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FILM TAKES OVER THE THEATRE: AN HISTORICAL STUDY OF AMERICAN RESIDENT STOCK COMPANIES FROM 1920 TO 1932

City University of New York PH.D. 1979

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1979

FILM TAKES OVER THE THEATRE: AN HISTORICAL STUDY OF AMERICAN RESIDENT STOCK COMPANIES FROM 1920 TO 1932

by

MARY ISRAEL

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.

1979

The Almighty Dollar: ink drawing by Hammond; Theatre Collection, The Free Library of Philadelphia (photo: Thom Loughman)

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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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

The years with which this study is involved saw the firm establishment of hundreds of individual, commercial producing organizations spread across the United States, each of which provided the main theatrical fare for the city in which it resided. The relatively sudden disappearance of these theatre companies, in the late twenties and early thirties, coincided with the birth and technological development of the "talking" moving pictures, giving evidence that the success of the big-business "sound" film industry was directly related to the loss of resident stock as it was then known. The purpose of this study is two-fold: to determine what factors led to the popularity, until the late twenties, of the American stock companies which flourished longer than is commonly supposed, and to evaluate the role that the "talking" moving picture among other factors--including the Great Depression--played in determining the fate of resident stock.

Significance of the Study

By the twenties, New York had become recognized as the headquarters of play production, and agencies there controlled most of the plays released to stock. But the stock companies which adapted these works to their local stages were owned and operated independently, and in this sense represented decentralized theatre in America. In these companies many of the

most important actors, designers, and directors were trained and nurtured for Broadway and, eventually, the "talkies." General theatre history textbooks have only touched upon the achievements of these companies. While a few biographical studies of actors who participated in resident stock include remarks on this aspect of their careers, the information offered is very limited. A number of Doctoral dissertations have dealt with resident stock, but are restricted, for the most part, to a specific company within a specific time period.

Limitations of the Study

Apart from constructing the anatomy of a "typical" stock company, this study is limited to an examination of several actual, specific companies of the twenties which were able to maintain a successful operation over a period of several years. While each of the companies studied differs to some degree in matters of schedule, budget, repertoire, and prestige, taken together they support the picture of the "typical" twenties stock company mentioned above, operating in the average American city. Special emphasis has been given to the peak years of these companies in the mid-twenties, in order to discover a relationship between the organizations in their periods of greatest efficiency, and the cities which they successfully served. An effort has been made to discover why the stock companies began to fail, in the late twenties and early thirties, to maintain their popularity with the public, or were superseded by sound films. For this reason, the last five years of the study--from 1927-1932--also take special focus.

Sources of Material

Information on resident stock companies from weekly Billboard and weekly Variety comprises the bulk of material drawn from reference sources. The items found on these pages often reflect the efficiency of the public relations department of the companies mentioned in the trade journals, and therefore are not necessarily representative of any one company's importance to the total stock scene. Certain conclusions may be drawn, however, regarding the availability to stock companies of specific recent Broadway plays, and the relative frequency with which these releases were produced outside of New York.

Personal interviews with surviving workers of the twenties resident stock companies make up the major part of primary source material. Where in-person interviews were not possible, I have collected, by letter, audiotapes, and telephone interviews, additional information from participants of the stock period under discussion. Copies of taped memoirs and interviews now held in the Oral History Collection at the University of California at Los Angeles have provided a useful supplement.

The special collections held in the Research Division of New York's Lincoln Center Library of the Performing Arts have proved helpful for the material provided on individuals who were part of resident stock; theatre programs offering additional information on some of the more prestigious stock companies have also been preserved here, and are valuable for their information on repertoire, ticket prices, and cast

members. The Players Collection, the Robinson Locke Collection, the Stuart Walker Collection, the Chamberlain and Lyman Brown Collection have been especially helpful.

Material has been taken from the dissertations and theses dealing with specific individuals or stock companies where this information contributes to the picture of a typical stock company of the twenties, in its years of both strength and decline.

I have undertaken extensive reading which deals with America's economic, social, political and cultural climate during the years in question, in order to build a solid background of the country as a whole, against which stands the picture of American resident stock.

Review of the Literature

Of the dissertations and theses which have been written about individual stock companies, or the stock companies of specific cities, several have been helpful to this study. William Deam's 1954 work at the University of Michigan has produced a biographical study of Laura Justine Bonstelle-Stuart, which details the operations of the well-known Bonstelle companies from 1910 until the manager's death in 1932. The study focuses on her Detroit theatre, which, because it was unique in quality and prestige, should be considered less than typical. These features have proven valuable, however, in determining what methods a company might best have employed for maximum efficiency and longevity. At the University of Washington, Mary K. Rohrer has made a thesis examination, subsequently

published, of Seattle stock companies through 1934, offering a study of these companies in one of America's healthiest theatre towns. Jean Ann Jory's Master's thesis at the University of Utah is a biographical study of her father, Victor Jory. Since Jory was a prominent stock actor in the twenties, much of her thesis deals with the years he worked in various of these organizations. A second Master's thesis dealing with an important stock personality has been written by Muriel Ann Mouring at the University of California, and details the career of Henry Duffy, one of the West Coast's leading actor-producers. Since both Jory and Duffy either acted in or managed companies which have been examined in the body of this work, the Jory and Mouring theses support these sections, augmented by telephone interviews with and transcripts of audiotapes from Mr. Jory. Two dissertations from the University of California at Los Angeles deal with legitimate theatre in Los Angeles during the period of my study. The work by Marvin Kirschman centers on the Belasco Theatre from 1927 to 1933. Camille Bokar has examined all legitimate theatre in Los Angeles from 1920 to 1929. Both of these works have provided insights into the features of Los Angeles stock theatre as the artist's stepping stone to the "talkies."

The study is comprised of seven chapters. Chapter I provides an overview of America between the end of World War I and 1932, in an attempt to relate the psychological climate of the country to the types of theatrical fare in demand. Chapter II details the anatomy of a hypothetical, "typical" twenties

stock company--its company members, repertoire, negotiations with play brokers, work schedule, the hiring of actors, salaries and budget, wardrobe problems, stage settings, the relationship between the company and the community in which it resided, ticket sales and publicity, the stock company versus the road show, and the quality of performance. A number of specific companies are discussed in Chapter III, in order to point out unique features of some of the more important organizations. Chapter IV provides a picture of the silent film industry, and its appeal to the American populace in comparison to that of live theatre. The development of "talkies" is dealt with in Chapter V, followed by Chapter VI's discussion of sound film's devastating impact on stock theatre. Chapter VII offers a summary, and conclusions reached as a result of the investigation.

CHAPTER I

AMERICA IN THE TWENTIES

America "roared" in the twenties, or so we have been told. Certainly it was a decade of vitality for a country eager to forget its war-time struggles and to pursue its dreams of prosperity. It was a period which initiated many new ideas--some which raised questions about established traditions. Old-time conventions were scrutinized, and perhaps ventilated more often than broken. As early post-war chaos subsided, the average citizen looked forward to his increased leisure time, during which he might contemplate an even better life. Formulas for success were being shared by those who had achieved it. The machine age was providing means not only to ease the burdens of living, but to enjoy new forms of recreation. Increased earnings and installment buying allowed the consumers to treat themselves to colorfully advertised products, earlier considered shameful luxuries. If the "Lost Generation" poured out its works of disillusionment, the average American enjoyed with honesty the material products of the technological age. The "younger generation" would, as it has throughout history, feel obliged to rebel, but youth would stabilize itself with time. Rural families migrated in great numbers to the cities in order to claim their share of "the good life" that eluded them on the

farm; the process of urbanization rapidly increased. The decade offered much that was new, stimulating, at times even dazzling. But our perception of those years is vulnerable to distortion if viewed in terms of a "headlines montage"--bathtub gin, political scandals, wholesale adultery, short skirts and plunging necklines, abandonment of religious beliefs, fashion fads, game crazes, and youth's innocence lost in a Model-T Ford. The country did not lapse into a wanton madness. Rather, the burdens of a great many Americans were lightened, allowing them to work at their jobs and raise their families in an easier spirit.

In many ways, life in the twenties was brushed with theatrical color. Commercial products were often promoted by illustrated newspaper and magazine ads, by salesmen making "pitches," and by dramatized radio commercials. Religious groups which had often condemned theatre as "sinful" rediscovered the drama as a means of preaching salvation. Evangelism was in the air, and Aimee Semple MacPherson hypnotized her disciples with her own brand of theatrics--surpassing by far the earlier "draw" of Billy Sunday. Much of twenties theatre dramatized the American family influenced by "modern" thinking. As usual, most of these productions were first viewed in the East; many of them were later delivered to stock companies which served them up to the provinces. The radio, the automobile, and tabloid newspapers all made means of communication simpler and faster. Debate between old ways and new ones thus became more energetic. Perhaps much of the "roar" was

simply this--a new freedom to talk about matters only hesitantly touched on earlier. To whatever degree the twenties were wild--until those sobering October days in 1929--what were the reasons for the attitudes and behavior of the "typical" American?

The Armistice which ended World War I inspired an optimistic belief in American citizens that the general welfare of the country would take priority above all else. The people would soon have to reckon with a President who chose international peace as his primary interest, and with a government unprepared immediately to restore the peaceful life as formerly known. Some suggestions had been made, prior to the end of the war, concerning plans for reconstruction, but these ideas had come primarily from private people and organizations and were little heeded by the authorities that might have implemented them. An effective process of achieving renewal was impeded by the conflict between labor, which urged an active government participation, and business, which feared government controls. A general uncertainty about the nation's future pervaded the country.

With the cessation of hostilities, government withdrew the support it had been offering the workers through the War Labor Board; price supports had just ended for the farmer; racial strife emerged as Blacks in the northern cities fought to hang on to their jobs, threatened by returning soldiers looking for work. The Blacks who were themselves returning from the battlefields had acquired an unprecedented sense of

resoluteness. Bitter debates regarding America's commitments to countries abroad added to the unrest, and the League of Nations was being rendered ineffectual by the splits in ideology. It was, in short, to become a brief period of labor strikes, inflation, an unsteady economy, unemployment, racial unrest, and problematical foreign policy.

The sudden ending of the war had also created a kind of confusion about where the chauvinistic spirit of patriotic Americans should now be directed. It has been suggested that the various vigilante groups which sprang up against the "communist menace" and suspect minority groups were born of the need to replace the defeated Hun with a new symbol of danger.[1] J. Edgar Hoover turned out frightening reports on the activities of supposed revolutionaries he assumed to be wholly responsible for labor strikes in various cities. Attorney General Mitchell Palmer, himself an aspirant for the office of President, went to work to purge the country of the "Red Menace." As a result of the "Palmer Raids," 1919 saw the unlawful imprisonment or deportation of hundreds of aliens and foreign-born, suspected by the super-patriots of being a threat to the Republic. Numerous zealot groups conferred upon themselves the right to enforce protective measures. Not only labor, but religion, politics, education, literature, and the arts were carefully screened

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[1]David Burner, "Prelude to Normalcy," in Change and Continuity in Twentieth Century America: The 1920's, eds., John Braeman, Robert H. Brenner, and David Brody (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), pp. 16-17.

in order to detect and weed out elements of Bolshevism. The theatre responded to these pressures by turning out innocuous comedies authored by American playwrights. The 1919-1920 New York season is described by Burns Mantle as a "comedy year . . . the greatest hits dealing . . . with native characters and characteristics."[2] These are the plays which would become middle-class stock fare within a year or two.

The American people were tired of war, and were in some doubt as to whether or not this country's involvement had been necessary. President Wilson's ideals of a "noble" America suggested making even more sacrifices for the sake of a permanently peaceful world. His visions of the future indicated additional struggle for a nation which had looked forward to whatever relaxation and comfort it had enjoyed before the war. Furthermore, Wilson's last active days as President were spent in physical separation from his country and its citizens as he struggled in Paris for the best possible peace treaty and the establishment of the League of Nations. Apparently unwilling to trust the abilities of colleagues who might have assisted him, and refusing to communicate with American correspondents who might have reported in his favor, he further isolated himself and reduced his chances of persuading the American public to share his goals. At home, many of the Presidential responsibilities fell to cabinet members who were either inexperienced or misguided. Over a period of time, the President

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[2]Burns Mantle, ed., The Best Plays of 1920-1921 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1921), p. 1.

alienated both conservatives and liberals with his lack of political tact in regard to the Treaty and the League, which had become his prime interests; the nation as a whole began to resent the attendant neglect it was experiencing.

Eventually the Treaty of Versailles was roundly defeated, the health and spirit of the President broken; he would not be able to run for office again. If the Democrats were relieved and grateful for the opportunity to offer the country a fresh candidate, they did little to recapture the sentiments of the voters. Democratic nominee, James M. Cox, nonentity to most people, declaimed his support of Wilson's ideals and offered the nation more of the same. Meanwhile the Republican party had discovered Warren G. Harding, a direct antithesis to Woodrow Wilson. Harding's homely philosophy was in sharp contrast to Wilson's "lofty" and "impractical" ideals. Harding was a man, warm and unassuming, in whom the people could trust. Here was a leader who would encourage the nation to involve itself not in heroics, but in a happy state of the Harding-coined word--"normalcy." The country was promised deliverance from trials associated with war; it would be allowed to restore itself. Furthermore, Harding favored the businessman when Wilson, at least paying lip service to an industrial democracy, had not. Was not America venerated for its accomplishments in business and technology? Between the end of the war and this 1920 campaign, an alarming economic decline had been in evidence, but with Harding soon in office to assure that government did not interfere with business pro-

gress, surely it would be restored to its earlier, healthier state. Besides, America had emerged from the war as a creditor nation. There was every reason to have faith in an improved economy.

In time, the Big Red Scare lost the terrifying proportions it had taken on. Much of the public had had time to discover the horror of the Palmer Raids, and the loathesome activities of super-patriot organizations. The Republican party, with its ear to the ground, could connect the illegal reprisals of the Justice Department to Wilson and his party, comforting the voters with assurances of an end to the hysteria, if only Harding were in charge. The voters were disinclined to listen any longer to appeals for Wilsonian idealism, and they turned to Republican Harding in hopes that this "just folks" man would cure the ills of the nation.

When Harding was elected, the country was freed of any demanding international commitments. The nation suffered an economic depression during 1921 and 1922, but soon recovered its equilibrium, and with the help of government administration, big business took charge.

