figure whose real achievements as one of New York's great cultural visionaries had been eclipsed by the memory of his unique persona, which he had constructed with the same care that he had lavished on his theatres. Seen in that context, Arthur Hammerstein's decision to build a theatre which memorialized only his father's work in the "highbrow" art of grand opera was understandable, but it hardly did justice to Hammerstein's enormous influence in having New York become recognized as an international cultural center. This study will demonstrate that his remarkable career in

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the commercial theatre deserves attention if we are to fully appreciate Hammerstein's contribution to theatre history.

In an era when the majority of the country's legitimate and vaudeville theatre owners willingly surrendered their autonomy in exchange for the financial security offered them by centralized monopolies such as the Theatrical Syndicate and the United Booking Office, Hammerstein chose to remain independent in order to achieve his ambitious goal, the transformation of New York's cultural landscape. His theatres were often hailed as landmark structures and confirmed New York's status as the nation's greatest metropolis. Hammerstein's legitimate theatre presentations, which he selected to appeal to the tastes of highly diverse audiences, accurately represented the variety of productions available during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In contrast, his innovative vaudeville programming, in which he sought to erase the boundaries that divided elitist from popular entertainments, established Hammerstein's reputation as an artist ahead of his time, whose work influenced the next generation of musical theatre practitioners. While his accomplishments commanded the attention of people from every strata of society, Hammerstein's pioneering achievements had particular resonance for immigrants like himself. Aided by New York's journalists, he became one of the era's most celebrated figures, a modern-day folk hero, who personified the immigrants' belief in such characteristic American traits as self-reliance, courage, imagination, and idealism. In a career defined by his determination to succeed on his own terms, Hammerstein earned membership in that select group of cultural leaders known as true American visionaries.

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NOTES

1. Nicholas Van Hoogstraten, Lost Broadway Theatres, rev. ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 237.

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3. Lloyd Morris, Incredible New York: High Life and Low Life from 1850 to 1950, (New York: Random House, 1951; repr. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 201.

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5. Lawrence W. Levine, Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 56.

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7. Mary C. Henderson, The City and the Theatre: New York Playhouses from Bowling Green to Times Square, (Clifton, NJ: James T. White and Company, 1973), 137.

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Chapter Two

FROM HARLEM TO HERALD SQUARE: HAMMERSTEIN'S FIRST THEATRES

Between 1888 and 1894, Oscar Hammerstein I built three large theatres in the suburb of Harlem and an even larger one in the heart of New York's Rialto. He also became one of the commercial theatre's most influential managers, often experimenting with programming that erased the traditional boundaries dividing elitist and popular entertainments.

During this period, Hammerstein became a public figure whose fame sometimes exceeded that of the stars he engaged to play in his theatres. Thanks to a carefully conceived persona, whose actions generated good press, Hammerstein became a modern-day folk hero, the "little man" who refused to be intimidated by the machinations of members of New York's Police and Fire Departments and Tammany Hall bureaucrats.

Although often accused of profligacy, Hammerstein was, in truth, an astute businessman. Using only his own wealth, he constructed performance spaces which more than satisfied the perceived needs of his different audiences. He did, however, make some faulty artistic decisions during these years. Yet these few unsuccessful ventures, which might have inhibited another less-determined manager, caused Hammerstein to create even greater challenges for himself.

Despite the fact that he entered the commercial theatre "out of town," Hammerstein soon became a major presence in New York. Fiercely independent, he

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pursued his own vision and, in doing so, transformed the city's theatrical landscape forever.

Hammerstein in Harlem

By the 1880s the once-rural suburb of Harlem had become a fast-growing residential area. Hammerstein, like many other New York businessmen, saw the financial opportunity in the area's real estate market. During much of this decade, he divided his time between his United States Tobacco Journal, the most influential of the tobacco industry's trade publications, and the construction of more than fifty homes, including one for his own family, and elegant apartment buildings, such as the "Kaiser Wilhelm II," designed to appeal to affluent German-Americans like himself.

When the Second, Third, and Ninth Avenue "Els" were extended north to Harlem during the same era, other real estate developers built new tenements close to these mass transit lines to attract tenants away from the city's overcrowded, unsanitary, and unsafe ghettoes. For fifteen cents, the price of a round-trip ticket on the "El," many of New York's working-class immigrants were able to rent improved living spaces without fear of losing their livelihoods.

Because each elevated line and the Harlem Railroad had major stations at 125th Street, that thoroughfare became the suburb's "Main Street," the prime location for Harlem's retail shops, churches and synagogues, restaurants, and places of amusement. Therefore, it was not surprising that Hammerstein built his first three theatres there. The surprise was that he built them at all.

In 1888, at the age of forty-two, Hammerstein ceased building residences, sold his United States Tobacco Journal, and made his former avocation, the theatre, his full-

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time career. His early work in the theatre had been limited to German language productions performed in rented spaces. Although he had been praised by his fellow German immigrants for his presentations, there was no evidence that he ever made any profits from these short-term ventures. Like many people of wealth, he simply used part of his resources to provide a cultural service for a specific clientele.

By announcing that he was going to build a first-class "combination" house on Harlem's "Main Street," Hammerstein moved immediately into the ranks of New York's commercial theatre entrepreneurs. Since he was never asked to discuss his new career decision publicly, it can only be surmised that he believed that Harlem's affluent residents would support this undertaking in sufficient numbers to make it profitable.

Hammerstein's decision to attract Harlem's upper-class citizens was made clear when he chose a construction site at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue, rather than purchasing property nearer to Harlem's mass transit stations. The prestige of this prime location enhanced Hammerstein's plan to have his theatres emulate the "monumental" opera houses in Europe's major cities.

The Harlem Opera House and the Harlem Music Hall

Excavation work for these two theatres began in late 1888. Since Hammerstein had no theatre credentials except those he had earned in New York's kleindeutschland and because he was building approximately five miles north of the Rialto, New York's press gave his new project polite but cursory coverage until shortly before the Harlem Opera House opened.

Even Tammany Hall maintained a "hands off" policy throughout the construction phase. Perhaps the politicians realized that Hammerstein's undertaking would leave them

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with a valuable addition to Harlem's streetscape. The fact that Hammerstein engaged the services of the architectural firm of J. B. McElfatrick and Sons, a business relationship which would extend over the next quarter century, assured them that these new theatres would be constructed according to the highest standards of the industry.

Hammerstein was to receive much praise from the press for his contributions to his theatres' designs, ornamentation, and technological innovations throughout his career. Since all the McElfatrick records disappeared following the death of William McElfatrick in 1922, there is no clear evidence as to the actual extent of Hammerstein's contributions. Nevertheless Byrne D. Blackwood's dissertation, "The Theatres of J. B. McElfatrick and Sons, Architects, 1855-1922," a comprehensive study of McElfatrick's theatres, eleven of which were built in collaboration with Hammerstein, provides sufficient data to support the credit awarded him by the press.

The Harlem Opera House opened on 30 September 1889. For his first presentation, Hammerstein selected Daniel Frohman's production of David Belasco and William B. DeMille's The Wife, a play which had already proven popular with audiences during its initial presentation two seasons earlier at Frohman's Lyceum Theatre at Fourth Avenue and Twenty-third Street. The critics who saw Frohman's "combination" production at the Harlem Opera House gave it uniformly positive reviews.

The majority of the critics, however, devoted most of their columns to detailed descriptions of the lavish theatre Hammerstein built. The building's Renaissance-influenced facade gave it a commanding presence on 125th Street. Inside, patrons entered the theatre via a marble arcade more than one hundred feet long. This promenade led to a huge foyer dominated on one side by a huge stone fireplace, and, on

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the other, by a fourteen by seventeen foot mirror. This much-praised ornament permitted Harlemites to see themselves and their peers reflected in an opulent setting. It catered to their self-perceptions as arbiters of culture and good taste.

The eighteen-hundred seat auditorium, decorated in shades of blue and cream, was divided into three levels. The second balcony, however, was not referred to as a gallery, the term most-often used to designate a theatre's least expensive seating area. By employing the more refined name of "family circle" for this area, Hammerstein made it clear that he would not tolerate the antics of the "gallery gods," usually all-male claques, who considered theatregoing, like attendance at sporting events, to be an active, participatory event.

Although the critic for the New York Times chided Hammerstein for his theatre's "excessive gorgeousness"[2] it was clear that the Harlem Opera House was a worthy cultural landmark which served to define the new suburb's status as a model community. More troubling was the question posed by the New York Clipper: "The question is: will they patronize it sufficiently to repay Mr. Hammerstein, the owner, for the money he has advanced to give them this magnificent temple of Thespis?"[3] "They," of course, were those affluent Harlem residents who regularly attended the theatres along the Rialto.

Hammerstein sought to resolve this problem in two ways. First, the Harlem Opera House's weekly offerings were added to all the major newspapers' theatre directories. This form of advertising ensured that all interested readers would be informed of the new house's present and upcoming productions. Secondly, in keeping with his aspirations for the theatre's recognition as a cultural landmark, Hammerstein booked many of the finest actors of the time, often paying exorbitant fees in exchange for

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their services and the equally important but intangible aura of "star power" which they brought to Harlem.

During its first season, lasting thirty-four weeks, Harlem Opera House audiences had the opportunity to see such legendary actors as E. H. Sothern, Edwin Booth, Helena Modjeska, Mr. and Mrs. James A. Herne, Fanny Davenport, and Joseph Jefferson. While Hammerstein had provided these players with a performance space of superior quality, often only a short carriage ride from their homes, they equated a week's run at the Harlem Opera House with an "out of town" engagement. Consequently, they demanded payments which often claimed from 75-90 percent of each performance's box office receipts. Determined to maintain his theatre's status as a first-class showplace, Hammerstein complied with these extraordinary financial requests.

Because of these expenses, any plans he had for his adjacent Harlem Music Hall had to be postponed. Although the exterior was completed, the auditorium, one of the larger concert halls in New York, had not yet been fully decorated. Nor had any work begun on the planned restaurant and roof garden. Hammerstein never realized this complex as he had originally envisioned it, but his Harlem Music Hall had some success as a rental property for musical performances and social events. When he sold the property in 1897, the under-used theatre became profitable as one of Harlem's more elegant vaudeville venues, Hurtig and Seamon's Music Hall. Probably the least known of Hammerstein's ten New York theatres, his Harlem Music Hall spent its final years as the Apollo Burlesque Theatre, catering to white, male audiences. It was closed permanently in 1933.[4]

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Although most of the Harlem Opera House's presentations during its first season were dramatic works, Hammerstein also introduced five opera companies into the schedule. These first forays into grand opera represented part of Hammerstein's strategy to affirm the public's perception of his theatre as a showcase for high art. The most successful of these ventures was presented during the last week of March 1890.

With the invaluable assistance of the Metropolitan Opera Company's leading soprano, Lilli Lehmann, Hammerstein was able to present an abbreviated week of first-class opera. While Lehmann sang at only two of the five performances, Hammerstein was delighted to learn that opera lovers were willing to travel to Harlem to hear a full orchestra, conducted by Walter Damrosch, accompany the great soprano as she sang the title role in Bellini's Norma. Like the highly paid stars from the legitimate theatre who appeared that first season, Lehmann's presence added to the prestige of the Harlem Opera House.

Misinterpreting the overwhelmingly positive response to Lehmann's brief appearances, Hammerstein announced that he was forming his own Harlem Opera Company as part of the theatre's second season. The hastily assembled company of relatively unknown singers opened on 11 October 1890 with Verdi's Ernani. Neither the critics nor Harlem's affluent residents were impressed. Following the performance of Bizet's Carmen three weeks later, Hammerstein disbanded the company; the Harlem Opera House became a "combination" house once again.

Still determined to make his opulent showplace more than a venue for touring productions, Hammerstein formed his own dramatic stock company in January 1891. Despite the presence of talented, if unknown, actors, the fledgling company survived no

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longer than his Harlem Opera Company had. Harrison Grey Fiske's editorial, which appeared following the stock company's demise on 14 March 1891, sums up the primary causes for its failure:

> Harlem is a residential section of the city; it has no transient or floating population; all things being equal its theatregoing inhabitants prefer a trip via the elevated roads to the places of amusement in the brighter, gayer portions of the town . . . . His first production [Husbands and Wives] was the veriest trifle of farce-comedy, and his second was Pillars of Society! Any tyro at management might know that Ibsen's dull play would keep people from the theatre . . . . A successful stock company . . . must have many qualities that were wanting in Mr. Hammerstein's forlorn effort.[5]

After two dark weeks, the Harlem Opera House became a "combination" house once again. Hammerstein had to concede that Fiske's analysis of Harlem theatregoers' lack of interest in supporting a local stock company was correct. Despite its elegance, Hammerstein's first theatre would always be regarded as an "out of town" venue with no chance of ever competing with the presentations offered at theatres along the Rialto.

A Minor Case of Graft and Revenge

Like the majority of New York's theatre owners, Hammerstein was happy to provide free tickets to city officials upon request. While technically illegal, this form of graft was accepted practice. It was particularly beneficial for theatre owners to maintain good relations with the New York Police Department. When Captain Henry Hooker, of Harlem's 30th Precinct, learned that his request for tickets to Lilli Lehmann's appearances at the Harlem Opera House had been rejected because both performances had been sold

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out far in advance, he refused to accept free tickets for any of the other performances that week.

Instead, he decided to make Hammerstein pay for this supposed insult. On 1 May 1890 Captain Hooker sent one of his detectives to the Harlem Opera House. The detective announced that William Gillette's Held By the Enemy could not proceed because Hammerstein had not renewed his license. The infuriated audience was ordered to leave the theatre immediately and Hammerstein, who protested this carefully orchestrated machination, was arrested by Captain Hooker himself and taken to precinct headquarters. He was charged with operating a theatre without a license and released on one thousand dollars bail.

It was a minor incident. The city's journalists, however, decided to make it a prominent story. Thanks to their continuing coverage of the subsequent events, all of which portrayed the almost unknown theatre owner as the victim/hero, Hammerstein became known as the "little man" who stood his ground against the corrupt forces of New York's political machine. Before the month ended, readers of the city's dailies were informed that Hammerstein not only provided free tickets to Captain Hooker on many occasions, he even hired one of Hooker's cronies to work as an usher. The man proved to be so incompetent that Hammerstein was forced to fire him.

Further complications ensued. At the mayor's office, the licensing clerk "forgot" that Hammerstein tried to pay his fee on time. Since all New York theatre licenses expired on 1 May, it was clear that Hammerstein had been singled out for harassment unjustly. Then Hammerstein filed a formal complaint against Captain Hooker. The

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spiteful police officer was charged with "conduct unbecoming an officer" and "neglect of duty."

The day-long hearing before the Police Board of Commissioners gave Hammerstein ample opportunity to plead his case and to make a mockery of the defense's claim that Captain Hooker had not acted out of malice. Well aware that Captain Hooker's actions had caused the press to imply that the situation was not an isolated episode but representative of police actions against individuals, the board moved quickly to resolve the case.

> It will probably be some time before Police Captain Henry D. Hooker will have an opportunity to close summarily any more theatres, for the Police Commissioners yesterday transferred him from the Thirtieth Precinct to the command of the police patrol boat, and to emphasize the rebuke, they further imposed a fine of thirty days pay. . . . The Captain may thank his lucky stars that he was let off so easily, for it was only his long and honorable record on the force that saved him from being dismissed.[5]

It was a harsh punishment for a police officer, but the Board of Commissioners probably wanted to avoid any further queries about more serious incidents of graft. The news articles detailing Hammerstein's plight and his ultimate exoneration had brought him the kind of public recognition which even the most creative of publicists would have been hard-pressed to match.

Inadvertently, the great Lilli Lehmann had provided Hammerstein with the opportunity to receive the kind of attention and support from New York's journalists that would soon make him one of the city's best-known and best-loved celebrities. In spite of his wealth and his dedication to the arts, Hammerstein became a folk hero. He paid a

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price, however, for having gained his popularity at the city's expense. There was no doubt that the "Hooker incident" had rankled municipal authorities. By demanding to be heard, Hammerstein made himself a target for future harassment.

The primary value of the favorable press he received during May 1890 was that, for the first time, Hammerstein's activities had an impact on a heretofore uninterested population, specifically, those residents of Harlem who traveled on the "El" lines and had never even considered buying a ticket to attend the Harlem Opera House. These tenement dwellers preferred the more popular entertainments presented at the much smaller Theatre Comique, a "combination" house located further east on 125th Street between Lexington and Third Avenues.

Having developed part of affluent Harlem, Hammerstein was very aware that this poor and working-class audience existed. Before the first season of the Harlem Opera House had reached its halfway mark, the following article appeared in the New York Times:

> By next September, the various "combinations" will have to take into consideration the new Columbus Theatre . . . under the direction of Oscar Hammerstein . . . . The new theatre will be in one Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street, about one hundred feet west of Lexington Avenue, and will be opposite the Theatre Comique.

Although Vincent Sheean attributes the plan for a third Harlem performance space to Hammerstein's alleged indifference to financial realities, his construction of the Columbus Theatre was, in fact, a sound business decision. From its inception, the new theatre was designed to appeal to Harlem's working-class.

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The Columbus Theatre

Working once again with J. B. McElfatrick and Sons, Hammerstein began construction on his new theatre in the spring of 1890. Unlike the Harlem Opera House-Harlem Music Hall complex, which closely resembled the "monumental" theatres built in nineteenth-century Europe, the Columbus Theatre was planned to become part of the neighborhood. Hammerstein designed his first two theatres to be imposing, to draw attention to themselves. The Columbus Theatre, which shared its facade with space for three retail shops and had a second floor designed for office space, had a much less intimidating presence, even though Hammerstein retained the use of Renaissance ornamentation.

The theatre's interior, while not merely functional, had little of the Harlem Opera House's extravagant decor. A small foyer led to a traditional auditorium, painted dark red with mahogany trim, with seating for two thousand. The only parts of the space that received special mention were its elaborate proscenium surmounted by a life-size figure of the muse of Comedy and two smaller figures representing Tragedy and Music, and the brightly painted drop curtain that depicted Columbus kneeling before Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand.

The critic for the New York Times commented that the new theatre "will admirably meet the requirements of the neighborhood in which it has been erected."[1] Hammerstein would have preferred a more glowing response to his new theatre. Nevertheless, he was probably satisfied that the Columbus Theatre was allowed to open only five nights after he was forced to postpone its well-advertised grand opening. This time, his dilemma was caused by a member of the New York Fire Department. As in the

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"Hooker incident," Hammerstein had been singled out for harassment in yet another situation involving graft.

Harrison Grey Fiske, who had been following Hammerstein's efforts with great interest, devoted part of his own column in the New York Dramatic Mirror to this new problem:

> Manager Hammerstein seems to have been singled out for official persecution. First the police tried it, and now the Fire Department has taken a hand. The refusal of Chief Bonner to report favorably on the Columbus Theatre building . . . was due to a suspicious connection between members of the Department and a fire extinguisher concern which had not been patronized by Mr. Hammerstein. Chief Bonner will do well to reflect on the punishment which overtook Captain Hooker. Even if his motive was honest, he is open to severe censure for having neglected to make his report until the last moment, thereby causing loss to the manager and disappointment to the public as well.

The New York Dramatic Mirror, an influential trade paper, was read by a broad spectrum of theatre people in New York and throughout the country. While the delay in granting Hammerstein his license did not have the repercussions of the "Hooker incident" of the previous spring, the fact that it motivated Fiske to speak out, in defense of Hammerstein, against those he termed the "semi-criminals of Tammany Hall," clearly indicated that Harlem's new theatre owner-manager was no longer considered a minor player in the city's commercial theatre.

The theatre's debut week, now reduced to a single performance on Saturday evening, 11 October 1890, began with Romeo and Juliet starring Otis Skinner and Margaret Mather as the tragic lovers. Although far from the realm of popular

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entertainments. Shakespeare's tragedy was one of his best-known and most accessible plays. The publicity concerning the Columbus Theatre's delayed opening worked in Hammerstein's favor. The performance was warmly greeted by a standing-room-only crowd.

Hammerstein had already booked Mather's company for a return engagement later that fall, but in contrast with the expensive star policy he employed at his Harlem Opera House, the Columbus Theatre's primary attractions were touring productions of popular plays, such as Duncan B. Harrison's Honest Hearts and Willing Hands with famed prizefighter John L. Sullivan in his acting debut, and "chestnuts" such as The Two Orphans and Camille, plays which still served as popular vehicles for older stars like Kate Claxton and Clara Morris. In addition to legitimate productions, Hammerstein also presented entertainments such as Primrose and West's Minstrels and the Boston Howard Athenaeum Specialty Company. None of the productions of the Columbus Theatre's debut season were critical or artistic triumphs. Yet they had great appeal for Harlem's working-class audiences and made the Columbus Theatre a profitable venture from the start.

The First Manhattan Opera House

Another theatre owner-manager might have been content to remain in Harlem, despite its limitations, and continue to present touring productions that appealed to the suburb's two different audiences. Hammerstein, however, had greater aspirations. In 1891, at the same time that he announced his formation of a dramatic stock company at the Harlem Opera House, he began excavation work for a fourth venue at Forty-second Street and Sixth Avenue, directly west of the present Bryant Park. His new playhouse, to

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be called the Murray Hill Theatre, was to be a "combination" house similar in style to the Harlem Opera House. When a legal dispute over title to the land arose in early 1891, however, Hammerstein lost interest in replicating his first theatre. He sold the property and searched for a more prominent location for his next theatre. He found the site at Broadway and Thirty-fourth Street, in the heart of the Rialto.

In the early 1890s, New York's theatre district, the Rialto, consisted of two dozen major venues. A few, such as Tony Pastor's New Fourteenth Street Theatre, the original Koster and Bial's Music Hall on Twenty-third Street, the Union Square Theatre, and Augustin Daly's Theatre at Broadway and Thirtieth Street, had become successful ventures for their owners. The Metropolitan Opera House, at the northern end of the Rialto, was heavily subsidized by its founders. Most of the theatre managers in the district, however, had to operate under less benevolent circumstances. Managers such as Lester Wallack and Josh Hart, whose first theatre ventures in Lower Manhattan had been profitable, struggled to attract audiences to their new playhouses.

Hammerstein's decision to build his fourth theatre in an area already beset with too much competition must have seemed foolhardy to his more well-established contemporaries. To have him name it an "opera house" made the project an act of arrogance as well. The well-financed Metropolitan Opera House had already made New York's first permanent home for grand opera, the Academy of Music, superfluous.

Hammerstein appeared, however, to have no misgivings about the success of his new endeavor. On 1 May 1891, he hosted a press reception to explain his plans:

> The Hammerstein idea is that there is room in the city for a new theatre of vast proportions . . . that German opera will be supported for four months each season, and that at other times special plays . . . requiring

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> plenty of stage room and a large amount of scenery can be given with profit . . . . The seating capacity . . . will be 2,600. The Hammerstein idea of the arrangement of the boxes will be strictly carried out. That is . . . the (60) boxes will be suspended under the balcony. . . . The new house will be built upon the same plans as had already been prepared for the proposed Murray Hill Theatre, only on an enlarged scale.[10]

The Manhattan Opera House, Hammerstein's fourth collaboration with the McElfatrick architects, opened eighteen months later, on 14 November 1892. A lengthy essay printed in the opening night programme compared the new theatre to Garnier's Paris Opera House and the Vienna Staatsoper, two superb examples of what Marvin Carlson has termed "the architectural symbol of nineteenth-century high bourgeois culture."[11] The first Manhattan Opera House, while a truly "monumental" addition to New York's urban hub, did not approach the grandeur of the European houses to which it had been compared. Smaller in size and with an interior somewhat less luxurious than that of the Metropolitan Opera House, Hammerstein's first Rialto theatre was, nevertheless, a worthy addition to the theatre district. The fact that it had been financed by an individual rather than a consortium of wealthy men made its existence all the more remarkable.

Although some critics carped at his use of blue plush rather than the more traditional red fabrics seen in older opera houses, there was unanimous praise for the two thousand electric lights, which gave the theatre a festive glow. Hammerstein was also complimented for his unique box seat arrangement, an invention deemed worthy of a patent. By suspending the boxes directly under the first balcony, he had eliminated the

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problem of poor sight lines, an inconvenience box seat holders endured at all other theatres in exchange for the social prestige which these most visible of "private" seats implied. The major flaw with the first Manhattan Opera House was not the structure itself. The problem was Hammerstein's choice of productions.

A Theatre Without an Identity

Hammerstein opened the Manhattan Opera House, not with grand opera, but with the American debut of a British actress, Mrs. Sara Bernard-Beere, who had received many positive critical responses to her work on the London stage. Had she been presented in an appropriate performance space, she might have been able to overcome her poor choice of plays and make a positive impression on New York's theatre critics and audiences, but the Manhattan Opera House was ill-suited for drama.

Her first play, F. C. Phillips and Frank Rogers' Lena Despard, had failed five years earlier when Lillie Langtry had attempted the part. For her second week, Mrs. Bernard-Beere played the title role in a new work, Ariane. Despite an excellent supporting cast, which included Maurice Barrymore, the production and its star seemed lost on the theatre's vast stage. For her final week, Mrs. Bernard-Beere attempted Adrienne Lecouvreur, one of Sarah Bernhardt's star vehicles.

Although most of the critics treated Mrs. Bernard-Beere with great kindness, they were also quite blunt about the inappropriateness of the Manhattan Opera House for dramatic works. Since his plans to present German opera had fallen through, perhaps Hammerstein had convinced himself that the debut of a new dramatic star would complement the debut of his new theatre. Instead, his Manhattan Opera House, unlike his Harlem theatres, opened with a much-publicized failure.

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Hammerstein was able to recoup some of his losses with the second production, a large-scale musical entitled The Isle of Champagne, starring the popular Thomas Q. Seabrooke. While not a great work, the production fully utilized the technical resources Hammerstein had had installed. Buoyed by the increase in holiday audiences seeking light entertainment, The Isle of Champagne ran for seven weeks before embarking on a national tour, playing its first week at the Harlem Opera House.

Undaunted by the failure of his first opera company in Harlem, Hammerstein formed a new organization. The Hammerstein English Opera Company made its debut at the Manhattan Opera House on 24 January 1893 with a new opera, Moskowski's Boabdil. Although the work had been well-received in Europe, the American critics were not impressed.

> The favor awarded to "Boabdil" in Germany was not duplicated here. The music is, indeed, singularly disappointing, lacking either grace, color, or originality. The cast was fairly good . . . . The opera calls for an elaborate setting and full justice was done to all its pomp and display.[12]

The company performed five well-known operas, all lavishly mounted and poorly attended, during the next two weeks. Then, just as he had done in Harlem, Hammerstein disbanded the company. With the exception of illustrated lectures, entitled "The Wonders of the World" and "A Trip to the Moon," the Manhattan Opera House remained dark for February and March.

The theatre reopened in April as a legitimate house for Alexander Salvini, son of the great Italian actor, Tomasso Salvini, and his company. A dashing actor who specialized in playing romantic heroes, Salvini, unlike Mrs. Bernard-Beere, took full

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advantage of the Manhattan Opera House's huge stage in such plays as Don Cesar, The Three Guardsmen, and Cavalleria Rusticana, which Mascagni had recently adapted for grand opera. Critics admired Salvini's energetic acting style, but they still commented about the theatre's inappropriateness for dramatic works.

Following Salvini's four week engagement, the Manhattan Opera House was dark for another month. It reopened briefly in late June for the American premiere of Robert Planquette's operetta, The Talisman, a recent success in Paris. The critic for the New York Times, having assured his readers that the operetta's plot had nothing to do with Sir Walter Scott, went on to praise the production's spectacle and dances:

> "The Talisman" is simply a peg on which to hang some uncommonly brilliant scenery and costumes. Indeed, the new entertainment is purely spectacular, and it is one of the most dazzling shows seen in the city of late. The ballet in the second act, called "Versailles," is certainly one of the most gorgeous and well-staged ballets ever put on the stage in New York . . . . Let us applaud Herr Hammerstein's keen perception of the public demand. Yet we must declare that we wish he had found a more interesting opera comique than "The Talisman" to use as a background for his ballet.[11]

The expensive production closed at the end of its second week, the start of the 4th of July holiday. Although Hammerstein made no official announcement at the time, The Talisman was the final production to play at his first Manhattan Opera House. While the operetta had the cast and the spectacle needed to fill his theatre's large stage, it had opened too late in the season to draw sufficient audiences.

The huge theatre, opened for less than eight months, had already become an expensive liability. Salvini had been a popular draw, but only the musical extravaganza,

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The Isle of Champagne, had earned the kind of profits Hammerstein had expected. Particularly damaging was the fact that the house had been dark for three months. Hammerstein had made two major artistic blunders at the Harlem Opera House with his ill-fated attempts to create first, an opera company, and later, a stock company. However, he had been able to reinstate the Harlem Opera House's more successful policy of presenting first-class touring productions after an interruption of only two weeks. This was in stark contrast to his new Rialto theatre's erratic schedule. The Manhattan Opera House, with its as yet unfinished roof garden, had become the theatre district's beautiful white elephant. Determined not to lose his new theatre, Hammerstein negotiated a lease with the most unlikely tenants. When the story reached New York's newspaper readers on 19 July 1893, it was front page news.

The Manhattan Opera House would reopen for the 1893-1894 season as the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall, "a new home in one of the finest theatres in the city . . . that will not even admit of rivalry with the celebrated Empire and Alhambra in London."[14] A performance space which had once been compared, albeit hyperbolically, to two of the world's great opera houses would, in the space of six weeks, be transformed into a world-class variety hall run by two of New York's most well-known brewmeisters. At least, that was what the newspapers reported.

The landlord-tenant relationship seemed a reasonable solution to the needs of both parties. Hammerstein, however, had no intention of accepting a passive role in the Music Hall's operation. Koster and Bial had little interest in dealing with performers. Their primary interest was in selling beer. They had introduced entertainment at their Twenty-third Street location as an inducement for customers to order another round.

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This formula had been highly successful at that location, but they had not put it into practice at the half-dozen saloons they also operated in lower New York, where entertainment would have been an unnecessary expense. Unlike Hammerstein, Koster and Bial were frugal men with no interest in becoming celebrated show business personalities. Yet they were shrewd enough to realize that the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall at the just-named Herald Square had to offer its patrons a distinctive variety program in order to succeed financially. Despite his failed attempts at high art, Hammerstein had had enough success with popular entertainments to be of value to their new enterprise. Although their business relationship would end in a highly publicized dispute, until that time, each week's programme at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall would list Hammerstein as the organization's third proprietor and manager.

A Theatre Transformed

The New Koster and Bial's Music Hall opened on 28 August 1893. In order to accommodate tables and to provide a more relaxed atmosphere, seating capacity had been reduced to fifteen hundred fixed seats. However, this number was augmented by a new third level area, the "Lounge," containing tables and chairs for eight hundred more patrons. Hammerstein's patented box seat arrangement was reduced by two-thirds. This reduction had been made in order to construct a wide promenade on the first balcony level so that standees could view the stage. In keeping with its proprietors' desire to have a world-class establishment, Hammerstein's original decor, including the marble foyer and staircase, was left intact. The refurbished theatre was far removed from the unpretentious beer hall which had made Koster and Bial wealthy.

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> When the performance was over . . . the audience . . . called for Mr. Koster and Mr. Bial to appear on the stage and make a speech. They are modest men and declined to do so. Mr. Hammerstein responded for them and made a brief speech in which he said that the policy of the house would be to give its audiences just what the management found was desired.

From the start, the "policy of the house," as far as entertainment was concerned, was Hammerstein's domain. The opening half of that evening's bill contained a fairly standard group of variety acts headlined by the popular Spanish dancer, Carmencita. The second half of the bill, however, was an expanded version of the ballet, "Versailles," from The Talisman, directed by Hammerstein himself. Koster and Bial, content to manage the food and beverage services, gave their unlikely partner almost complete freedom to create suitable programs for their Music Hall.

Thanks to their laissez-faire attitude, Hammerstein soon became one of New York's best, and best-known, variety managers. In addition, while he achieved some recognition as a stage director of large-scale musical productions, his new position allowed him to utilize his talent for music composition. Most of his prodigious output was limited to indistinguishable marches and forgettable ballads, but on 10 October 1893, Hammerstein's comic opera, The Koh-i-Noor, premiered at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall to a sell-out crowd from all parts of the city.

The Koh-i-Noor

What had begun as an innocent wager between friends quickly became the kind of news event which would endear Hammerstein to New Yorkers for much of his career. A long-time friend, composer Gustav Kerker, bet Hammerstein one hundred dollars that he could not write a serious musical work in forty-eight hours. Hammerstein, always

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ready for a challenge, announced that he would create an opera. Since he declared his intention in a public bar at the Gilsey House hotel, a reporter from the New York Herald overheard this conversation and passed the information on to his colleagues at other newspapers.

Hammerstein convinced the Gilsey House manager to lock him in Room 247 without food for the duration. Whether he actually completed The Koh-i-Noor during these two days was never known, but the dailies pounced on the event and turned it into one of the best publicity stunts of Hammerstein's career. Never one to shirk from the public, Hammerstein announced that he would present his new opera at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall.

Lavishly mounted, with a cast of one hundred singers and dancers, the one-act comic opera in three scenes attracted audiences for four weeks during November 1893. To Hammerstein's delight, the critics, despite being aware of the work's raison d' êtrc, wrote generally positive comments about his musical gifts and carefully avoided too much discussion of the work's convoluted plot, which revolved around the theft of "The Kohi-Noor" diamond.

The critic from the New York Clipper, who realized that many at the opera's premiere had come only to see Hammerstein accept his one hundred dollars from Kerker, wrote, "therefore all were agreeably disappointed when 'The Koh-i-Noor' proved itself to be a gem of some value, even if it contained some flaws to mar its sparkle . . . . The operetta was well acted, well sung, well staged, and well costumed."[16] While it might not have been so well received had it been performed alone, The Koh-i-Noor succeeded

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admirably as part of an excellent variety bill. It also helped to affirm the status of the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall as a first-class "entertainment resort."

This prestige factor was vital to the new enterprise's image because it had to appeal to a much broader patronage than the predominantly male audiences who frequented the former Koster and Bial's. Many of their customers accepted the higher admission prices and continued on as regulars, but those who preferred the more casual ambiance of the Twenty-third Street venue moved on to lesser "entertainment resorts." The key component of the New Music Hall's audience became New York's women, particularly those who shopped on Ladies' Mile and who often took charge of their families' social lives.

Hammerstein's musical spectacles, so unlike typical vaudeville fare, were effective in attracting middle-class women. His greatest drawing card, however, was Eugene Sandow. Billed as "The Strongest Man in the World," Sandow impressed men with his feats of strength and women with his well-formed physique. His act, only slightly more elaborate than that seen at carnival midways, was held over for twelve weeks, a remarkable achievement for its time. Sandow's abilities were genuine, but his real staying power came from the ongoing publicity campaign, which included a series of provocative photographs that Hammerstein and Sandow's manager, a young man from Chicago named Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr., created for him. At the time, the strongman was Ziegfeld's first, and only, client. Sandow's extended stay must have given the twenty-four-year-old Ziegfeld plenty of opportunities to observe how Hammerstein managed his variety programs all through the winter season. He would have had to be

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aware of the elaborate production techniques Hammerstein employed to highlight female performers, a concept which Ziegfeld would one day claim as his own.

The most popular, and the most controversial, of Hammerstein's displays of feminine beauty were his "Living Pictures." These consisted of a series of twenty tableaux based on recreations of famous paintings, the majority of which centered on a scantily dressed female figure. In order to assuage more conservative patrons, Hammerstein also included recreations depicting famous and fully-clothed lovers, such as Romeo and Juliet. The idea was pure kitsch, but it made excellent use of his theatre's capacity for spectacular effects.

> The warm weather had but little effect upon the attendance at this resort on Monday night, June 11 . . . . The performance concluded with Oscar Hammerstein's first series of living pictures, which have proved to be the strongest drawing card the house has had . . . and after the performance the roof garden was packed with people . . . to listen to the Hungarian orchestra.[17]

If Koster and Bial or Hammerstein had any misgivings about their partnership, there were no outward signs. Due to popular demand, a Wednesday matinee performance had been added to their seven-performance schedule. In addition, Hammerstein's decision to experiment with a series of Sunday afternoon concerts drew crowds during the spring. On summer evenings the roof garden remained open after all performances. Some naysayers had predicted that Koster and Bial would never survive their transition to Herald Square and had been proven wrong. However, the fact that some patrons had begun to refer to their Music Hall as "Hammerstein's" annoyed the brewmeisters.

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Unfortunately, Bial chose to remind Hammerstein that they, not he, were in charge by insisting that the weekly bills feature the American debut of a female European concert singer whenever possible. While such a decision might be rationalized as a search for the next Jenny Lind, the actual results had been negligible. Hammerstein, already chafing at being compelled to depend on his partners to save his theatre, decided to make his displeasure public. His action led not only to the termination of his business relationship with Koster and Bial. It also marked the beginning of the end of their Music Hall's preeminence as New York's finest "entertainment resort."

Hammerstein Hisses a Performer

The New Koster and Bial's Music Hall fall season began on Monday, 10 September 1894. Included on the bill was the debut of Hammerstein's second series of "Living Pictures." A young Austrian soprano, Marietta DiDio, making her first American appearance, had been given the tenth position on the program, a less-than-ideal placement for any performer. While her first published reviews were not unkind, it was clear that DiDio was not considered a great discovery.

On Thursday evening, Hammerstein sat alone in a box for the entire performance. When DiDio appeared on stage he hissed her loudly. He hissed again after she had sung her first song. This bizarre pattern was repeated until DiDio finished her act and exited. There could be no doubt that Hammerstein had acted intentionally.

When a patron in an adjoining box questioned him about his unseemly conduct, Hammerstein was later reported to have told the man that it was "his theatre" and that he could hiss whomever he pleased. Matters became more unpleasant when Hammerstein and another patron, George Kessler, engaged in a heated argument and then in a fist

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fight. By the time the police arrived the theatre was in an uproar. Many of Koster and Bial's long-time-regulars were delighted with the situation, a reminder of similar occasions at their Twenty-third Street location, and followed the antagonists to the West Thirtieth Street Precinct Headquarters.

The incident might have been forgotten had Hammerstein agreed to Kessler's decision to drop the assault charge he had filed against him. However, Hammerstein had succeeded in attracting more attention to himself then even he thought possible. He demanded his day in court. Koster and Bial, appalled by their partner' s ungentlemanly conduct, quickly removed Hammerstein's name from their Music Hall's publicity and programs.

The press treated the "DiDio incident" as a giant joke and Hammerstein actually benefited from the publicity his poor behavior engendered. His legal battle with Koster and Bial, however, was deadly serious. The Music Hall had become a highly lucrative enterprise. Since much of its success was due to his innovative programming, it was not surprising that Hammerstein fought to take possession of it. Koster and Bial, who amassed their fortunes quietly over the last quarter century, were mortified by Hammerstein's eagerness to have himself portrayed as the victim of their machinations. By the time the partnership was legally dissolved on 23 February 1895, they agreed to pay Hammerstein a cash settlement of $375,000. [15]

Seven years after he began construction on his Harlem Opera House-Harlem Music Hall complex, Hammerstein had become one of New York's most famous theatre entrepreneurs. While he no longer participated in their day-to-day administration, the Harlem Opera House and the Columbus Theatre remained two of the city's most

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profitable "combination" houses. The Harlem Music Hall, while not as well-known as his other Harlem venues, played an important part in the suburb's developing cultural and social life as the setting for concerts, balls, and civic meetings.

The Manhattan Opera House, Hammerstein's only Rialto theatre, added to his reputation as a builder of notable cultural landmarks. Its first season also demonstrated that he had not yet developed the managerial skills necessary to make the enterprise a consistently profitable venture. Hammerstein's decision to form a partnership with Koster and Bial not only saved his theatre, it also enabled him to concentrate on developing his programming expertise. The financial and critical success of the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall's first season was due, in large part, to Hammerstein's managerial skills and to the popularity of his large-scale works in which he displayed his talents as a composer and as a stage director.

Determined to operate independently, he forced Koster and Bial into a legal battle for possession of the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall. Rather than give in to Hammerstein's demand, Koster and Bial paid him a large cash settlement in exchange for the dissolution of their partnership. Hammerstein, rather than returning to his Harlem theatres, purchased a huge site north of the Rialto and began construction on his most ambitious project, the Olympia, a "palace of amusement" unlike any other theatre structure in the world.

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Chapter 3

NORTH OF LONGACRE SQUARE: HAMMERSTEIN'S OLYMPIA

Koster and Bial paid Hammerstein a sizable settlement in order to legally terminate their partnership and to regain full control of the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall. Their theatre's preeminence as New York's only world-class "entertainment resort" was soon challenged, however, when Hammerstein opened his fifth theatre, the Olympia. From its tumultuous opening night in November 1895 until it was demolished by a wrecker's ball forty years later, Hammerstein's fifth collaboration with J. B. McElfatrick and Sons marked the point of origin of New York's present-day theatre district and earned him the title, "The Father of Times Square." Yet Hammerstein lost control of his magnificent "palace of amusement" less than three years after it had opened. The Olympia's first season was a critical and popular success, but Hammerstein's inexperience as a legitimate manager, together with his need to be recognized as a serious composer, turned the once-profitable venture into a liability. While his innovative vaudeville programs continued to draw enthusiastic audiences, his own artistic needs often conflicted with his proven managerial skills. This conflict led to Hammerstein's loss of his unique multipurpose structure.

Today, the term "multiplex" is most often used to describe a group of characterless movie theatres united by a common lobby area where refreshments are sold. In contrast, Hammerstein's Olympia, a remarkable combination of grand promenades and

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cultural centers which began to appear in major American cities in the latter half of the twentieth century. One of the best known of these centers is the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. Like the Olympia, it contains three major performance spaces under one roof. The Kennedy Center, like most performing arts centers, is partly subsidized by government funds. The Olympia, however, belonged only to Hammerstein.

In an interview with Harrison Grey Fiske, editor of the New York Dramatic Mirror, Hammerstein defines his position as owner and manager of the Olympia:

> I have no partner, no backer, no manager, no anybody but myself. I am done with partners. I want to feel that I am the boss, and that when I give an order, there will be no one popping up to countermand it. You can say in the most emphatic way that I am alone in this.[1]

While some readers undoubtedly perceived this statement as a sign of Hammerstein's arrogance, his sentiments were, in fact, no different than those he would have expressed seven years earlier had Fiske decided to interview him while he was building his Harlem Opera House. Hammerstein had not changed, but he had evolved into a major figure in the American theatre whose work demanded attention. In an era when the captains of industry used part of their wealth to build performance spaces for grand opera and classical music to demonstrate that Americans were as cultured as their European contemporaries, Hammerstein chose to design and construct a building, unlike any other in the world, for the purpose of presenting vaudeville and musical entertainments for middle- and working-class audiences.

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Set apart from the Rialto theatres, the Olympia became an urban center for popular art forms. To make his visionary concept a reality, Hammerstein spent vast sums of money to introduce a series of artists and attractions which challenged the hierarchy of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" culture. The Olympia Music Hall and the Olympia Roof Garden often played to capacity crowds. During the Olympia's second and third seasons, however, the profits Hammerstein earned from those venues could not overcome the losses he incurred with his legitimate productions at the Olympia Theatre.

The palatial Olympia fulfilled his ambition to be known as a great theatre builder and enhanced his reputation as a vaudeville manager. Neither of these achievements, however, satisfied his ambition to be recognized as a serious composer or compensated for his misbegotten attempt to present Anna Held as a legitimate theatre star too early in her career. Refusing to admit that his musical talent was, at best, modest, and that he still lacked the expertise to select consistently successful musical productions, Hammerstein, ever the independent, drove himself into bankruptcy. He then watched as less visionary managers, the Sire Brothers and the Syndicate's Charles Frohman, divided the Olympia into separately run spaces and turned his "palace of amusement" into profitable ventures of their own.

The Olympia: A Cultural Landmark

Unlike the metropolitan Opera House, whose dull exterior gave passers-by little indication of its lavishly appointed interior, Hammerstein clearly wanted his Olympia to become one of New York's most recognized buildings. To ensure this, he chose to construct it apart from the other theatres on the Rialto. The site, known as the "Broadway Block" between Forty-fourth and Forty-fifth Streets, was part of an unsavory

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area known as the "Thieves' Lair." During the day, this neighborhood north of Longacre Square was markedly banal, a place where carriages were stored and repaired and where horses were stabled. At night, however, its best known inhabitants, the prostitutes and criminals who lived on the side streets east and west of Broadway, claimed the region as their own and transformed its gaslit streets into a zone where even the police feared to walk.

Although many contemporary performing arts centers, such as New York's Lincoln Center and Newark's New Jersey Performing Arts Center, have since been built in formerly rundown neighborhoods, Hammerstein's decision to build his Olympia in a disreputable area was seen by many of his peers as an act of folly. This attitude began to change, however, as news editors, always eager to publish reports of Hammerstein's ventures in order to sell more newspapers to his ever-increasing base of supporters, printed stories which clarified that Hammerstein intended to build a theatre without rival containing three performance spaces under a single roof and, above them, a glass-enclosed roof garden capable of year-round use. As more details about Hammerstein's ambitious plans for his Olympia continued to be made public, there was a growing realization that his latest theatre posed a genuine threat to many of the city's vaudeville and legitimate managers. Not only were his theatres admired, but by 1895 Hammerstein had acquired a celebrity status which none of his peers could match.

Watching the construction of the mammoth building as it rose ten stories above Broadway became a habit for New York's residents and visitors alike. Decorated in the style of a French Renaissance palace, the theatre could hardly fail to impress viewers from all levels of society. People of great wealth often built their mansions and summer

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"cottages" in styles which replicated or idealized their perceptions of European chateaux. Yet the buildings which housed "their" opera and "their" symphony orchestra had surprisingly neutral exteriors, totally unlike the great "monumental" opera houses and concert halls of Europe. However, Hammerstein was not building the Olympia to impress New York's "smart set" or their more patrician forerunners, the Knickerbockers. His "palace of amusement" was designed for the city's newer residents, immigrants like himself, whose status as middle- or working-class citizens usually denied them the privilege of access to the city's finer cultural institutions. From the beginning, Hammerstein's decision to charge popular prices defined the Olympia as a theatre for the masses.

If his competitors, particularly vaudeville managers, such as Keith and Albee, Proctor, and Koster and Bial, were beginning to grow uneasy about the presence of the Olympia, their fears were intensified when Hammerstein announced his basic admission price. For fifty cents a ticketholder could gain entry to the building and move from one performance space to the next without incurring an extra fee. The single admission policy, a standard practice employed by many of today's theme parks, was a new concept in 1895. By introducing this admission policy. Hammerstein not only undercut his competitors' prices, he further added to his carefully crafted persona as a folk hero by making his Olympia accessible even to entertainment seekers of limited means.

Unlike his Columbus Theatre, which Hammerstein had built to blend into the Harlem streetscape, the Olympia's commanding presence seemed almost a case study in excess. Its white limestone facade, covering three sides of the structure, made it appear even larger than its actual dimensions of two hundred feet in length by one hundred and

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fifty feet in depth and ninety-six feet in height. Perhaps in keeping with the single admission fee policy, the Olympia had only a single entrance, marked by four massive oak doors located at the center of the building. From that point patrons proceeded to a spacious marble foyer containing two large elevators and two huge marble staircases leading to the balconies and the box tiers of the Music Hall and the Theatre.

Hammerstein positioned the Concert Hall in the center of the building at the same level as the Music Hall's and the Theatre's first balconies. Described as being decorated in the style of Louis XV, the rectangular room measured eighty-five feet long and forty-three feet wide. Its ceiling, decorated with floral motifs, rose forty-five feet above. Employing the same technique he had used in his Harlem Opera House, Hammerstein's design included four large mirrors, which made the room appear to be even bigger than it actually was. Although the Concert Hall was in use on the Olympia's opening night, there is no surviving commentary regarding its capacity. Apparently, Hammerstein always intended that it be an informal space with tables and chairs, where patrons might smoke and order drinks while enjoying a "free" Promenade Concert at any time between 7:30 p.m. and midnight. While the Concert Hall received the least press coverage of any of the three venues, its central location indicated that Hammerstein considered it vital to the Olympia's financial success, particularly since drinks were not served in the Music Hall.

The Theatre, located at the Olympia's south end, had seats for approximately twelve hundred patrons plus a nine hundred square foot standing area. Described as being decorated in the style of Louis XVI and painted in blues accented with gold leaf trim, the ornate auditorium contained eighty-four boxes, more than the number at either

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the Metropolitan Opera House or Carnegie Hall.[2] Although Hammerstein did not use his patented box seat arrangement, which had earned him so much praise at his first Manhattan Opera House, the Olympia Theatre "democratized" the concept of box seating. When the Theatre was filled to capacity, as it often was during its first season, over half its patrons had box seats.

As opulent as these two spaces were, neither could match the grandeur of the Music Hall. Located at the north end of the Olympia, the Music Hall, described as being in the style of Louis XIV, and painted white with gold leaf trim, had seating for over sixteen hundred patrons as well as a nine hundred square foot standing area. What made the auditorium unique was its one hundred twenty-four boxes, more than any theatre in the world, which rose in seven levels from the orchestra to the top of the proscenium, seventy feet above. A show unto itself, filled with life-sized statues and ornamentation marked by the curved, undulating lines associated with Le Roi Soleil, the Olympia Music Hall sought to recreate the ambiance of the French royal court.

Every part of the Olympia's interior, including its lavish decor, its wide promenades, and even its huge stages, was designed to complement its palatial exterior in order to appeal to bourgeois fantasies of cultural refinement and to provide visual and tangible evidence that Hammerstein had spent great sums of money in order to give his patrons the finest possible theatrical environment. While the majority of observers applauded Hammerstein's work, some critics felt that he had gone too far. A reporter for the New York Tribune assured his readers that the Olympia would never suffer from poor houses "for there are enough cupids and caryatids to make up a pretty fair crowd."[3]

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While Hammerstein's auditoriums and public areas received the most detailed press coverage, he had also spent lavishly to equip his stages and backstage areas with the best possible technical resources. According to William Birkmire, "The dressing rooms are numerous . . . and a luxury compared with those usually provided in the average playhouse."[4] Birkmire concludes his descriptive essay about the Olympia with a statement with which even Hammerstein's harshest critics had to agree. "There is no standard in this country by which the Olympia can be measured. No theatrical management has ever before offered the public such a diversified scheme of amusement in such a building as this."[5]

Nevertheless, in the rush to have the Olympia ready for opening night, Hammerstein halted worked on his glass-enclosed roof garden and did not complete it until the following spring. The much talked-about basement rooms, which were to include an "Oriental" cafe, bowling alleys, and a Turkish bath, were never built. If these aborted construction plans indicated that Hammerstein's grandiose ambitions were beyond even his reach, their absence had no effect on the public's desire to be part of what would be the theatrical event of the 1895-1896 season.

The Opening of the Olympia

On 25 November 1895, the night of the Olympia's opening, New York's weather was dreadful. Broadway was an unpaved sea of wet mud. The Olympia's huge Otis elevators were inoperable. Hammerstein's star attraction for his Music Hall was still in France. The final coat of paint was far from dry. Yet when the newly-installed electric lights shone on the Olympia's facade for the first time that Monday evening, thousands of

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New Yorkers, dressed in their finest, made their way north of Longacre Square in carriages and on foot to see the Olympia for themselves.

Hammerstein was accused of overbooking his grand opening, but a more plausible explanation for the huge turnout was that the multiplex had already become one of the city's landmark buildings. New Yorkers simply wanted to be part of an historic cultural event. Hammerstein and his house staff, unable to stop the crush of people attempting to push their way into the Olympia, finally had to seek help from the Police Department.

> Oscar Hammerstein had to call on the police last night to help him keep people out of his Olympia, one of the most colossal places of amusement in the world. He had seating room for 6,000 . . . while 5,000, Mr. Hammerstein says, slid through the mud and slush of Longacre back into the ranks of Cosmopolis.[7]

Ticketholders determined enough to force their way inside became part of another chaotic scene as the harried staff attempted to direct audiences to the proper theatre. A reporter for the New York Tribune, like many other patrons, discovered an alternative:

> Many of them got discouraged in their efforts to see or hear anything at all, except the paint on one another's backs . . . and they found their way to the concert hall, upstairs in the middle of the building, and soon that was full, too. There was no vaudeville show there, and there was no play, but there was an orchestra, and there was room to breathe and to smoke and to drink, if the waiter was not too busy to bring anything.[8]

While some were discouraged, there were thousands of others who struggled cheerfully to find their seats in the Music Hall and in the Theatre. When their house

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lights finally dimmed, long after the scheduled 8:15 p.m. curtain time, cheers and applause greeted the overtures. Since many critics devoted most of their "reviews" to praise for the Olympia and descriptions of the patrons' good humor despite the lack of crowd control, the performers appearing at the Olympia that historic Monday evening received very little coverage.

The Music Hall program consisted of fifteen European vaudeville acts, most of which were making their American debuts. Hammerstein designed this long bill in order to compete directly with the one playing at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall, his chief rival. Unlike Keith and Albee, who presented shorter, more economical bills as part of their policy of "continuous" vaudeville, Hammerstein clearly sought to overtake Koster and Bial as the manager of the most sophisticated and innovative vaudeville theatre in New York. Thanks to the experience he had gained as a manager at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall, he was fully prepared to make the Olympia Music Hall the city's finest variety venue.

As the European vaudevillians entertained the first Music Hall audience, Hammerstein had an equally successful debut at the Olympia Theatre with a distinctly American production, the New York premiere of E. E. Rice's Olympia Burlesque Company's musical extravaganza, Excelsior, Jr., starring Fay Templeton. Although the opening night program stated that the musical would have a limited engagement, Excelsior,Jr. became the season's greatest success and ran for eighteen weeks for a total of 144 performances.

Audiences responded warmly to the entertainments in each of the performance spaces. However, the Olympia's triumphant opening night belonged to Hammerstein.

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When the crowds in all three theatres demanded that he speak, he obliged with his customary brevity:

> With a particularly shiny silk hat, several sizes too large for him, and a generous smile of gratified pride, Oscar Hammerstein bowed his thanks from the stage. He looked happy when he said, "Ladies and gentlemen: I always liked this life, and I always liked this world. But never did this life and this world look so beautiful to me as it does tonight."

Harrison Grey Fiske, who had only recently added a new weekly section, "The Vaudeville Stage," to his New York Dramatic Mirror, devoted a column to Hammerstein and his achievements. The special feature, which included a photograph of Hammerstein, was entitled, "The Man of the Hour."

> This is a likeness of the man who is being talked about and written about more than any politician or man of prominence now before the public.
>
> And why should he not be talked of and written of, when he has made more of a stir in the theatrical world since he has been in it than any combination of managers?
>
> Oscar Hammerstein is a man of many talents. He may be a trifle eccentric at times, but, in the language of the old minstrel ditty, "he gets there just the same."
>
> He is a man who has convictions, and what is better, he has the courage of those convictions, and when he starts in to do anything, he does it thoroughly.

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The historic occasion of the Olympia's opening provided Fiske with the perfect opportunity to pay tribute to Hammerstein as one of the city's great visionaries and as the most important and intriguing man in the theatre community. In an era when conformity pervaded every aspect of American life, including the theatre, Fiske's admiration of Hammerstein's individualism plainly indicated that Fiske, like many others, still believed that the best role models were men and women like Hammerstein who challenged the status quo in order to effect positive change.

The public's response to the Olympia verified Fiske's description of Hammerstein as the most admired figure of his time. His "palace of amusement" rivaled the grandeur of Europe's royal residences, but Hammerstein's "democratic" architectural plan gave the structure its decidedly American, nonaristocratic flavor. By making his combination of formal and informal performance spaces equally accessible to all patrons, Hammerstein eliminated the social barriers which had always separated audiences. He further enhanced this democratic ideal by building his Music Hall and his Theatre with an enormous number of box seats. These seats, which had been the preserve of the upper classes at all other theatres, including Hammerstein's four previous theatres, were available at popular prices at the Olympia. If Hammerstein could not permanently alter his patrons' lives, he had given them a superb showplace in which they were invited to escape, at least for a few hours, from the mundane and often stultifying conditions they endured every day. By combining an idealized copy of an Old World palace with a model plan suited to the New World, Hammerstein made his Olympia a perfect cultural landmark for a country still engaged in the transitional process of defining itself. The Olympia, like the nation, was incomparable. It was also, however, a commercial

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enterprise. Hammerstein could not depend on the Olympia's novel design and egalitarian pricing policy to attract both new and repeat audiences. Fortunately, both critics and audiences agreed that he had selected the proper kinds of entertainments with which to inaugurate the Olympia's first season. The addition of a Sunday concert series brought more audiences to the Olympia, but Hammerstein still needed a star attraction of sufficient magnitude to enhance the Music Hall's vaudeville acts. He found such a star in Yvette Guilbert.