To the average citizen, the successful businessman was a hero--this illustrated in the Protestant Ethic. The American dream of getting ahead was making money. "Rugged individualism" leading to success and wealth was revered, despite the muckrakers' exposures of the Robber Barons. ". . . the legend seemed to run, your chances were probably better if you started poor; the rags-to-riches theme had

been celebrated by orators all through the second half of the nineteenth century."[3] This was also a standard topic of the tent chautauquas, in operation through the late twenties. These summer groups traveled from one town to another and presented entertainments designed to educate and uplift the citizenry. The programs included music, plays, recitations, and discussions of literature in addition to lectures which were a popular feature of the chautauqua. Almost any subject could be introduced, as long as it was morally decent. One well-known trouper, preacher Russell H. Conwell, delivered his special "Acres of Diamonds" lecture to a total of 6,000 summer audiences. The "acres of diamonds," he advised, might well lie in your own back yard; harvest your crop with ambition and effort.[4]

Woman suffrage was won in 1920, and while it gave the woman's vote as much validity as the man's, the female population did not rush to an active involvement in politics. Most likely, women coveted suffrage as a matter of principle--a demonstration of their equality to men rather than an opportunity to activate their own ideas in government. In any case, there was the more immediate problem of proving their capabilities in the job world.

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[3]John W. Dodds, American Memoir (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 87.

[4]Dodds, p. 100.

> Up to this time girls of the middle class had been largely restricted to school-teaching, social service work, nursing, stenography, and clerical work in business houses. But now they poured out of the schools and colleges into all manners of occupations. They besieged the offices of publishers and advertisers; they went into tearoom management until there threatened to be more purveyors than consumers of chicken patties and cinnamon toast; they sold antiques, sold real estate, opened smart little shops, and finally invaded the department stores. . . . Small-town girls who would have been contented to stay in Sauk Center all their days were now borrowing from father to go to New York or Chicago to seek their fortunes--in Bests' or Macy's or Marshall Field's. Married women who were encumbered with home and children and could not seek jobs, consoled themselves with the thought that home-making and child-rearing were really professions, after all.[5]

If the ladies tied to hearth and home were prevented from seeking a new identity in the outside professional world, they were gradually freed from some of the burdens of household toil.[6] Electric washing machines, electric irons and commercial laundries guided the homemaker away from the old-fashioned washboard. The electric vacuum cleaner all but relegated the dust-mop and the rug-beater to the back closet. Canned foods and commercial bakery products reduced the time formerly spent cooking. More and more frequently the telephone was used to order home delivery of

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[5]Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931), p. 97.

[6]But we are discussing trends, and to avoid the dangers of generalization it should be noted that the "liberation" of women was not always positive in nature. We are reminded that "The 'emancipation' of women had proved a mixed blessing; for many, emancipation from the drudgery of the home meant a change to the drudgery of the sweatshop." See Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, The Growth of the American Republic (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 461-62.

food.[7] The lady of the house had more time for leisure activities--recreational shopping, luncheons, or visits with friends during which the increased opportunities for women might at least be discussed. Ladies began to bob their hair, often to the great dismay of their husbands. It was not only fashionable, not only an assertion of rights for the female sex, but an honest convenience for the woman who wanted to look smart while saving time. As the hemline rose the corset lost favor; the body as well as the spirit was being liberated for many "stylish" women. And style, for this period, took on new dimensions. It was becoming more important for a woman to enhance her natural endowments with artificial means, and to develop her social skills. It was part of getting ahead. Professional hairdressers invaded the town as the local barbers looked on in terror. Beauty shops proliferated; a new industry was born.[8] Cosmetic sales boomed, and the products were used more openly.

> Although the June, 1919, issue of the Ladies Home Journal contained four advertisements which listed rouge among other products, only one of them commented on its inclusion, and this referred to its rouge as one that was "imperceptible if properly applied." In those days the women who used rouge--at least in the circles in which the Journal was read--wished to disguise the fact. . . . In the June, 1929, issue, exactly ten years later, the Journal permitted a lipstick to be advertised with the comment, "It's comforting to know that the alluring note of scarlet will stay with you for hours."[9]

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[7] Allen, p. 173.

[8] Allen, p. 107.

[9] Allen, p. 107.

Professional guidance was available for those women uncertain of the boundaries of good taste. One such arbiter of the social graces was Dorothy Dix, who dispensed advice daily through her syndicated newspaper column. Lynd and Lynd's Middletown, which examines the social trends of a "typical" American town, establishes the propriety of Miss Dix's views.

> Her advice is discussed by mothers and daughters as they sew together at Ladies' Aid meetings and many of them say that her column is the first and sometimes the only thing which they read every day in the paper. Her remarks were quoted with approval in a Sunday morning sermon by the man commonly regarded as the "most intellectual" minister in town.[10]

The twenties woman could look to Dorothy Dix not only for personal counsel, since she was at this time a mature woman in her sixties, but also for affirmation of the importance the female animal played in society.

> "Woman," as Dorothy Dix says, "makes the family's social status. . . . The old idea used to be that the way for a woman to help her husband was by being thrifty and industrious, by . . . peeling the potatoes a little thinner, and . . . making over her old hats and frocks. . . . But the woman who makes of herself nothing but a domestic drudge . . . is not a help to her husband. She is a hindrance . . . and . . . a man's wife is the show window where he exhibits the measure of his achievement. . . . The biggest deals are put over luncheon tables . . . we meet at dinner the people who can push our fortunes. . . . The woman who belongs to clubs, who makes herself interesting and agreeable . . . is a help to her husband."[11]

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[10]Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, Middletown: A Study in American Culture (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1929), p. 116.

[11]Dorothy Dix quoted in Lynd and Lynd, p. 116.

The "getting ahead" theme is evident here. For the woman who was uncertain as to the means of making herself "interesting and agreeable," Miss Dix could be more specific:

> "Good looks are a girl's trump card," says Dorothy Dix, though she is quick to add that much can be done without natural beauty if you "dress well and thereby appear 50 per cent better looking than you are . . . make yourself charming," and "cultivate bridge and dancing, the ability to play jazz and a few outdoor sports."[12]

The divorce rate grew during the twenties, and the shame of a broken marriage decreased, although it was a common view of the clergy that the sanctity of marriage was undermined when weddings were performed outside the church.[13] But women who discovered they could function successfully outside the home were less and less willing to put up with a bad marriage. Dorothy Dix summed it up:

> The reason there are more divorces is that people are demanding more of life than they used to. . . . In former times . . . they expected to settle down to a life of hard work . . . and to putting up with each other. Probably men are just as good husbands now as they ever were, but grandmother had to stand grandpa, for he was her meal ticket and her card of admission to good society. A divorced woman was a disgraced woman. . . . But now we view the matter differently. We see that no good purpose is achieved by keeping two people together who have come to hate each other.[14]

Many of the most popular plays of the twenties dealt with the changing status of women and its effects on the home

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[12]Dorothy Dix quoted in Lynd and Lynd, p. 117.

[13]In Middletown in 1923, thirty-five percent of the local marriages were performed by a secular agent, as opposed to thirteen percent in 1890. This report from Lynd and Lynd, p. 112.

[14]Dorothy Dix quoted in Lynd and Lynd, p. 128.

and society. Rachel Crothers was one of America's most important women writers of the first quarter of this century, and while her early plays argued against the double standard, by the twenties she had "turned her scrutiny upon the failings of her own sex."[15] Often her focus was on youthful female characters rebelling against traditional family morals but in danger of repeating the mistakes of the previous generation. Miss Crothers' Mary 3d (1923) is worth mention because it touches on several problems of the "modern" woman. The play takes in three generations of women--a grandmother, mother, and daughter, and reveals the flaws of each in relation to the men in their lives. Dorothy Dix's statement that "grandmother had to stand grandpa" is virtually echoed by grandmother Mary who tells her daughter, "You're a happy woman. If you're not, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. When I was your age, it was the fashion to be happy. Women loved their husbands and appreciated their blessings. Or if they didn't they didn't air it from the house-tops." But Mary the second is living in the 1920s and she recognizes that her marriage is a sham. Her discovery is encouraged by Mary the third whose father condemns her as "the product of this damnable modern loose-thinking." In accordance with the advice of Miss Dix, Mary the second leaves her husband--Nora style--to search for her own set of values. While Miss Crothers is not necessarily applauding the views of

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[15] Arthur Hobson Quinn, The American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1927), part II, p. 61.

Dorothy Dix, the situations she has created at least reflect the twenties thinking.

One of New York's biggest hits during the season of 1924-1925 was Dancing Mothers. In this play Edgar Selwyn and Edmund Golding have also introduced the rebellious, free-thinking young girl, a father who indulges his daughter but takes his wife for granted, and a mother who has sacrificed a career and become a dull homebody. During the course of the action this mother rediscovers her own worth and leaves her unappreciative husband. As Miss Dix might have counseled, she acquires a new wardrobe and hairstyle which restore her former charm and attract the town's most eligible bachelors.

Barry Conners' The Patsy and Martin Flavin's Broken Dishes--both Broadway hits--picture women who do little but bemoan their husbands' lack of success. In each of these comedies there is a wholesome, down-to-earth daughter who is "Daddy's girl," and at least one selfish sister who shares the mother's artifice, snobbishness, and drive to "get ahead." Both plays end happily when the hen-pecked husbands reassert their roles as bread-winners and masters of their households. Conners and Flavin thus make comment on a different side of the self-assertive twenties wife.

That prosperity being enjoyed by the average American only whetted his appetite for more. Being admirably industrious was not enough, and often he looked for short-cuts to success. Many of these came to his attention through advertisements.

> Advertising has grown rapidly since 1890, when the local press first began to urge that "advertising is to business what fertilizer is to a farm." Local grocers rely less upon the mild advertising of giving the children a bag of candy or cookies when they pay the monthly bill and now scratch their heads over "copy" for the press. . . . Today all sorts of advertising devices are tried: a local drug chain hires an airplane to blazon "Hook's Drugs" on the sky; a shoe store conducting a sale offers one dollar each to the first twenty-five women appearing at the store on Monday morning . . . and an airplane drops a thousand coupons in the town's trading area, each coupon good for from $0.25 to $5.00 worth of trade in some local stores. The advertising carried in the leading paper is six times that in the leading daily of 1890.[16]

Robert Lewis Allen describes the advertising of the twenties as moving from a business to a profession to a racket:

> The copy-writer was learning to pay less attention to the special qualities and advantages of his products, and more to the study of what the mass of unregenerate mankind wanted--to be young and desirable, to be rich, to keep up with the Joneses, to be envied. The winning method was to associate his product with one or more of these ends, logically or illogically, truthfully or cynically; to draw a lesson from the dramatic case of some imaginary man or woman whose fault was altered by the use of X's soap, to show that in the most fashionable circles people were choosing the right cigarette in blindfold tests, or to suggest by means of glowing testimonies--often bought and paid for--that the advertised product was used by women of fashion, movie stars, and non-stop fliers.[17]

When the body could not be made beautiful, one's charms could be developed; personality experts were willing to share their secrets--for a price. The ingenue in Conners' The Patsy explains:

> There's some books advertised in all the magazines. When a fellow isn't as beautiful as her big sister--and she hasn't got very swell clothes--well--you've got to do

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[16]Lynd and Lynd, P. 47.

[17]Allen, p. 172.

> something! (She gets books from under cushions on settee.) Here's the advertisement that made me buy them. "Do you wish to be the life of the party? Do you long to be popular? Do you want to be lionized by the ladies? Do you want the men to adore you for your wit and brilliance? Repartee is only repertoire."

Advertising intensified competition between companies. Various industries began finding their way into the privacy of the home, and the homemaker in general did not object. "Order-takers" became "salesmen." Minimum orders were imposed upon the salesman. Prizes were awarded to those salesmen who did best. Halitosis, in spite of the A.M.A.'s objections, was to be cured forever by Listerine. George Mowry writes:

> . . . despite the "truth in advertising" movement, much of the old chicanery in a more sophisticated form persisted through the decade. Still, mass consumption depended to a great degree upon the beguiling wiles of the "ad" man. In a very real sense, advertising was at once the ignition system of the economy, the dynamo of mass dissatisfaction, and the creator of illusions in a most materialistic world.[18]

If consumers were aware of any chicanery they still seemed to admire the ad man for the artistry that led to his success. One twenties play written for amateur theatre renders the advertiser in a light apparently designed to please the community audiences. The heroine of Elizabeth Stancy Payne's Harem Scarem is a "smart, keen, American business woman," an advertising manager for a New York hosiery firm. "Nothing is impossible to an American advertising manager," says she, and proves it by resolving the comedy's conflicts with the $50,000

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[18]George Mowry, ed., The Twenties: Fords, Flappers and Fanatics (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 15.

she has saved from her commissions.

Advertising was part of business, and business was the noblest profession for the average American of the decade. The Harvard Business School had enjoyed unchallenged leadership until 1925, when Stanford University announced it had opened the first Graduate school in the West. Harvard followed suit in the following year with its Graduate School.[19] Columbia University and the University of Chicago had organized home-study courses in business.[20] In the early twenties in our "typical" city Middletown, a leading businessman spoke to a civic club which listened with approval to his summation, "Next to the doctor we think of the banker to help us and to guide us in our wants and worries today."[21] It seemed at times that business had become the national religion.

> Bruce Barton, a magnificently successful advertising man, gave the gospel its most popular phrasing in his best seller of 1925, The Man Nobody Knows. To his infinite satisfaction, Barton, the son of a minister, discovered that Christ was a businessman. "Jesus," he wrote, ". . . picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world."[22]

Barton's epigraph for his book was drawn straight from the Bible's voice of Christ: "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's *business*?" Preaching that there is no difference

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[19] Arlington J. Stone, "The Dawn of a New Science," in Mowry, pp. 13-14.

[20] Allen, p. 177.

[21] Lynd and Lynd, p. 84.

[22] John M. Blum et al., *The National Experience: A History of the United States Since 1865*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1973), p. 590.

between work and religious work, Barton concludes that all business is his Father's business. Jesus

> was not at all sure where he was going when he laid down his tools and turned his back on the carpenter shop . . . each of us has to venture on Life as on to an uncharted sea. Something inside him carried him forward--the something which has whispered to so many small town boys that there is a place for them in the world which lies beyond the hills.[23]

During the first few years of the decade Americans were watching the political arena only closely enough to insure that a protector of prosperity was kept in the White House. Harding died in office in August of 1923, and the grief of the country seemed genuine. The incredible scandals of his administration were soon revealed, but as the Senate dug deeper and deeper into the Teapot Dome and Elks Hills complexities, the public lost patience with and interest in the unpleasant matters. The fact is that the average American was not inclined to upset himself about shady political practices. Graft and "pocket-lining" were facts of life not easily dealt with. The simplest course, then, was to shrug them off and to rely on obscure forces of reform to minimize political corruption. Vice-President Calvin Coolidge had taken the reins and was quietly sweeping the Harding house clean. If Harding had fallen short of the American ideal, Coolidge seemed to be everything a President should be. He had proven himself in the 1919 Boston police strike, when as governor of Massachusetts, he had put

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[23]Bruce Barton, The Man Nobody Knows (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1925), pp. 179-181.

down that rebellion and become a national hero. He shared his predecessor's reverence for business and disapproval of government interference. He believed in the _status quo_ and would leave undisturbed government machinery that was running smoothly. There was little fear he would experiment with new and dangerous ideas. He was an amiable man with a reputation for integrity. Less clubby than Harding, it was unlikely he could be duped by the same kind of rascals that had taken in the former President. With his quiet manner, he would act as a benevolent presence, sparing the country of administrative problems he would handle in private.