A Star Attraction for the Music Hall

Although vaudeville was still in its formative years, its managers had already begun to develop the basic patterns which would govern vaudeville programming during its half-century as America's most popular form of live entertainment. Because its primary audiences were drawn from the middle- and working classes, people who had little or no previous experience with professional performances and were easily intimidated by more elitist art forms, managers had to consider a number of factors when designing a standard bill. Perhaps the most important part of a bill was its variety. Since most vaudeville houses catered to the family trade, managers had to include acts which would appeal to a wide age range. Secondly, vaudeville thrived on a sense of intimacy between performer and audience. While the design of the auditorium served as a proper divider, the most popular vaudevillians were those who were able to create a sense of rapport with their audiences. The concept of the "fourth wall," so vital to the realism of most legitimate productions, was employed effectively only in the presentations of the

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brief "playlets" managers were beginning to add to their programs. The third factor was economy. In order to attract audiences, ticket prices were kept reasonably low. Therefore, vaudevillians remained among the lowest-paid of all entertainers.

Hammerstein competed directly with New York's other managers for patrons, but his determination to be recognized as the manager of the finest vaudeville house in America caused him to create new standards to serve his own purposes. Since the Olympia Music Hall was the most grandiose vaudeville venue, Hammerstein's programming had to complement its spectacular setting. To ensure this, Hammerstein paid his vaudevillians generous salaries, wages that seemed more appropriate to the twentieth century than to his own era. Secondly, although the Music Hall's magnificence made it appear ill-suited for the intimacy upon which so many vaudevillians relied, the theatre's superb acoustics and sophisticated lighting system enabled Hammerstein to rely often on soloists as his star attractions. Lastly, while variety was an important factor in Hammerstein's planning, his Music Hall, like his chief rival, the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall, was never intended to serve as a venue for family entertainment. Therefore, Hammerstein was free to experiment and to expand vaudeville's boundaries far beyond the more modest goals of his competitors. He shared their need to ensure that audiences were entertained, but he had more ambitious plans for his programs. At his previous theatres, he often depended on the name value of stars to attract audiences. As manager of the Olympia, he chose a more risk-prone strategy by deciding to create stars. Yvette Guilbert was only the first of many Hammerstein discoveries.

Having already publicized the fact that he would pay the chansonneuse the incredible sum of four thousand dollars a week, Hammerstein seemed, according to some

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wags, on the verge of repeating the same mistake he made three years earlier when he presented Mrs. Sara Bernard-Beere in a performance space that was not suited to her ability as a dramatic actress. Although critically praised in her native France, Guilbert seemed an unusual centerpiece for a lively vaudeville bill designed to entertain predominantly American audiences. The fact that only one of her seven songs was sung in English seemed certain to limit her appeal. However, audiences were enthralled by her performance. The phenomenal success of her American debut at the Olympia Music Hall not only proved the wags wrong; it also made Guilbert a major international star.

> On her first entrance Mlle. Guilbert did not impress her audience as being any more than an ordinary French music hall singer. She is tall and angular, and her face . . . is by no means pretty. But when she began to sing her appearance changed and she became fascinating . . . . She is not a ballad singer in the ordinary sense of the term. She is rather an acting and pantomimic singer . . . . Each of her creations is a distinct study . . . . Mlle. Guilbert shows herself to be . . . an actress of rare emotional power. [10]

Guilbert sang to packed houses for four weeks. Her artistry caused such a sensation that she was invited to give a concert at the Metropolitan Opera House. "In spite of the protests of some of the French opera singers . . . the auditorium was packed and the applause was deafening."[11] Hammerstein's decision to invest in this most unusual star attraction for his Music Hall had been more than justified. Guilbert's appearances at the Olympia had proved to be both commercially and artistically rewarding. It was yet another demonstration of Hammerstein's remarkable ability to provide sophisticated entertainment which nevertheless appealed to a wide spectrum of patrons. Guilbert's

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extraordinary popularity was undoubtedly a factor that served to motivate Hammerstein to attempt yet another experiment which redefined vaudeville's parameters. In doing so, he also displayed his own need to be recognized as a serious artist.

A Change in Programming Policy

Since Hammerstein was in charge of every aspect of the Olympia's operation, he was able to fulfill his desire to present his own work in the proper setting. While his previous attempts to form opera companies and a dramatic stock company had failed at both his Harlem Opera House and at his first Manhattan Opera House, due in part to his lack of experience, he did achieve some critical and much popular success as a stage director and composer at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall. His staging of the spectacular ballet, "Versailles," and his elaborate presentation of his own comic opera, The Koh-i-Noor, had been crucial to that establishment's being designated as New York's finest "entertainment resort." Since Hammerstein intended that the Olympia serve as the city's principal entertainment venue, he could claim both artistic and commercial justifications for deciding to present his latest opera, Marguerite, an adaptation of the Faust legend, at the Olympia Music Hall. Unlike The Koh-i-Noor, however, which Hammerstein wrote merely to win a wager made over a mug of beer, he clearly wanted Marguerite to be judged as a serious endeavor.

On 10 February 1896, a standing-room-only audience witnessed the inauguration of the Olympia Music Hall's new programming policy. The first half of the bill consisted of seven vaudeville acts, one of which, the Leamey Troupe of trapeze artists, had been held over since the Olympia's opening night. Following the intermission, which gave patrons the opportunity to go to the Concert Hall and listen to part of the ongoing

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Promenade Concert, the curtain rose on Marguerite. While his libretto drew upon the Faust legend's basic theme regarding the sacrifice of one's soul in exchange for earthly rewards, Hammerstein, well aware that a typical Music Hall audience would have little patience for so disturbing a narrative, made major structural changes in the plot and augmented it to include a corps de ballet, musical selections performed by the Olympia Grand Orchestra, a huge chorus, and spectacular visual effects. In what proved to be his major deviation from the legend, Hammerstein made Marguerite, not Faust, his central character, a woman capable of saving Faust from succumbing to the devil's temptations. This shift in focus enabled Hammerstein to create a plausible, if melodramatic, happy ending.

As might be expected, some critics disapproved of Hammerstein's tampering. However, Hammerstein understood that his Music Hall audiences would respond favorably to a variation on the well-tested theme of a man saved from perdition thanks to the efforts of a good woman. Marguerite was not high art, but its use of middle-class moral values proved to be highly satisfying to Olympia audiences. Hammerstein's adaptation introduced further changes which also made his work more accessible. In his version, Faust and Marguerite are a young married couple. A painter rather than a scholar, Faust's great ambition is to create a nude painting which will bring him renown. The first scene, set in the painter's studio, depicts the frustrated artist and his dissatisfaction with his efforts. Mephisto appears and promises Faust that he will provide him with all the subjects he needs in return for his soul. Marguerite begs her husband to spurn Mephisto's offer. To further entice the conflicted artist, Mephisto causes all the

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paintings in the studio to come to life. Despite Marguerite's entreaties, Faust agrees to Mephisto's terms.

In the second scene, set in Mephisto's home, the Palace of Flowers, Mephisto entertains Faust with a series of seven elaborate dance sequences with such names as "The Hussars," "The Wedding Party," and "The Circus." While impressed, Faust is not yet satisfied, and he demands that Mephisto present him with the ideal woman who is to be the subject of his painting. She is, of course, his own Marguerite.

Sensing that Mephisto means to harm them both, Marguerite snatches his magic staff away from him. In her hands the staff becomes a holy object. When she waves it, the Palace of Flowers disappears and is replaced by a third scene, the interior of a huge cathedral. As the organ plays, the sound of a choir singing hymns can be heard. The evil spell has been broken. As Mephisto slips away, the young lovers are reunited and the opera ends with a spectacular ballet.

The majority of critics wrote favorable reviews of the performances, particularly that of Alice Rose in the title role. Hammerstein was praised for taking advantage of the Music Hall's huge stage for his large-scale production numbers and for the production's scenic beauty. Most importantly, he received the credit he desired for his music and lyrics. The New York Times critic echoes the opinion of the majority: "The performance showed that Mr. Hammerstein worked very hard on the production. The music is quite tuneful, the lyrics are well-written, and on the whole the piece made quite a pleasing impression." [12] Since Hammerstein was still a relative novice in the field of musical theatre, the many positive compliments he received in the press and from his audiences must have provided him with the encouragement he so badly needed. However, while

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his work was well received as a unique contribution to vaudeville programming, there was little indication that either critics or audiences expected him to attempt to write for the legitimate theatre.

Without box office receipts for verification, there is no way to judge whether or not Marguerite continued to draw enthusiastic audiences. However, Hammerstein kept this expensive production on the Music Hall bill for thirteen weeks for a total of ninety-one performances. One indication that the work continued to be popular was the fact that Hammerstein scheduled a "Professional matinee" performance of Marguerite in mid-March 1896 in order that other actors working in the New York area could have the opportunity to see it.

> The Olympia Music Hall was crowded to its utmost capacity on Friday afternoon last by the actors and actresses employed in the various city theatres. They had been invited there by Oscar Hammerstein to see his opera-ballet-spectacle, Marguerite. . . . The singers . . . were warmly applauded and many of their songs were redemanded . . . . There were several cries for a speech, but the owner-builder-manager-composer-librettist-impresario contented himself with a bow and a smile. Among the guests were Lillian Russell, Fay Templeton, Theresa Vaughan, Marie Dressler, James T. Powers, Aubrey Boucicault, E. A. Stevens and representatives from every company in New York, Brooklyn and Jersey City."[11]

According to the trade papers, Hammerstein's combination of first-class vaudeville acts followed by his Marguerite remained a strong drawing card. Clearly a more polished work than The Koh-i-Noor, Hammerstein's elaborate Marguerite appealed to adult audiences seeking novelty. In contrast, the majority of vaudeville managers

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attempted to fulfill this demand with less costly, highly eclectic programs designed to please every age group.

As the genre evolved into a full-fledged industry, many managers extended their franchises by leasing existing theatres or by building new ones. When Excelsior, Jr. ended its long run at the Olympia Theatre, Hammerstein, perhaps because he was unable to book another production so late in the season, took advantage of the growing demand for vaudeville and turned his Olympia Theatre into a second vaudeville venue. This policy, in combination with his "50 Cents Admits to All" ticket price, made Hammerstein an even more formidable rival for New York's other vaudeville managers.

Hammerstein was not pleased to be managing two vaudeville houses at the end of the Olympia's first season. The revenues from these dual ventures, however, plus the continuing success of his Promenade Concerts in the Concert Hall, forced other vaudeville managers to seek new methods in order to compete. Tony Pastor, the acknowledged "Dean" of American vaudeville, had to slash ticket prices in order to attract audiences to his theatre on Fourteenth Street. F. F. Proctor was rumored to be looking for a third theatre, which would mark his entry onto the Rialto. The New Koster and Bial's Music Hall, now under the management of Koster's son, John, was no longer considered the city's finest vaudeville venue. To compete, Koster began to promote his bills as "all-star" programs, a claim Hammerstein was unwilling to employ in the Olympia's advertisements.

Perhaps the most startling announcement to indicate how influential Hammerstein's unique approach to vaudeville programming had become appeared in the New York Dramatic Mirror regarding the Metropolitan Opera House. "An orchestra of

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seventy-five, under the direction of Anton Seidl, will play and ballet divertissements with electrical displays and vaudeville acts will be given . . . . Smoking will be permitted." [14] This plan, which so obviously imitated Hammerstein's atypical yet profitable approach to vaudeville, was clearly designed to draw audiences away from the Olympia. However, the idea of a smoke-filled Metropolitan Opera House, populated by seekers of variety entertainment, must have seemed particularly ludicrous to the wealthy and privileged New Yorkers who built the great opera house for themselves. Despite new and ongoing competition, Hammerstein continued to enhance his reputation as the city's premiere vaudeville manager by presenting star attractions whose artistry placed them far above their contemporaries.

Enter Fregoli, Followed by Weber and Fields

Signor Fregoli, a quick change artist, arrived at the Olympia Music Hall with a crew of five assistants and literally tons of props, costumes, and scenery. A dedicated artist with a seriousness of purpose atypical of the majority of vaudevillians, Fregoli made no attempt to ingratiate himself. Other performers on the bill disliked his condescending attitude, but none could deny that, in performance, Fregoli was brilliant. As the review in the New York Times states, "It is Fregoli that gives the show. The rest of it is merely an introduction and a conclusion in which he kindly allows other people to make a living. [15]

Unlike more traditional impersonators so popular during the era, whose success depended on their ability to transform themselves into a copy of a single well-known celebrity, such as the many male versions of the famed soprano, Adelina Patti, Fregoli astonished audiences by playing a gallery of characters of both sexes. In his first

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program, Fregoli portrayed a nun, a baritone singing grand opera, a vocal coach and his female pupil, a rakish man-about-town who interspersed his renditions of popular songs with amusing monologues, and a magician. In a short play, aptly titled The Chameleon, performed with a complete drawing room setting, Fregoli played five characters including a middle-class matron, her young lover, her suspicious husband, an elderly servant, and a sleepy-faced lodger unable to comprehend why the other four characters were rushing in and out of doors and windows, brandishing pistols, and disturbing his rest. Fregoli, whose performances were often an hour long, had an act which was impossible to follow.

This fact had become apparent to Joe Weber and Lew Fields, two young "Dutch" comedians who were making their Broadway debut at the Olympia, even as they observed Fregoli's painstaking rehearsals. Although the team had honed their hilarious "Mike and Meyer" routines to near perfection at second and third-class vaudeville houses all over the country, they realized that their once foolproof act could never compete with Fregoli's mastery.

Rather than imploring Hammerstein to place them earlier in program, they asked his permission to rehearse a brand new act which would burlesque Fregoli's performance. Hammerstein agreed to this risky idea and, in doing so, enabled Weber And Fields to discover an entirely new direction for their careers.

Wisely, Weber and Fields made no attempt to best Fregoli's astounding abilities. Instead, they used part of the seven hundred and fifty dollar weekly salary Hammerstein was paying them to hire two of Field's relatives to play copies of their "Mike and Meyer" characters in their new act. As soon as the comedians, dressed in their "Mike and Meyer"

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costumes, exited the stage. Field's brother and brother-in-law, also dressed as "Mike and Meyer," entered. As the act progressed, the two teams would switch back and forth at an increasingly accelerated pace until exits and entrances seemed to occur almost simultaneously.

> At the end of it all, Mike and Meyer once again, stood on the stage. There was stunned silence, then thunderous applause. Weber and Fields took several bows, then gestured toward the wings. Their doubles came forward to share in the credit . . . . Hammerstein laughed until he cried . . . . Fregoli was surprisingly gracious, even going so far as to give the boys pointers on how to make their changes quicker. [16]

The success of their new act convinced the comedians that the time had come for them to move beyond performance and to form their own company in a permanent location. According to Fields's biographers, they first approached Hammerstein with a plan to lease his Olympia Theatre for this venture, which was to include vaudeville acts and parodies of current Rialto hit plays and musicals. Hammerstein, determined to remain in complete charge of the Olympia, turned their intriguing proposal down.[17] His refusal to consider Weber and Fields's plan was the first major error he had made as "Sole Owner and Manager" of the Olympia. Instead of providing him with a steady income as his tenants, Weber and Fields became his competitors at their own music hall less than three months after Hammerstein rejected their offer. Although he refused to lease his Theatre to Weber and Fields, Hammerstein quickly signed Fregoli to an exclusive contract and retained his services for the entire summer as the star attraction of the Olympia Roof Garden.

The Roof Garden Season

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Between Decoration Day and mid-June, 1896, six major roof garden theatres opened. With the exception of the Olympia, these permanent performance spaces were specifically designed to take advantage of New York's warm summer weather and to provide patrons with the opportunity to "leave" the city by rising above it. While each was distinctive, all these "summer resorts" shared an ambiance of informality, an emphasis on light, popular entertainments, and an abundance of available refreshments.

The managers of the roof gardens atop the Casino Theatre, the American Theatre, Madison Square Garden, Proctor's Pleasure Palace, and the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall predicted that a successful season was about to begin. Privately, they wondered how much of that success would belong to Hammerstein. The Olympia Roof Garden was not only New York's newest "resort," it was also the largest. Covering an area of twenty thousand square feet, Hammerstein's glass-enclosed space was able to accommodate more than three thousand people in any kind of weather.

To help eliminate crowding on the two large elevators which carried patrons from the lobby to the Olympia Roof Garden, Hammerstein continued his Promenade Concerts in the Concert Hall. Unlike his competitors, whose open-air "resorts" closely resembled the ground-level biergartens of Lower New York, Hammerstein's roof garden was designed as a fantasy world far removed from the city below. His Music Hall, Concert Hall, and Theatre recreated the grandeur of the French royal court. In contrast, the Olympia Roof Garden's decor surrounded patrons with a setting which romanticized the more familiar agrarian world into which they had been born. For many, Hammerstein's idealized bucolic environment evoked strong, positive memories of an almost-forgotten landscape. An immigrant himself more than thirty years earlier, Hammerstein had had to

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learn how to survive in an alien habitat which grew more crowded, dirty, and noisy as thousands of newcomers moved from small towns and farms to find work in an increasingly industrialized and impersonal metropolis. His glass-enclosed Olympia Roof Garden was artfully designed to provide New York's middle- and working-class audiences with a respite from the rigors of daily life.

Swans glided in a forty foot lake; exotic flowering plants hung from the girders which supported the roof; ducks and fish swam in a pond fed by a waterfall at the center of a woodland setting. To the right and left of the large proscenium stage were huge paintings of Alpine mountain scenes, which Hammerstein embellished with real trees and shrubs as well as life-sized set pieces such as rocks, hillocks, and even a practical wooden bridge. Lit by thousands of incandescent bulbs, the Olympia Roof Garden's pastoral ambiance was as spectacular as the regal atmosphere Hammerstein created for the Olympia's other performance spaces.

The lake, pond, and waterfall formed the aesthetic portion of what Hammerstein considered his best innovation, a patented cooling system consisting of a series of pipes carrying water chilled in the Olympia's basement, that trickled over the glass-enclosed roof. Although there was some doubt expressed about the actual cooling power of the system, the combination of the soft sounds of the running water and the visual impact of the man-made water displays served to enhance the audience's perception that the Olympia Roof Garden had a refreshing atmosphere despite the fact that it was a sealed environment.

The Olympia Roof Garden's grand opening on the evening of 15 June 1896 was another Hammerstein triumph. When the audience of more than three thousand

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demanded that he make a speech prior to the vaudeville program, he was too overcome to respond. From his box, he simply rose and bowed as the crowd cheered and applauded. Almost unknown eight years earlier, Hammerstein had become a model for people who still believed, despite the often harsh circumstances of their own lives, that America remained the place where an individual's dreams could be realized. Nevertheless, Hammerstein's continued success had not saved him from the machinations of New York's notoriously corrupt political machine on numerous occasions. Thanks to the phenomenal public response to Fregoli, who was now appearing at the Olympia Roof Garden in a new production, El Dorado, in which he portrayed fifty characters, Hammerstein found himself, once again, in conflict with Tammany Hall.

"Honest" Graft

When a legitimate play or vaudeville program became a success in New York, speculators and their cohorts bought up as many low-priced tickets as possible for the purpose of selling them at inflated prices. Patrons heading for the box office were told that, although the next performance was sold out, the speculator could, for a fee, provide the necessary tickets. Tammany Hall had legalized this corrupt system by granting licenses to speculators.

On any given night, a dozen or more speculators stood near the Olympia's huge entry doors hawking overpriced tickets. Hammerstein first countered by placing large signs on Broadway which stated that speculator's tickets would not be accepted. When that failed to dissuade them, he posted his eldest sons, Harry and Arthur, at the entrance to warn prospective patrons. Speculator Richard Murray, who held License #35, had no trouble having Arthur arrested on a charge of conspiracy.

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Although Murray subsequently dropped the ridiculous charge, probably out of fear of dealing with Hammerstein père in a court of law, speculators continued to assert their legal right to cheat patrons. In an interview with the New York Times, Hammerstein speaks of his frustration with these licensed thieves:

> The ticket speculators have annoyed and worried me beyond expression since the opening of the roof garden. Their business is an injury to the house and an imposition upon the public. They sometimes charge people $4 and $5 for a single seat. I am opposed to it, because if I allow them to continue without protest, the public may, by and by, imagine that I am in league with them. [18]

In four sentences, Hammerstein, ever aware of his folk hero persona, managed to exonerate himself, to imply that some speculators were actually in the employ of other managers, and, most importantly, to promote the fact that people were willing to pay exorbitant prices in order to attend the Olympia Roof Garden. Once again he proved to be his own best publicist.

Years later Hammerstein would claim that his profits from the Olympia's first season exceeded $135,000. Although this was probably an exaggerated figure, Hammerstein's success had attracted the attention of London's music hall owners. According to the New York Dramatic Mirror, the London Empire Theatre Company offered to buy the Olympia for three million dollars. In the same article, Hammerstein gives his response to this and other lucrative offers:

> It is true that I have received these offers, but under no circumstances would I accept them. Olympia is my pride, my very existence. I could not be happy without the work I have laid out for myself here, and I will not sell under any circumstances [19]

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Hammerstein's pride in his achievement was understandable. The Olympia had satisfied his ambition to build one of the world's great theatres. In addition to being an excellent showcase for a variety of carefully chosen artists, the Olympia also allowed Hammerstein to begin to fulfill his own need to be recognized as a serious composer. Unfortunately, the Olympia's second season marked a turning point in his desire to be seen as an artist. Having earned considerable praise as a director of spectacular divertissements and as the composer of two one-act operas, he believed that he was ready to attempt a full-length work for the legitimate stage, the comic opera, Santa Maria. Although it ran for one hundred performances at the Olympia Theatre, there was clear evidence that the expensive production lost money from the start. With no one in a position to question his authority, Hammerstein allowed his artistic ambitions to cloud his otherwise remarkable business acumen.

Santa Maria

By the time the much-anticipated Santa Maria opened on 24 September 1896, Hammerstein, sure of its success, had formed the Olympia Music Publishing Company for the express purpose of selling the sheet music to its score to patrons who attended the production. While none of the reviews of the production indicated that such an expense was warranted, the critics were not entirely unkind to Hammerstein.

The comic opera's narrative, a variation the theme of the missing heir, is uncomplicated. The King of Holland is about to divorce his wife because she has not given him an heir. A gypsy informs him that she had born him a child eighteen years earlier and then given it away while he was at war. The delighted King sends his trusted

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Lieutenant to search for this missing heir. Much to his surprise, the Lieutenant discovers that the lost "son" is actually a beautiful young woman. By the time they return to Holland, having had some comic misadventures along the way, the young couple have fallen in love. The King heartily approves of the match and declares that the lovers will be the future King and Queen of Holland.

There was considerable praise for the Olympia Comic Opera Company's leading players, Camille D'Arville, Julius Steger, and James T. Powers, as well as for the production's costumes and settings. Hammerstein was congratulated for his latest technological innovation, a patented ice palace setting created entirely of aluminum. The review in the Evening Post declared, "While there is little to be said in favor of the book, which is trash, the music is generally tuneful and certainly entertaining."[20] The critic for the New York Times called the work "deliciously naive" and compared Hammerstein to the anonymous authors of Gammer Gurton's Needle and Ralph Roister Doister.

> For the rest there is plenty of singable music which we shall not attempt to consider critically. There is a succession of showy pictures . . . . There are troops of pretty girls in gay costumes . . . . Mr. Hammerstein is scarcely a Sullivan or a Suppe. Nor is he, as a librettist, a rival of Gilbert. But he is a man of extraordinary versatility and wonderful energy, who is doing much . . . to entertain his fellow-citizens.[21]

Hammerstein, who had shown himself to be notably impervious to negative criticism in the past, was apparently stung by the critics' refusal to treat Santa Maria as a masterpiece. Rather than allowing his first legitimate production to have a brief run, he made it a vanity production. Despite dwindling attendance, Santa Maria continued at the

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Olympia Theatre until 12 December 1896. His leading lady, Camille D'Arville, however, left the production soon after its fiftieth performance.

> The reason of my absence from Olympia is the fact that Mr. Hammerstein has not paid me my full salary for three weeks. He owes me . . . the sum of $825 which is half my salary . . . . Miss D'Arville said further that the other members have only been paid half salaries for some time.[22]

In the past, Hammerstein shocked his contemporaries by paying his stars exorbitant fees. Now, determined to keep his own production open, he reneged on his contractual obligations. Surprisingly, most of the large company agreed to accept reduced salaries. He replaced D'Arville with Alice Rose, his "Marguerite," and Santa Maria continued at the Olympia Theatre. Obviously, Hammerstein took advantage of his performers' desire to keep working. He did attempt to repay their loyalty to him by taking the production to Philadelphia in January 1897 to start a national tour. Philadelphia's theatre critics, however, were not impressed by Hammerstein's first effort for the legitimate stage. Wisely, Hammerstein canceled the tour.

After Santa Maria played its one hundredth performance, Hammerstein reopened the Olympia Theatre with a London success, Edward Paulton's Dorcas. Described as an "operatic comedy," the production failed to draw, and Hammerstein closed it after sixteen performances. Then, just as he had done at his first Manhattan Opera House, he allowed the Theatre to remain dark for three months, thus depriving himself of badly needed revenues. This downward financial spiral worsened when he opened the Theatre once again on 26 April 1897. Perhaps hoping to recapture the success of The Isle of Champagne, the only profitable production at his first Manhattan Opera House, he

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presented a new musical burlesque, Thomas Byrne and Edwin Perlet's The Isle of Gold. The critic for the New York Times, who had been kind to Hammerstein's Santa Maria, accurately summarizes the production's negative reception in the press:

> It is neither a burlesque or musical . . . . There is no plot to "The Isle of Gold," so the performers were not wholly to blame for the three hours of depression, about two hours more than the major part of the assembled crowd could endure . . . . Just why "The Isle of Gold" was produced will doubtless remain a theatrical mystery . . . . It was not worth the trouble and expense."[21]

After a week of poorly attended performances, Hammerstein closed the production. Although a number of celebrities, including actor-manager Richard Mansfield, attempted to negotiate a lease, Hammerstein refused all offers, stubbornly refusing to lease his theatre. Instead, the Olympia Theatre remained dark until the following October. Only the success of his vaudeville programs in the Music Hall, the Promenade Concerts in the Concert Hall, and a new novelty, the Olympia Winter Roof Garden, enabled Hammerstein to survive.

The Olympia Winter Roof Garden

Because it could be heated, the glass-enclosed Olympia Roof Garden reopened on 2 November 1896. Not content to offer his audiences another vaudeville program, Hammerstein gave his pastoral fantasy world a French flair. Publicized as an American: Moulin Rouge, the Winter Roof Garden's bill was divided into two distinct parts. At 8:15 p.m., the curtain rose on a vaudeville program entitled Gay Paris to Greater New York. Although many of the performers had actually performed in Parisian music halls,

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the program title's real purpose was to serve as a bridge to the second part of the evening, the Bal Champetre.

> At 11 o'clock, the curtain fell on the vaudeville performance, and immediately a large force of attaches began to remove the seats and clear a large space in the center of the floor . . . . An orchestra of thirty-five was seated on the stage . . . sixteen dancers . . . began to dance a quadrille. [24]

Following the quadrille, as the orchestra began to play a waltz, the audience was invited to dance. According to the New York Dramatic Mirror:

> . . . it was several minutes before the 'public' plucked up its courage and took a hand. The first couple who stepped forth received a rousing cheer . . . by degrees the floor was pretty well-covered with dancing couples, who seemed to be enjoying themselves thoroughly. [25]

Hammerstein's Bal Champetre, which predated by nearly fifteen years the American craze for social dancing exemplified by Vernon and Irene Castle, was a resounding success. Night after night, crowds waited to gain entry to the brightly lit and comfortably heated Roof Garden. Ironically, Hammerstein's novelty began to compete with his other attractions. To avoid this problem, he changed the Winter Roof Garden's hours so that it opened after the Olympia Music Hall's vaudeville program had ended. Despite the late hour, the Winter Roof Garden's unique setting and its novel "rustic ball" continued to attract large crowds for five months throughout the winter season and provided Hammerstein with income he badly needed to maintain the Olympia's position as New York's most important vaudeville venue.

The "Vaudeville Wars"

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Public demand for more variety programming became so insistent that New Yorkers could choose from more than fifteen theatres devoted to this most popular of popular entertainments. Competition among the Rialto's variety managers grew so intense that the press coined the term "vaudeville wars" to pique their readers' interest in the rivalries. While the minor venues catered to less discerning neighborhood audiences, the first-class theatres sought to draw patrons from all over the city with unique attractions or policies.

Down on Fourteenth Street, Tony Pastor's audiences knew that they could expect the beloved entertainer to perform at every program. On Twenty-third Street, F. F. Proctor introduced "continuous vaudeville" and kept his theatre open from 11 a.m. until 11 p.m. His slogan, "After breakfast, go to Proctor's; after Proctor's, go to bed," was familiar to almost everyone. At Union Square, B. F. Keith and E. F. Albee made "The Home of Polite Vaudeville" particularly attractive to more conservative entertainment seekers.

While these managers were important participants in the "vaudeville wars" of the 1896-1897 season, the chief combatants were John Koster, who had taken over the management of the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall from his father and Albert Bial, and Hammerstein. Since they managed the finest vaudeville venues in the city, the only ones which emulated the great British music halls, their rivalry dominated the industry in New York.

When Koster signed Yvette Guilbert for her second American engagement, Hammerstein countered by presenting Louise Beaudet, an American singer who had become a star in Parisian music halls. While the professional critics judged the women

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to be equally talented, vaudeville audiences patronized both establishments in order to observe both performers and argue about their talents. Guilbert's selection of predominantly French songs closely resembled those she had sung for Hammerstein the year before. Beaudet, however, in addition to being a new discovery, sang most of her songs in English and used her excellent French only sparingly. Since the "vaudeville wars" were judged as much on quantity as they were on quality, the fact that Beaudet drew crowds to the Olympia for eight weeks, whereas Guilbert only sang for four weeks at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall, indicated that Hammerstein emerged victorious from that highly publicized "battle."

Despite the fact that he was respected for his discovery of top-flight artists, Hammerstein, on one occasion, risked his reputation and earned the dubious distinction of presenting vaudeville's first "freak" act. Unlike the human "freaks" displayed at dime museums and carnivals because they were born with a unique physical deformity that defined their otherness, vaudeville's "freak" acts were composed of a broader spectrum of individuals. Some of these performers, such as Machnow, an illiterate giant, whose "act" consisted of shaking hands with members of the audience, were no different than those exploited by men such as P. T. Barnum. The majority of "freak" acts, however, were composed of one or more individuals who became famous, or notorious, for deeds unrelated to their artistic abilities. Celebrities from the world of sports were among the more profitable attractions. Vaudeville managers, eager to capitalize on their popularity, added boxers, such as heavyweight champion Jack Johnson to their traditional bills. Johnson's "act" allowed him to display his prowess in the ring. In contrast, boxer James

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J. Corbett, known as "Gentleman Jim," delighted vaudeville audiences by demonstrating a genuine talent for storytelling.

The best remembered "freak" acts, however, were the short-lived, but highly lucrative, engagements of untalented nonprofessionals involved in scandalous or criminal behavior touted by the tabloid press. Perhaps the most sensational of this type of "freak" act was that of Evelyn Nesbit Thaw, whose husband, socialite Harry Thaw, murdered her former paramour, architect Stanford White, at the Madison Square Roof Garden in 1906. Audiences who flocked to see the notorious beauty at vaudeville houses all over the country in 1913 and 1914 were not drawn by her limited skill as a dancer. They simply wanted to see the era's most famous "fallen woman" in person.

The phenomenal success of the Cherry Sisters at the Olympia Music Hall, however, defied reason. They were not physically grotesque. They had not acquired fame in another occupation. Their personal lives contained no hint of scandal or criminal behavior. They were unique simply because they were so bad. In a review, entitled "Four Freaks from Iowa," the critic for the New York Times describes their Olympia debut:

> It was a little after 10 o'clock when three lank figures and one short and thick walked awkwardly to the center of the stage. They were all dressed in shapeless red gowns, made by themselves almost surely, and the fat sister carried a bass drum. They stood quietly for a moment, apparently seeing nothing and wondering what the jeering laughter could mean. Then they began to sing, in thin, strained soprano . . . the ancient "Ta-Ra-Ra Boom de Aye." People listened in amazement as one senseless verse followed another, accompanied at rare intervals by a graceless gesture and intermittent thumps on the big drum . . . . A few men made pointless jests, a

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> few laughed, and all the rest sat quietly and
> wished the cruel sport would cease. It did, at last,
> and wise people will severely let it alone. [25]

Despite unanimously negative reviews, the talentless Cherry Sisters, with their meager repertoire of songs and recitations, drew standing-room-only audiences for five weeks. Hammerstein's decision to risk his reputation paid him back handsomely. In addition, the Cherry Sisters' act became the standard used by vaudevillians to judge the profession's worst performers.

While the Cherry Sisters earned money for Hammerstein, his most significant victories in the "vaudeville wars" were gained by the elaborate musical productions he presented. Since these spectacles were atypical of standard vaudeville programming, they appealed to a much broader audience and served to distinguish the Olympia Music Hall from all other vaudeville houses. Koster, who had no interest in directing, attempted to compete by giving his bills a loosely unifying theme. Hammerstein, however, worked to erase the line which divided vaudeville from the legitimate theatre.

Weber and Fields created a sensation at their own music hall by presenting performances that contained standard vaudeville acts and parodies of current Rialto hits. Hammerstein, aware of the young comedians' success, also used parodies. However, he adapted his productions from real events involving members of New York society. The most successful of these burlesques, Silly's Dinner, opened at the Olympia Music Hall on 11 January 1897.

Since the actual event, the "Seeley Dinner," had been well-covered by the press, the capacity audience already knew the facts about the most talked-about "stag" party

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ever held in New York. Planned as a private dinner party for socialite bride-groom-to-be, Clifton Seeley, and a large group of his wealthy male friends, the "Seeley Dinner" achieved notoriety when it was raided by the New York Police Department. Annabelle Whitford, one of the young women asked to perform an allegedly lewd dance for Seeley and his friends, notified her stepfather. Infuriated, Whitford's stepfather informed the police commissioner, who sent a small group of officers to investigate. The investigation quickly turned into a mêlée. Accusations of impropriety were hurled from both sides. New York's newspapers provided readers with ample coverage of the "Seeley Dinner" and its questionable entertainment. According to the New York Times, Miss Whitford, testified that "she would be expected to dance in very scanty attire."[27] In the same article, however, Mr. Seeley was quoted as stating that "while something out of the ordinary was expected, it was positively not stipulated that any performer should appear in the nude."[28]

The press coverage of the "Seeley Dinner" dwelled on its more sordid aspects. Hammerstein's comic version, however, gave New Yorkers an opportunity to laugh at the foibles of the upper class. Because the party had taken place in a private dining room at Louis Sherry's elegant restaurant, Hammerstein spared no expense in recreating the setting. He also scored a coup by casting two of the young women hired to perform for this all-male gathering. Hammerstein's production included dances by the now notorious Cora Routt and "Little Egypt," frantic entrances and exits derived from farce, songs, and clever caricatures of society's "sports," New York policemen, and even Louis Sherry himself, thinly disguised as "M. Claret." While some critics hesitated to give the production their approval, audience demand kept Silly's Dinner on the bill for ten weeks.

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Hammerstein appeared to be winning the "vaudeville wars." He was, however, still in danger of losing his Olympia. Because the Olympia Theatre was not generating any income he found himself hard-pressed to meet day-to-day expenses. To alleviate this problem, he took drastic action. He ended the Promenade Concerts in the Concert Hall. A news release published in the New York Dramatic Mirror, describing Hammerstein's plans for refurbishing the Olympia's grandiose foyer, contained this statement: "The concert hall will be converted into a ladies' promenade, and will be redecorated in a way to gladden the female heart." [29]

While there was no indication that the stately Concert Hall had become a male bastion, Hammerstein, always aware of his public, knew that women comprised a large part of his audiences. This direct appeal to feminine sensibilities was an example of a radical shift in American thought. Although society remained paternalistic, many women found outlets for personal fulfillment outside their traditional roles as wives and mothers. In his ground-breaking book, The Rise of the City: 1878-1898, social historian Arthur Meier Schlesinger devotes an entire chapter to "The American Woman." "The progressive liberation from household routine left the middle-class woman with more leisure on her hands than ever before and opened the way for a wider participation in the world that lay beyond domestic walls." [30] Since attendance at museums and theatres was regarded as an appropriate way for a respectable woman to utilize her free time, Hammerstein's plan to transform his Concert Hall into a ladies' promenade clearly indicated that he expected to profit from the patronage of the new female leisure class.

As another way of his increasing his income, he ended his unique "50 Cents Admits to All" pricing policy. The New York Dramatic Mirror announced

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Hammerstein's rather bizarre rationale for ending this policy. "He has found that people become confused between the two auditoriums, and will build a separate entrance to the theatre at the corner of Broadway and Forty-fourth Street. The door leading from the main lobby will be closed."[31] Since the only time the Olympia's patrons displayed any sense of confusion whatsoever was during the building's chaotic but enjoyable opening night eighteen months earlier, Hammerstein's "reason" for separating his Theatre seemed disingenuous. By eliminating the Concert Hall's function as a centrally located, informal performance space and by constructing a separate entrance for his Theatre, which he renamed the Lyric, Hammerstein was, in truth, admitting that the huge structure was too unwieldy to be managed by one individual.

Further proof of Hammerstein's financial plight was his sale of the Harlem Opera House-Harlem Music Hall complex to Benjamin Lichtenstein, a partner in the law firm Hammerstein engaged to assist him with his financial affairs. Although it remained in the family, Hammerstein also leased his Columbus Theatre to his eldest son, Harry, and his partner, Jack Kahn.

In their first advertisement in the trade papers, the Columbus Theatre's new management team announced: "All bookings and contracts for this and next season made by Mr. Oscar Hammerstein will be carried out by the new management."[32] While these contracts marked the end of Hammerstein's association with his first three theatres, the money he received from these transactions enabled him to reopen his Olympia Roof Garden on 28 April 1897, four weeks ahead of his competitors' open-air "summer resorts," and to continue to pay generous salaries to his popular star attractions the entire season.

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Vaudeville vs. Legitimate

The Olympia's third season began on 20 September 1897. According to the New York Dramatic Mirror, "The opening was very suspicious. The house was crowded, and the magnificent music hall never looked prettier. Mr. Hammerstein was here, there, and everywhere, wearing the smile of a man who is content in spite of his worries." [11] The vaudeville program that opened the performance contained seven acts, including the famed "blackface" comedy team of Dave Montgomery and Fred Stone. Following the intermission, a long one-act play, Chester A. Bailey's The Cat and the Cherub, had its premiere.

Publicized as a tragedy, Bailey's play was, in fact, a melodrama with a revenge theme. What made the work unique was its exotic setting and its sympathetic treatment of Chinese-American characters. Set in San Francisco's Chinatown, the play was produced with elaborate settings and costumes, typical of Hammerstein's productions but highly unusual for a play on a vaudeville bill. The complicated plot centers on the revenge a father takes on the owner of an opium den who is responsible for the death of his son. At the play's climax, the bereaved father stabs the opium dealer.

> The footsteps of an approaching policeman are heard, and Wing Shee lifts the body of Chin Fang up, puts it in a sitting position and, after calmly lighting his pipe, addresses some commonplace remarks to the corpse. The policeman looks in on the two men and, as the curtain falls, continues on his way. The scene was intensely dramatic, and when the curtain fell, the applause was so spontaneous and hearty that the author came forward to bow his thanks and say a few words in reference to his work. [12]

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Bailey's play was hailed by the critics. The New York Clipper stated, "It marks a new era in history in this city that the Chinese are treated seriously."[4] What made Bailey's work so remarkable was his skill at weaving a universal theme into a script populated with characters that the great majority of Americans feared as the "yellow peril," a mysterious people who seemed alienated from "normal" human sentiments. Instead of presenting Chinese-Americans as laughable caricatures with poor language skills or as evil stereotypes with malevolent powers, The Cat and the Cherub, despite its exoticism, portrayed its characters as human beings.

Bailey's even-handed treatment of his characters did not extend to the casting of Asian-Americans in the production, however. In an era in which the Chinese Exclusion Act had been passed to halt the supposed threat of mass Chinese immigration, such realism would have been unthinkable. Like all people of color, the Asian-Americans' distinctive physical characteristics defined their status as second-class citizens. Because white actors assumed the roles of the Chinese-American characters, Hammerstein's audiences were not forced to examine their conception of otherness or to question their acceptance of a double standard based on racial inequality.

The critical and public acclaim for Bailey's play aroused the ire of the Rialto's legitimate theatre managers. Already experiencing financial difficulty because of the growing popularity of vaudeville houses, they realized that Hammerstein, who had already stretched the boundaries of vaudeville entertainment further than any other manager, had finally merged it with legitimate theatre. Under the leadership of Charles Frohman, they decided to take legal action against him. Frohman's lawyers discovered an archaic city ordinance which narrowly defined the kinds of entertainment permitted in

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theatres designated as music halls. Because music hall licenses permitted their managers to sell alcoholic beverages, the ordinance prohibited the exhibition of dramatic works. This technical point formed the basis for Frohman's suit against Hammerstein. Eight other music halls, including the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall and Weber and Fields's Music Hall, were named in Frohman's lawsuit. The Olympia Music Hall, however, was singled out as the "test case." The verdict for or against Hammerstein would determine the future programs of all of New York's music halls.

> As the case against Mr. Hammerstein was the first and most important, decision in the others will be reserved until his is disposed of . . . . Magistrate Mott . . . is the most cranky and eccentric justice who ever sat on a police court bench . . . . As he was appointed by Mayor Strong, who has openly and in the plainest language declared his aversion to all music halls, the chances are that he will try to please his chief by deciding against the managers. [36]

The journalists who had invented the "vaudeville wars" a year earlier now took up the "vaudeville vs. legitimate" contest and made The Cat and the Cherub a cause célèbre. Following a number of postponements, however, Frohman quietly dropped his lawsuit when it was revealed that his application for a music hall license, presumably for his Empire Theatre, had been denied. Ironically, Hammerstein was able to profit from the success of The Cat and the Cherub for only four weeks. Because of the play's enthusiastic reception at the Olympia Music Hall, its previously unknown author was convinced by producer William A. Brady to transfer the entire production to London, where it was presented as part of a double bill at a West End theatre.

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Hammerstein, having successfully merged vaudeville with legitimate drama, now attempted to do the same with grand opera. Adapting the "Living Pictures" concept he introduced at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall and then at the Olympia Music Hall in Marguerite, Hammerstein created an opulent production entitled Grand Operas in Tableaux. A dozen classically trained singers sang selections from five operas in fully-realized settings. Although New York's music critics praised Hammerstein for this expensive venture into "highbrow" art and for his discovery of a remarkable soprano, Louise Hepner, the production did not "go over" with typical Olympia audiences. While trained singers had often been warmly received as part of Hammerstein's vaudeville bills, his decision to devote half of his program to grand opera was perceived as too elitist. Nevertheless, Hammerstein might have survived this ill-fated attempt to merge popular and high art had it not been for the failure of Anna Held's debut as a legitimate star in La Poupée at the Lyric Theatre.

La Poupée

Hammerstein's notable achievements as an innovative vaudeville manager provided a clear contrast to his failure as a legitimate manager. Only one legitimate production, Excelsior, Jr., generated the kind of revenues he needed to make his "palace of amusement" consistently profitable. His poor choices, together with his determination to keep his own comic opera, Santa Maria, running for one hundred performances, despite its mixed critical reviews, depleted his finances for the Olympia's second season. In order to avoid bankruptcy, he had to ensure that Anna Held's debut as a legitimate star was both a critical and popular success. His decision to present Held was not without justification. Unfortunately, Held was simply not up to the task. Her failure, and the

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subsequent failure of Hammerstein's lavish production, became the immediate cause for the entire multiplex being shut down.

Only twenty-four, Held had already become one of Europe's greatest music hall stars. Her fame increased when, under the guidance of her manager-husband, Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr., she made her American debut at the Herald Square Theatre playing in a revival of Charles Hoyt's A Parlor Match in 1896. Her role was small, but she charmed audiences when she sang "Won't You Come and Play Wiz Me" in her delightful French accent. Hammerstein was aware of her sensational success. Having observed how well Hammerstein presented his female performers at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall, Ziegfeld needed no further proof that Held's debut as a legitimate star would, under Hammerstein's management, be handled with great care and with no expenses spared.

Maurice Ordonneau's comic opera, La Poupée, had scored a great success in Paris and in London. Since its narrative required that its female lead play both a real character and a life-sized doll, it seemed a perfect vehicle in which to display Held's talents as a singer, dancer, and actress. When the eagerly anticipated production opened on 21 October 1897 at the Olympia's redecorated Lyric Theatre, however, the general response to her performance was less than favorable. Some critics wrote vaguely complimentary reviews, but Harrison Grey Fiske, in his review for the New York Dramatic Mirror, stated that Held's inexperience was all too apparent.

> Anna Held . . . was most unsatisfactory in the title role. she is as yet an amateur in the arts of acting and singing. The methods which won her favor as a music hall singer are not the methods to succeed in opera, and Miss Held seemed painfully conscious of the perilous step from one field to another. [17]

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Two years later, the critic for the New York Times, in a highly flattering review of Held's performance in Harry B. Smith's musical comedy, Papa's Wife, commented that "when she sang in "La Poupée," she was almost unintelligible." [34] As charming as she was on stage, Held had not yet developed the vocal technique necessary to play La Poupée effectively.

Nine days after the play's opening, following a heated argument between Hammerstein and Ziegfeld, Held left the production. Shortly after her departure, she became the star attraction at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall. Hammerstein replaced Held with his discovery, Louise Hepner. Although more than capable, Hepner had none of Held's aura of "star power." La Poupée ran for a total of forty performances, but on 11 December 1897, Hammerstein's Olympia went dark.

Two years after his showplace's historic opening night, Hammerstein finally ran out of money. His present debts were appraised at fifty thousand dollars, a large but not impossible sum. His real financial problem was his long-term debt, the mortgage on the Olympia, held by the New York Life Insurance Company. Hammerstein purchased the site for the Olympia in a cash transaction that totaled more than a million dollars. [35] However, in order to realize his vision for his "palace of amusement," he had secured a building mortgage loan. While not widely publicized, the New York Life Insurance Company investment made the company Hammerstein's "silent partner" from the start. [36] It was the kind of business relationship which suited the fiercely independent Hammerstein perfectly. He accepted the loan and then simply "forgot" to make payments when his profits dropped. The impersonal New York Life Insurance Company, however, did not forget.

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Although a number of managers expressed interest in purchasing the mammoth structure, the New York Life Insurance Company received no firm offers. Consequently, it held the mortgage to a property which had ceased to produce any revenue at all. Hammerstein, following his lawyer's advice, formed the Olympia Amusement Company and waited out the winter. When the insurance company asked him to reopen the Olympia, he immediately announced his plans to the press:

> The new cafe . . . will be completed . . . . The grand concert hall will be transformed into a promenade for the patrons . . . twenty-five boxes in the auditorium will be removed and replaced with seats . . . The Lyric Theatre will either be leased or run on the basis of a dramatic stock company. Vaudeville performances will be given in the roof garden Winter and Summer . . . and popular prices will prevail.[41]

The Olympia Music Hall reopened on 11 April 1898. A capacity audience applauded a program featuring Primrose and West's Big Minstrel Jubilee and Hammerstein's tribute to the Spanish-American War, an elaborate "afterpiece" entitled Maneuvers of the Sailors of the Battleship Maine, that included military drills, impersonations of well-known heroes, and patriotic songs. The audience, filled with well-wishers, cheered the performances and considered the night another Hammerstein triumph. once again, he appeared to have beaten the odds.

Then, one month later, he presented his burlesque on the follies of war, War Bubbles, following the regular vaudeville program. The critic for the New York Herald clearly summarizes Hammerstein's artistic strengths and weaknesses:

> There are several hits to the burlesque quite well worth laughing at, and the music is, in several instances, quite catchy. If only Mr. Hammerstein

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> would . . . content himself with writing the music to someone else's book and then producing the piece. As a composer he has a melodic facility . . . but he is not a librettist . . . . And Mr. Hammerstein forgot all about the story before he was halfway through the piece.[42]

Hammerstein made only minor revisions to his burlesque and kept it on the program, even moving it to the Olympia Roof Garden after he closed the Music Hall for the season. However, the Olympia Roof Garden's third summer season lasted only three weeks. On 12 June 1898 "the strong arm of the law was brought into play . . . and the great building was once more in darkness."[43] This time the foreclosure was irrevocable. Having spent all his funds to reopen his Olympia, Hammerstein was unable to pay the interest on the mortgage held by the New York life Insurance Company. When the Olympia went on the auction block two weeks later, the insurance company bid $950,000. There were no better offers. According to the reporters present, Hammerstein watched the auction but displayed no overt emotion.

The Hammerstein Testimonial

Hammerstein issued no public statements regarding his loss of the Olympia, but New York's theatre community turned out in force in a series of benefit performances, the proceeds of which went to Hammerstein. Under the auspices of the Morning Telegraph and the Associated Theatrical Managers of New York, on 29 June 1898 over five hundred artists gave performances in his honor at five venues, the Harlem Opera House, the Harlem Music Hall, the Garden Theatre, the Madison Square Roof Garden, and the Madison Square Amphitheatre. The performers received no fees, and ticket sales

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exceeded six thousand dollars, enough to cover almost half of Hammerstein's outstanding personal debts.

While some of his rivals were undoubtedly pleased by Hammerstein's loss, this huge tribute, to which so many people contributed their time and their talent, clearly represented how the majority of the theatre community felt about him. In addition, the fact that so many patrons were willing to buy a ticket in order to help defray his debts confirmed Hammerstein's strong and positive influence on New York's commercial theatre. The Hammerstein Testimonial, produced on a scale that Hammerstein himself would approve, affirmed his decision to continue his theatrical career.

Hammerstein's unique vision for his Olympia failed, but the great building's four performance spaces had proved to be both beautiful and functional. Within six months after its foreclosure, the building was purchased by the Sire Brothers who, after only minor refurbishments, reopened the Music Hall and the Roof Garden as the New York Theatre and Roof Garden. Borrowing Hammerstein's strategies, they made the Concert Hall a promenade and leased the Lyric Theatre to Charles Frohman. Frohman, one of the founding members of the Theatrical Syndicate, renamed his new playhouse the Criterion.

Hammerstein's vision, the Olympia as the center for popular art, failed because he operated it without the financial "cushion" he needed to cover expenses when his legitimate productions failed to draw. As a corollary, his need to be perceived as an artist contributed to his poor revenues. Rather than admit his limitations as a legitimate manager and as a composer, he continued to jeopardize his enterprise. In the end, his only victim was himself. A decade after he entered the commercial theatre, he was both

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a legendary figure and an "also ran." In the summer of 1898, no one could have predicted that his next theatre would also become his most profitable venture.

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32. New York Dramatic Mirror, 27 February 1897, 23.

33. New York Dramatic Mirror, 2 October 1897, 9.

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35. New York Clipper, 25 September 1897, 153.

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Chapter 4

HAMMERSTEIN'S THEATRES DEFINE NEW YORK'S NEW THEATRE DISTRICT

Despite the loss of the Olympia, Hammerstein returned to the commercial theatre less than a year after his "palace of amusement" was sold at auction to the New York Life Insurance Company. While this phoenix-like return added greatly to his status as a folk hero, the most surprising aspect of his reappearance was his decision to continue his dual career as a legitimate and vaudeville manager. Hammerstein's reputation as the city's most innovative vaudeville manager was secure. His inexperience as a legitimate manager, however, had caused him to lose the Olympia. Determined to succeed, Hammerstein began to rebuild his career by constructing his sixth theatre, which he named the Victoria, for fifty thousand dollars, a fraction of the amount he lavished on his earlier theatres.

The Victoria Theatre (1899), located at the corner of Seventh Avenue and Forty-second Street, did not compare to Hammerstein's previous theatres, whose regal, often extravagant, facades made them important additions to the cityscape. The theatre's tan brick exterior and minimal decor made it appear a most unlikely candidate for its future position as the most famous and profitable of Hammerstein's theatres. In addition to his departure from his typical theatre design and construction methods, Hammerstein also forged new business alliances, which enabled him to compete successfully.

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The most important of these alliances was with his third son, William, whom he hired as his business manager. William Hammerstein would prove to be his father's most loyal employee a relationship that would end only with William's untimely death at age forty in 1914. To provide legitimate productions for his new enterprise, Hammerstein allied himself with Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger, two of the founding members of the Theatrical Syndicate. The Victoria Theatre's status as a Syndicate booking house was short-lived, however. Despite its mutual financial benefits, Hammerstein ended his alliance with Klaw and Erlanger in order to remain independent, thus enabling him to maintain complete control of the Victoria's productions.

Unlike the dark months that proved so costly to him at his first Manhattan Opera House and at the Olympia (Lyric) Theatre, Hammerstein's Victoria and its roof gardens remained open for business from March 1899 until May 1915. Like his Columbus Theatre in Harlem, this enterprise was profitable from its inception. Because of this success, Hammerstein was able to build his seventh theatre, the Theatre Republic (1900), which he envisioned as a presentation house for America's finest theatre art.

Built adjacent to his Victoria, the Theatre Republic became the first of the famed playhouses that defined Forty-second Street as the main thoroughfare of New York's Times Square theatre district. In addition, by connecting his theatres' roofs, Hammerstein was able to replace the roof garden atop the Victoria with a larger one, the Paradise Gardens. Less than three years after he lost the Olympia, Hammerstein created a smaller-scaled version of his unique "palace of amusement" that attracted a wide spectrum of patrons. His Paradise Gardens became the setting for Hammerstein's unique vaudeville programming, combining first-class vaudeville acts with large-scale musical

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productions. These productions were the forerunners of the "reviews" produced by Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr., and the Shuberts for the legitimate theatre.

The Victoria Theatre, with its huge stage and its unique music hall/theatre ambiance, was New York's most unconventional playhouse. Unlike other New York theatres, which were classified as "musical," "dramatic," or "spectacle" houses, the Victoria Theatre proved to be an excellent venue for a remarkably diverse cycle of legitimate productions. From 1899 to 1904, Hammerstein's deliberately eclectic programming made the Victoria Theatre a model showcase for the broad range of the era's legitimate fare from vaudeville-inspired "variety farce" to musical comedy to realistic drama to verse tragedy.

While Hammerstein's nontraditional approach to legitimate and vaudeville presentations made the Victoria Theatre a success, his idealistic plan to make his Theatre Republic a "national" theatre ended after only two seasons. Hammerstein's presentations at his elegant "drawing room of the drama" competed with those offered by the Theatrical Syndicate to its extensive network of first-class theatres located throughout North America. Because touring was considered vital to a production's financial success, almost every leading player eventually succumbed to the Syndicate's predatory, but financially rewarding, booking system. Despite his new alliance with Liebler and Company, the foremost independent production company at the turn of the century, Hammerstein's choice of presentations was severely limited. Rather than have his Theatre Republic become another Syndicate booking house, he leased it to a fellow independent, David Belasco, in 1902. The profits Hammerstein realized from this

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decade-long business relationship with Belasco provided Hammerstein with the financial "cushion" he had been unable to achieve at the Olympia.

Two new playhouses, the Circle (1901) and the Majestic (1903), were built on the Grand (Columbus) Circle, at the southwest corner of Central Park, but the continuing success of Hammerstein's theatres north of Longacre Square became the catalyst that motivated other theatre entrepreneurs to join Hammerstein and to build their playhouses near his, beginning in 1903. By the following year, when Adolph S. Ochs, owner of the New York Times, persuaded the city's political bosses to rename Longacre Square as Times Square, in recognition of his newspaper's new headquarters, located directly across Seventh Avenue from Hammerstein's Victoria, New York's new theatre district had ten theatres. Hammerstein had built five of them.