The manner in which Coolidge completed the Harding term reassured the country, and his own election to the Presidency was all but a certainty.

> To the Democrats' charge of the Teapot Dome oil scandal in the election of 1924 the local Republicans found it necessary to reply only, "Of course, any party is corrupt, and the Democrats are just as bad". . . . One of the widely used and eagerly applauded campaign songs of Middletown Republicans ended with the refrain:
>
> "When we get to Washington, home sweet home,
> We won't give a damn for the Teapot Dome."[24]

"Keep cool with Coolidge," became the Republican campaign cry. It appealed to the temper of the voters, and in 1924 "Silent Cal" was swept into office. Business would be allowed to continue as usual.

There ensued an unrestrained consolidation in industry and banking. Chain-store retailing burgeoned, affecting the

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[24] Lynd and Lynd, pp. 420-21.

buying-habits of almost all consumers who abandoned the small merchants in search of a bargain. In the belief that government should help, not hinder, business, anti-trust laws were made all but unenforceable.[25] Agriculture suffered, but industry glowed with health. Consumer credit became a big business in itself, and speculation moved into the realm of the working man.

> The big business of banking seemed to have shifted largely from providing credit for legitimate business to selling securities, playing the stock market, and encouraging others to do likewise. As one observer remarked, "The bank provided everything for their customers but a roulette wheel."[26]

The Florida Land Boom of 1924-1925 was one of the most startling examples of "speculation fever." Over a period of years, land in the state was being developed, and lots were being sold. Both expert and amateur investors were excited by the profits they had seen others take from real estate. The climate in Florida was appealing, and the sites were accessible to the northern cities. At the beginning of the twenties there were already seven million automobiles in the nation,[27] by the time of the Land Boom many more, so that travel to the area was relatively simple. When Florida's Governor Martin proclaimed that the best was yet to come, Americans from all parts of the country clogged the roads that summer of 1924 to claim their

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[25] Harold U. Faulkner, From Versailles to the New Deal (New York: United States Publishers Assn., Inc., 1950), p. 234.

[26] Faulkner, p. 232.

[27] American Heritage, 16, No. 5 (Aug. 1965), p. 47.

share of Coolidge Prosperity.[28] Money was made, to be sure; lots were snatched up in street-corner transactions and immediately resold at handsome profits. Some buyers were to discover that their land was non-existent or under water, but still the frantic trading continued until the realities of business began to intrude themselves on the fiesta-like atmosphere. Prices eventually peaked in 1925 and buyers were harder to find. Many landholders began to default on payments and buildings were left half-completed. Street-corner trading stopped and real estate offices all but closed. If there remained any question that the boom was over, a 1926 September hurricane blew in and devastated the Miami area.[29] In retrospect it seems prophetic.

The events in Florida did not materially affect the rest of the country whose faith in the nation's stability grew even stronger. By 1926 there were some conservative bankers who began to worry about massive numbers of sales on credit, but the manufacturers were happy and words of caution went unheeded.[30]

By 1926 the average work-week had been reduced to an estimated 49.8 hours.[31] Increased leisure time could be

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[28] Allen, p. 271.

[29] Allen, pp. 280-81.

[30] Mowry, p. 31.

[31] Gilman M. Ostrander, "The Revolution in Morals," in Change and Continuity, p. 345.

filled by the numerous diversions being offered the public. The radio was one of these. Pittsburgh boasted the first radio station in 1920 with Westinghouse's KDKA; by 1926 there were more than 700 stations in operation.[32] KDKA had opened in time to carry the Harding-Cox election returns. Soon radio was to broadcast major sports events, Rudy Vallee's crooning, Paul Whiteman's jazz, and classical music along with other entertainments. And it did more:

> The radio . . . became a major stimulus and conveyor of the new mass culture. By the middle of the decade few people were out of earshot of the loud speaker. And since the industry combined the functions of purveying free entertainment and selling advertising aimed directly at the national market, it became an indispensable prop for the mass consumption economy.[33]

This in spite of Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover's 1923 prediction that the public would never allow "so great a possibility for service to be drowned in advertising chatter."[34]

The visual delights impossible for radio were easiest found at the local motion picture house. The exotic costume dramas, romantic adventure tales and "good-girl" sentimental stories of the early twenties gradually gave way to more sophisticated treatments involving racketeers, speak-easies, and adventures of the flapper.

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[32]George W. Gray, "Singing Off on the First Ten Years," in Mowry, p. 63.

[33]Lloyd Lewis, "The Deluxe Picture Palace," in Mowry, p. 59.

[34]Dodds, p. 71.

> Soon we had . . . a whole deluge of films portraying life in the twenties as one frenetic binge. Such films as Flaming Youth, The Bedroom Window, Forbidden Fruit, and Passion's Flame helped the novel of the time prove to anyone who wanted to believe it that America was jazz-mad and had thrown its sense of morality away with its corsets. If one were to take these films as reflecting the real standards of the age, the country had embarked on a vast irresponsible spree. As one film producer advertised: "Brilliant men, beautiful jazz babies, champagne baths, midnight revels, petting parties in the purple dawn."[35]

But for all the alleged appeal in these treatments, the movies had their ups and downs until the introduction of sound pictures in 1927. Movie-makers were becoming alarmed, in 1926, by the fall-off in film attendance. The radio sets installed in millions of the country's homes were proving formidable competition. Film-goers were becoming more discriminating, and also, they were drawn to the latest detective or mystery novel on their living-room table. To further entice the patrons, most of the first-run houses and many of the neighborhood theatres added orchestras and vaudeville acts to perform before the regular feature.[36] The development of the talkies, which will be discussed in a later chapter, revolutionized the industry. By 1931 movie attendance had doubled over 1926, as had the capital invested in it.[37]

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[35]Dodds, p. 59.

[36]Benjamin B. Hampton, History of the American Film Industry: From Its Beginnings to 1931 (New York: Dover Publications, New York: Covici, Friede, 1931), pp. 369-73.

[37]Report of the President's Research Committee on Recent Social Trends, Recent Social Trends in the United States (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1933), p. 940.

During the decade, municipal parks and playgrounds grew rapidly in number. Camping became popular and government recognized the trend by providing numerous facilities on government reservations. Athletic sports and games, of importance since the end of the Civil War, took on increased popularity. Golf courses became available to the general public, though not in numbers to keep pace with the demand. Between 1921 and 1930, attendance at football games more than doubled, creating an unprecedented wave in the building of stadiums. The luncheon club movement, headed by the Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions clubs seemed to have become a way of life.[38] Crossword puzzle books, Mah-Jong and bridge games were active at-home involvements. Earlier, the local stock company had been one of the few sources of a town's entertainment. With the competition of these new diversions, resident groups stepped up their advertising and publicity ploys which usually worked well, although certainly some theatre patrons were lost to other entertainments.

The greatest change in the activities of Americans came with the automobile. The first American gasoline car was sold in 1896; by 1900 there were about 4,000 cars in the country, but these were still expensive and complicated.[39] In 1900 Henry Ford introduced, at a cost of $850, his new Model-T, and within ten years it could be purchased for $360.[40] If

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[38] Recent Social Trends, pp. 912-957.

[39] Dodds, p. 147.

[40] Dodds, p. 150.

Ford's early auto lacked speed and comfort, its owners were pleased with its simple efficiency. "People used to laugh and say that all you needed to keep a Model-T running was a can opener and some baling wire. Not much went wrong that couldn't be fixed by pretty direct action. . . . It was a car for the people, and the people loved it."[41] Much of the twenties' economic activity was due to the automobile.

> The twenties' American virtue of thrift was undermined systematically and with great success by the advertising companies, and a finance company office in Muncie estimated that between 75 and 90 percent of automobiles purchased locally were bought on the installment plan.[42]

By developing the idea of assemblyline constructions, Ford was able to offer his product for a reasonable price, and the great demand for the gas-run carriage during the twenties made automobile manufacturing the country's largest industry.[43] Mass auto sales demanded new highway construction which stimulated even more car buying. The Ford Motor Company, General Motors Corporation, and the Chrysler Corporation became the "big three" to rule the twenties' automobile business.

When the Chevrolet began to challenge and even surpass sales of the Model-T, Ford raced to unveil, in 1927, the new Model-A. The consumer was now demanding comfort, speed and beauty of design. Repair shops, filling stations, and tourists' rests sprang up; railroads all but ceased operations of their branch lines when interurban buses and trucks took over their

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[41]Dodds, pp. 150-51.

[42]Ostrander, in Change and Continuity, p. 345.

[43]Link and Catton, p. 15.

functions.[44] The automobile cut into the road show business.

> "The automobile," wrote a drama editor in Chillicothe, Ohio, "takes those who want the good legitimate shows to Columbus, 48 miles away. Twenty-five years ago this city played every star of any value, but now automobiles bring the big cities closer and the people will ride 100 miles to see a better show than they can get at home."[45]

Stock theatre probably suffered less from the public's freedom to travel since road show ticket prices were too expensive for many local patrons.

For many Americans the car became a status symbol. It was not uncommon for a Middletown family to mortgage its home to buy a car; a number of these homes were still without bathtubs. Businessmen suffering sales dips blamed the car for eating up the working-man's budget. Clergymen cried out against the Sunday morning motor trips which kept their flocks away from services.[46] Buying an automobile might force a family to sacrifice entertainments which would bite into the family budget. But even for those car owners who could also afford theatre tickets, ball-park admissions, or the price of entry to a dance band hall, their automobile was an entertainment in itself. As early as 1921, Broadway was making fun of Americans who allowed the automobile to take control of their lives. Six-Cylinder Love, by William Anthony McGuire, works its plot around

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[44] Allen, pp. 162-64.

[45] Jack Poggi, Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 39.

[46] Lynd and Lynd, pp. 254-56.

a Model-T Ford which changes hands as each owner discovers the extent to which it is disrupting family life.

In the excitement of sketching out the novelties of the twenties, writers have often worked in dangerous generalities. It was a colorful period, to be sure, and there were changes in the lives of the people. For the most part, however, they were modifying their former ideas and ways rather than throwing them away. Religious beliefs did not wither and die with "modern" thinking; the family unit did not disintegrate; old moral codes did not evaporate.

Anti-Darwin Fundamentalist forces were conducting loud campaigns at the same time other church leaders were making attempts to adapt religion to the changes in American life. Interest in the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy peaked with the Scopes trial in 1925 and then dwindled, at least as reflected by the number of religious articles dealing with the topics of science and heresy.[47] If Fundamentalism in particular was on the wane, the church in general not only survived, but maintained a membership proportionate to the growth of the population.[48] Darwin's teachings were indirectly popularized by the clergy's more flexible interpretation of the Bible, and its expanded role in the social and civic life of the community. "Churchmen have found it increasingly necessary to square their teachings with the findings of scientific inquiry,"

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[47] Recent Social Trends, p. 1018.

[48] Recent Social Trends, p. 1020.

reported the President's Research Committee on Social Trends, but in a concern for accuracy noted that "there is no approach to unanimity among the denominations," and that "often members of the same congregation differ more widely than do the creeds of separate denominations."[49] Seminary students, as well as the congregation they would lead, were adopting a tendency toward independent thought, and "the note of authority in Protestant teaching has partially given way to the more cautious moods of discussion and inquiry."[50] The church assumed a more active involvement in social and economic problems, stressing the need for improved working conditions in industry; the subject of family stability included discussion of birth control, sometimes resulting in recommendations favoring limitations of family size.[51] There was a marked increase in the number of hospitals maintained by various denominations.[52] Youth agencies featured by religious organizations had been increasing since 1900. By the twenties, when the church was in real competition with popular secular activities, it met the challenge by creating its own programs for recreation and social exchange. The Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations, the Knights of Columbus, and the Jewish Welfare Board

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[49] Recent Social Trends, pp. 1010-11.

[50] Recent Social Trends, p. 1055.

[51] Recent Social Trends, pp. 1015-17.

[52] Recent Social Trends, pp. 1050-51.

successfully recruited enormous numbers of young people. Their functions included religious instruction and character building, but extended also to the sponsorship of organized athletics. A Middletown YMCA offered a class entitled "Athletes of the Bible."[53] As a result of the emphasis on sports and fit bodies, the church plant added gymnasiums, baths, and game rooms.[54]

Technology could aid religion as well as other areas. Radio sermons became a broadcast staple, and some denominations sponsored speakers addressing themselves to social problems.[55] Nor did the church fail to note the magic of advertising. The President's Committee on Recent Social Trends reported, "Paid newspaper advertisements by Protestant city churches and wayside bulletin boards along all major automobile routes have become characteristic."[56] Formulas for success were somehow working for almost all religious agencies in the country. Not only was church membership maintained, but church wealth grew, even outstripping the rate of increase of the national income.[57] As in industry and banking, mergers took place among churches, particularly those teaching similar doctrines.[58]

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[53]Lynd and Lynd, p. 396.

[54]Recent Social Trends, p. 1058.

[55]Recent Social Trends, p. 1052.

[56]Recent Social Trends, p. 1055.

[57]Recent Social Trends, p. 1026.

[58]Recent Social Trends, p. 1040.

Organization and administration took on new importance, and greater numbers of professionals were hired to keep various church departments running smoothly.[59]

The growing popularity of a Modernist religious viewpoint has been noted. Many Americans, while retaining their church memberships, altered their methods of observance. Daily family prayers became less frequent; the habit of saying grace at public dinners was declining; mid-week prayer meetings were frequently pre-empted by other civic events; Sunday movies, card games and football games were becoming acceptable.[60] Much of the energy earlier applied to the formal application of religious beliefs was being diverted to the churches' social and civic activities. In short, religious tradition was losing ground. At the same time it should be noted that the public had not lost its interest in good drama of religious theme. Stock theatres presented such plays, often during Easter and Christmas weeks. And during the 1922-1923 season in New York, sophisticated New York audiences attended 272 performances of Channing Pollack's The Fool, which depicted a contemporary clergyman as living the life Christ might have lived during the twenties.

Woman suffrage no doubt contributed to the spirit of liberation for the ladies, but a stronger influence, whether they knew it or not, came from the many-times filtered

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[59] Recent Social Trends, p. 1059.

[60] Lynd and Lynd, pp. 337-342.

theories of Freud. Darwin had produced Origin of Species in 1859 and The Descent of Man in 1871. It was some time before the "inquiries" about his theories began to affect American life, but interests were developing in a scientific approach to the mystery of man. Numerous outlines-of-knowledge were published for the perfunctory education of the in-a-hurry reader.[61] The vigorous post-war discussions of Freud were often as superficial as the sources which had inspired them. Cocktail-party debaters were selective in their choice of Freudian topics, and could usually take the floor with remarks on the libido. For the vast number of Americans who had never heard of Freud, the new gospel was disseminated through sex-adventure magazines, sensational fiction, and the movies--whose flappers glamorized the unrepressed new woman. Prohibition was poorly enforced and in those circles that defied the Volstead Act, women began to drink with men in an assertion of their newly-sensed equality. Throughout the twenties many popular plays included scenes where cocktails were served as a matter of course, or hip-flasks were used with no more than a wink. This, presumably, was for patrons who had indulged in cocktails before Prohibition and thought little of doing so afterward. In 1922, almost two years after Prohibition began, Broadway opened Don Marquis' The Old Soak, which was to become one of the year's biggest hits. The main character of the story is a homespun, lovable character whose

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[61]Allen, p. 185.

main activity is imbibing bootleg whiskey. He proves to be the wisest character of the play, and the one most understanding of the family's problems. He alone finds the solution to these conflicts after several long pulls on a bottle, and as the play ends, is seen stashing away a fresh flask of whiskey.

Flappers did not rule the nation, but the new philosophy would raise, in even the most traditional minds, some questions about the double standard. The President's Committee on Recent Social Trends examined a broad spectrum of periodicals--ranging from "intellectual" magazines to those devoted to "confessions," motion picture gossip and sensational gossip and sensational novelettes--in an effort to discover a relationship between liberalized reading matter and the actual attitudes of the public. The Committee wisely advised consideration of forces that affected the magazines' content--public relations, pressure groups, advertisers and the social and editorial taboos which varied from one periodical to another. Magazine articles, short stories, stage plays and motion pictures all, conceded the Committee, demonstrated a rebellion against traditional moral codes, but did not necessarily reflect an actual, simultaneous rebellion on the part of the public. The study posits that an intense period of discussion results "when an institution is under construction or is a candidate for adoption," or when "it is undergoing remodeling or demolition. . . . A satisfactory social institution will receive far less attention in periodicals than an institution which is under

attack."[62] The implication then, is that discussion precedes change, and that literature, movies and plays were some of the means used by the public to examine their society as it was "undergoing remodeling." Investigation and greater freedom of expression would violate few moral codes, and was compatible with the idea of getting ahead.

And ahead the nation moved, in spirit and prosperity. President Coolidge represented his administrative inactivity as "steady continuity," and that sober assurance encouraged the fever of speculation. There were warning signs of an unstable market, but with White House reassurance, stock-trading records continued to be set. The nation was startled, in the summer of 1927, when Coolidge announced he would not run for office again. Herbert Hoover seemed a promising substitute. He had proven the success of the Protestant Ethic, having been born on a farm and accumulated a fortune; he had performed with efficiency his duties as Secretary of Commerce. With the promise of total victory over poverty, he would convince the voters that his election would mean "Hoover and Happiness."

New York's Governor Al Smith was the Democrats' nominee. Since there was little difference between the platforms of the two parties, the voters' choice was apparently based on differences between the candidates. Smith had raised himself from the slums, but his "Sidewalks of New York" theme coupled with his Tammany Hall affiliations smacked of corrupt, big-city, back-room shenanigans. He was a "wet" and spoke

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[62] Recent Social Trends, p. 386.

frankly for the repeal of Prohibition. Coolidge had avoided any hazardous changes and the public seemed happy. Perhaps due to a reverence for this kind of legislative caution, the voters preferred Hoover's careful but vague view of Prohibition as "a great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose." Then too, Smith was a Catholic, and therefore unacceptable to a majority of the voters. And so, standing in the rosy vapors of Coolidge Prosperity, Hoover won by a landslide. His term began with the market up, and investors continued to buy. During the following months, frenzied purchasing alternated with terrifying mass selling, but the constant market rallies seemed to give the lie to the prophets of doom. In October and November of 1929 the Big Bull went into convulsions, collapsed, twitched, and finally died. But a country that had enjoyed a decade of economic health found it difficult to imagine their pleasures were over. And so the people listened for some time with optimism to Hoover's assurances of a restored society. There were, in fact, through the efforts of the Administration, some fleeting signs of progress, but eventually the conspicuous breadlines made the situation clear.

The sobering effect of these events was reflected in the "style" of the early thirties. There was no wholesale abandonment of the ideas that had been born of the twenties, but alterations in thinking have been noted. How, for example, could the concept of businessman as hero go unchallenged? With mass unemployment many women were forced back into the role of

"homemaker." Coincident with loss of earlier female independence, hemlines took a drop and bobbed hair lost favor. The Coué formula--"Day by day in every way I am getting better and better"--began to lose its appeal. It was little comfort for those Americans standing in soup lines. There was hardly an industry left untouched by the sudden depression. Among the few that actually prospered was the business of making movies--an industry which captured a virtual monopoly on American paid entertainment.

Throughout most of the twenties, however, the theatre was a better barometer than films of the changes taking place in entertainment. Most of the decade was a vital one for theatre while silent films were stagnating and losing public interest. Many products of the Great White Way were eventually released to resident stock theatres across the country, or were bought up by Hollywood for screen adaptation. The New York stage--even after the mid-twenties--was more active than it had ever been, with an astonishing variety of fare. Modern light comedies retained their popularity; plays of Shakespeare, Ibsen and Chekhov were done occasionally; those of Shaw more frequently; Eugene O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, Robert Sherwood, Philip Barry, Sidney Howard, S.N. Behrman, George Kaufman and others of the new school of American dramatists were gaining recognition and respect. Musical revues and extravaganzas featuring semi-draped showgirls became the rage for many, and an outrage to others. The New York License Commissioner heard complaints against these and a number of current "dirty" farces. The result was the 1922 formation of "The Citizen's

Jury," composed of 300 volunteers from civic associations, which functioned as a kind of overseer of stage morality.[63] Some shows were cleared, some obliged to clean up their content, others forced to close. In 1927, Mae West's Sex was raided, and she was sentenced to ten days in prison. She tried again the following year with Pleasure Man which was raided opening night and closed two days later. The "blue" plays of 1927 "were so lowdown that they led to a Wales 'Padlock Bill,' calling for shutting down any show that really let rip."[64] Laurie and Green note with some surprise that the well-publicized police-raids failed to cause box-office stampedes. "Class" clientele was scared off, and other potential patrons were disinclined to bother with shows that were offering nothing but smut.[65]

The smutty shows did not hit stock theatre. While the provinces often enjoyed recent Broadway releases, many of the plays they did were somewhat dated--light comedies and romances which New York had welcomed before the "roar." Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, Pollyanna, Peg O' My Heart and Miss Nelly of N'Orleans continued to draw local audiences well into the twenties. Madcap but innocuous romantic-comedies were favorites in stock. The Boomerang, for instance, despite its 1915 vintage, is cited repeatedly in Billboard's stock theatre production lists. Older plays meant cheaper royalties for stock,

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[63] Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., Showbiz: from Vaude to Video (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1951), p. 287.

[64] Green and Laurie, p. 289.

[65] Green and Laurie, pp. 289-290.

but they were balanced with carefully selected recent works. The church was largely responsible for the clean-up of twenties Broadway, and its influence was stronger yet in the provinces. Local theatre reflected more accurately the psychology of the average citizen than did the offerings in the big cities. "Modern" philosophy was delivered to stock theatregoers across America, but over a period of time and often in filtered form. The most significant change in the lives of the people was that the twenties provided the time and the money to enjoy themselves.

CHAPTER II

THE TYPICAL STOCK COMPANY

Resident theatre companies cropped up, during the twenties, in hundreds of cities across the nation. Like the stock companies which had operated throughout the nineteenth century, they were characterized by their relative permanence and their ability to support themselves. But the resident theatres of the 1920s differed, in a number of ways, from the earlier stock organizations. Stock companies of the first half of the nineteenth century presented a different play on each of the usual three or four nights a week they performed--the repertory idea. The variety of fare included some new plays, but a much larger percentage of revivals--some of which had been fairly recent successes, others slightly older,

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This chapter is based on a paper I presented at the forty-second annual convention of the American Theatre Association. The paper was titled "American Stock Theatre of the 1920's" and was given on Sunday, 13 August 1978 in New Orleans.

Footnote key:

This and later chapters use information from a number of taped interviews which are part of the Ralph Freud Collection of Taped Interviews, Oral History Department, University of California at Los Angeles. References to this source will cite the name of the individual interviewed, the date of the interview, and the tape number, followed by the designation, "Freud Collection."

and the rest primarily from Shakespeare and old comedy of the eighteenth century. A particular week's repertoire was often determined by a visiting star who wished to play his favorite roles. Over a period of time policies were altered. The increasing popularity of matinees, for instance, increased the number of weekly performances to an average of eight. The nightly change of bill was abandoned and the repertory idea lost favor. Producers became more interested in successful new plays which managed longer runs. These older companies were first-class organizations which could afford to retain a large troupe of actors--usually an average of thirty.[1] But the introduction of the extended engagement was partly responsible for the demise of these troupes, since all company members had to be paid whether or not they were appearing in the current production. Then, by 1870 the many stock groups which had emerged in cities outside the eastern metropoles were being put out of business by the "combination companies" touring the country with their packaged productions. Mrs. John Drew had assumed management of Philadelphia's Arch Street Theatre in 1861, but it functioned as a successful stock house for only eight years. "About this time I concluded to follow the example of all the other theatres in the city, and ceased to have a

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[1]This average is based on information supplied by Edward William Mammen, The Old Stock Company School of Acting: A Study of the Boston Museum (Boston: Trustees of the Public Library, 1945), p. 19 and p. 72 (note 11), and various seasons' lists of company members throughout the pages of T. Allston Brown, A History of the New York Stage (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1903; reissued by Benjamin Blom, 1964).

stock company, and called the theatre a 'combination theatre;' but it never did so well as before."[2] Until 1869, however, as a result of Mrs. Drew's management,

> Philadelphia enjoyed one of the most brilliant periods of its theatrical history. Not only did the most famous players, such as Wallack, E.L. Davenport, Edwin Booth, Charlotte Cushman, Lotta, tread the boards of her theatre, but several of the members of her stock company--Fanny Davenport, Stuart Robson, Louis James--later became stars.[3]

There were some stock theatres which managed, for a time, to continue successful operations in spite of the long-run policy and the competition of the touring packages. Among these were the Boston Museum, and Wallack's, Daly's, and Palmer's in New York. Arthur Hornblow, bemoaning the theatre's decline at the turn of the century, speaks of the contributions these groups made to the seventies, "a particularly brilliant and interesting era in the history of the American stage."[4] Their theatres featured visiting stars from time to time, but even the regular members of the companies were highly respected and sometimes famous actors, such as George Holland and his son E.M. Holland, E.L. Davenport, Rose Coghlan, Madame Ponisi, John Gilbert, Ada Dyas, Effie Shannon, Clara Morris, Kate Claxton, John Drew, Sara Jewett, Ada Rehan, Otis Skinner, Agnes Ethel,

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[2]Mrs. John Drew, An Autobiographical Sketch of Mrs. John Drew (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), p. 117.

[3]Arthur Hornblow, A History of the Theatre in America from Its Beginnings to the Present Time (New York: J.B. Lippincott and Co., 1919; reprint ed., New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1965), p. 85.

[4]Hornblow, p. 238.

William Warren, Mrs. John Gilbert, and Fanny Davenport.

James Wallack began his first management venture in New York in 1836 and soon became one of the city's most successful producers. His enterprise was taken over, upon his death, by his son John Lester who maintained the elder Wallack's reputation of high quality until the mid-eighties.

Augustin Daly is remembered as one of America's most important and successful theatre managers. Hornblow comments, "Not only did he create a remarkable stock company . . . but he inspired public confidence and catered to a cultured and refined clientele. . . . Whenever a playgoer went to Daly's, he felt reasonably sure that he was going to see the best that American dramatic genius had to offer."[5] While John Ranken Towse argued that Daly's achievements had been vastly overrated,[6] he gave him credit for running "the best light-comedy company in the country."[7]

From 1872, A.M. Palmer began a prominent career in New York theatre management. His first work was at the Union Square Theatre, and Towse remarks:

> In his day the Union Square Company was the best in the country, and probably the world for its own particular purpose, but it was not an ideal stock organization for the simple reason that its capacity was strictly limited to melodrama, either of the sensational or social emotional variety. . . . Mr. Palmer . . . was content to do well

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[5]Hornblow, p. 258.

[6]John Ranken Towse, Sixty Years of the Theatre: An Old Critic's Memories (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1916), p. 341.

[7]Towse, p. 341.

> what he set out to do. . . . All his representations were distinguished by vigor and vitality, and that cooperative smoothness and proportion which can only be attained by actors long accustomed to each other's methods and characteristics.[8]

Palmer is remembered as a man of good taste, and one possessing a canniness in selecting plays and the actors who would perform them.

The Boston Museum, which opened as a stock house in 1843, maintained a level of excellence during its fifty-year life. Much of the strength of the troupe is attributed to the comic genius of William Warren who remained with the Museum for the last thirty-six years of his career. The company kept a strong coterie of resident actors, received important visiting stars for special engagements, and--as did other major troupes--trained young actors for leading roles.