Hammerstein's Atypical Theatre: The Victoria

In contrast to the Olympia, whose construction was greeted with a flurry of news articles, Hammerstein's sixth theatre, which he called the Victoria Concert Hall, received very little press coverage as it rose on the northwest corner of Seventh Avenue and Forty-second Street. Hammerstein, who normally welcomed reporters, had good reason for avoiding too much scrutiny by the press or public officials, particularly inspectors from New York's Department of Buildings. He was constructing his new theatre under a pretense. With the cooperation of his architects at J. B. McElfatrick and Sons, Hammerstein lied about his theatre's true function in order to have its construction comply with Section 500 of the city's Building Code. Section 500 applied to venues designated as concert halls and allowed Hammerstein to avoid the more costly methods and materials required for theatre construction. When the Commissioner of Buildings, T.

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J. Brady, questioned Hammerstein's intended use for his new structure, he received a written reply from J. B. McElfatrick himself:

> Such buildings (concert halls) can be erected without being made fireproof . . . . There are no fly galleries, carpenter shops, scene rooms nor paint frames; there is no excavation under the stage, all of which makes this building unfit for either theatrical or operatic productions.

For the next decade, Hammerstein continued to play a cat-and-mouse game with New York's building inspectors regarding the Victoria's ability to meet the city's stringent building code regulations. The fact that the Victoria was never closed for not being in compliance with the building code that applied to theatre construction was partly due to Hammerstein's prestige as one of New York's cultural leaders as well as his willingness to placate any disgruntled bureaucrat by making minor alterations to his theatre. Hammerstein's skill at manipulating public opinion in his favor undoubtedly caused many inspectors to refrain from questioning his misuse of his approved "concert hall."

Even more surprising were the favorable comments he received from critics and audiences about the Victoria Theatre's decor, since it was the only Hammerstein theatre built "on the cheap." Arthur Hammerstein, who was responsible for executing the Victoria's ornamentation, comments on his father's uncharacteristic economizing:

> Every bit of old brick and lumber from the buildings torn down on the site was put to use . . . . He bought a vanload of red plush from a fire-insurance company for fifty dollars . . . . He bought carpets at twenty-five cents a yard from a transatlantic liner that was being retired from service . . . . The orchestra seats, all second-hand, were forever breaking down, and were often held up by beer boxes supplied by Harry Mock, who ran the bar . . . . The reason the coloring was

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> white and gold was that we had no money for paint; the white was only the unpainted plaster.[5]

Despite these vivid examples of Hammerstein's new frugality, New York's journalists, obviously delighted to have Hammerstein as a prime news source once again, described the theatre in glowing terms:

> The Victoria, at a birds-eye view, looks like a big tinkling pearl box-all white and gold with the opals of electricity studding it in profusion . . . . [It has] gorgeous carpets, splendid lounges, and all the ultraelegance of an ultraelegance-loving metropolis were to be seen everywhere.[6]

In addition to its spacious lobby, Hammerstein included a wide promenade, furnished with tables and chairs, that wrapped around the theatre's orchestra seats. The Victoria's stage, one of the largest in any New York theatre, had a proscenium width of forty-two feet and a depth of sixty feet. Despite these factors, the thirteen hundred seat Victoria was regarded as a medium-sized house. Because of this perception of intimacy, performers as disparate as the Rogers Brothers and Eleanora Duse found the Victoria to be an excellent showcase. Part theatre, part music hall, the unpretentious Victoria, its bland facade brightened by Hammerstein's ingenious use of electric light, became the centerpiece of what was soon to become New York's newest urban hub.

When the theatre opened on 2 March 1899, Hammerstein's new alliance with Klaw and Erlanger provided him with an ideal production to inaugurate his new playhouse. John J. McNally's "variety farce," A Reign of Error, was a perfect vehicle in which to display the talents of Gus and Max Rogers, Klaw and Erlanger's new comedy team. Like Weber and Fields, the Rogers Brothers honed their skills as "Dutch"

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comedians in vaudeville houses across the country. Klaw and Erlanger, eager to find new talent for the Theatrical Syndicate, decided to make them legitimate stars. McNally was hired to write a loosely-structured script which permitted the Rogers Brothers to interpolate their vaudeville characterizations with a semblance of a plot.

While some critics wished that Hammerstein had selected a more substantial production with which to open the Victoria, the production's fifteen-week run indicated that A Reign of Error was an excellent popular choice. Shortly after the production opened, Hammerstein announced that the Rogers Brothers would open the Victoria's 1899-1900 season in a new McNally "variety farce." He refrained, however, from further comment regarding the permanence of his new association with Klaw and Erlanger. Instead, he hurried to complete work on the Victoria's roof garden, which he named the Venetian Terrace.

The Venetian Terrace Roof Garden

Continuing to circumvent the city's building code regulations, Hammerstein used the profits from the Victoria's debut production to complete his new roof garden, the Venetian Terrace. Although he would replace this modest "summer resort" with a larger roof garden in 1901, the financial success of the Venetian Terrace in the summers of 1899 and 1900 served to reaffirm Hammerstein's reputation as an excellent vaudeville manager. In addition, its design also demonstrated that Hammerstein continued to be innovative even when working with a limited budget.

Despite its romantic name, the Venetian Terrace was as unpretentious as the Victoria. It did, however, contain two unique features. On the box tier level, Hammerstein added a paved promenade that enabled patrons to enjoy views of New

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York from all four sides without interrupting performances. Unlike all the other roof gardens, whose stages were merely smaller versions of the proscenium stages in the theatres below them, the Venetian Terrace's performance space foreshadowed the configuration used in theatres with thrust stages a half-century later.

> The principal stage is in the middle of the roof, a platform surrounded by tables and chairs. Terraced seats surround these on three sides, while at the western end is another small stage with curtains. The box tier is raised on small pillars and girders and on this level an open promenade extends around the four sides of the building . . . . The place is open to starlight and to all the breezes that blow over Manhattan Island. [4]

The Venetian Terrace, undoubtedly the least decorative of any Hammerstein theatre, succeeded in spite of its rather utilitarian design because it provided New Yorkers with an inexpensive and entertaining diversion removed from the city's noise and stifling heat.

Even Hammerstein's vaudeville programming was in marked contrast to the star attractions and lavish spectacles for which he had become famous at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall and at the Olympia Music Hall. Instead, the Venetian Terrace's twelve-act bills were filled primarily with circus performers and trained animal acts and an occasional novelty, such as Belle Davis and her Pickaninny Actors or the Rossow Midgets. Hammerstein temporarily abandoned his innovative approach to vaudeville programming as a cost-saving measure during the summers of 1899 and 1900. In return, he regained the professional credibility he lost when the Olympia Roof Garden was shut down by the New York Police Department early in the summer of 1898. In an end-of-season commentary on New York's roof gardens, the New York Dramatic Mirror

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praises Hammerstein's addition to the city's popular "summer resorts." "It has been highly successful, and the energetic Hammerstein has reason to congratulate himself on adding another to his long list of hits."

To ensure that he would continue to have a good selection of vaudeville acts from which to choose, Hammerstein formed an alliance with William Morris, an independent booking agent, toward the end of the Venetian Terrace's first season. Like the legitimate theatre, vaudeville was becoming centralized. Using strategies similar to those employed by the Theatrical Syndicate, the owners of large numbers of vaudeville theatres, such as B. F. Keith, Alexander Pantages, and Martin Beck, gained power and control by establishing touring "circuits," which allowed them to guarantee performers a fixed number of playing weeks at theatres they controlled. By using monopolistic business practices, these powerful entrepreneurs eliminated the haphazard booking conditions under which all but the most popular vaudevillians struggled to survive. Like the members of the Theatrical Syndicate, however, the owners of the vaudeville "circuits" ran a "closed shop." This made it difficult for young performers to get bookings.

Morris attempted to resolve this problem by working with independent vaudeville managers, such as Sylvester Z. Poli of Connecticut and Percy G. Williams of Brooklyn, whose theatres did not compete for the same audiences. Morris never intended to form a "circuit." His clients did, in fact, form an informal "circuit" that enabled Morris to guarantee his performers some job security. By adding Hammerstein to his list of clients, Morris was able to provide his performers with the opportunity for a summer booking at one of New York's most popular roof gardens. Hammerstein, who previously had featured debuts by European artists, benefited from this new alliance because he was able

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to present talented American newcomers, such as W. C. Fields and Louise Dresser, at salaries that did not adversely affect his profits.

Will the Victoria Become a Syndicate House?

As he promised, Hammerstein opened the Victoria's second season with a new McNally "variety farce," The Rogers Brothers In Wall Street, on 18 September 1899. The comedy team's second legitimate production proved to be even more successful than A Reign of Error had been. The review in the New York Times indicates why Klaw and Erlanger decided to add the brothers' name to the production's title:

> Always funny, the pair of dialect comedians were never more so than in McNally's latest skit in three acts . . . . Plot wasn't needed, nor was it desired. All that was needed was music and dancing and pictures to fill in the intervals while the Rogers Brothers went behind the curtains to change their costumes and to give their legs and lungs a much needed rest.[6]

The Rogers Brothers drew audiences to the Victoria for one hundred and two performances before starting out on a national tour of Syndicate-controlled theatres. The mutually beneficial alliance between Hammerstein and Klaw and Erlanger continued with the Victoria's third legitimate production, which opened on New Year's Day, 1900. This presentation, however, was designed for a very different audience.

Written especially for children, Glenn MacDonough's musical extravaganza, Chris and the Wonderful Lamp, had elaborate and fanciful settings and a cast of over one hundred performers that made excellent use of the Victoria's large stage. The production's surprisingly long run of fifty-eight performances, however, was undoubtedly due to the fact that John Philip Sousa had composed ten new songs for the production.

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Sousa, the "March King," was the most celebrated band leader of his day. Having his name associated with the production, his only work written specifically for young audiences, virtually assured its success. Yet despite the fact that Hammerstein's alliance with Klaw and Erlanger had established the Victoria Theatre as one of the city's major venues for popular musical works, he refused to relinquish his independence.

The Rogers Brothers returned to open the Victoria's 1900-1901 season in their third McNally "variety farce," The Rogers Brothers in Central Park. That production, however, marked the end of Hammerstein's association with Klaw and Erlanger. It also squelched the persistent rumor that Hammerstein was content to have his theatre serve as another of the Theatrical Syndicate's booking houses. His decision to end his association with Klaw and Erlanger placed Hammerstein among the small group of independent managers who placed artistic integrity above commercial success. Hammerstein's determination to be recognized for the quality of his presentations conflicted with the "business first" attitude that guided the selection of the majority of the Theatrical Syndicate's productions. In his unpublished, dissertation, "The History of the Theatrical Syndicate: Its Effect Upon the Theatre in America," Monroe Lippman describes three of the organization's members as follows:

> True, neither Klaw nor Erlanger was devoid of artistic appreciation, but only [Charles) Frohman had the ability to produce plays, and he was more interested in that phase of the theatre than the business side. With . . . the subjection of the art of the theatre to the business of the theatre which must ineluctably result, what immediately followed was to be expected.

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What followed was the establishment of a monopoly, based on the willingness of its members to pool their theatres and place them under the control of the Theatrical Syndicate. By controlling most of the theatrical real estate across the North American continent, the Theatrical Syndicate dictated the selection of productions and, with the sole exception of Mrs. Minnie Maddern Fiske, wife of Harrison Grey Fiske, owner of the New York Dramatic Mirror, forced every major legitimate star to comply with its policies in order to get bookings at the nation's first-class theatres.

As Lippman points out, the outcry in defense of individual artistic enterprise that accompanied the publication of the Theatrical Syndicate's original Agreement in the New York Dramatic Mirror in 1898 was quickly silenced. "Most of the others had proved to be more interested in their box office receipts than in their artistic independence . . . . But Mrs. Fiske had proved that her opposition to the Syndicate was based purely on the principle of artistic independence." [8] The same principle caused Hammerstein to assert his independence and end his profitable relationship with Klaw and Erlanger. That association had enabled Hammerstein to return to the forefront of New York's commercial theatre less than three years after he lost the Olympia. It had not, however, satisfied his need to be recognized as one of New York's cultural leaders. To reach this goal, he used his profits from the Victoria Theatre and its Venetian Terrace roof garden to build his seventh theatre, the Theatre Republic, which he conceived as a "national" theatre for the presentation of the finest dramatic art.

The Theatre Republic

Tucked behind the brightly lit Victoria, the exterior of Hammerstein's seventh theatre displayed few of the qualities that made most of his previous theatres cultural

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landmarks. Its facade, composed of a subtle pattern of brownstone and dark gray brick, incorporated only two distinctive features. A carved stone medallion, inscribed with the words "Theatre Republic," was placed near the theatre's roof. Hammerstein also added a double staircase, adorned with elaborate light fixtures, that led to a separate entrance and box office for balcony patrons. While apparently redundant, this dual entry system aided in getting ticketholders to their seats promptly. The Theatre Republic's small lobby served only as a transitional space from Forty-second Street to the auditorium. Because it was constructed on a small plot, Hammerstein was unable to provide the theatre with the wide promenades and staircases that earned him so much praise in his previous theatres. To compensate, Hammerstein created a lavish performance space that appealed to his patrons' desire to be seen in a fashionable setting. In addition, the auditorium's highly ornamented decor served to mask its relatively small dimensions.

The proscenium was richly adorned with allegorical figures. Just below its peak, Hammerstein installed an upper stage, reminiscent of the raised side boxes used in some Restoration theatres, to house a small orchestra. By eliminating a traditional orchestra pit, Hammerstein was able to increase his total seating capacity to eleven hundred. To enhance the perception that the theatre was larger than its actual size, Hammerstein built a gilded dome, decorated with pairs of cupids, that rose seventy-five feet above the orchestra floor. Decorated in fine brocades of green, ivory, and gold, his new playhouse was, according to the New York Times, "a perfect parlor theatre, compact in size, artistic in decoration, and complete in every detail."[9]

The theatre's almost-square stage measured thirty-five feet in width and thirty-two feet in depth. Small in comparison to other Hammerstein stages, it was, nevertheless,

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more than adequate for the dramatic productions Hammerstein planned to present. One of the theatre's more innovative technical aspects was described in the New York Dramatic Mirror: "There are no sheaves, pulleys, or counterweights, as in the ordinary stage. All the scenery, as well as the curtain, being operated by an electric motor controlled by one man from a switchboard on the stage."[10] This use of modern technology was not as sophisticated as the double stage invented by Steele MacKaye for the Madison Square Theatre in 1879. It did, however, demonstrate that Hammerstein continued to use his skill for creating machines designed to increase individual productivity in order to reduce his expenses. His fascination with technological advancements was, however, subservient to his grandiose artistic ambitions for his new playhouse. During his brief curtain speech at the Theatre Republic's gala opening night, 27 September 1900, Hammerstein explained his reason for using "foreign" syntax to name his seventh theatre:

> Mr. Hammerstein said, simply, and no doubt truthfully, that he wished to devote the new house to pure and noble things. The Parisian, he declared, spoke proudly of "our Comedie-Francaise," the Berliner called the Imperial Opera House "ours," and he wished the New Yorker to learn to say "our Theatre Republic."[11]

It seemed presumptuous of Hammerstein to hope that a commercial playhouse could ever be compared to the great, subsidized theatres of Europe. Yet, the Theatre Republic was not the first theatre he built for the purpose of transforming New York's cultural landscape. The Harlem Opera House and the Olympia were significant examples of Hammerstein's ability to construct theatres that rivaled, or surpassed, their European

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counterparts. Clearly, he meant to distinguish his new theatre from New York's commercially oriented enterprises, including his own Victoria Theatre, by making the Theatre Republic a showcase where artistic quality, rather than profits, guided his selection of plays. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, Hammerstein's "pure and noble" idea to create an American "national" theatre was hampered by the dilemma that plagued the American theatre for over a century-- the lack of a body of work written by great indigenous playwrights.

England had Shakespeare and Jonson; France had Moliere and Racine; Germany had Goethe and Schiller; Norway had Ibsen and Bjornson. The dramatic works of these and other great European playwrights formed the artistic legacy that brought about the establishment of "national" theatres in Europe. Drama was considered part of a nation's cultural identity. The individuals who worked in these subsidized theatres were respected because they were perceived as contributors to a nation's artistic heritage. In contrast, America was a nation whose cultural identity was largely borrowed from European sources. A prime example of this was the popularity of British playwrights. Rather than serving the play, America's legitimate theatre was constructed around its leading actors. Scripts were treated as "vehicles" written, or adapted, to suit the individual talents of an array of stars. The Theatrical Syndicate thrived on the star system. Independents like David Belasco wrote and produced plays tailored for his stars. Having severed his ties with Klaw and Erlanger, Hammerstein could not look to the Theatrical Syndicate to aid him in the creation of a theatre governed by artistic principles. To give his ambitious plan the credibility it needed, Hammerstein had to engage a star whose achievements distinguished him as a uniquely American artist.

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Therefore, his decision to invite James A. Herne to inaugurate his "national" theatre was an appropriate, yet highly risky, choice.

One of the last actor-managers, Herne had been a star of the American theatre for more than thirty years. In addition to running his own company, he also wrote a number of successful plays for himself, his wife, Katherine, and his daughters, Julie and Crystal. Unlike the majority of American stars, however, whose national reputations were preceded by critical acclaim in New York, Herne achieved his greatest success on the road. Even Margaret Fleming, the realistic play for which Herne is best remembered today, had been severely criticized following its single New York performance at A. M. Palmer's Theatre on 9 December 1891.[12] That play's local failure, however, had not diminished Herne's drawing power at theatres across the country. Despite his opposition to the monopolistic practices of the Theatrical Syndicate, the organization was so determined to include Herne on their roster of stars that he was allowed to select non-Syndicate houses as part of his tours, a violation of the Theatrical Syndicate's basic agreement.[13] While Herne must have been flattered by Hammerstein's invitation to open the Theatre Republic, the opportunity to support a fellow independent's attempt to manage an American theatre in which artistic endeavor was to take precedence over commercial considerations was the key factor leading to Herne's decision to risk presenting his latest work to New York's sophisticated audiences. Unlike Hammerstein, he did not need their approval.

Sag Harbor, in which Herne starred with his daughters, Julie and Crystal, received enthusiastic notices when it opened in Boston. Following the play's four-month engagement there, Herne toured the production to Chicago where he received more

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accolades for his work as playwright and star. He was, however, quite candid about New York's reception of his realistic play, set in a rural fishing village on Long Island. The New York Times provided its readers with a synopsis of Herne's opening night curtain speech.

> Mr. Herne devoted himself chiefly to expressing his fears, which were not altogether ill-founded, that his new play might not draw very well in New York in spite of the polite first-night applause; he also praised Mr. Hammerstein and the dome and advised the spectators to become actors, so they might get the best view of it from the stage. [14]

Herne's advice to his stylishly dressed first-nighters undoubtedly caused them to smile. It also clarified why he expressed doubts about his play's ability to impress them. The realism of Sag Harbor was alien to the realism that most New York theatregoers preferred, the portrayal of characters whose lives seemed to reflect their own. His play's gentle pace and unsophisticated characters were out-of-touch with the urbane atmosphere of the city. Sag Harbor succeeded as a piece of "Americana," but for those who spent their lives in the great metropolis, Herne s carefully-drawn portrait of small-town life must have seemed as anachronistic as the fables told them by their elders.

Despite this obstacle, Herne's reputation as one of America's finest actors enabled him to draw audiences to the Theatre Republic for nine weeks. While only a modest commercial success, Herne's engagement indicated that Hammerstein's ambitious goal to manage a "national" theatre was not entirely without merit. In order to make the Theatre Republic a profitable enterprise, however, Hammerstein had to find productions that would appeal to more contemporary tastes. To accomplish this, he forged a new alliance

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with Liebler and Company, an independent producing firm, noted for the consistently high quality of its work.

It was unlikely that Theodore Liebler and George Tyler, partners in Liebler and Company, shared Hammerstein's aspiration to be recognized among New York's cultural leaders. Since their productions competed with those offered by the Theatrical Syndicate, both in New York and on the road, their alliance with Hammerstein had to be based on business principles rather than on artistic endeavor. The Theatre Republic provided them with a first-class showcase for their impressive list of stars, including Viola Allen, Henrietta Crosman, and, making her American debut, Mrs. Patrick Campbell. While these stars received great critical acclaim and drew large audiences to the Theatre Republic, the productions in which they appeared demonstrated the primary flaw in Hammerstein's vision for a "national" theatre. Only one of the three actresses, Viola Allen, scored a hit in a play written by an American, Lorimar Stoddard's In the Palace of the King, the Theatre Republic's most successful production during its first season.

It was a quite respectable period drama which was given a handsome production. The primary reasons for the play's long run, however, had less to do with its inherent quality than with its commercial- value. Viola Allen had been a star in Charles Frohman's famed Empire Theatre Company. Stoddard's play became the vehicle which proved that Allen could be judged as a star in her own right. In addition, like many of the era's commercial productions, designed to appeal to the ever-increasing numbers of middle-class female patrons, Stoddard's play was not an original work but an adaptation of a best-selling novel with the same title. Since the play's title was, in today's parlance,

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pre-sold to the thousands of women who had read the novel. Hammerstein was able to publicize both the production's title, as well as its leading lady, to attract audiences.

As one of England's greatest stars, Mrs. Patrick Campbell had no need to promote the cause of American drama. Audiences who crowded into the Theatre Republic to see her perform during its second season were perfectly content to see her recreate her performances in such plays as Arthur Wing Pinero's The Second Mrs. Tanqueray and Bjornstjerne Bjornson's Beyond Human Power. When the demand for tickets overwhelmed both of the Theatre Republic's box offices, Mrs. Campbell, delighted by the public's acclaim, agreed to Hammerstein's offer to schedule additional matinees at the Victoria. Rather than deal with the logistics involved in transferring an entire production next door, Mrs. Campbell and her company, which included George Arliss, took advantage of the Victoria's large stage to present Maurice Maeterlinck's expressionist masterpiece Pélleas and Mélisande. While some applauded Mrs. Campbell's unusual addition to her repertoire of realistic dramas, the majority of critics and audiences seemed as mystified by the play as the Parisians who had attended its premiere performance at Lugné-Poë's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre eight years earlier.

Henrietta Crosman, the last star to appear at the Theatre Republic, did attempt an original American work, Evelyn Greenleaf Sutherland's Joan 0' the Shoals. Its poor reviews, however, forced her to close the production. Undaunted, she received Hammerstein's permission to revive her previous success, George C. Hazleton's Mistress Nell, while she and her company rehearsed a "new" play. On 27 February 1902, William Shakespeare's As You Like It, starring Crosman as Rosalind, became one of the surprise hits of the season. Many critics considered Crosman's performance to be the high point

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of her career. Nevertheless, despite its success, the production was Hammerstein s final presentation at the Theatre Republic.

Hammerstein's decision to abandon his ambitious plan to establish a "national" theatre after only two seasons seemed premature. Particularly ironic was the fact that the combined successes of the Victoria's musical plays and the Theatre Republic's dramas brought him, for the first time in his career, the kind of recognition as a legitimate manager that previously accompanied his work as a vaudeville manager. There was no doubt, however, that his determination to operate two theatres as independent enterprises jeopardized his ability to find enough first-class productions to fill two seasons simultaneously. By 1902, the Theatrical Syndicate's relentless efforts to control the nation's legitimate theatre business eliminated all but a few independent managers. Even Lippman, whose study of the Theatrical Syndicate is based on the questionable premise that the organization did more good than harm, admits that "it is regrettable that such a monopoly should exist in the theatre."[15] In order to compete effectively with the Theatrical Syndicate, Hammerstein was forced to employ its business strategies, specifically the "star system" and the long run, in order to make his Theatre Republic commercially viable.

Rather than surrendering his autonomy to the Syndicate, Hammerstein developed an alternative business plan. He concentrated his efforts on the Victoria Theatre and expanded its offerings far beyond the popular musicals that dominated its first four seasons. In addition, he enabled a fellow independent, David Belasco, to free himself from Syndicate control by leasing his Theatre Republic to him. William Winter, the theatre critic for the New York Tribune, indulged in dramatic license to recreate

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Hammerstein's initial meeting with Belasco regarding the lease in his biography of Belasco. Winter 's dialogue for Hammerstein is as follows:

> Mr. Belasco, the Theatrical Syndicate is trying to crush me out of business. Valuable attractions have been prevented from patronizing my houses this season. I must have attractions. You must have a New York theatre, or you will find yourself helpless. [16]

Winter's recreation of Hammerstein's discussion of his plight indicates that Hammerstein is in desperate need of Belasco's aid, thus making Belasco the hero in this episode of "The Independents Versus the Theatrical Syndicate." Yet Winter's description of the terms of the lease Hammerstein and Belasco signed makes it clear that Hammerstein held the upper hand in this transaction:

> The contract was for a period of five years, with an option of renewal by Belasco for another five years, and under it he assumed full governance of the theatre, engaging himself to pay to Hammerstein a rental of $30,000 a year and 10% of gross receipts from all performances given there. [17]

Winter goes on to note that Belasco's associates were appalled by Hammerstein's financial terms. Still employing his flair for the melodramatic, Winter has Belasco retort, "And don't you realize how lucky I am to be in a position to pay him an unheard of rent?" [18] Belasco built his own theatre on Forty-fourth Street in 1907, but he also took advantage of the renewal option Hammerstein placed in their original leasing agreement and remained Hammerstein's tenant until 1912. The Theatre Republic, conceived as a "national" theatre, became instead, the showcase for the work of one American artist.

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Hammerstein's idea for a "national" theatre would be borrowed, revised, and adapted by other visionaries throughout the twentieth century. In 1926, Eva LeGalliene founded the Civic Repertory Company in order to present plays of artistic merit that were shunned by mainstream producers. After seven years, however, economics forced LeGallienne to transfer her acclaimed production of Alice in Wonderland to the Times Square theatre district. The Association of Producing Artists (APA), founded by Ellis Rabb in 1960, and merged with T. Edward Hambleton's Phoenix Theatre in 1964, presented successful productions on and off-Broadway for more than a decade. Today, Tony Randall's National Actors' Theatre, currently housed at the Lyceum Theatre, represents the latest adaptation of Hammerstein's vision to make a "national" theatre commercially viable. Unlike Randall's organization, which is partly subsidized, however, Hammerstein needed to select productions that would compete effectively with the star "vehicles" offered by the Theatrical Syndicate. To do this, Hammerstein had to make the Victoria Theatre more than a' successful venue for light, musical entertainments.

New Audiences for the Victoria Theatre

Even before Hammerstein invited Mrs. Patrick Campbell to use the Victoria for matinee performances of Pélleas and Mélisande, he had presented nonmusical works designed to appeal to more discerning patrons. While he never claimed to make the Victoria a "national" theatre, the eclectic mix of productions he presented on its large stage clearly demonstrated the range of choices available to American audiences at the beginning of the twentieth century. For a man who delighted in poking fun at the follies of New York's upper class at the Olympia Music Hall with musical burlesques such as

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Silly's Dinner, Hammerstein's decision to present plays by Clyde Fitch represented an abrupt departure.

One of the most popular and prolific playwrights of the era, Fitch specialized in writing what the critics termed "society dramas," allegedly realistic glimpses into the lives and lifestyles of New York's upper class. While Fitch's melodrama, The Way of the World, demonstrated little of the verbal dexterity of William Congreve's classic Restoration comedy of the same name, his version, set in contemporary New York, also dealt with characters who, like Congreve's, were members of the elite.

Furthermore, the play's star, Elsie de Wolfe, had great appeal for female theatregoers. A less gifted actress than Viola Allen, de Wolfe had nevertheless become one of Charles Frohman's stars because of her status as one of the best-known members of the city's "Four Hundred," a title invented in 1892 by journalist Ward McCallister to inform his readers of the select number of privileged guests invited to attend Mrs. Astor's annual ball. For New York's upper class, an invitation from Mrs. Astor was regarded with the same reverence as a summons from a queen.[9] Elsie de Wolfe was one of the chosen few.

A fashion icon, de Wolfe was admired as one of the city's most stylish women. She was often photographed for the newspapers' society pages, a factor that extended her appeal far beyond the rarefied confines of her own social milieu. Theatre historian Kim Marra explains why de Wolfe's first independent production became an influential model for the cultural standards used to judge the American woman of the twentieth century and to drive her consumer purchases:

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> Her production of The Way of the World heralded the institution . . . of a complex, consumer-driven representational apparatus which would set dominant cultural standards for women's appearance and deportment throughout the twentieth century.[29]

Hammerstein, who expressed no personal interest in society matters, was nevertheless aware that de Wolfe had enormous appeal for the middle- and working-class women whose patronage had been an important factor in his success since he opened the Harlem Opera House and the Columbus Theatre at the beginning of his career in the commercial theatre. Undoubtedly, de Wolfe would have preferred the elegant Theatre Republic as a proper showcase for her first independent production. The Victoria's large stage, however, allowed her to make a spectacular entrance in a real chauffeur-driven automobile wearing the very latest in feminine attire.

The female characters in Congreve's artificial world triumphed by matching wits with their male counterparts. Two hundred years later, the female characters in Fitch's realistic world, as exemplified by Elsie de Wolfe, knew that their physical appearance had far more appeal to men than their mental acuity. For her audiences of middle-class women, seated in the Victoria's orchestra, and for the shopgirls, seated in its balconies, de Wolfe's beautifully dressed heroine was the personification of the ideal qualities that women employed to attract men. To allow de Wolfe time for a number of costume changes, Fitch divided his play into five acts. He also sensationalized his drama of a wealthy, beautiful, and childless society wife by creating a potentially shocking plot device.

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While her loving but neglectful husband pursues a career in politics, de Wolfe's character, Mrs. Croyden, strikes up a warm, but platonic, friendship with Mr. Nevill, an unhappily married man of her own class. Shortly before election day, Mrs. Croyden has a child. Her husband's political enemies, afraid that Croyden will be elected, publish a report implying that the Croyden's son was actually fathered by Nevill. Croyden, believing that his wife has betrayed him, goes on a drunken rampage and refuses to allow his son to be christened with his name. The problem is resolved when Nevill's mistreated wife joins forces with Mrs. Croyden to expose Nevill as a depraved cad who lied about his relationship with Mrs. Croyden in order to obtain a divorce. As the curtain falls, the Croydens are happily reunited just as Croyden learns that he has won the election.

New York's theatre critics, all males, wrote favorably of the play's production values, but they denounced its improbable plot. All one had to do was to look at de Wolfe to know that she had always been a faithful wife. The play's relevance as a social phenomenon, however, was undeniable. The review in the New York Dramatic Mirror begins with a comment, not on the play, but on the audience:

> The production of The Way of the World brought together a fine assemblage of society folk and notable first-nighters. The fact was the "smart set" present stared at its reflection across the footlights and smiled more or less approvingly. Mr. Fitch has been very wise in staking out his dramatic claim in the province of fashionable society . . . . He is proving to the few millions of outsiders that in the way of dramatic complications nothing is impossible in the "smart set." [21]

Hammerstein's attempt to appeal to more elitist audiences might have been dismissed as an aberration, but he was obviously counting on their continued patronage

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to ensure the success of his presentation of George Henry Boker's Francesca da Rimini, which opened at the Victoria on 31 December 1901.

Boker's play, considered by many the best American work in blank verse, fared badly in its first production in 1855. A new production in 1883, starring Lawrence Barrett and Otis Skinner, proved to be an artistic and popular success. The Hammerstein revival, starring Skinner, Aubrey Boucicault, and Marcia Van Dresser, was one of the highlights of New York's 1901-1902 season. Critics and knowledgeable audiences continued to debate the quality of Boker's poetry, a debate which still generates scholarly dispute, but the production and the actors received almost unanimous acclaim. In a season dominated by a menu of escapist fare, Hammerstein's decision to present this seemingly noncommercial work proved to be a worthwhile artistic risk, which greatly enhanced his status as a legitimate theatre manager.

The Victoria's 1902-1903 season would prove to be its last full season as a legitimate playhouse. Yet the success of three dramatic presentations Hammerstein selected indicated that he continued to attract large and diverse audiences. Viola Allen, wisely following the same strategy that made her first independent production a hit at the Theatre Republic, made her Victoria debut starring in Hall Caine's adaptation of his best-selling novel, The Eternal City. The majority of theatre critics judged Caine to be a better novelist than playwright. Nevertheless, the sumptuously mounted melodrama's title, in combination with Allen's star power, proved to be strong drawing cards.

For another attraction, Hammerstein had only to advertise her last name --Duse. Her two-week engagement was sold out long before she arrived from Italy to begin her third American tour at the Victoria. As many critics noted, the intimate ambiance of the

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theatre provided a perfect setting for her understated acting style. Since Duse performed in her native language, her audiences were composed of people from every strata of society. Educated theatregoers, always ready for an impassioned discussion regarding the contrasting techniques employed by Duse and Bernhardt, mixed with Italian immigrants, who purchased a ticket just to be in the presence of the woman whose talent reflected Italy's distinguished artistic heritage. The only disappointment expressed during her engagement concerned Duse's choice of plays, all written by Gabriele D'Annunzio. While his poetry had been hailed in his native Italy, the plays he wrote for Duse, which displayed his penchant for florid language and often grisly melodramatic plots, seemed curiously ill-suited for Duse's subtle acting technique. Nevertheless, the rare opportunity to see the great actress in person overshadowed the critics' negative response to her repertoire.

The same critics had even more reservations about Hammerstein's third dramatic presentation that season, Michael Morton's English adaptation of Henri Bataille's French adaptation of Leo Tolstoi's great Russian novel, Resurrection. The review in the New York Times, entitled "Tolstoi at Fourth Hand," holds out little hope for the play's acceptance:

> "Resurrection" is not a novel of a kind that easily lends itself to the stage. Its primary purpose is to picture on a broad and infinitely detailed canvas the moral and sociological degradation of the Russian Empire and to preach the means of regeneration . . . . To the casual theatergoer, the play at the Victoria falls into the Hall Caine kind of religious drama. [22]

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While the elitist critics dismissed the production because Morton's adaptation had transformed Tolstoi's tragic realism into unrelenting melodrama, Hammerstein's "casual theatregoers," many of them immigrants who came to America to escape the oppressive conditions so vividly depicted in the play, flocked to the theatre for three months.

Despite its unpretentious atmosphere, the Victoria Theatre, built "on the cheap," housed a fascinating variety of productions from 1899 to 1904. Designed as a playhouse for light, musical entertainments, the Victoria served serious drama equally well. The Theatrical Syndicate remained a constant threat to Hammerstein's success as an independent. As the remarkable commercial success of Resurrection demonstrated, however, Hammerstein gauged his audiences correctly. He used this skill to draw patrons to his new roof garden, atop the Victoria and the Theatre Republic.

The Paradise Gardens

Hammerstein's third roof garden, which he opened for the summer of 1901, was more than a replacement for his modest Venetian Terrace. He completely redesigned and enlarged his "summer resort." Patrons arriving via the elevators from the Victoria's spacious lobby walked directly into a glass-enclosed performance space whose large proscenium stage was built along the theatre's eastern wall. In addition to the orchestra seats, a row of box seats ran along both sides of the theatre. With a capacity of one thousand, the Paradise Gardens was nearly as large as the Victoria itself. Behind the orchestra seats, Hammerstein placed a number of tables and chairs. While less ornate than his Olympia Roof Garden, the Paradise Gardens' theatre, brightly illuminated with thousands of incandescent bulbs, was an attractive space with excellent acoustics.

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Hammerstein did not retain the Venetian Terrace's popular open-air promenade. He replaced it with a unique attraction that made the Paradise Gardens a favorite venue for New York residents and visitors alike. The New York Times describes his ingenious addition in vivid detail:

> The most picturesque section of the garden, however, is that which extends over the Republic Theatre roof. It is in the rear of the auditorium . . . and led up to by broad flights of steps. There is a miniature reproduction of a spot in picturesque Holland known as the Mills of Doertjen. Perched on the top of a hill is the historic Cruikshan windmill running with the wind. Beside it the old clay and straw house of the miller. A quaint rustic bridge leads one down into a valley, where among the fishermen's huts a river runs, with fisherman's boats at anchor . . . . On the opposite side of the roof is . . . an old grist mill . . . . Close beside it is the Syedam Tavern. In this garden are placed tables for refreshments, and from any point, the stage performance can be seen over the heads of the audience. [23]

Unlike the enclosed fantasy world he created for the Olympia Roof Garden, Hammerstein's miniature Dutch village atop the Theatre Republic was more than an elaborate stage setting. It was a "living" environment, that foreshadowed the large scale historic village recreations popular today. For immigrants and for others who spent their youth in rural areas, this quaint, bucolic village, high above Forty-second Street, evoked nostalgic memories. Even more importantly, Hammerstein's idealized Dutch village was designed for interaction. He expected his audiences to use the environment, to wander through it, and to become active participants, at least for an evening, in the life of the village.

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Over the next decade, in spite of hollow threats by a number of Tammany Hall bureaucrats from the Department of Buildings and the Department of Health, Hammerstein continued to delight his patrons with a variety of improvements to his Dutch village. He added a vegetable garden, farm animals, and even an actress, costumed as a milkmaid, who offered fresh milk to patrons too young to order from the Paradise Gardens' extensive menu of alcoholic beverages. Hammerstein's recreation of an idealized pastoral world in the middle of the nation's most industrialized city was only part of the reason for his roof garden's great popularity. After two summers of successful but fairly traditional vaudeville acts at the Venetian Terrace, Hammerstein returned to the innovative programming he presented at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall and at the Olympia.

One reason for this improved programming was the fact that William Morris, despite his independent status, had developed a much larger pool of talented vaudevillians from which to choose. The highlight of the bill's dozen acts in the summer of 1901 was the appearance of the celebrated dance team of Johnson and Dean, whose specialty, the "cakewalk," had become the latest dance fad. It was the thirteenth "act" on the bill, however, that best represented "vintage" Hammerstein. Working with director Ned Wayburn, Hammerstein created an elaborate "afterpiece," The Sunny South, that starred singer-dancer Eleanor Falk and comedian Johnnie Page, and featured a chorus of twenty young women. This forerunner of the kind of revues Wayburn would create for Ziegfeld and the Shuberts was an immediate hit and played for the entire season.

Hammerstein and Wayburn collaborated again the following summer. The Three Ch's: Chic, Charm and Chaste starred Countess Olga Von Hastzfeld, assisted by a chorus

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of comely young women. To ensure that this revue style "afterpiece" would appeal to women as well as men, Wayburn and Hammerstein enhanced its visual impact by incorporating a number of costume changes, ranging from haute couture to jockey's silks to antebellum gowns, all designed to emphasize the company's feminine beauty. Like The Sunny South, The Three Ch's drew large audiences for the entire summer. This second production was also Wayburn and Hammerstein's final collaboration.

In the fall of 1902, Klaw and Erlanger purchased the former Olympia and its roof garden, thus making it a Syndicate house. Determined to defeat Hammerstein, Klaw and Erlanger hired Wayburn in 1903 to create the production that would inaugurate their renamed Crystal Gardens. Hammerstein proved to be just as determined and produced his own musical, with an all-female cast of one hundred singers and dancers, at the Paradise Gardens. By wisely avoiding a libretto, Hammerstein was able to emphasize his skills as a director of large-scale extravaganzas. The production, which he named Punch, Judy, and Co., perhaps to indicate its suitability as family entertainment, was another season-long success. Its seventy-two performance run far outlasted Wayburn's small-scale effort for Klaw and Erlanger.

Klaw and Erlanger's decision to join their fellow Syndicate member, Charles Frohman, at the former Olympia was only the first sign that Hammerstein's success north of Longacre Square had not gone unnoticed by New York's legitimate theatre managers. By the summer of 1903, as Hammerstein's Punch, Judy, & Co. and his Dutch village continued to attract audiences to his Paradise Gardens, workmen hurried to complete construction on four new playhouses in the former "Thieves' Lair" for the 1903-1904 season. Daniel Frohman's New Lyceum Theatre and Henry B. Harris's Hudson Theatre

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were built east of Broadway. The Shubert Brothers opened their Lyric Theatre on Forty-second Street, adjacent to the former Theatre Republic, which its tenant, David Belasco, had renamed after himself. Directly across Forty-second Street, Klaw and Erlanger opened their New Amsterdam Theatre. It appeared that Hammerstein might become the victim of his own success.

Hammerstein opened the Victoria's sixth season with three musical plays, one of which, Harry B. Smith and Ludwig Englander's The Office Boy, marked the beginning of Charles Dillingham's long career as a successful producer. Hammerstein's continued success seemed to indicate that he could survive as an independent legitimate manager. Nevertheless, the presence of four beautiful new theatres, as well as Klaw and Erlanger's purchase of the former Olympia Music Hall and roof garden, posed a threat to the Victoria's appeal as a first-class legitimate playhouse. It lacked the splendor of these new and refurbished theatres. The Victoria's informal ambiance, however, and its superb location, soon to be further improved by the opening of the new Rapid Transit subway station at Broadway and Forty-second Street, made it an ideal venue for popular entertainments. Curiously, none of the city's vaudeville managers took advantage of Hammerstein's loss of the Olympia five years earlier to build a theatre near Longacre Square for year-round vaudeville.

Always able to perceive an unmet need, Hammerstein chose to resolve the situation himself. With very little fanfare, and no public statement about his departure from legitimate theatre management, Hammerstein reopened his Victoria Theatre as the Victoria Theatre of Varieties on 8 February 1904. A brief announcement in the New York Dramatic Mirror notes this major transition:

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> It is Mr. Hammerstein's intention to conduct his house as a first-class music hall, with the smoking privilege and the usual refreshments. Matinees will be given every day, at which the prices will be 25 and 50 cents. The evening prices will be 50 cents, 75 cents and $1.[24]

It was a rather inauspicious statement to mark the debut of what social historian Lloyd Morris would accurately describe as "the Metropolitan Opera House of vaudeville."[25]

Hammerstein's return to the forefront as one of New York's leading independent theatre managers was all the more remarkable because he accomplished it by succeeding in an area, the legitimate theatre, that was dominated by the monopolistic practices of the Theatrical Syndicate. By remaining independent for the period between 1899 and 1904, he also enabled other independents to compete effectively with the Syndicate. Actors, such as Viola Allen, Henrietta Crosman, and Elsie de Wolfe, and independent producers, including Liebler and Company and Charles Dillingham, used Hammerstein's theatres to launch their own projects.

Perhaps no independent benefited more from Hammerstein's refusal to join forces with the Syndicate than David Belasco. By leasing the Theatre Republic, Belasco was able to free himself from Syndicate control. Belasco's gain, of course, was due to the fact that Hammerstein's visionary plan to create a "national" theatre failed after only two seasons. Nevertheless, Hammerstein continued to present a highly diverse and worthy selection of productions at his Victoria Theatre. Many of them, such as Boker's Francesca da Rimini and the engagement of Eleanora Duse, would never have been presented at Syndicate-controlled houses because of their perceived limited appeal. As the long run of Resurrection proved, Hammerstein's ability to gauge his audiences' tastes

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was not always based on positive critical reviews. This was also true of his lavish productions at the Paradise Gardens. Legitimate theatre critics paid little attention to these summer entertainments. Hammerstein's middle- and workingclass audiences, however, delighted in them, thus allowing Hammerstein to profit from their long runs.

There was no doubt that the powerful Theatrical Syndicate influenced Hammerstein's decision to end his career as an independent legitimate theatre manager. His skill at attracting audiences for his vaudeville programming, however, was the major factor leading to his plan to transform the Victoria Theatre to a full-time vaudeville house five years after it opened. From a business perspective, it was the best decision of his theatrical career. For variety artists, Hammerstein's return to full-time vaudeville marked the beginning of an era when an engagement at his theatre became the most prized booking of their careers.

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Chapter Five

AT "THE CORNER:" HAMMERSTEIN'S VICTORIA THEATRE OF VARIETIES

Hammerstein's decision to rename his Victoria Theatre and to change its programming from legitimate productions to year-round vaudeville presentations in February 1904 marked the beginning of a new era in American popular entertainment. By operating the only showcase devoted exclusively to variety artists in New York's new theatre district, Hammerstein altered the perception of vaudeville as a neighborhood diversion designed to appeal primarily to the city's working-class audiences. Continuing the work he began at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall and at the Olympia Music Hall, Hammerstein elevated the genre by treating vaudeville as an art form in whose development tradition and innovation played a part. During the third decade of vaudeville's fifty-year history, from 1904 to 1915, Hammerstein's theatre became the "mecca" where every vaudevillian aspired to perform.

Because Hammerstein was so well known, he capitalized on his celebrity and soon replaced his theatre's rather unwieldy name, the Victoria Theatre of Varieties, with his own. The huge electric signs that spelled out "Hammerstein's" in letters over four feet high on his theatre's Forty-second Street and Seventh Avenue facades marked the center of the Times Square theatre district for over a decade. Hammerstein's name had a resonance that extended far beyond Times Square, however. Vaudeville audiences across

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the nation accepted the phrase, "direct from Hammerstein's," as proof that a vaudeville artist had reached the pinnacle of success.

"Hammerstein's" position as the center of vaudeville's universe was due only in part to its prime location, dubbed "The Corner" by New York's journalists. At "Hammerstein's" vaudevillians were treated as artists rather than commodities. This was reflected in Hammerstein's decision to pay his artists generous weekly salaries, often double those paid by his competitors, for less work. By adapting the financial and working conditions employed in the legitimate theatre to his vaudeville operation, Hammerstein achieved two goals. First, he changed the perception of vaudeville's status as a strictly "lowbrow" entertainment. Secondly, he succeeded in distinguishing "Hammerstein's" from New York's other vaudeville venues.

Unlike legitimate playhouses, which were built in close proximity to one another, New York's vaudeville venues were located in densely populated areas all over the city and were supported mainly by local patronage. B. F. Keith and F. F. Proctor took advantage of this situation with their policy of "continuous" vaudeville. Patrons were invited to drop in at a Keith or Proctor theatre at any time. Because the profitability of "continuous" vaudeville depended on the volume of business generated, Keith and Proctor, guided by the principles of economy, brevity, and simplicity, used a standard nine-act format that required vaudevillians to perform five or six times daily from Monday through Saturday.

Because "Hammerstein's" depended on what was termed a "floating" rather than a neighborhood population for its audiences, Hammerstein employed a number of strategies that encouraged patrons to make the journey to his theatre. Instead of

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"continuous" vaudeville, Hammerstein used the "two-a-day" performance schedule, with matinee and evening performances which more closely resembled the policy used at legitimate theatres. This strategy limited the number of patrons Hammerstein could accommodate but it affirmed the public's perception of "Hammerstein's" as a first-class venue, thus making the trip to his theatre a special event. To further enhance his theatre's reputation, Hammerstein offered what were known as "big bills," programs consisting of up to twice as many acts as the nine act format used at "continuous" houses. Programs at "Hammerstein's" typically ran four or five hours in length. It was not unusual to see a number of headliners on a single bill. Keith and Proctor, on the other hand, always reserved the eighth, or "next-to-closing," slot for their single headliner.

Hammerstein used two other production strategies to distinguish his programs from those of his competitors. The fact that both involved artistic risks rarely taken by other managers strengthened his position as the dominant force in vaudeville. Continuing the practice he began at the Olympia Music Hall, Hammerstein sought to showcase new talent. Unlike his more conservative rivals, who preferred to present established performers, Hammerstein, aided by the skilled promotional campaigns created by his son, William, was responsible for the vaudeville debuts of hundreds of artists. In addition to presenting talented newcomers, Hammerstein continued to honor performers' requests to try out new acts, just as he had with Weber and Fields at the Olympia Music Hall. From the beginning, Hammerstein's "big bills," using well-known headliners, debut performances, and novel experiments, in combination with his "two-a-day" performance schedule, established his theatre as the nation's most prestigious vaudeville venue.

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As many vaudevillians discovered, the opportunity to appear at "Hammerstein's" was not without its hazards. Its audiences were considered "wise" as well as demonstrative. Patrons took vaudeville seriously and displayed little patience for acts that did not meet their high expectations. At houses owned by Keith and Proctor, audiences were reprimanded for any displays of impolite behavior. The patrons at "Hammerstein's," however, were encouraged to express their approval or disapproval. This lack of formality, which was reminiscent of typical audience etiquette of the previous century, was due, in part, to the fact that "Hammerstein's" operated under a music hall license that permitted the sale of alcoholic beverages during the performances. Even more important, however, was the fact that Hammerstein used his audiences' informal critiques to restructure the playing order of his bills or to assist an artist in choosing better material. To perform at "Hammerstein's" was an honor. To "go over" before its exacting audiences was a challenge that separated the true vaudeville artists from the novice practitioners.

Hammerstein's decision to return to year-round vaudeville presentations was an immediate success because, unlike his competitors, he concentrated his efforts on a single venue. The loss of the Olympia, as well as his plan to operate the Theatre Republic and the Victoria Theatre simultaneously, demonstrated the perils involved in Hammerstein's previous attempts to pursue his artistic ambitions independently. By using his creative energies to make "Hammerstein's" the nation's leading vaudeville theatre, however, Hammerstein became a major figure in an industry that was already controlled by entrepreneurs whose sole motivation was financial gain. While these men established vaudeville empires based on business principles similar to those used by the Theatrical

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Syndicate, Hammerstein employed a business strategy designed to satisfy his financial needs as well as his artistic ambitions. Because he succeeded in accomplishing both goals, Hammerstein became the primary target in two more "vaudeville wars" in 1907, and again, in 1913.

Everybody Called It "Hammerstein's"

Hammerstein's decision to transform his Victoria Theatre into a year-round vaudeville house was vital to vaudeville's development. Refusing to be bound by the restrictive business practices employed by his competitors, Hammerstein treated vaudeville as an evolving genre. Because he was willing to take artistic risks, Hammerstein was able to continue the innovative work he began at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall and at the Olympia Music Hall. At "Hammerstein's," vaudeville shed its image as a minor diversion calculated to appeal to neighborhood audiences of all ages and became a uniquely American popular art form where both the performance and the response to the performance were taken seriously. In contrast to Keith and Proctor, whose programming was, in today's parlance, prepackaged into a standard nine-act format and presented without alteration thirty or more times every week, Hammerstein's "big bills" and his "two-a-day" performance schedule gave him the flexibility to use his audiences' responses to improve the order of his programs and, if necessary, to work with artists in the selection of better material. For vaudevillians and patrons, a trip to "Hammerstein's" was a truly collaborative event.

"Two-a-day" vaudeville performances began at "Hammerstein's" on 8 February 1904. A reporter for the New York Times describes a familiar scene that endeared Hammerstein to his patrons and to the press. Wearing his famed silk hat and smoking

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one of his hand-rolled cigars. Hammerstein stood in his theatre's spacious lobby, greeting and chatting with ticket holders, a practice he began at his Harlem Opera House. By making himself accessible, Hammerstein affirmed the public's perception of him as a manager who was genuinely concerned that his presentations satisfied his audiences' entertainment needs. Unlike his competitors, who isolated their private lives from their work, Hammerstein's decision to live in a modest suite of rooms above his theatre's brightly lit marquee enabled him to interact with his patrons and the press on a regular basis.

The reporter also notes, somewhat ruefully, "A little more than a year ago, on the same stage now occupied by the dogs, the ventriloquist with his wooden-headed dummies, the blackface comedians, and the aerial gymnasts, Eleanora Duse was exhibiting her exquisite art. " He goes on, however, to inform his readers of more practical matters that clarify the reasons for Hammerstein's decision to return to full-time vaudeville management. "The box office man was complacently surveying an almost empty ticket rack . . . and a typical first-night audience was settling itself comfortably . . . to enjoy what might be described as . . . all-star vaudeville . . . . They came knowing what to expect, and there were no regrets."[1]

Duse's appearance the year before enhanced Hammerstein's reputation among New York's critics and theatregoers interested in "highbrow" art, but Hammerstein's most prolonged successes, both in the legitimate theatre and in vaudeville, always depended on his ability to correctly gauge the artistic preferences of a broader audience. Nevertheless, his decision to present only matinee and evening performances fostered the perception that the programs at "Hammerstein's" were special events. The reporter's offhand

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comment about the near-capacity, "typical first-night audience," a phrase usually associated with legitimate theatre openings, clearly indicates that Hammerstein's return to year-round vaudeville production had an immediate effect on its status. Hammerstein's skill at attracting large audiences drawn from a broad spectrum of the city's population, evidenced by his success at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall and at the Olympia Music Hall, distinguished his new enterprise from those of his competitors, who relied on local patronage.

In New York, where all the major vaudeville venues presented new bills on Mondays, the Monday shows at "Hammerstein's" became the equivalent of the legitimate theatre's opening nights. The matinee performance was crucial to "Hammerstein's" artists because it gave them the opportunity to be seen by other performers, critics from the trade journals, agents, and other managers. The Monday evening performance was just as important because the patrons at "Hammerstein's" had such high expectations. Any vaudevillian who "got over" to these demanding and highly demonstrative audiences was virtually assured of a successful week's engagement. In addition, because he operated independently, Hammerstein could reward an especially well received performer with an extended engagement at a higher salary.

Hammerstein describes his "typical" audience in the second issue of Variety, the trade journal founded by Sime Silverman in 1905 to serve the vaudeville community. Hammerstein was the first vaudeville manager interviewed by Silverman. In an obvious attempt to give his fledgling newspaper credibility, Silverman placed the title of the interview, "Oscar Hammerstein on Vaudeville," together with a photograph of Hammerstein, above the masthead. Hammerstein defines his audiences with certainty:

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"You must understand that this is the Victoria with a clientele of the finer grade. You can put on a whistler or any old kind of act at Keith's and they shout themselves hoarse over it, but here they know what is what."[3] Even if Hammerstein could be accused of using the interview to promote his own interests, his determination to be known as New York's leading vaudeville manager motivated him to present only the finest acts. Shortly after "Hammerstein's" became a full-time vaudeville venue, the critic for the New York Dramatic Mirror commented, "Mr. Hammerstein is certainly setting the pace for his rivals by putting up stunning bills, made up almost entirely of headliners. Last week's programme was high-class from start to finish, and there was not a single 'chaser' act on the programme."[4]

At "continuous" vaudeville houses like Keith's and Proctor's, "chaser" acts, the weakest on the bill, were given the ninth, and final, position on the program. Since they followed the headliners, who were always awarded the coveted eighth slot, "chaser" acts were useful in clearing the house, known as "playing to the haircuts," as patrons gathered up their coats and hats and made their way to the exits, thus allowing a new audience to take their seats. Since "Hammerstein's" entertained only two audiences daily, there was no need to employ "chaser" acts.

Furthermore, since "Hammerstein's" served alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages during all performances, patrons who chose not to see a particular act were invited to sit at the tables placed in the wide promenade that surrounded the orchestra seats. Just as his Dutch farm provided patrons with alternative entertainment during the summer season, Hammerstein's indoor biergarten gave New Yorkers a space for social interaction unmatched by any of his competitors. The bar at "Hammerstein's" undoubtedly added to

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the venue's popularity and prosperity. As historian John E. DiMeglio points out in his book, Vaudeville U.S.A., however, it was "Hammerstein's" programming that attracted such large audiences. To verify his claim, DiMeglic, quotes three headliners who understood the value of "going over" at "Hammerstein's:"

> New York's greatest theater was Hammerstein's . . . . Vaudevillians loved to play there because it drew a show-wise crowd considered superior to any. Buster Keaton termed the Victoria as being "in its day everything--and perhaps a little more than the Palace became later." He asserted that "any old-timer will tell you, Hammerstein's . . . was vaudeville at its best." Will Rogers . . . called it "the greatest Vaudeville Theatre of that and of all time" and George Jesse described it as "the most glamorous vaudeville theatre in all the world." Prior to the Palace, the vaudevillian knew that the best billing he could get was "Direct from Hammerstein's, New York."[4]

Since vaudeville, even at the height of its popularity, never generated the kind of critical or scholarly recognition accorded to other art forms, such as those seen in legitimate theatres, symphony halls, or opera houses, vaudevillians, such as Keaton, Rogers, and Jessel, often indulged in hyperbole when reminiscing about their careers. Despite this tendency, however, there was general agreement that the opportunity to appear at "Hammerstein's" was regarded by the vaudeville community as a mark of distinction. In a genre dominated by managers who viewed vaudevillians as commodities, Hammerstein's "two-a-day" policy, his generous salaries, and his theatre's location at the center of New York's theatre district were the factors that prompted Rogers to describe "Hammerstein's" as "the greatest Vaudeville Theatre of that and all time." While Jessel's comment that "Hammerstein's" was "glamorous" seems illogical,

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considering that the theatre itself was the least elegant of any Hammerstein structure, its status as the most important vaudeville house of the era overrode its lack of physical grandeur. There were finer venues, such as the Harlem Opera House, now part of the Keith "circuit," but "Hammerstein's" was unique. Adding to the "glamorous" quality Jessel perceived was the concern Hammerstein displayed toward his performers as artists.