The actors who reached stardom remained dependent on these resident theatres for most of the century. Until 1870, when improved railroad facilities made it possible for stars to take their combination companies on the road, they moved individually from one stock company to another playing their favorite roles, supported by the local actors. Garff Wilson reminds us:

> Since much of American theatrical history was made by these independent stars, it is easy to forget the continuing importance of the resident company and to recall theatrical history in terms of individual performers only. But notable as the individual stars became, remember that they were the product of the resident companies, that they acted with the local troupes throughout their careers, and that these local troupes remained the basic theatrical unit

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[8]Towse, p. 141.

during all of the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth centuries.[9]

The beginning of the new century saw a revival of stock along different lines. There was a will to survive on the part of many local managers across the country who had been frozen out of business by the Syndicate. They were determined to practice their profession, albeit on a much cheaper scale. By 1910 the road companies began to decline. Railroad costs were forcing them to increase ticket prices which audiences were more and more reluctant to pay. In the interests of economy, the quality of the touring productions became lower, resulting in poorer business. The health of stock increased. Like the earlier companies which had come to depend on successful new plays, the newly revived 1920s stock groups also looked for modern plays with public appeal, but they settled into a routine weekly change of bill, with an average ten to twelve performances per week. These companies were smaller, and lacked the stars and prestige of their predecessors, but their tickets were cheap.

Even a very small twenties town could support a stock company; in larger towns, multiple companies could exist, and even flourish. The basic operations of the various producing organizations were virtually the same, the major differences usually reflecting the financial stability of the theatre

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[9]Garff Wilson, Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre: From Ye Bear and Ye Cubb to Hair (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 81.

management. The observer outside-looking-in might note the size of the company, the degree of scenic proficiency and the relative size and comfort of the theatre itself. Front-office and backstage operations, less visible to the patron, naturally were also affected by the management's budget.

An examination of fifty of some of the plays most frequently performed across the nation during this period reveals that seven men and five women were required for the average cast, indicating that production of the most popular plays called for a company of twelve. Often the management would call on members of the community--interested amateurs or young actors aspiring toward permanent jobs--to take over small parts when extra performers were needed. While some of the companies functioned with as few as eight performers, the average was ten or eleven, with the director and stage manager frequently playing small parts. Larger, less typical companies might contract twelve to eighteen players for a season, thus expanding the possibilities for their repertoire. The typical company's nucleus, however, was made of leading man and leading woman; second man and second woman; character man and character woman; juvenile and ingenue; one or two utility or general business actors and sometimes, a comedian. On occasion, but usually with the larger companies, an actor or actress was "jobbed in" to play a special role, but this was infrequent with the average company in an average community.

The front-office and backstage staffs made up the remainder of the company, and their numbers varied according to what the budget would allow. Frequently the producer was also

a performer and often one of the leading players, thus serving as actor-manager. More often than not, he or she also undertook the direction of the plays, relying heavily on the stage manager for assistance. A well-rounded executive staff also included a business-manager, a treasurer, a secretary and a publicity director, although there was obviously some doubling-in-brass within the smaller companies. For example, Frank McHugh, who began his acting career with his family's stock company in Homestead, Pennsylvania, and continued with other companies through the mid-twenties, recalls that as a young man he was paid one dollar per week to write notices about his company and send them to the trade journals. A company's "publicity department," to whatever extent it existed, was also aided by local critics or fans of the company who sometimes sent reviews or news notes to the trade journals.[10]

Backstage, the responsibilities of the scenic artist, also sometimes taken on by the producer, varied according to the requirements of the week's production and the budget available to his creative abilities. Most often a set of standard flats was pulled out of stock and simply repainted for each show, this task made easier with the help of the "pot boy" who cleaned out the paint pails and performed other duties assistant to the scenic head. The carpenter, electrician and properties head each performed their duties with as many assistants as they were allowed, and six to eight stage hands was

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[10] Personal interview with Frank McHugh, 8 March 1977.

the usual number required for the standard set changes in an average show. Part-time workers included ushers, bill-posters, and those bit players and extras frequently hired for particular shows. One or two janitors were required to maintain the theatre. And almost every company had an orchestra. A very small organization working on a very tight budget would provide itself with at least a piano player, and more often the orchestra was made up of between three and fifteen musicians who played before and after the performance and between the acts. The music served to entertain the audience while the curtain was down, but actor Harry Ellerbe recalls,

> Like the legitimate theatres in New York at that time . . . the music they played had nothing to do with the plays. It was entertaining, and very soft music. . . . If you stopped talking and wanted to listen, you could, but it was just incidental. [They played] popular tunes or just whatever they would choose. It was very much like what they used to have in hotel lobbies. They just played--played through the day.[11]

Still, there was a benefit for the actors. Reports one stock actress:

> You'd get tired sometimes. I can remember thinking, "How can I ever do this tonight? Where am I going to get the pep?" And I'd get in the theatre and they'd start that overture. Especially if it was a peppy one, all of a sudden I'd be all right. When I used to hear that music starting up, why [I'd] just feel like [I] could do anything.[12]

A company working out of Toledo, Ohio, did away with the usual orchestra and announced that it was using chimes, "a la Belasco."[13]

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[11]Telephone interview with Harry Ellerbe, 15 February 1979.

[12]Personal interview with Agnes Young, 9 March 1977.

[13]Billboard, 4 December 1920, p. 14.

Apparently it, like Belasco, was enamored of the unusual, but music it was, nonetheless. Other companies occasionally featured an all-female orchestra, again offering something unique.

Thus, an average company could function with approximately forty paid employees. Small-time producers could manage with as few as twenty, and there were those with enough prestige and money to employ seventy or more, enjoying casts and backstage crews nearly double the size of an average company.

The community usually looked for the most current popular plays--those which offered from the eastern metropoles, and especially New York, the latest in respectably liberated ideas. Bedroom comedies of that era were most attractive to the town-folk, with current "serious" drama and mystery-thrillers following in popularity. Thus did the local populace enjoy such fare as Good Gracious Annabelle, Getting Gertie's Garter, Up In Mabel's Room, The Patsy, or The Show-Off, followed in popularity with more sober current plays, among which were Smilin' Through, Seventh Heaven, They Knew What They Wanted and What Price Glory?; The Thirteenth Chair, At 9:45, Three Live Ghosts, The Bat and the like were some of those offered as mystery pieces.[14]

Occasionally, the companies attempted recent Broadway musicals such as Very Good, Eddie, The Kiss Burglar, Oh Boy and Oh, What A Girl. It was only with the "quality" companies in big cities or areas near college towns that older classics--

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[14]Billboard, from 1920 to 1932.

Shakespeare, Ibsen and the like were attempted. Broadway releases were usually available from one to three years after their original New York production, perhaps soon enough for an impatient provincial audience which was adjusting itself to the idea of a "roaring twenties" kind of philosophy. Smaller, less financially agile organizations were forced to rely more frequently on the old pot-boilers and melodramas which were less destructive of their royalty budgets. "Pirating" was not uncommon. Frequently, when the matter of royalties threatened a company's finances, a play which was currently being done on Broadway or one which was a recent stock release would be "adapted" to the stock company, retitled and otherwise disguised as an "original work" of anonymous origin or one credited to a fictitious playwright. McHugh recounts that the Century Play Company, run by Tom Kane and James Thatcher, dealt in stock rights to individual companies for a fee of $100 for 100 years' rights. According to McHugh, Kane and Thatcher subsidized young playwrights to rewrite New York hits (for which rights were unavailable) and supply the revised works with new titles.[15] An item uncovered on a 1920 stock page of Billboard supplies a kindlier view of the play brokers. Complaining that plays which had not done well on Broadway were "boosted" for stock--on the assumption that a New York run of any length would be sufficient cause for stock success--the writer claims:

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[15]Personal interview with Frank McHugh, 11 November 1975.

> Such was not the case. The out-of-town stock manager found that a good play, minus the "Broadway" stamp, would please his patrons and has acted accordingly. The Century Play Company, realizing this fact, has encouraged their [sic] best writers to write plays for stock purposes with the result that the firm has many excellent plays in its catalog which have "never seen" Broadway, but at the same time are giving perfect satisfaction.[16]

It is possible, of course, that this news note was supplied to the stock page editor by the Century Play Company offices, designed to ward off accusations of "pirating." In one of the companies for which McHugh worked, Peg O' My Heart, at the time either unavailable for stock or too expensive in terms of royalties, was re-written for the company to which McHugh belonged. The management offered a prize to whichever company member could come up with the best new title.[17]

McHugh describes another method of offering the latest from Broadway while still escaping the royalty-seekers. A small-town manager would write to Belasco, for instance, who handled his own royalty negotiations, asking that a price be quoted for the stock rights of a recent Belasco production. When Belasco had replied, the manager would request that a copy of the play be sent to him for his perusal. Once sent, the small-town company would quickly play the show, after which the local manager would return the script, without comment, hoping Belasco would assume the management had decided against

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[16] Billboard, 13 March 1920, p. 13.

[17] McHugh interview, 11 November 1975.

it. If the thievery was discovered, the manager would feign great surprise that Belasco had not yet received his royalty check, and so in the end saved some of his dignity if not the royalty fee.[18]

Special occasions, such as Easter and Christmas weeks, were frequently observed by the presentations of plays of some religious significance, such as The Servant in the House or The Holy City. Snow-White, Peter Pan and Treasure Island were among plays occasionally offered as children's or family fare. Small companies often kept a "script trunk," usually constructed by the company's tailor, full of non-royalty plays. Scripts from this collection were dug out and adapted to the company during the quiet periods such as Lent or Christmas week, or one involving a town festivity.[19]

Some of the more prestigious stock companies had connections with New York producers, either through earlier affiliations between the manager of the local organization and the eastern management or because the stock company had attracted enough attention, by way of quality productions, to earn the recognition of the New York producers. Where this kind of liaison existed, special rights were given to the company to use that "provincial" organization's facilities for tryout purposes. Usually this was a company which had demonstrated its ability to captivate a relatively sophisticated audience

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[18]McHugh interview, 11 November 1975.

[19]McHugh interview, 8 March 1977.

in a relatively large city with the more sophisticated fare of New York. In addition, sometimes arrangements were made for a potentially successful play scheduled for Broadway to be premiered at one of these stock houses; less frequently, an original play by a new playwright would show such promise in its original stock company presentation that it would subsequently be bought up for Broadway production.

Play rights to stock managements were otherwise handled by the Century Play Company or the American Play Company; the Darcy-Wolford Company, the Co-National, Standard, and Danforth play brokers also handled stock rights.[20] Some plays which had been done on Broadway were available to stock companies on a "restricted territories" basis; others became immediately available to any of the country's local companies that could pay the royalties.[21] According to Alfred Bernheim, play brokers' fees in 1929 were the same as they had been for the twenty-five years previous, ranging from $50 to $1,000 per week:

> The figure depends upon such factors as the age of the play, the length of its New York run, the publicity it has received, its success and length of time on the road, and the type of the play itself. . . . A play does not carry a fixed royalty. The prices asked by the producers vary in accordance with such factors as the size of the town in which the stock company plays, the drawing population of adjacent territory, the

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[20]McHugh has mentioned the Darcy-Wolford Play Brokers as one of the agencies he recalls handled stock rights. The Century, American, Co-National, Standard and Danforth brokers are all cited in *Billboard*'s dramatic stock pages.

[21]Announcements of new releases, whether for "restricted territories" or "all territories" appear in the stock pages of weekly *Billboard*.

seating capacity of the theatre, the scale of admissions charged by the company, and the local business conditions.[22]

When negotiations for stock rights had been completed, the manager was supplied with a copy of the entire play, the manuscript containing plans for the settings of the New York production, and the stage "business" used by its director. With this information the local director could, and almost always did, imitate the Broadway plan, an efficient aid to the company that changed its bill weekly. If creativity in direction was impeded, vital rehearsal time was conserved for the purpose of getting the production into shape in one week's time. The actor did not receive a copy of the entire play, but were supplied with "sides," one set for each character. These were the 8-1/2" by 5-1/2" sheets on which were typed the character's speeches, preceded only by the "cue"--the last several words belonging to the speech of the preceding character. In this sense the actor received his "part"--that physical section of the play which contained his lines. The Belasco office issued sides somewhat longer--half the size of a legal sheet. "Belasco," one prominent stock actor suggests, "just had to be different."[23] When the week's production was finished the sides were returned to the play broker who sent them out to another company about to produce the show. Victor

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[22]Alfred L. Bernheim, The Business of Theatre: An Economic History of the American Theatre, 1750-1932 (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1932; reprint ed., 1964), p. 96.

[23]Audiotape received from Victor Jory, September 1975.

Jory recalls:

> If the set of parts had been used by many other companies previous to your playing it--and they generally had been--there was still always evidence, in spite of the erasures, [of] ghosts of the notes actors in other companies using the scripts had made. If the notes were still there in pencil, you erased them and made your own notes.[24]

If the play was a recent Broadway release, and therefore one unfamiliar to the stock company actor working outside of New York, the sides, containing only his own speeches and the cues preceding, revealed little of the play's theme and ultimate outcome. In this sense, the stock actor was undoubtedly impaired in his conception of working out a development of character in relation to the whole--that process which has become especially important to contemporary actors using the Stanislavski approach. On the other hand, actors who worked in twenties stock report that they found the sides system very convenient, for their batch of small sheets was very easy to carry in a back pocket or a small purse, and since learning a large role in one week's time was often a problem, each moment stolen from dining or traveling that could be spent on study was important. Leading actors would often find time to read the entire play, a copy of which was usually in the hands of the company mamager three or four days before rehearsals were to begin.[25]

In today's terms, rehearsal and playing schedules were grueling, especially when a company played a season which ran

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[24]Jory audiotape.

[25]Jory audiotape.

between fifteen and forty weeks, with a change of bill every seven days. A company with a moderate schedule might present nine or ten performances per week--seven nightly and two or three matinees. Often there were performances every night of the week, with three to five matinees in addition. Some companies, less typical, worked on a "two-a-day" basis, which meant that the management offered fourteen performances per week.

If the average was nine or ten performances, this working schedule might be considered typical:

Sunday: The new show opens. After the performance, sides for next week's play are issued.

Monday: The cast reports for rehearsal at 10:00 a.m. Rehearsal for next week's show is held, with a break for lunch, until 5:00 p.m. This rehearsal includes a reading of the entire play, and completion of blocking of the first two acts. The actors study and have dinner from 5:30 to 8:00 p.m., after which they return to the theatre for that night's 8:30 curtain. After the performance the actors return home to study for next week's play.

Tuesday: 10:00 a.m. rehearsal is held, during which the blocking of the third act of next week's show is completed and bits of "business" are worked out. The actors go to lunch, then return to the theatre for make-up and costume preparation for this week's matinee, with study for next week's play sandwiched in. After the matinee, the actors go to dinner and then return to the theatre to prepare for the evening show of this week. After the performance the actors return home to study for next week's play.

Wednesday: The actors report for rehearsal at 10:00 a.m. The small-part players must know their lines. The whole play is gone through at least two times. The director gives "polishing" instructions until 5:30 p.m. The actors go to dinner, afterwards to the theatre to prepare their make-up and costumes for the evening performance of the current show.

Thursday: No rehearsal. The leading men study for next weeks's show; the leading women shop for clothes and accessories. The actors return to the theatre in the afternoon for the matinee of the current show, and study late that afternoon for next week's show.

Friday: The cast reports to rehearsal at 10:00 a.m. All cast members must know their lines for next week's show. A late night rehearsal might be held after this evening's performance to smooth out rough spots in next weeks' show.

Saturday: A matinee and evening performance of this week's show is presented. The actors use the time between performances to study for next week's show. After the evening performance the stage crew strikes the set of the current show. The actors study or relax.

Sunday: The cast arrives at the theatre at 11:00 a.m. to start the dress run-through in make-up and costume. The third act of the new show is set up and rehearsed; then the second act; then the first, so that the first act is set up for the beginning of the Sunday night opening. The curtain goes up at 8:30 p.m.

According to Jory, there were two reasons for starting the run-through with the third act and working backwards. The first and most obvious, is that this system allowed the production's first act to be set up as opening night curtain time approached. Second, the major block of time available could be spent on the third act, that in which the actor was weakest in his memorized lines, since he learned them in the play's sequence.[26]

Occasionally, in some of the "better" companies where the director-manager was intent on producing the most polished possible presentation, rehearsals would be held after the

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[26]Jory audiotape.

night's performance and sometimes into the early morning. Often these sessions involved only one or two actors whose stage business, during rehearsals, had left the director dissatisfied.

Dress rehearsals were not always held in stock company productions. In some organizations, where the management or the attending audience may have been less demanding, the actor's first glimpse of the new set was during the opening night performance. Gladys Hurlbut, a twenties stock actress writes, "In stock, no one ever saw the scenery until the opening performance, dress rehearsals were unheard of and the best that happened was that the actors were allowed on stage a few minutes before curtain time to try out their props and effects."[27]

This was not necessarily a characteristic of "milltown" stock. Frank McHugh, who worked in a number of theatres belonging to the prominent Sylvester Poli circuit, has reported that these companies, however successful, never held a dress rehearsal, that they did in fact, rehearse in a hall apart from the theatre since sets were under construction in the theatre itself.[28]

Hiring of stock actors was handled in a number of ways. Some, after working for a company or companies for several

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[27]Gladys Hurlbut, Next Week, East Lynne (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1950), pp. 29-30.

[28]McHugh interview, 11 November 1975.

seasons, had established a reputation in stock circles that would provide them with an entree into the office of a more important stock producer. Some few managers who operated stock chains would find a place for an actor in a theatre other than the one in which he had been working. There were, of course, stock company agents which sent out actors. Among these were O.H. Johnstone in Chicago; and in New York were Wales Winter, Paul Scott, Chamberlain Brown, Pauline Boyle, Helen Robinson, the Packard Exchange and the Bennett agency.[29] Many young actors were hired without previous experience and mainly on the basis of a personal appeal to the producer, but these people were started out in "bit" or "extra" parts. More frequently, letters of introduction, either by prominent citizens or by acting school teachers proved successful for the applicant, although dramatic school training was certainly not required. McHugh reports that ladies were often hired as complete amateurs if they came with a recommendation, had some beauty, charm, a hint of talent, and were able to work for little money. If they had any potential at all, says McHugh, they were pretty well-schooled by the end of a season.[30] Occasionally, young people with aspirations toward the theatre

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[29]Hurlbut refers to the Packard Theatrical Agency as "the biggest and the best," and mentions that Wales Winter always got her a stock job within a few days. (See Hurlbut, pp. 22 and 184.) Ralph Bellamy cites O.H. Johnstone, Wales Winter, Chamberlain Brown, Pauline Boyle and Paul Scott as important stock agents. (Ralph Bellamy interview, recorded 17 November 1965, tape #11, Freud Collection.) Most of these, along with Helen Robinson and the Bennett agency are mentioned at various times in the dramatic stock pages of <u>Billboard</u>.

[30]McHugh interview, 8 March 1977.

would find a place for themselves in a chautauqua or lyceum company, most often presenting recitations of poetry.[31] With this exposure to public performance they sometimes graduated into stock theatre. Actress Agnes Young began in this way in New England, registering with all the local stock companies for bit or extra parts after her stint with the lyceums in that area.[32] And Hollywood actor Dean Jagger launched his career in a similar way.[33]

The first-class companies sometimes hired professional New York actors for "stock-starring" or tryout engagements of those shows which were being considered for Broadway by New York producers. But the average company had neither the connections nor the budget for this kind of operation, and usually worked throughout the season with the same group of actors, doing the usual stock fare.

In the average company a general utility man could expect to earn from $50 to $75 a week; the second man or second woman from $50 to $150; and the ingenue and juvenile about the same; the character players from $75; leading men and leading

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[31]Lyceums were popular indoor programs in small towns, and featured lectures, music, recitations and other "mixed entertainments." The events were usually sponsored by churches, ladies' aid societies, school officials, merchant groups or lodges, and were especially popular during the winter months in those areas where cold weather prevented the tent chautauquas from operating. See John S. Noffinsinger, <u>Correspondence Schools, Lyceums, Chautauquas</u> (New York: Macmillan Co., 1926), pp. 113-118.

[32]Young interview.

[33]Dean Jagger interview, recorded 23 January 1966, tape #1, Freud Collection.

women averaged from $150 to $300. The highest salary ever paid to any stock leading man during this period was, according to this investigation, $700 per week.[34] The variance in the salaries cited above was usually dependent on the amount of experience an actor could offer his employer and, through his skills or charm, the kind of name he had established for himself. Although Bernheim cites specific union minimum salaries set for stage crew workers and those for orchestra members, he does not quote actual Equity minimums for stock actors. No stock player interviewed by this writer remembers a minimum for the resident members. Jory asserts that minimums did not exist for twenties stock actors, and that Equity only concerned itself with other means of protecting the company members. One such rule, he states, demanded that the theatre managements post a bond at the beginning of a season so that the players' salaries--in whatever amount--were guaranteed.[35] Bernheim speaks of other safeguards under Equity for stock actors:

> The manager engages the actor to appear in his company in a certain town, in a stipulated line of parts at a fixed weekly salary for ten performances a week, each performance over ten being paid for on a pro-rata basis. The date of the commencement of the engagement is stated in the contract and salary starts with that date, there being one week free for rehearsal period. . . . The manager may close his company at any time during the first eight weeks of his season upon two weeks' written notice. After the eighth week, he may close down upon one week's notice. In either case, however, an individual actor is entitled to a season of at least two weeks. The manager may dismiss

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[34]Jory audiotape.

[35]Telephone interview with Victor Jory, 6 February 1979.

any individual actor at any time upon two weeks' written notice, and any actor, on his part, may leave the company upon the same notice.

The stock contract establishes the 100 per cent Equity Shop. There is also a provision for arbitration of any dispute between actor and manager.[36]

The stock actor's salary was usually paid on Friday or Saturday night, that one on which old-time Shakespearean companies usually presented Hamlet, and so was "the night the ghost walked." After the actors' strike of 1919, Equity ruling demanded that the actors be paid in cash, to avoid the possibility of bouncing checks.[37] Under union ruling, therefore, the salary of a stock actor was presumably guaranteed, along with his status. Inevitably there were cheaters:

> John and Mona Rapier were booked to play with the Campbell Stock Company in Rochester, Minnesota, under an Equity contract said to call for an all-Equity company. They found, it is said, on arrival in Rochester that they were the only Equity actors in the company and refused to work. The management is alleged to have held their baggage until it was replevined by officials of the Actors Equity Association.[38]

As opposed to contemporary theatre where the management is responsible for all costs independent of the actors' salaries, the stock company actor was responsible for his or her own costume problems and expenses, excepting for the infrequent "period" shows or those productions which required unusual

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[36] Bernheim, p. 128.

[37] Victor Jory, in interview with Frances Hall, recorded 31 December 1965, tape #5, Freud Collection.

[38] Billboard, 25 February 1922, p. 25.

costume demands. Inevitably then, the stock actor's salary was spent, in part, on expanding his or her wardrobe in order to meet the demands of the upcoming show. There were always ways of economizing. Leading men from different companies often exchanged pieces of clothing. Stock actor Ralph Bellamy, who later became an important Broadway star and film personality, reveals that as he and his friend, Melvyn Douglas, also then a stock actor, were about the same size, they exchanged suits.[39] Jory also recalls doing this:

> When I was playing, I found two or three other leading men approximately my size. Now, in those days, actors carried with them not suitcases, but trunks or wardrobes. Everything was saved from previous productions. They probably would have thirty or forty changes from the last ten, twelve, or fifteen years. But you added to this, in the present styles, by interchanging with leading men or leading women in another company. . . . I might wire Bert Lytell and say, "Have you got a very light gray suit . . . I need it for next week's production," and he would send it on to me. Or he might wire me and say, "Do you have a dinner jacket of seven years ago--eight years ago?". . . . This way your wardrobe was supplemented.[40]

Wardrobe was a more difficult problem for the women in the company who feared being detected wearing the same dress twice. They, like the men, sometimes traded gowns with actresses in other companies, but the most common method of dealing with the problem was by camouflaging the dresses they had worn before. Hurlbut explains that leading women, who had the first choice in colors, bought white or very light-colored clothing at the beginning of a season and dyed

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[39]Bellamy Interview.

[40]Jory audiotape.

the garments one shade darker each time they were used.[41] A bunch of artificial flowers could later be pinned to a gown, ruffles or trim added to a neckline or hem to give it a different look. Society women sometimes sold their used gowns to leading ladies or ingenues. An actress who was clever with a needle was that much better off. The ingenuity of one such leading lady is described by former stock woman Dorothy Spencer who explains that the actress bought a good, plain dress which she wore for the season's first show. The following week she purchased some wide lace which she painted silver, cut into a bolero and wore over the dress. Later she used the same dress with an ermine-tail collar attached to the neckline, and continued in this way to alter the dress throughout the season.[42] Some actresses were fortunate to have a mother close by who was willing and skilled enough to solve their wardrobe problems. Bette Davis, for instance, was the daughter of a competent dressmaker who could swiftly assemble a wardrobe for Miss Davis's stock appearances.[43] Even so, it was a costly business for any actress. "A leading woman averaged four changes a week and often more. The higher salary we got, the better we were expected to dress. I always spent most of my wages on clothes," says Gladys Hurlbut.[44]

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[41]Hurlbut, p. 147.

[42]Personal interview with Dorothy Spencer, 15 February 1977.

[43]Bette Davis interview, recorded 28 July 1966, tape #3, Freud Collection.

[44]Hurlbut, p. 146.

Items could sometimes be borrowed, in exchange for program credits, from clothing stores in the area, but these were most often restricted to hats and furs. "It wasn't quite as easy with dresses," explains Frances Hall, "because wearing them for a week made it a used dress as far as they were concerned."[45]

The local stores were also usually willing to lend the producer pieces of furniture for upcoming shows. The setting could thus be dressed in a style otherwise beyond the budget of the company. If the company's existing sets could not be adapted to the new play, then new ones were constructed according to the plans of the New York production. Work on the flats was done in the theatre itself during this period, often late at night so as to avoid interference with rehearsal and performance.[46] The scenic artists decorated the flats as they were held in the paint frame, a large rectangular wooden skeleton housed in the fly loft against the rear wall.

A stock company belonged to the city in which it resided, and its willingness to share its offstage life with the community often, or perhaps always, determined its success at the box-office. The citizens of the town ascribed a glamor to the company members that was probably unrealistic, confusing the romance of their onstage characters with the actual lives of the actors, who were often trailed after by the good town-

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[45]Hall interview.

[46]Howard McNear interview, recorded 18 January 1966, tape #5, Freud Collection.

folk in search of autographs and an exchange of pleasantries. If the actors preferred some privacy, spending whatever time they had away from the theatre relaxing among themselves or working on play-study, they were aware of their dependence on the community and its support. The sacrifices they made in this regard were usually well paid for, not only through box-office receipts, but also through weekly gifts from and the general adulation of the theatre-goers. When the curtain rang down, all barriers between the audience and the actors on stage evaporated, and flowers, gift-wrapped cakes, candy, jewelry and clothing were passed across the footlights to the actors, most usually on opening and closing nights. Nor were these demonstrations always saved for the end of a performance. With the Orpheum Players in Reading, Pennsylvania, for instance, leading lady Irene Summerly received a birthday cake and flowers as she sat in the second-act bed of Up in Mabel's Room between the second and third acts.[47] A Binghamton, New York, actress was honored in a similar way:

> Marjorie Dow, playing characters with the Guy Harrington Stock Company . . . for the last four seasons, was given a surprise during the performance of One of the Family at the Stone Theatre December 16. It was Miss Dow's natal day. Almost everyone connected with the house purchased presents and at the end of the first act Mr. Harrington dragged on a small express wagon on which all the gifts were loaded. Miss Dow was overcome with emotion and could barely voice her thanks.[48]

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[47] Billboard, 3 February 1923, p. 83.

[48] Billboard, 1 January 1927, p. 31.

Many theatre patrons had a favorite among the company who became their particular object of attention. So loyal were these fans to the members of their resident company that the road show stars who might play the city, or the stars that were sometimes jobbed into the company for a particular show were paid less heed than those local players who would remain through many weeks, and even seasons. This affection for the players was carefully nurtured by the producer who saw to it that his company made a public display of their most attractive qualities. Attendance at civic functions was frequent, with leading players often conducting discussions or delivering prepared speeches to local groups. Dressed as impeccably as their tastes and wardrobes would allow, they created an image of great style, sometimes leading the way to the locals' current idea of "fashion." The stage wardrobe of the leading players was, in fact, sometimes displayed in the windows of the town's most prominent apparel shops.[49] It was good business, attracting attention for both the company and clothing store.

If the regular theatre patrons had not already decided on a "favorite" in the company, the manager found ways to press them into a choice. Agnes Young recalls one such instance, where slips of paper were distributed among the audience so that each member of the audience could write down the name of his or her favorite actor in the company. The manager, working in concert with a local fabrics store, announced that a prize of beautiful fabric, enough for a suit or dress, would be awarded

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[49]Jory audiotape.

to the winner of the contest.[50] Nor was the audience to be deprived of its rewards, for a Minneapolis company announced that for the week of January 6, 1923, "the management will give away free a Ford for the best story told about the Ford car by a patron in the audience."[51]

Stock companies also formed their own baseball teams and played against various private organizations and clubs, and sometimes, even against prison teams. Occasionally, a member of the company would direct a prison-produced play. The theatre lobby frequently became an art gallery for local painters or for art students still attending school. Members of the company were often called upon to lecture or supervise directing or make-up classes for school productions.[52] The importance of civic activity is illustrated by the election of a stock manager in Nashville, Tennessee, "into the ranks of the local Exchange Club, a civic organization composed of only one hundred citizens."[53] At least two stock managers, Buzz Bainbridge of Minneapolis and George Baker of Portland, Oregon, became mayors of their respective cities.