At Keith's theatres, which vaudevillians nicknamed the "Sunday School Circuit," performers were required to abide by stringent rules of behavior that reinforced Keith's concept of "polite" vaudeville suitable-for family audiences. Failure to follow these rules, the majority of which dealt with the use of appropriate language and costume, resulted in a stiff fine, or worse, blacklisting from all Keith theatres. In contrast, Hammerstein treated his performers with the same respect he had shown to his legitimate theatre stars. In "My Vaudeville Years," an essay that ends the book, Selected Vaudeville Criticism, vaudevillian Grace La Rue credits Hammerstein as being a major influence on her career and equates his behavior with that of Tony Pastor, perhaps the most beloved of all vaudeville managers. Writing of Pastor, La Rue states, "He was sweet and kind to everybody and always ready with encouragement. The only other manager like him in this respect was Oscar Hammerstein that -- is, the only other in America; in England the managers are more likely to consider the artist and management on equal terms."[5] La Rue's perception of Pastor and Hammerstein as examples of managers who dealt with performers as colleagues rather than commodities was reflected in their remarkable accomplishments.

In 1881, Tony Pastor's New Fourteenth Street theatre became the first New York venue where vaudeville was presented as a suitable entertainment for family audiences.

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Prior to that, variety artists performed only for male-dominated audiences at the city's saloons and music halls, including the original Koster and Bial's Music Hall on Twenty-third Street, where their primary function was to increase the sale of alcoholic beverages. Hammerstein, first at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall in Herald Square and then at the Olympia Music Hall, transformed Pastor's conception of vaudeville as family fare into a more sophisticated entertainment that combined traditional variety acts with features adopted from other art forms, such as ballet, musical extravaganzas, and legitimate drama.

Unlike other entrepreneurs, like Keith and Proctor, whose restrictive policies ultimately robbed vaudeville of its remarkable energy and vitality, Hammerstein continued to take artistic risks by allowing his theatre to serve as a showcase for untried talent. Of the hundreds of vaudeville artists who made their debuts at "Hammerstein's," the greatest of them all was Eva Tanguay. Her sensational appearance in March 1904 marked the beginning of a career that made Tanguay a headliner for twenty years.

The Queen of Vaudeville

Hammerstein's uncanny ability to select performers who would "go over" with his audiences made him one of vaudeville's legendary managers. Their response to Tanguay, however, surpassed even his expectations. Tanguay first came to his attention when she played a featured role in R. A. Barnet's My Lady, one of the many successful musical plays he presented at the Victoria Theatre. When her goal to become a legitimate theatre star foundered, she approached Hammerstein with a request to attempt a solo "turn" in vaudeville. Hammerstein agreed to give her the chance to present her new act. While the highly critical "Hammerstein's" audiences, who took vaudeville seriously, proclaimed

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Tanguay vaudeville's newest star, the critic for the New York Dramatic Mirror raises doubts about her actual talent:

> Eva Tanguay made her vaudeville debut last week. Miss Tanguay's chief claim to recognition it a superabundance of energetic vitality that finds vent in a series of movements in which every muscle in her body is brought into full play . . . . The words and music do not matter much, as Miss Tanguay put so much business and ginger into her work that the audience did not get to know what the song was about. A wise man once said that action is the key to success on the stage, and if this be so, then Miss Tanguay was the biggest kind of hit. She has some very odd little dance steps, and she worked up her finish so smartly that she was recalled again and again. [5]

Unlike previous Hammerstein discoveries, such as Yvette Guilbert and Louise Beaudet, who were praised for their artistry, Tanguay's appeal stemmed from the sheer force of her personality. When Tanguay appeared on stage; she demanded attention. Audiences loved her because she dared to flaunt conventional feminine behavior by wearing outrageous, and often suggestive, costumes and because her choice of material, particularly her signature song, "I Don't Care," represented her defiant attitude toward the restraints imposed on women by the paternalistic moral code that governed male-female relationships in the early twentieth century. As historian Robert W. Snyder states in The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New-York, "Victorian culture was built by people who were profoundly concerned about what other people thought of them, and what they thought of others. Tanguay spurned all of that, and laughed at the same time." [6] Tanguay's cheerful, subversive act undoubtedly appealed to Hammerstein's rebellious nature. His status as a modern-day folk hero was enhanced by his

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unconventional attitudes, as demonstrated by his highly publicized conflicts with the city's bureaucrats and his determination to remain independent in an era when the commercial theatre thrived on mergers and consolidation. Despite their mutual willingness to defy convention, however, they pursued very different goals. Hammerstein's determination to be recognized as a cultural leader drove him to seek new challenges. Tanguay, on the other hand, like the majority of famed vaudevillians, made only superficial changes in her act. Her long career represented one of vaudeville's most endearing, and frustrating, paradoxes. Despite the constant demand for novelty, vaudeville audiences seemed to prefer those performers whose work varied the least. The patrons at "Hammerstein's," however, grew accustomed to judging new acts.

The Voice of the People

Since Hammerstein dealt with vaudeville as an evolving art form, he continued the practice he began at the Olympia Music Hall in 1896 when he permitted Weber and Fields to try out a new act that burlesqued the masterful quick change artist, Fregoli. At "Hammerstein's," he honored his patrons' requests for favorite headliners, but he also allowed artists willing to take the risk to experiment with entirely new acts. Not all of these new acts "got over" with the audiences Hammerstein described as knowing "what is what." Will Rogers's new act was so successful, however, that it transformed his entire career.

Unlike Tanguay, whose unchanging and raucous performance style confined her career to the vaudeville stage, Will Rogers represented another category of "Hammerstein's" headliners, who were able to make the transition to other genres. Like many of these "graduates," Rogers first tested and honed his unique style before

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"Hammerstein's" demanding audiences. His success as a star of the Ziegfeld Follies and as one of the early stars of sound films was based on the cowboy persona he first developed in vaudeville to enhance his skill with a lariat.

His first act was classified as a "dumb," or nonspeaking, act. In contrast to Tanguay, who used highly theatrical costumes to augment her singing and dancing, Rogers wore the same clothes he had worn in his native Oklahoma. For urban audiences, whose contact with the American West was limited to dime novels or perhaps the fictional "Wild West" shows presented by "Buffalo Bill" Cody, Rogers was a unique attraction simply because he was a genuine cowboy. His first vaudeville appearance was at B. F. Keith's Union Square Theatre in June 1905. Despite the fact that audiences packed the theatre to see Rogers perform his remarkable rope tricks, Keith's manager, E. F. Albee, refused to increase Rogers's weekly salary of seventy-five dollars in order to engage Rogers for a second week.

Thanks to his good relations with New York's journalists, Hammerstein learned of Rogers's success and sent his son, William, to make Rogers a better offer. For one hundred and forty dollars a week, Rogers became the star of "Hammerstein's" summer season. He displayed his mastery with a lariat in the theatre at matinees. Then, after supervising the well-publicized lifting of his horse to the roof, Rogers repeated his act in the evening for patrons at the Paradise Gardens.

Rogers's "dumb" act made him one of vaudeville's most popular headliners for over two years. In December 1907, however, Rogers, without his horse, appeared at "Hammerstein's" with a new "talking" act, on a bill with Eva Tanguay. The critic for Variety, no doubt aware that Tanguay's lively performance needed little commentary,

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simply states, "Miss Tanguay continues 'not to care' with her old enthusiastic energy." The critic has more to say about Rogers's new act:

> Rogers attains classification as a comedy talking act, with a great deal more certainty than a host of others who bill themselves that way. His incidental remarks are fresh and breezy as can be and the act runs along entertainingly. Rogers affects not to take himself seriously, and therein lies the novelty of his attitude.[5]

Rogers's gentle, rustic persona and his talent for describing the world in terms that made it seem both human and humorous became the foundation upon which he built his new act. He drew his material from the current news stories of the day and presented his incisive commentaries on such topics as politics and celebrities to audiences he treated as if they were personal acquaintances. In doing so, Rogers became the spokesman for a generation of Americans grappling with a complex world in which events seemed to evoke more questions than answers. Noted for his integrity and loyalty, Rogers never forgot Hammerstein's generosity and his willingness to let him experiment with his "talking" act. In the spring of 1915, just prior to becoming a Ziegfeld star, Rogers made his last appearance at "Hammerstein's" as the headliner on its final bill.

Parsifalia

Because Hammerstein's "two-a-day" vaudeville programming proved so successful, as exemplified by the profits he earned from Rogers's first appearance in the summer of 1905, Hammerstein adopted a new policy. Rather than close his theatre for the summer, he kept it open for matinees and simply moved his performers to the Paradise Gardens for the evening show. The success of this simplified policy brought

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about the end of Hammerstein's extravagant "afterpieces." The logistics required to present them in two spaces daily would have been too costly.

He did, however, write and direct one final musical spectacle, Parsifalia, which he presented in the summer of 1904. Disguised as a light entertainment for his roof garden patrons, Parsifalia was, in truth, Hammerstein's creative method for settling an old score with the only man he regarded as his enemy, Heinrich Conried, the new Director of the Metropolitan Opera House. The production was not the first time Hammerstein used his musical ability to serve his personal agenda. At the Olympia Music Hall, he skewered New York's wealthy young "sports" in his burlesque, Silly's Dinner, and he attempted an antiwar statement in War Bubbles.

The origin of Hammerstein's and Conried's feud dated back more than twenty years, long before Hammerstein began his full-time career in the commercial theatre at the Harlem Opera House. Prior to that time, he occasionally presented German-language productions designed to appeal to his fellow German immigrants. According to Vincent Sheean, in 1882 Hammerstein hired Conried, an actor who had recently emigrated from Germany, for the lead role in The Perjured Prince. "The play was liked by the New York Germans, but Heinrich Conried was even more liked. He became sort of a matinee idol."[9] Despite the production's success, Hammerstein and Conried argued. Sheean provides no explanation for the feud, but Conried's later behavior indicates that the men fought about money rather than a less tangible reward, such as star billing. Conried ultimately walked out and, unable to find a suitable replacement for his leading man, Hammerstein was forced to close the production. Although not usually a man to bear a grudge, Hammerstein never forgave Conried for his unprofessional behavior.

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The long-simmering feud came alive twenty years later when Conried, who had little experience with grand opera, was, inexplicably, chosen to direct the Metropolitan Opera Company in 1903. Once again, Conried displayed his lack of professionalism by presenting an unauthorized production of Richard Wagner's Parsifal. Cosima Wagner, the composer's widow, tried to stop the illegal production by having the Emperor write a personal appeal to Conried in which he requested his former countryman to cancel the performances. Aware of the publicity value of the dispute, Conried kept the press informed of the controversy and succeeded in making his "highbrow" production front page news. Because of the publicity, Parsifal was sold out for each of its ten performances, "and when Conried chose it for his 'benefit' that April he enjoyed a personal profit of about $10,000."[10] Hammerstein, no stranger to publicity himself, took advantage of Conried's sudden notoriety to create a musical "afterpiece" that presented Conried as a buffoon.

According to the review in the New York Dramatic Mirror, "It is not a burlesque on Parsifal, as might be expected from its title, but a jolly little travesty on the methods of Herr Conried, who produced Parsifal without the consent of Frau Wagner."[11] The plot of Hammerstein's burlesque centers on Conried's inability to conduct a rehearsal of Parsifal due to constant interference from an angry Cosima Wagner and an even angrier Goddess Musica. In one farcical scene, Frau Wagner, wielding an outsized umbrella, chases a cowardly Conried all over the Paradise Gardens while the Goddess Musica, assisted by a large chorus of young women, takes over the stage to perform such decidedly nonoperatic Hammerstein tunes as "Leap Year in Midnight Town" and "Lizzie O'Conner, the Great Prima Donna."

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To ensure its success as a summer entertainment, Hammerstein's simple libretto allowed for the interpolation of comic "turns," such as those of Willy Zimmerman, who specialized in caricaturing famous composers. Since his burlesque required no familiarity with Parsifal beyond its recent notoriety, Hammerstein's travesty scored a hit with his roof garden audiences and remained on the bill for fifteen weeks. Because it was presented as a vaudeville "afterpiece," Parsifalia escaped the attention of New York's music critics. In hindsight, there was no doubt that Hammerstein's final musical extravaganza in the summer of 1904 foreshadowed what New York's journalists would term the "opera wars" that pitted Hammerstein's independent Manhattan Opera Company against Conried's well-subsidized Metropolitan Opera Company from 1906 to 1910.

From the outset, Hammerstein depended on the profits from his vaudeville operation to fund his visionary plan to present grand opera for the masses rather than elitist audiences. As Vincent Sheean states, "Every dollar Hammerstein got from it went into a pool or fund for the production of opera."[12] In addition to the opportunity Parsifalia gave Hammerstein to vent his antagonism toward Conried, his "jolly little travesty" indicated that he still clung to his ambition to be recognized as a composer. For the rest of his career, he continued to compose for "Hammerstein's" orchestra. Hammerstein also fostered the careers of younger composers, such as Irving Berlin, whose appearances at "Hammerstein's" helped to establish the fabled "Tin Pan Alley" as the center of American popular music.

The Second "Vaudeville Wars"

In 1907, "Hammerstein's" status as the nation's greatest vaudeville house came under attack in what became the second "vaudeville wars." Unlike the first "vaudeville

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wars" ten years earlier, in which Hammerstein's Olympia Music Hall vied with the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall for artistic as well as financial supremacy, the second "vaudeville wars" were waged by combatants motivated only by their desire for profits.

By 1907, America's vaudeville industry was almost as centralized as the legitimate theatre industry had become under the domination of the Theatrical Syndicate. Because there were more vaudeville houses than legitimate theatres, however, a classification system, dividing vaudeville venues into "big time" and "small time" operations, enabled a number of entrepreneurs to create networks of theatres, or "circuits," that served specific geographic regions. Martin Beck, owner of the Orpheum "circuit," controlled "big time" vaudeville west of Chicago. B. F. Keith's "circuit" dominated "big time" vaudeville in the east and midwest with one exception--New York City.

Because of New York's large population and because it was the nation's cultural center, a number of independent managers were able to function successfully in spite of Keith's presence. Since "Hammerstein's" was regarded as the nation's premier vaudeville house, no other manager dared to build a competing venue in the Times Square theatre district. The relatively peaceful policy of coexistence among New York's "big time" vaudeville managers was severely threatened, however, when the Theatrical Syndicate's Klaw and Erlanger joined forces with the Shubert Brothers and formed the United States Amusement Company in 1907.

Using the same strategy they employed to form the Theatrical Syndicate, Klaw and Erlanger convinced the Shuberts to join with them by pooling a number of their theatres to create a new vaudeville "circuit" designed specifically to end Keith's

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monopoly in the east and midwest. To provide the artists for this "circuit," they hired William Morris, the major independent vaudeville agent. They named their project "Advanced Vaudeville." To protect his business interests in New York, Keith had to convince the "big time" managers to ally with him by agreeing to book their acts through his United Booking Office. In The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville, Anthony Slide describes the United Booking Office as follows: "It worked as a 'trust,' controlling the booking of all vaudeville acts into East and Midwest vaudeville houses and charging a commission to all the acts it booked." [13] In order to prevent any internal strife, Keith devised a clever plan that divided New York into vaudeville territories. By offering independent managers a plan that protected their individual interests, Keith succeeded in uniting them against a common enemy, the United States Amusement Company.

F. F. Proctor, who owned five venues, was the first to join forces with Keith. He was followed by Percy G. Williams, who controlled "big time" vaudeville in Brooklyn. On 13 February 1907, Hammerstein signed a Memorandum of Agreement in which he agreed to book all his acts through Keith's United Booking Office. There were two reasons for this. First, he was no longer able to use William Morris as his booking agent since Morris was put in charge of "Advanced Vaudeville." The second and more important reason was that Hammerstein again faced competition from Klaw and Erlanger. To ensure that "Advanced Vaudeville" would have a strong presence in the Times Square theatre district, Klaw and Erlanger transformed their New York Theatre, the former Olympia Music Hall, into a vaudeville house. Having resisted Klaw and Erlanger's plan to make the Victoria Theatre a permanent showcase for the Theatrical

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Syndicate's legitimate stars, the Rogers Brothers. Hammerstein relinquished some of his independence in order to protect himself against their new vaudeville enterprise.

Although designed to protect Keith's monopoly, the Memorandum of Agreement signed by Hammerstein gave him, not Keith, the exclusive right to present "big time" vaudeville in the Times Square theatre district. Hammerstein's territory was as follows:

> Beginning at the foot of West 56th Street at the Hudson River; then running East to Fifth Avenue; then South to the North side of 37th Street; then West along the North side of 37th Street . . . to the Hudson River; then North to the point of beginning." [14]

The territorial agreement verified the fact that "Hammerstein's" was New York's, and therefore, the nation's, leading vaudeville house, but the alliance with Keith's United Booking Office was viewed with disfavor by many performers and by the trade journals, particularly Variety. Sime Silverman, the founder and editor of Variety, used his widely-read paper as a platform to speak out against what he believed was Keith's lack of concern for the welfare of the vaudevillians he controlled in a series of articles entitled "Why the Vaudeville Artists of America Should Organize." Silverman's disappointment with Hammerstein and other independent managers who allied themselves with Keith was reflected in his decision to promote "Advanced Vaudeville" as the antidote to Keith's reputation as an employer who showed little concern for the artists who made him wealthy.

Klaw and Erlanger and the Shuberts took out full-page ads to announce the first "Advanced Vaudeville" program at Philadelphia's Chestnut Street Opera House in April 1907. They waited until Labor Day weekend, however, to launch their largest assault,

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the simultaneous openings of seventeen "Advanced Vaudeville" houses. Silverman, whose favoritism was well-known, wrote a glowing account of the response to the nine-act bill that made its debut at the New York Theatre, the new enterprise's primary showcase. "Last Saturday night marked a big step forward in the progress of vaudeville, for then a variety show attained the dignity of a 'first night'. . . . The house was packed, jammed and overcrowded, containing nearly all the theatrical lights of the city, with others from abroad, who timed their visit to be present at the beginning of a new vaudeville era." [15]

The decision to have "Advanced Vaudeville" debut on a Saturday night during the final holiday weekend of the summer indicated that neither Klaw and Erlanger nor the Shuberts were certain that their program could compete successfully with "Hammerstein's" traditional Monday openings. In addition, the Saturday opening eliminated the potential threat of immediate negative commentary in the daily press. Perhaps most telling was Silverman's emphasis on the "dignity" of the event as demonstrated by the presence of an audience comprised mainly of fellow "theatrical lights." It would not be unrealistic to assume that Klaw and Erlanger and the Shuberts "papered" the house with well-wishers in order to ensure that "Advanced Vaudeville" was given an appropriate welcome.

As regular vaudeville patrons quickly discovered, however, "Advanced Vaudeville" at the New York Theatre fell far short of the programs at "Hammerstein's." Klaw and Erlanger's traditional nine-act bills, which they presented twice daily, were no match for the "big bills" for which "Hammerstein's" was famous. Even their first headliner, comedian George Fuller Golden, had appeared at Hammerstein's Venetian

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Terrace in 1900. The lack of genuinely innovative programming was symptomatic of the entire venture. Within months after "Advanced Vaudeville" made its spectacular debut at a "circuit" of theatres, the playhouses Klaw and Erlanger and the Shuberts transformed into vaudeville houses became, once again, venues for their legitimate productions. "Advanced Vaudeville" closed forever at the New York Theatre on 19 January 1908.

According to theatre historian Brooks McNamara, Klaw and Erlanger's project failed because Keith's United Booking Office "was too skilled and too knowledgeable about the vaudeville business." [16] Indeed, the United Booking Office was a remarkably effective organization. Despite its impersonal nature, the majority of vaudevillians depended on it to secure their seasonal engagements, thus providing them with reasonable assurances that they would be able to earn their livings. Organizations such as the White Rats, the first union of American variety artists, protested against the United Booking Office's service fees, which were automatically subtracted from performers' weekly salaries. There was no doubt, however, that Keith's "business first" approach transformed vaudeville into a highly efficient mechanism.

Vaudevillian Joe Laurie, Jr., however, presents a more intriguing, and more devious, rationale for the quick demise of "Advanced Vaudeville." In his massive compendium of vaudeville's history, Vaudeville: From the Honky Tonks to the Palace, Laurie argues that "what [William] Morris didn't know was that they [Klaw and Erlanger] were only in the vaude [sic] business to get a big price from Keith to quit." [17] Morris was, in fact, the only member of the team that created "Advanced Vaudeville" to suffer from its demise. Having severed his long-term business associations with his former clients, including Hammerstein, Morris was forced to rebuild his independent

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booking agency from the ground up. In contrast, Keith paid Klaw and Erlanger and the Shuberts a cash settlement of two million dollars in exchange for the contracts of all their performers as well as making these unlikely partners agree to dissolve the United States Amusement Company and to refrain from presenting vaudeville at any of their theatres for ten years. [14]

The dissolution of the United States Amusement Company brought the second "vaudeville wars" to an abrupt halt. The potential threat posed by "Advanced Vaudeville" generated major changes in New York's thriving vaudeville industry, however. The Memorandum of Agreement Hammerstein signed with Keith enabled "Hammerstein's" to retain its dominant position as the only "big time" vaudeville venue in the Times Square theatre district. To enhance its status, Hammerstein made its "big bill even longer. By expanding his programming, Hammerstein was able to honor his obligation to book artists through Keith's United Booking Office and to present short-lived topical acts that could only be seen at "Hammerstein's." The mastermind behind these highly publicized attractions was not Hammerstein but his son, William, who learned about showmanship from his famous father.

William Hammerstein: The Man Behind the Scenes

Hammerstein's third son, known to vaudevillians by his nickname, Willie, was instrumental in making "Hammerstein's" a legendary and extremely profitable enterprise. Unlike his father, whose willingness to take artistic risks challenged the classification of vaudeville as a "lowbrow" entertainment form, Willie capitalized on another of its strengths, its immediacy, to capture the public's attention. Because of Willie Hammerstein's skill as a promoter, "Hammerstein's" became celebrated for its "freak"

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acts. The actual number of these non-professionals, a combination of carnival grotesques, figures from the world of sports, and participants in lurid scandals sensationalized in the tabloid press was small in comparison to the thousands of true vaudeville artists who played at "Hammerstein's." Their publicity value, however, was undeniable.

When these acts were presented, "Hammerstein's" seemed more like P. T. Barnum's American Museum, a popular mid-nineteenth century attraction, than a twentieth-century vaudeville house. Ironically, by replicating the past, the ' freak" acts presented at "Hammerstein's" foreshadowed the Times Square theatre district's specific appeal to male audiences in the 1930's, when the elegant playhouses of Forty-second Street were transformed into all-night movie theatres and burlesque houses. During its heyday, however, "Hammerstein's" suffered no such gender discrimination. Its prestige as the nation's premier vaudeville house permitted women and men alike to satisfy their desires to see these temporary "heroes" and "heroines" in person without damaging their own reputations.

In contrast to the terrible Cherry Sisters, who turned their lack of talent into an asset that provided them with a modest vaudeville career, the "freak" acts that appeared at "Hammerstein's" were rarely seen at any other vaudeville houses. In exchange for a generous salary, these non-professionals made brief appearances and then disappeared from the spotlight. What made the "freak" acts so popular were Willie's publicity campaigns that heralded their debuts. Since "truth in advertising" was never Willie's motto, the sense of anticipation he created with his often outrageous stunts was usually more enjoyable than the "freak" act itself.

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Because they already had name recognition, the stars from the world of sports who appeared at "Hammerstein's" rarely required unusual publicity campaigns to draw audiences. The majority of them simply demonstrated their already proven skills. Heavyweight champion Jack Johnson's "act" consisted of a carefully rehearsed boxing match lasting three rounds. Johnson, of course, always emerged victorious. There were other sports figures, however, who attempted a true vaudeville "turn." One of the most popular was former boxer James J. Corbett, known as "Gentleman Jim." His talent for storytelling delighted "Hammerstein's" audiences. Corbett's success enabled him to have a brief, but lucrative, second career as a vaudevillian.

Most of those who followed Corbett's lead, however, displayed little of his flair. In the first issue of Variety, the review of jockey Tod Sloan's vaudeville debut affirms its founder's claim to print only objective criticism. "He offers a monologue (written by Geo. M. Cohan) of race track stuff and personal experiences . . . . His delivery is weak and uncertain and . . . he does not make a good impression . . . . As his act stands he is valuable only because of the money he draws."[19]

Willie's promotional skill proved vital to the success of Joyce Green's "act" in the summer of 1907 since she had no discernible talent. To attract patrons to see her on "Hammerstein's Roof," he issued a challenge to New York's vaudeville comics. Their task was simple; all they had to do was to make Joyce Green smile. For three weeks, Willie obtained the free services of many comedians as they tried to elicit a response from the attractive, young, black woman, whom Willie promoted as "Sober Sue." Patrons jammed the roof garden to laugh as the frustrated comics strived in vain to "go over" with the pleasant but unsmiling young woman. It was only after Green left New

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York to attend a funeral that Willie revealed the sad reason for "Sober Sue's" apparent lack of a sense of humor. She had been born without the facial muscles required for smiling, and thus always appeared expressionless. Today, such exploitation would be regarded as criminal. To the audiences at "Hammerstein's," however, it was just another example of Willie's showmanship.

The most profitable of all the "freak" acts to appear at "Hammerstein's" demonstrated Willie's ability to attract audiences. He created a debut act that allowed the public to see a woman best known as a participant in a lurid sex scandal in a setting which reflected the remarkable appeal of the American "dance craze" popularized by the sophisticated dance team of Vernon and Irene Castle. Evelyn Nesbit, a former chorus girl and one of the era's leading beauties, made headlines when her husband, socialite Harry K. Thaw, murdered her former paramour, famed architect Stanford White, at the Madison Square Roof Garden in 1906. During the sensational trial that followed the murder, photographs of Nesbit appeared on the front pages of all but the most conservative newspapers. Thaw was declared insane and sent to Matteawan, a prison for the criminally insane in upstate New York. Nesbit, now a mother, moved to England. By 1913, however, she had run out of money. When she returned to New York, she approached Hammerstein and asked for a job. Not wishing to appear unkind, he sent her to see Willie, assuming that his son would reject her. Instead, Willie saw her potential as a moneymaker for "Hammerstein's." Thanks to his good relations with the city's journalists, Willie created a campaign promoting Nesbit's return to the stage in a new dance act at a salary of three thousand dollars a week. While Nesbit rehearsed with her partner, Jack Clifford, Willie prepared for her vaudeville debut by reminding the public

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of her notoriety only a few years earlier. For a second time, photographs of Nesbit appeared in newspapers all across the country. Feature stories asked whether she was a "vamp" or a "damsel in distress."

According to Variety, "The first week of Evelyn Nesbit Thaw's engagement at Hammerstein's . . . broke all box office records for the house . . . . The weekly gross receipts were between $20,000 and $21,000." The review also notes that Nesbit's act, consisting of three dances, lasted exactly eight minutes. "She was dressed in a filmy, transparent, yellow ankle-length dress, her hair hanging down her back . . . . Clifford lifted Miss Nesbit above his head and whirled about a few times. After the third number she clung around his neck while he swung her. It's a nice little act if you don't stop to analyze it too closely."[20] Given her meager talent as a dancer, Nesbit might have had only a brief career in "small time" vaudeville had not Willie taken advantage of a coincidence that occurred during the second week of her engagement.