The manager who was unaware of the need for this kind of communication with the townspeople either failed or quickly learned the solution. Ralph Bellamy, in his early operations

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[50]Young interview.

[51]Billboard, 6 January 1923, p. 29.

[52]Jory audiotape.

[53]Billboard, 3 September 1921, p. 14.

of a Nashville company was facing bankruptcy:

> We had awful trouble getting started . . . . The first week we did eight-hundred and some dollars. My weekly nut was around $4,500, which was a lot of money in those days. And the second week was not much better--a little bit. And I didn't know what to do. And a local fellow, Alf Levine, met me at . . . the stage door one morning when I was going into rehearsal, and he said, "It's a bad time here." And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Well, we need you and we ought to have you, and if you'd like to go to luncheon clubs and do some things with your cast and make yourself known, I'll be glad to introduce you." So we did. I went on the air, just before or just after the "setting-up exercises" on radio, and told funny stories about the scenery falling down and everything, you know, and then I'd go to rehearsal, and then we'd go to the Lions, the Elks, the Kiwanis, the Exchange, and sing and tell stories and things, and the next week we made money. This was in the fall; we ran through the winter, through the summer, through the winter, and into the next summer . . . That must have been about sixty or seventy weeks, and it was so hot, and there was no ventilation. They had butcher fans in the ceiling--big butcher fans. The oil dripped on women's dresses, and we'd say, "Have it cleaned, buy a new dress," and they'd say, "No, never mind." We came in front of the curtain and said, "We're going to have to take a vacation, and we'll be back in the fall," and the audience stood up and said, "No! No! Don't go!"[54]

The imaginative publicity director came up with unique devices, such as the one used by the Lewis-Worth Company then operating in Miami, which boasted that over 5,000 theatre-goers had signed a petition requesting a four-week extension of the company's run. "An immediate decision to that effect was reached," reports Billboard.[55] The Hazel Burgess Players in Nashville reported a sudden land-office business after a gloomy start in 1921. The heavy patronage of the theatre was attributed to the ingenuity of the manager who "has worked every

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[54]Bellamy interview.

[55]Billboard, 12 March 1921, p. 14.

known publicity scheme in the history of the theatre." Included among these were receptions after the Wednesday and Saturday matinees as part of the "get acquainted" movement.[56] Another scheme was devised by the manager of the Times Square Players in Fall River, Massachusetts:

> A ballot will be distributed with every ticket to determine the most popular member of the Fall River soccer team. . . . The winner of the contest will receive a handsome silver trophy which will be personally awarded by Diana Farris, leading woman of the company. . . . Verily, stock managers during the past season have shown uncommon discernment in conducting various contests which will add to the patronage of the theatre.[57]

The ballots were counted and it was revealed that

> R.H. White was the winner of this novel contest, and on Monday evening of the current week the 16 men comprising the team, the manager and trainers attended the Academy of Music in a body, accompanied by their many friends and followers. Between the first and second act of <u>Kiss and Make Up</u>, the current week's attraction, Diana Farris, leading woman of the company, presented Mr. White with the trophy. . . . Verily, the new, novel and unique contests inaugurated by C.O. Sachs, manager of the company, has [sic] done much towards increasing the patronage of the Academy during the current season.[58]

Yet another device by the Harder-Hall Players of Paterson, New Jersey, worked as follows:

> In preparation for Christmas greetings to many unfortunates in this city Neil Buckley and Larry Fletcher started a campaign to collect discarded overcoats to be distributed among the needy hereabouts. In exchange for the contributed coat the donor was given a pass for two orchestra seats good for the Tuesday night performance of Christmas week. Messrs. Buckley and Fletcher were heart and soul in their self-imposed task of rooting for coats. It was a friendly contest between the two of them as to who would turn over the greater number of coats to the charity, with Mr. Harder

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[56] <u>Billboard</u>, 6 August 1921, p. 30.

[57] <u>Billboard</u>, 7 November 1925, p. 28.

[58] <u>Billboard</u>, 2 January 1926, p. 28.

of the firm promising a nice reward to the winner of the contest.[59]

A discount of ticket prices or even free admission was another means of endearing the public to the company, as well as helping to fill the house. "Special matinee on Tuesday and Friday of each week, catering to the ladies with a bargain price of twenty cents," was a not uncommon announcement;[60] or one such as "Last week, Wednesday night, Gene Lewis admitted every mother in Beaumont free as a guest of Pauline LeRoy, who played the part of the mother in the big production of *Sinners*."[61]

The audiences were made aware of their importance to the company, and their opinions were actively solicited as to the type of theatre fare they preferred, what kinds of plays they hoped to see in the future. Sometimes suggestion boxes were set up in the lobby; other times responses were gotten directly through educational and civic groups with whom the actors visited. Notes in the theatre programs requested that audience members write to the management, making their wishes known. The more favorable of these letters were sometimes printed and distributed to the public, a kind of "natural" advertising.[62]

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[59] *Billboard*, 2 January 1926, p. 28.

[60] *Billboard*, 26 February 1921, p. 14.

[61] *Billboard*, 13 November 1920, p. 14.

[62] Jory audiotape.

In the same way that the company established a personal rapport with the public through visits to and participation in civic organizations, it returned the invitations to the theatre-goers by allowing them to enter briefly the "mystical" world behind the front curtain. Some companies invited the play-goers on stage after matinees. Tea and cakes were served and the plays were discussed. Occasionally the front curtain was raised after an evening performance and "each actor made an entrance, talked to the audience, shaking hands and introducing himself."[63] And there were other means of providing the play-goer with a glimpse of the backstage world. Jory describes the practice of one company for which he worked:

> People wanted to know how those marvelous changes of scenes and scenery were accomplished. Some stock companies would announce that during certain weeks the curtain would be raised during the set changes, music would be played, and while this was done the crew invariably were provided with snow white coveralls to provide a pleasant image, and the people watched the sets being changed and props brought in--scrims and so forth.
>
> How did the actors put on those make-ups that, week after week, changed their appearances so amazingly? Well, to answer this question, some companies on certain nights raised the curtain a half-hour before regular curtain time. And would you believe it, the house would be three-quarters filled with people who came. And the actors made up on stage. Various things they were doing were explained by the director, or the leading man or leading woman. They made up on stage in front of the audience, and they could be watched during the whole process, including the fitting of wigs.[64]

The company was also mindful of its philanthropic respon-

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[63]Jory audiotape.

[64]Jory audiotape.

sibilities. Producers made personal contributions to organizations devoted to the poor and handicapped; the cast gave benefits for particularly worthy causes. Special discounts were given to various of the city's organizations and civic groups. "Such groups were permitted to indicate what play they would like to see on their party night, and if, in the opinion of the producer, the general audience would enjoy it, that play was included in the season's offerings."[65]

Regardless of the ultimate fate of old-time resident stock, these devices apparently worked. The regular theatregoers took the company to their hearts. One lady of this group recalls the players in the theatre she visited each week:

> We loved them all and felt we knew them personally. But suddenly without any explanation, the leading lady did not appear on stage for two weeks. We were puzzled and concerned. Then we heard a community rumor: the leading woman had suffered a miscarriage. Word traveled fast, so that somehow by the time she reappeared in the next show the entire audience was aware of what she had endured, and with the first act curtain gave her a standing ovation.[66]

With most companies there were season subscriptions, which meant that those who purchased their tickets on this basis occupied the same seats on the same week-night throughout the season. These were the "regulars" and cast members came to recognize their fans in the audience, whom they would often see after the performance at the stage door. The devotion of the "regulars" is illustrated by a story told by Agnes Young

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[65] Jory audiotape.

[66] Personal interview with Lillian Jasperson, 10 March 1975.

who was met by one of her female devotees after the evening performance. "I'm awfully sorry, repented the lady play-goer, "that I couldn't come last week. I had a baby."[67]

The average stock theatre seated from 800 to 1400 people.[68] A matinee seat cost, without special discount, around twenty-five cents; the top matinee price was around one dollar. Evening performances averaged from seventy-five cents to a dollar and a half--this against the road show prices which were up to two-fifty per seat. But the discriminating often felt that compared to the road show, stock theatre left much to be desired. In a 1920 Billboard news article, written by one identified only as "a prominent stock actor," we read:

> It's an old saying that a bad road season is a good stock season, and up to the present this has been generally true. There is, of course, a reason, and a comparatively simple one. A bad road season means very few shows out, and the people of the locality turn to the local stock company for their dramatic fare. . . . The public should be more than glad to receive its entertainment from the local stock company at a greatly reduced price. There can be no denying the argument that a stock company, offering well-presented plays at 75 cents, should clean up in the territory where touring attractions, only fairly presented at $2.50, are starving to death. . . . Yet stock companies have been closing right and left and reports of poor business continue to pour in. There must be a reason. There is--and it is easy to find. Our touring companies for the past few years have undergone a great change for the better. . . . The public in general has been educated to a better theatre, better plays, presented in a better manner. . . . The stock managers, with a few exceptions, have not kept pace with these improvements.[69]

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[67]Young interview.

[68]Jory audiotape.

[69]Billboard, 4 December 1920, p. 14.

Throughout the decade this was a common criticism on the part of astute critics. Many actors came to be accused of being "stocky." They benefited, without question, from the sheer exercise of having to jump into a new role each week and adapt themselves quickly to the demands of each production. Most stock players were able to develop a facility in this area which the usual stage actor could not rival. But becoming "stocky" was an occupational hazard for the players in these companies. The pressures of preparing a role in one week's time no doubt led the actors to find ways of accomplishing their tasks in the quickest possible ways--short-cuts not necessarily leading to excellence. When the actor had become familiar with his audience after a certain number of weeks or seasons, he often became dependent on tricks which he felt might win over his play-goers. These ranged from constant flagrant upstaging devices to slick "stock" gestures and readings, whatever the play or role. While preparing for a New Jersey production of Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, for instance, Gladys Hurlbut recalls, "The juvenile thumbed through the pages of his part the first morning and grinned at me. He pantomimed pulling something down from a shelf, 'Characterization number nine this week,' he said. 'Juvenile-rural-comic.'"[70] These actors were usually content with a season's contract which offered a steady salary and at least a semi-

[70]Hurlbut, p. 27.

permanent home in the community. There were others who hoped for and expected an eventual migration to Broadway, and therefore worked constantly to improve their acting abilities. When they were successful, they brought with them to the New York scene the unique benefits of their stock experience. This point is confirmed by producer Herman Shumlin, who, in his frequent dealings with former stock actors, recalls with admiration their solid knowledge of the business, and their ability to recognize and solve stage problems quickly.[71]

Direction was minimal since time allowed only for moving actors around into their appropriate stage positions, and working out specific bits of business. Any kind of character development or interpretation of a role had to be left, for the most part, in the hands of the players. Frances Hall speaks of this problem in the following way: "I think that you had to do everything so quickly that you always wished that you had a little more time. I'd feel like the last night I'd just commenced to really feel as if I knew what the part was about, and I wished I had longer."[72]

If the conscientious actor was concerned about the quality of performance, it appears that the audience was generally satisfied, provided the management fulfilled its remaining obligations to the theatre-goers and the community.

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[71]Telephone interview with Herman Shumlin, 19 October 1977.

[72]Hall interview.

For many towns, stock theatre was the only live entertainment available on a regular basis. The vaudeville, burlesque, circuses and dance bands that other cities also featured were entertainments of a different sort, as were the silent films that ran alongside the resident theatre offerings. A real comparison in quality could only be made in those cities which accommodated road shows sent out from New York, but the expenses involved in mounting these productions and transporting the companies necessitated ticket prices often beyond the means of the average citizen. Therefore, comparison was not a simple matter, and the concept of relative "quality" is problematic. Jack Poggi asserts that road show audiences preferred musical comedy, spectacle, and the "literary" drama to average dramas and comedies.[73] One would assume then, that stock theatre fulfilled a somewhat different function from that of road productions--the local company's seasonal musical notwithstanding. Perhaps each type of organization found a different audience. The "road" had declined between 1910 and 1920, and if the process was not reversed during the next decade, at least it was temporarily arrested. The rising costs of even mediocre road productions were passed on to the managers of the theatres that housed them, and when these managers were no longer able to make a profit they turned to featuring movies or vaudeville. It was the public's taste for musicals, spectacle

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[73] Jack Poggi, Theatre in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 35.

and the "literary" drama, for which there were no real substitutions in the silent films, that kept the road shows alive.[74] But stock theatre patrons who might occasionally be able and willing to pay for a road show extravaganza were often disappointed. John Golden writes of this problem:

> I found second-rate New York productions advertising all-star New York casts that had never been nearer New York than Xenia, Ohio. I found plays billed as New York successes, of which I, a fairly well-informed New York manager, had never even heard. I saw displayed in more than one of the theatres, photographs of players who were supposed to be in the cast but who, I knew, were actually playing in New York. I found one musical comedy advertised as the original New York production; the whole road show traveled in two old trucks and the cast had in it exactly sixteen persons.[75]

The victimized theatre-goer who was "burned" more than once by receiving a two-dollar-and-fifty-cent road show misrepresentation might have found it difficult to evaluate the quality of his local stock company. If the local theatre patron was aware of any deficiencies in the resident company, perhaps he was willing to tolerate them in exchange for the opportunity to visit the theatre frequently at a price he could afford. And of course the weekly change of bill, however taxing for the company, must have been intriguing for the theatre patron, who watched his favorite players transform themselves, with each production, into a new character.

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[74]Poggi, p. 35.

[75]John Golden, "Saving the Theatre from Itself," Colliers, (28 March 1925), 21.

CHAPTER III

SOME NOTEWORTHY MANAGERS AND THEIR COMPANIES

When stock actors had only one week to prepare a role with which they were often entirely unfamiliar, they could only learn their lines and rely on their natural talent and hard work to get to the heart of the character. The typical stock company manager was primarily concerned with opening a show each week which ran smoothly and was of current interest. Actor Douglass Dumbrille, for instance, remembers that Harry Blaney--who, with his brother, ran stock theatres in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania--was concerned only about voice projection and speed. "'Louder-and-faster' Blaney! That's all he ever asked of us. 'I don't care whether you can act or not--just loud and fast!'"[1] A few theatre managers insisted on an excellence of performance that the typical company did not supply. These producers relentlessly pursued "quality" productions, and usually became noted for superior work, therefore able to draw actors of greater experience, as well as dedicated young players who recognized a promising future through their alliance with this kind of organization. The "distinguished" companies were usually located

[1]Douglass Dumbrille interview, recorded 19 January 1966, tape #4, Freud Collection.

in large cities which drew relatively sophisticated audiences. Another kind of stock group emerged, in the late 1920s, when players became increasingly aware of companies in areas near Hollywood, where prospects of film involvement were likely.