With the aid of paid accomplices, Thaw escaped from Matteawan and sought refuge in Canada. To maintain interest in Nesbit's admittedly minor act, Willie informed the press that Thaw sent him a telegram in which he threatened to kill "his" Evelyn. To give credence to his ruse, Willie hired private security guards to accompany Nesbit, Clifford, and her son twenty-four hours a day. Overnight, the formerly notorious showgirl was transformed into a working mother trying to earn a living for herself and her son. Audiences, curious to see if Thaw might actually try to kill his former wife, continued to fill "Hammerstein's" for another six weeks.

In addition to the profits she earned for "Hammerstein's," Nesbit found herself in demand at "big time" vaudeville houses across the country. Because of Willie's

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promotional skills, she became a headliner for two years and went on to star in silent films, usually as a beautiful but misunderstood woman. Ironically, Willie's most profitable "freak" act was also his last creation. In June 1914, less than a year after Nesbit's sensational debut at "Hammerstein's," Willie, only forty years of age died from Bright's disease.

Unfortunately, many who eulogized Willie emphasized only his talent for manipulating the press and the public. Despite the fact that he was a generation younger than New York's other vaudeville managers, Willie was one of the industry's most influential men. His self-effacing personal style was the perfect complement to his father's flamboyant behavior. Known only to a few close associates, Willie concentrated all his efforts on the day-to-day operation of "Hammerstein's," thus giving his father the freedom he needed to pursue his idealistic plan to present grand opera for the masses. Vincent Sheean provides a more fitting tribute to Willie's abilities by quoting Hammerstein's response to an unnamed reporter shortly after his son's death. "You know, there was never anyone like Willie . . . . Willie knew vaudeville. He knew more than any of the others. It was his life." [21]

The loss of his third son was only one a series of tragedies that profoundly affected the sixty-eight-year-old Hammerstein in 1914. Earlier that year, his youngest son, whom Hammerstein had proudly named Abraham Lincoln, was found dead in a New York hotel room. Two months after Willie's death, Hammerstein's eldest son, Harry, died of complications caused by diabetes. This was the same disease that would lead to Hammerstein's own death in 1919. In addition to the loss of his sons and the limitations imposed by his deteriorating health, Hammerstein faced increasing

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competition from entrepreneurs offering new entertainment options to attract new patrons. The Times Square theatre district that Hammerstein created in the former "Thieves' Lair" almost twenty years before now contained majestic hotels, lavish restaurants known as "lobster palaces," and elegant cabarets as well as many new theatres housing legitimate productions, "small time" vaudeville, and a newly refined popular entertainment genre, the motion picture. In 1914, however, the competition posed by these new enterprises was far less damaging than the presence of a new "big time" vaudeville house, the Palace Theatre.

The Last "Vaudeville Wars"

Except for the short-lived and unprofitable presentations of "Advanced Vaudeville" at Klaw and Erlanger's New York Theatre in late 1907 and early 1908, "Hammerstein's" status as the center of vaudeville's universe remained unchallenged from 1904 to 1913. With Willie's aid, Hammerstein had operated the theatre as an independent enterprise, free from the restrictive business and artistic policies imposed on vaudeville by the owners of large "circuits" of theatres, particularly B. F. Keith. In 1913, however, "Hammerstein's" lost its dominant position when Hammerstein sold his exclusive booking rights in the Times Square theatre district back to Keith to fund the construction of his Lexington Opera House. The last "vaudeville wars," in which "Hammerstein's" vied with Keith's Palace Theatre for supremacy from 1913 to 1915, ended when Hammerstein sold his theatre. Hammerstein's decision to withdraw from the "vaudeville wars" was the final act of his long career in the commercial theatre. It also marked the beginning of the end of vaudeville's evolution as a popular art form. Unlike Hammerstein, who combined traditional acts with experimental work in order to expand

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vaudeville's boundaries, the conservative business policies of Keith's manager, E. F. Albee, were marked by their lack of innovation. Under Albee's direction, the Palace Theatre became vaudeville's second "mecca," but profits, not artistic endeavor, became the primary measure of its success.

The division of New York into specific vaudeville territories that Keith had engineered in 1907 persuaded the city's major independent vaudeville managers to ally with his United Booking Office against the threat posed by "Advanced Vaudeville." It also prevented Keith from fulfilling his ambition to operate a showcase for his "polite" vaudeville in the Times Square theatre district. The dissolution of the rival United States Amusement Company and the curiously swift demise of its "Advanced Vaudeville" project less than a year later marked the end of any serious attempt to challenge "Hammerstein's" position as the nation's leading vaudeville house.

As Keith and Hammerstein knew, the Memorandum of Agreement they signed in 1907 would not withstand the scrutiny of a court of law. Dividing New York into vaudeville territories was merely Keith's expedient ploy to prevent internal rivalries among the managers who used his United Booking Office. Since their alliance was, in fact, no more than a "gentleman's agreement," couched in legalese, Hammerstein was able to honor his business relationship with Keith's booking agency and still operate his theatre exactly as he pleased. "Hammerstein's" informal music hall ambiance, its "big bills," and its superb location made it unique. It was not, however, invulnerable.

In 1913, the appearance of a new rival provided Keith with the opportunity to invade the prime vaudeville territory he had ceded to Hammerstein six years earlier. Martin Beck, the owner of the Orpheum "circuit," the major "big time" vaudeville

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enterprise west of Chicago, decided to expand his empire. To achieve this goal, Beck built the Palace Theatre, located at Broadway and Forty-seventh Street. In order to secure enough "big time" vaudeville acts, Beck entered into an agreement with Keith's United Booking Office. When the Palace opened on 24 March 1913, however, Keith, not Beck, held the controlling interest in the new theatre. Making the Palace the centerpiece of the Keith "circuit" satisfied Keith's ambition to establish his presence in the Times Square theatre district. It was also in direct violation of the territorial agreement Keith and Hammerstein had signed in 1907.

Having used his financial resources to buy out Beck, Keith then forced Hammerstein to negotiate a new agreement. These meetings, like those Keith had with Beck, were held in secret. Newly-elected President Woodrow Wilson, concerned with the proliferation of monopolies, initiated a program, entitled the "New Freedom," to study this problem and to persuade Congress to pass a series of reform bills designed to halt the growth of trusts. Rather than risk the potential for negative publicity generated by a legal hearing, Hammerstein chose to negotiate with Keith privately.

In an obvious attempt to eliminate Hammerstein, Keith offered him a one-third interest in the Palace. Hammerstein, ever the independent, countered by demanding, and receiving, a cash settlement of two hundred thousand dollars. According to Variety, "The money received . . . will be utilized by Oscar Hammerstein in the erection of his new opera house . . . . Legal proceedings would have brought the 'trust' matter into publicity. That is something the U.B.O. people do not care to have aired just now." [33] The settlement was sizable, but Hammerstein gave up his exclusive booking rights. In addition, he enabled Keith to avoid any government investigation into his predatory

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business practices because Keith could claim that his United Booking Office provided artists for competing vaudeville venues.

The opening of the Palace in 1913 was, however, an artistic and popular disaster. Sime Silverman remained Keith's most outspoken detractor. Since he did not depend on Keith for his livelihood, he was able to express his opinion without fear of reprisal:

> The fate of "$2 Vaudeville" at the new Palace . . . was sealed before the house opened Monday . . . . The Palace opposes Hammerstein's . . . . Monday night Hammerstein's played to capacity and repeated it twice Tuesday, with a program costing $1,000 less . . . although Hammerstein's bill has seven more acts . . . . The news of "the Palace's flop" pleased the regulars around the New Times Square mightily. Everyone knew of the double-crossing tactics employed in the opening of the Palace. [23]

New York's other reporters, particularly the members of the "Ten O'clock Club," the informal group that met every night at "Hammerstein's" to swap stories and to chat with Hammerstein agreed that the Palace's bill was not worth the price of its expensive seats. The "big bill" at "Hammerstein's," with a top ticket price of one dollar, was far more satisfying. By the time Keith closed the Palace for the summer of 1913, only the appearances of two legitimate stars, Ethel Barrymore and Sarah Bernhardt, had attracted the capacity audiences Keith had hoped to draw. Silverman, like so many others in the industry, however, misjudged Keith's apparent defeat in these "vaudeville wars."

While "Hammerstein's: programs, featuring such headliners as The Three Keatons, Eddie Foy, and Vernon and Irene Castle, continued to offer more variety, as well as better value, the elegant Palace began to attract a very different kind of patronage, one that more closely resembled the audiences at legitimate theatres. As cultural historian Robert W.

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Snyder points out, "The Palace was the embodiment of Keith and Albee refinements. An observer once called it their theatre for 'the silk stocking trade'." [24] "Hammerstein's" still drew enthusiastic audiences, but the theatre itself, now fifteen years old, was beginning to show its age. "Hammerstein's" survived the first full season of competition with the Palace, but following Willie's death in June 1914, Hammerstein soon realized that he was too ill to manage the operation alone.

With the aid of his only surviving son, Arthur, Hammerstein tried to maintain hismost profitable enterprise. Arthur, a prominent producer of musical plays, had little interest in vaudeville, however. Before the 1914-1915 season ended, Hammerstein sold his theatre to the Rialto Corporation, which planned to renovate it for use as a motion picture theatre. "Hammerstein's" closed on 1 May 1915, following the final performance of a vaudeville bill Hammerstein presented to pay tribute to Willie. The review in Billboard, after noting that attendance was only "fair," also states:

> A careful observer . . . might wonder at the full attendance during the closing acts . . . . The customary crowd that gets up during the last act. from force of habit, didn't get up, and the reason for this was a thirteen minute Charlie Chaplin film . . . . He has taken the terror out of the tail end of the show. [25]

Just as vaudeville's great appeal caused many owners to change their theatres from legitimate playhouses to vaudeville venues, as Hammerstein did with his Victoria Theatre, the successful transition to motion pictures made by former "Hammerstein's" favorites, such as Chaplin, brought about another transformation in popular entertainment. To attract new audiences, entrepreneurs in the fledgling motion picture

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industry abandoned their storefront nickelodeons and began to lease or build new showcases in which to present their films. The Rialto Theatre, under the management of S. F. "Roxy" Rothapfel, replaced "Hammerstein's" and "Hammerstein's Roof." Advertised as "The Temple of the Motion Picture," the new theatre opened on 21 April 1916. The New York Times describes how the Rialto Theatre marked the beginning of a new trend in popular entertainment:

> The Knickerbocker is a fine old theatre temporarily made over into a movie house, and even the Strand is so built that : . . . it could be converted to the uses of opera or drama, but the Rialto is a motion picture house, pure and simple. It is stageless, the screen placed boldly against the back wall of the theatre. It is built in the conviction that the American passion for movies is here to stay. [25]

The closing of "Hammerstein's" in 1915 marked the end of Hammerstein's long career in the commercial theatre. Hammerstein's decision to withdraw from the last "vaudeville wars" did not signal the end of vaudeville's remarkable appeal, but it did denote a major turning point in vaudeville's evolution as an art form. Faced with increasing competition, first from the newly-gentrified motion pictures, and then from radio that brought popular entertainment directly into people's homes, American vaudeville lost the innovative quality that made the trip to "Hammerstein's" a special event. The Palace Theatre, the only "big time" vaudeville house in the Times Square theatre district, became the industry's second, and final, "mecca." Yet its programming, defined by the economics imposed by Keith's nine-act bill and governed by the ultraconservative moral code that ensured vaudeville's acceptance as a respectable family entertainment, was no different than that presented at any other major theatre on the Keith "circuit."

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In contrast, Hammerstein made his single enterprise profitable by appealing primarily to adult audiences. "Hammerstein's" lively music hall ambiance and its "big bills," combining favorite headliners with debuts by untested performers and novel experiments, made it unlike any other vaudeville house. As the appearance of the "freak" acts cleverly promoted by his son, Willie, demonstrated, Hammerstein continued to rely on the press to verify the perception that "Hammerstein's," like its owner, was unique.

New York Pays Tribute to Hammerstein

Despite his declining health, Hammerstein agreed to perform at an Actors' Fund benefit held at the Hippodrome on 26 March 1916. Hammerstein and fourteen other composers, including Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Rudolf Friml, and Hammerstein's long-time friend, Gustav Kerker appeared together on the theatre's giant stage. Each man, seated at a baby grand piano, played one of his best-known compositions. Hammerstein was the last to perform in this all-star attraction. After he finished playing his waltz, "Louise," an actor, dressed as a policeman, entered and announced that he had a summons for Mr. Hammerstein.

> The audience suspected a sensation, but the undaunted Oscar only smiled at the sound of the familiar words. He hobbled back to the focal centre and bravely faced John Philip Sousa, who held the legal-looking paper. Then Mr. Sousa made a pretty little speech, in which he allowed that Mr. Hammerstein had done more for New York than it could ever do for him.[27]

Sousa, like all New Yorkers, was aware of the serious nature of Hammerstein's illness. Although Hammerstein continued to meet occasionally with reporters to announce new plans, including the creation of a "circuit" of vaudeville houses bearing his

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name, most news articles published about Hammerstein during these final years simply informed readers of his worsening medical condition. His appearance at the Hippodrome, his last in a theatrical setting, provided Sousa with the opportunity to pay tribute to Hammerstein for his achievements.

Following Hammerstein's death on 1 August 1919, the editors' of the New York Times chose to break one of the paper's unwritten rules. In recognition of Hammerstein's transformation of New York's cultural landscape, they printed the first column of his lengthy obituary on page one.

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NOTES

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2. Variety, 23 December 1905, 4.

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5. Grace La Rue, "My Vaudeville Years", in Selected Vaudeville Criticism, ed. Anthony Slide (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1988), 275.

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9. Vincent Sheean, Oscar Hammerstein I: The Life and Exploits of an Impresario (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 39.

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11. New York Dramatic Mirror, 18 June 1904, 16.

12. Sheean, 122.

13. Anthony Slide, The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 515.

14. Memorandum of Agreement: United Booking Office of America and Hammerstein Amusement Company, 13 February 1907 (New York: Shubert Archive).

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16. Brooks McNamara, The Shuberts of Broadway (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 42.

17. Joe Laurie, Jr., Vaudeville: From the Honky Tonks to the Palace (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1953), 372.

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18. Slide. The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville, 516.

19. Variety, 16 December 1905, 5.

20. Variety, 8 August 1913, 11.

21. Sheean, 338.

22. Variety, 2 May 1913, 6.

23. Variety, 28 March 1913, 1.

24. Snyder, 89.

25. Billboard, 1 May 1915, 15.

26. New York Times, 22 April 1916, 12.

27. New York Times, 27 March 1916, 16.

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Chapter Six

CONCLUSION: A CASE OF SELECTIVE MEMORY

The audience that cheered and applauded Hammerstein at the Hippodrome in March 1916 needed no prompting to remind them of his many accomplishments. They represented the countless New Yorkers who benefited directly from Hammerstein's transformation of the city's cultural landscape. Because so much of his life's work was a matter of public record, there were undoubtedly many New Yorkers who believed that they knew Hammerstein as one might know a distant, but celebrated, relative. They witnessed his triumphs, his failures, and his remarkable recoveries. They could vouch for his eccentric behavior, his quick wit, and his willingness to take risks. They would not have described him as a man whose only real passion in life was his love of grand opera. Hammerstein clearly relished being an opera impresario, but the innovative work he produced at his second Manhattan Opera House represented only one aspect of his multifaceted career.

By concentrating on his achievements in the commercial theatre, this study demonstrates that Hammerstein's passion was not limited to "highbrow" art. Many of his finest efforts, in fact, defied the sacralization of American culture. Because he refused to abide by the arbitrary standards that defined the cultural hierarchy of his time, Hammerstein repeatedly challenged the division of entertainment into elitist and popular art forms. In addition to erasing cultural boundaries, Hammerstein also sought to eliminate the social stratification that accompanied this artistic ranking by constructing

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theatres that: catered to each patron's sense of good taste and refinement. By charging popular prices and by maintaining high artistic standards, Hammerstein made his theatres entertainment centers for middle- and working-class audiences. Particularly important was Hammerstein's skill at designing theatres that appealed to the newly-emergent middle-class women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who assumed the responsibility of budgeting expenses for entertainment outside the home.

While some of his theatres, such as the Harlem Opera House and the Olympia, were hailed as landmark structures that affirmed New York's status as the nation's cultural center, Hammerstein often scored even greater successes at less prestigious venues, such as his Victoria Theatre and its unique roof garden theatre, the Paradise Gardens.

Unlike the majority of his peers, who avoided personal publicity, Hammerstein became one of the era's major celebrities. Noted for his distinctive costume, his aversion to bureaucracy, and, above all, his refusal to surrender his independence, Hammerstein, aided by New York's journalists, kept readers informed of his visionary plans as well as his disputes, legal and otherwise, with the petty officials who attempted to block his progress. Because of this artful self-promotion, Hammerstein endeared himself to the city's huge immigrant population who considered him a modern-day folk hero.

At a time when the legitimate theatre was dominated by the monopolistic business practices of the Theatrical Syndicate, Hammerstein chose to remain independent so that he could select the productions that he believed would attract audiences. His theatres became showcases for stars such as James A. Herne, Viola Allen, Henrietta Crosman, and Elsie de Wolfe, and for independent producers, such as Liebler and Company and

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Charles Dillingham, who, like Hammerstein, realized that the Theatrical Syndicate's emphasis on profits posed a real threat to artistic endeavor. He continued to foster the independent movement by leasing two of his playhouses to fellow independents David Belasco and Lew M. Fields.

Hammerstein's innovative approach to vaudeville programming, first at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall and then at the Olympia Music Hall and the Olympia Roof Garden, was surpassed only by his success at the Victoria Theatre of Varieties and its unique rooftop "resort," the Paradise Gardens. These venues, known to vaudevillians and audiences alike as "Hammerstein's" and "Hammerstein's Roof," served as America's "mecca" for "big time" vaudeville during the middle decade of vaudeville's fifty-year reign as the most popular of popular entertainments.

Hammerstein's lengthy career in the commercial theatre encompassed what is often referred to as a transitional period in American cultural history rather than a "golden age," such as the era in which the Palace became vaudeville's second "mecca" or when the musicals written by his grandson, Oscar Hammerstein II, in collaboration with composers such as Jerome Kern or Richard Rodgers, became the standard by which all musical plays were judged. Thus, many of Hammerstein's artistic innovations were incorrectly attributed to those who followed him.

In 1900, Hammerstein became the first producer to create a "national" theatre at his Theatre Republic. Yet his efforts were forgotten when a group of wealthy New Yorkers paid nearly two million dollars to construct the New Theatre (1909). This heavily subsidized playhouse, located at Sixty-second Street and Central Park West, was falsely promoted as America's first "national" theatre. While the "monumental"

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structure's Renaissance decor was reminiscent of Hammerstein's Olympia, its poor sightlines and even poorer acoustics soon made it the City's most grandiose white elephant. After two seasons of presentations of plays by European playwrights, America's second "national" theatre became a commercial booking house.

The Ziegfeld Follies, first presented in the summer of 1907 to compete with the vaudeville program at "Hammerstein's Roof," began as inexpensive imitations of the musical extravaganzas and "Living Pictures" presented by Hammerstein fifteen years earlier at the New Koster and Bial's Music Hall. Five years later, however, critics, who paid scant attention to Ziegfeld's summer programs, hailed the Ziegfeld Follies of 1912, the first to be presented during the regular theatre season, as an innovative approach to staging musical theatre. The success of this "review," which starred former "Hammerstein's" headliners Bert Williams and Lillian Lorraine, assisted by a chorus of "Anna Held Girls," generated a number of competing productions, most notably the annual editions of The Passing Show produced by the Shubert Brothers. To avoid risking their investments in these lavish productions, both Ziegfeld and the Shuberts continued to rely on the drawing power of vaudeville headliners already tested and approved by the "wise" audiences at "Hammerstein's."

Hammerstein's innovative plan, in which he invited his audiences to dance at his Bal Champetre at the Olympia Winter Roof Garden during the 1896-1897 season, was never mentioned when the American dance craze, led by Vernon and Irene Castle in 1913 and 1914, became the country's "new" fad. Rather than reminding the public that he had instituted social dancing many years before, Hammerstein simply installed a dance floor on "Hammerstein's Roof" in order to attract more female patrons and their

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escorts. His quaint Dutch village became a scenic backdrop for couples eager to demonstrate their newly acquired dancing skills.

As these examples indicate, the process of selective memory that diminished the vital role Hammerstein played in the transformation of American culture was already underway during the final years of his career. Hammerstein himself was partly to blame for this oversight. Always working toward the realization of his next project, Hammerstein never bothered to correct these errors of omission. His remarkable resilience was due to the fact that he continued to envision new goals to accomplish.

By the time of his death in 1919, Hammerstein's real contributions to the commercial theatre were already overshadowed by the memory of the legendary persona he had created to keep the press and the public interested in his work. In a nation addicted to the cult of celebrity, Hammerstein's actual accomplishments became subordinate to his skill as a showman. Even Arthur Hammerstein's plan to make Hammerstein's Theatre a lasting memorial to his father's brief career as an opera impresario ended when he was forced to sell the theatre less than four years after it opened.

Hammerstein's own theatres, once praised as cultural landmarks, no longer reflected Hammerstein's visionary achievements. The Harlem Opera House and the Columbus Theatre became neighborhood movie houses. The Harlem Music Hall was converted to a burlesque house. By the 1930's, the elegant theatres that once accurately represented the significance of Hammerstein's pioneering efforts in the creation and development of the Times Square theatre district, had been defaced by their new owners.

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The Lew M. Fields Theatre, built by Hammerstein in 1904, was the first of the famed Forty-second Street playhouses to be transformed into a "grind" movie house, where action films catering to male-dominated audiences were shown twenty-four hours a day. The former Theatre Republic also depended on male patrons for its survival. Renamed Minsky's Republic, the theatre's original facade was completely hidden by metal panels, covered with brightly painted stars and portraits of the burlesque beauties appearing inside. The alterations made to these Hammerstein's theatres demonstrated the cultural erosion that ultimately affected all of the Forty-second Street playhouses and transformed the block between Seventh and Eighth Avenues into a twentieth century "Thieves Lair."

The razing of the former Olympia spurred the process that erased public awareness of Hammerstein's achievements in the commercial theatre. In its final years of operation, the structure bore little resemblance to Hammerstein's "palace of amusement" that drew thousands of New Yorkers to its grand opening in 1895. The building's white limestone facade, grown dingy through years of neglect, was often painted over with garish signs advertising the second-run movies shown in its three theatres or the introduction of a new soft drink. The Olympia was torn down in 1935 when New York was overwhelmed by the effects of the Great Depression, thirty years before the idea of preserving the city's landmark buildings gained awareness. Only a few journalists took the time to write articles to remind their readers that Hammerstein's building marked the point of origin of the Times Square theatre district.

In the late 1930's, librettist Oscar Hammerstein II attempted to interest L. B. Mayer, the head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios, in producing a film biography of his

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grandfather. A treatment for the script was written, but the project was shelved. In 1946, an actor portraying Hammerstein appeared as a minor character in Columbia Pictures' The Jolson Story. The film made no mention of Jolson's appearances at "Hammerstein's" long before he became a Shubert star. In 1953, Robert Morley portrayed Hammerstein, the opera impresario, in J. Arthur Rank's biographical film, Melba. Three years later, Vincent Sheean's biography of Hammerstein, endorsed by Oscar Hammerstein II, was published. Like Rank's film, Sheean's popular biography reinforced the perception of Hammerstein as a man driven solely by his desire to present grand opera.

The decision to reclaim Forty-second Street and to make it the center of the Times Square theatre district for the twenty-first century, just as Hammerstein did at the beginning of this century, proved that Hammerstein's effort to present "highbrow" art to mass audiences represented only one of his contributions to New York's cultural development. Today, patrons arriving early for performances at the New Victory Theatre join with tourists to climb the theatre's double staircase, carefully restored to look as it did when Hammerstein built it to adorn his Theatre Republic in 1900, in order to get better view of the evolution of the "new" Forty-second Street. From this vantage point, the confluence of past and present, it is possible to see how Hammerstein's pioneering vision continues to inform the transformation of New York's cultural landscape.

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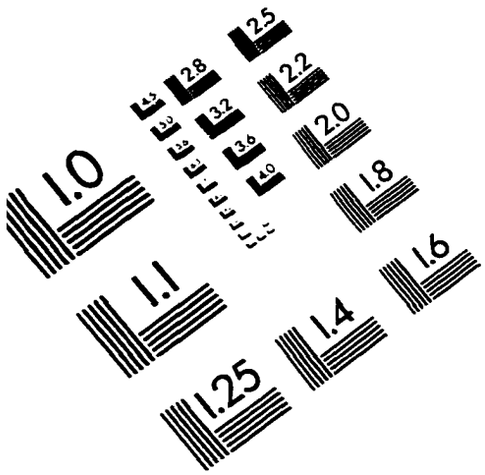

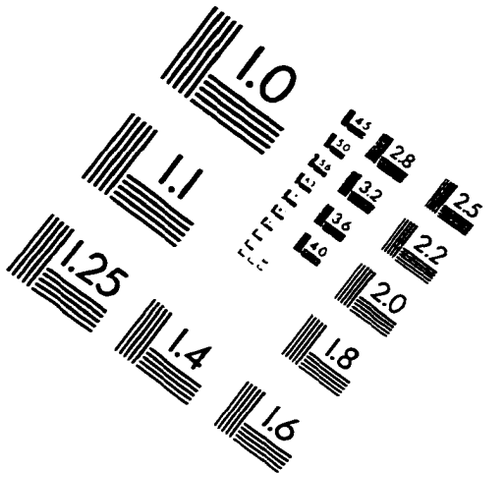

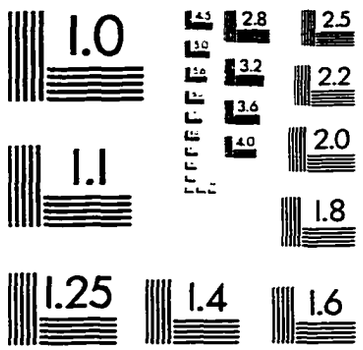

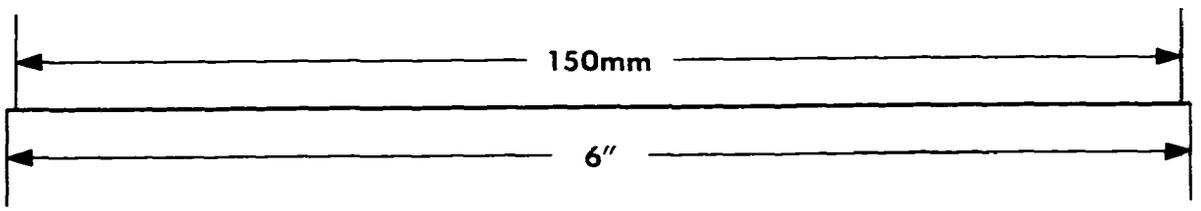

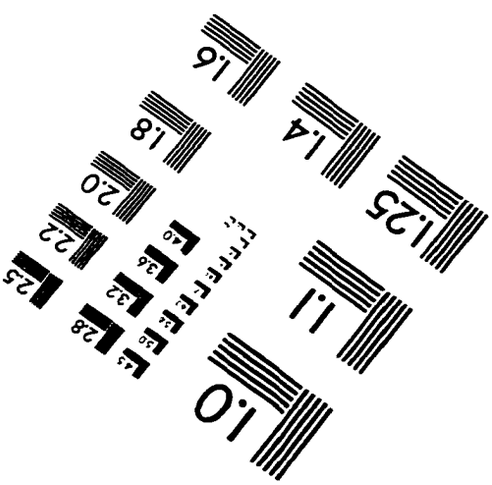

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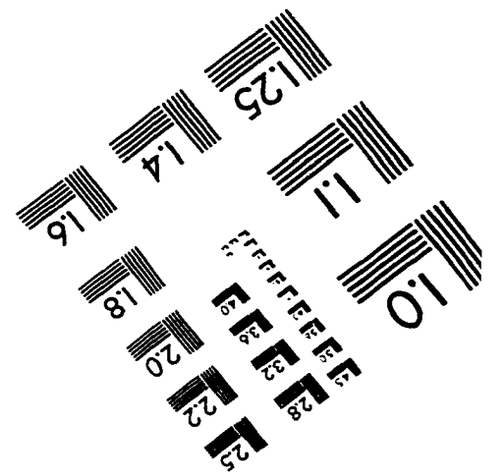

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