Jessie Bonstelle

One of the most highly respected stock companies of the twenties was run by Jessie (Laura Justine) Bonstelle, who had grown up in a theatrical environment. Her mother was a lover of theatre and was determined her daughter should become an actress. Bonstelle recounts, "Before I was nine years old I had learned one hundred and fifty recitations. . . . In these, incredible as it may seem, I was letter perfect."[2] Mrs. Bonsteele--as the family name was then spelled--"promoted" Jessie for any local or traveling production available. These efforts led to an alliance between young Miss Bonstelle and E.D. Stair, who was then managing the Howell, Michigan Opera House, and for whom she toured for a few years. She worked with Janauschek briefly, and from 1892-93 was employed as an understudy and chorus girl by Augustin Daly.[3]

Daly was, of course, one of the first stern regisseurs of American theatre. In Bonstelle's recollection, "Augustin Daly was an autocrat. His word was law."[4] However stringent

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[2]William L. Deam, "A Biographical Study of Miss Laura Justine Bonstelle-Stuart Together with an Evaluation of Her Contributions to the Modern Theatre World," (Ph.D dissertation, University of Michigan 1954), p. 8.

[3]Deam, p. 48.

[4]Deam, p. 47.

he may have been, Bonstelle apparently had become aware that the discipline he imposed on his company was directly proportionate to the excellence of his productions. It is interesting to note that Bonstelle's alumni speak of her in the same way she had spoken of Daly. Phyllis Loughton served as her stage manager for some years, and describes Bonstelle--with respect in her voice--as "mean, but great. . . . a human dynamo. . . . a martinet." These qualities surfaced, as Loughton explains it, when there was a need "to save time."[5] This was almost always, especially in a company like Bonstelle's.

Although the exact dates are unclear, Bonstelle worked for the Shubert brothers, soon after they began producing in 1900, as an actress-manager in their Brooklyn stock company. In 1901, a physician by the name of Peter C. Cornell began managing a theatre where he lived in Buffalo, New York. By 1904 he had acquired another theatre in the same city, and called upon Bonstelle, who by this time had made something of a name for herself in stock circles, to manage the new enterprise. By 1910 she had also begun managing a stock company at the Garrick Theatre in Detroit, which ran simultaneously with her Buffalo playhouse. Both the Buffalo and Detroit theatres were part of the Shubert chain; Bonstelle's connections with the famous brothers grew strong. Until 1924, when Bonstelle involved herself exclusively with the Detroit organization, her theatres were run only during the summer

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[5]Phyllis Loughton (Seaton) interview, recorded 26 October 1966, tape #8, Freud Collection.

seasons, when the traveling companies had vacated the buildings.[6] This gave her time to work closer to Broadway during the rest of the year. She produced and toured in at least one vehicle for herself. "Occasionally, Miss Bonstelle would receive an offer from a New York producer to either assist in the direction of a play or to star in one. . . . the general pattern of her work in the theatre was as an actress-manager with the Shuberts always in the background."[7] There was also a close association between Bonstelle and William Brady, for whom she had directed in New York.[8] These affiliations would work in her favor throughout her career.

The Garrick theatre was owned by E.D. Stair, whose professional relationship with Bonstelle had begun during her childhood. By 1925, ties between the two had become strained, and Bonstelle left the Garrick, contracting with a group of Detroit investors to begin a new theatre which she would manage. This was the Bonstelle Playhouse which she operated for three years under the sponsorship of St. Clair Heights Syndicate, Ltd. The investors who made up the organization were business-

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[6]Ralph Freud, who began working for Bonstelle in 1919, claims that she began her first year-round season in 1921 at Detroit's Lafayette theatre, which had stopped housing road shows. Freud says, "We played at the Lafayette for fifty weeks straight," but he does not indicate whether or not the full-year schedule was repeated at this theatre. (See Ralph Freud interview, recorded 2 March 1966, tape #1, Freud Collection.) Deam's study of Bonstelle's career makes no reference to the Lafayette theatre. It does, in fact, include excerpts from newspaper reviews of Bonstelle productions at the Garrick during the summer of 1924, indicating that Bonstelle's use of the Lafayette was a short-term venture. (See Deam, p. 121.)

[7]Deam, pp. 75-76.

[8]Deam, pp. 81-82.

men with their eyes on profit, and Bonstelle found herself entangled in time-consuming financial problems. She freed herself from this alliance after a successful campaign to establish a Detroit Civic Theatre, for which she became Managing Director from 1928 until her death in 1932.[9]

William Deam has suggested that Bonstelle's work came closest to the artistic ideal of stock theatre before 1925, when she was still associated with business people who were "wise in the profession of theatre." During the remaining seven years of her life she continued to command the respect of the profession, but the business of funding her theatre took more and more of her time which might otherwise have been directed toward production.[10]

As noted earlier, Bonstelle's stock operations took place during summers until 1925, at which time the Bonstelle Playhouse began year-round seasons.[11] One notable difference in her management before and after this date is that summer shows were always changed weekly, while productions at the Bonstelle Playhouse and the Detroit Civic Theatre often ran two weeks, and sometimes longer.

The Garrick and Buffalo companies were run simultaneously, and at one point, Bonstelle ran a third summer company in Providence, Rhode Island, which lasted only two seasons.

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[9] Deam, pp. 135-39.

[10] Deam, p. 184.

[11] See note #6, this chapter.

She had never lost her desire to become an actress, and so she starred frequently in her own productions. Ralph Freud estimates that during his two-and-a-half year stint with Bonstelle, she would play a role about every fourth week. She would play the starring role in her Providence company, then move on to the production in Buffalo, and then Detroit.[12] Freud marvels at her ability to show up at each of her theatres during the week:

> In addition to the Detroit theatre, she was operating a company in Buffalo, and one in Providence . . . and somehow--and this was in the days before airplanes--she managed to hit all those companies in a given week. Now you'd never know when she was going to arrive, but she'd be at enough of the dress rehearsals to make you fear she might be at the next one, whether she showed up or not. But some night during the run of a week she would be showing up, and you wouldn't know she was there, and God help you if there was anything ragged about the performance the night that she happened to hit town to see your particular company in your town.[13]

Miss Bonstelle did indeed demand perfection from her company members. Actress Sylvia Field called her "a slave driver," and said there were many times when she felt like "wringing Miss Bonstelle's neck."[14] Peter Cornell, the physician who had launched Bonstelle in Buffalo, sent his daughter to work in her Detroit theatre. Katharine Cornell later commented:

> One thinks of Miss Bonstelle now, and is immediately aware of all those things that gleam and beckon to you at the beginning of a career--high hopes--hard work--constant rehearsals--the security of working with someone who knew the

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[12]Freud interview.

[13]Freud interview.

[14]Sylvia Field, quoted in Deam, pp. 88-89.

> theatre, not in theory, not in precious and obscure phrases, but in plain, simple terms, and made you aware of it, enthuse about it, and further, and most important of all, willing to dedicate your life to it and share it.[15]

Freud reports that Bonstelle carried a payroll of approximately thirty-five people in Detroit. The company averaged twelve to fourteen actors, a stage carpenter who supervised six or seven stage hands, a stage manager, an electrician, a scenic designer, a property man, a house manager, a box-office staff, and three musicians who served as Bonstelle's orchestra. Assistants to the backstage workers made up the rest of the company. For shows with unusually large casts, members of the community were called in to play small roles. And, Freud adds, "She ran a very tight ship. Her standards were very high . . . and these companies were totally professional."[16]

The Bonstelle companies did ten performances per week--seven nightly and three matinees. Each new show opened on a Monday night, and after the final curtain sides were issued for the next week's production. Rehearsals were held every day except for Thursday when the actors were allowed the morning off to study and get their costumes in order before the matinee that afternoon.[17] Bonstelle was apparently indefatigable and assumed that her actors had been gifted with similar energy.

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[15]Katharine Cornell, quoted in Deam, pp. 89-90.

[16]Freud interview.

[17]Loughton (Seaton) interview.

Actor Walter Young, a long-time member of her troupe, recalls that the last day of rehearsals was known among the actors as "Black Monday." Rehearsal that day began at 10 a.m. and often lasted until shortly before the curtain was raised that evening.

> Bonnie was Niagara Falls, Boulder Dam, <u>et al</u> dynamos for driving effort--for as near perfection as possible, rolled into one not too large body. . . . "Go back!" was one of her pet expressions at rehearsals. That meant, repeat the offending scene for the umpteenth time. Most always, Bonnie had a reason for saying, "Go back."[18]

Bonstelle did not direct every show herself, but alumni of her companies agree that any director Bonstelle hired was a "supernumerary" or kind of "super stage-manager."[19] Her influence was always felt, and she had even discovered a way to continue directing the cast after the curtain had gone up. Dumbrille describes how she had special bulbs inserted in the footlights:

> She would stand at the back of the theatre during the show, when you were on, trying to remember lines. If the show was going smoothly, the white light was on; if the show was dragging, and people were dragging and not picking up their cues, the red light would go on--"Speed it up!"; and if it was green, it was "Slow down!"[20]

The actors who worked for Bonstelle were dedicated to their profession, or they did not stay with her long. Often

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[18] Walter Young, quoted in Deam, pp. 91-92.

[19] Dumbrille interview.

[20] Dumbrille interview.

there were rewards for those who were talented, and could endure the discipline she demanded of them. She had continued to direct an occasional Broadway show for the Shuberts, Brady, and John Golden, and "could carry a great recommendation to anybody hiring an [actor] from her in New York and could either cinch your getting in, or kill you if she didn't believe that you had the required amount of talent."[21] The affiliations she maintained with these New York producers had a definite effect on Bonstelle's repertoire. Stock managers in the twenties generally tried to get the most recent Broadway releases, because this is what the public wanted. Since Bonstelle was close to the Shuberts, she could often get first stock rights.[22] Brady made frequent use of Bonstelle's theatre in Detroit to try out plays he was considering for Broadway.[23] Bonstelle had an interest in the classics, but also a strong sense of which shows would sell tickets. She produced only a few Shakespearean plays during the whole of her career, but managed to slip in occasional presentations of Shaw, Ibsen, Chekhov and plays from the Restoration.[24] Minnie Maddern Fiske was a close personal friend, and Bonstelle sometimes starred herself in plays Fiske had made famous.[25] As a woman

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[21]Freud Interview.

[22]Deam, p. 81.

[23]Deam, p. 81, p. 120, p. 170, p. 177.

[24]See Appendix A; Deam, pp. 195-204.

[25]Deam, p. 114.

of high moral standards, she insisted on doing plays which would offend no one. Deam comments:

> She had only one major requirement for producing a play, other than the generally understood requirement that the play was worth producing, and that was her stand against the general tendency of the period toward sexy plays, risque situations, and vulgar language. She adamantly opposed the inclusion of any unnecessary drinking, the use of profane language, and situations which she considered in poor taste. She therefore consistently discarded many popular plays in favor of one she considered more uplifting, and was supported in her stand by both Dr. Cornell and E.D. Stair.[26]

She expected the same standards from her company. Phyllis Loughton says she knew of no drinking by any member of the company while she worked for Bonstelle. Loughton, herself a dynamo, had become Bonstelle's stage manager when she was only fifteen years old. According to Dumbrille, the young girl "knew everybody's business, everybody's lines . . . everybody's entrances. She knew the whole thing from start to finish. She was Bonstelle's right hand."[27] Loughton recalls that Bonstelle was once asked how this child could handle a stage crew, and Bonstelle replied, "Phyllis knows her job. . . . I've had no problem with drinking or swearing since Phyllis has been stage manager."[28]

Exact figures for the cost of running a Bonstelle production are unavailable, but Freud has indicated that the success of her operations allowed her more financial free-

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[26] Deam, p. 82.

[27] Dumbrille interview.

[28] Loughton (Seaton) interview.

dom than the average company.[29] Deam adds that she "never skimped on her settings, costumes and general stage furnishings, and was never bound by the length of the cast of characters in a play."[30] This is not to say that she was not constantly aware of her budget. Dumbrille even refers to her as having been "a little penurious," recalling that for her production of Peter Pan she refused to rent the "flying" equipment from New York, and had her stage hands build her own system. The results were less than successful, but it should be noted that Bonstelle was playing the title role, and was subjecting herself to the hazards of the operation.[31] In any case, newspaper reviews frequently commented on the excellence of her settings, due in no small part to the talent of her designers. Freud comments:

> The scenic artist with Bostelle . . . was a very gifted Hungarian named Steve Nastfogel . . . and there was another fellow in the company named Jo Mielziner . . . and Jo Mielziner and I both worked on the paint frame with Nastfogel, and learned about scene paint and so forth.[32]

The sets were dressed with great care. One of Loughton's duties as stage manager was to make frequent trips to museums to look at period furniture.[33] For certain shows Bonstelle found "essences" which she would put through the ventilating

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[29]Freud interview.

[30]Deam, p. 86.

[31]Dumbrille interview.

[32]Freud interview.

[33]Loughton (Seaton) interview.

system, so that the audience could smell, for example, the magnolias in Miss Nelly of N'Orleans, or the peach jam cooking in Turn to the Right.[34]

Jessie Bonstelle was so widely known as a star-maker that her stock companies were known as "Bonstellations." One of her greatest gifts was knowing the right point at which to let her best young people move on from stock to Broadway. Katharine Cornell has spoken of this:

> I owe her more than any other one person except my husband. And what she did for me she did for so many others. I remember one season in New York when forty actors from her company were playing on Broadway; twenty of them doing leads.[35]

The other great person in Miss Cornell's life--Guthrie McClintic--had also worked for Bonstelle. So had Stuart Walker, Josephine Hull, Jo Mielziner, Adams T. Rice, Ann Harding, Sylvia Field, Katherine Alexander, Frank Morgan, Walter Abel, Franklin Pangborn, Melvyn Douglas, Kenneth McKenna, Jessie Royce Landis, Sylvia Sidney, Edward Everett Horton, Gale Sondergaard, Sidney Blackmer, Winifred Lenihan, and many others.[36]

Bonstelle can be credited with two major achievements during her career as stock manager. First, she supplied the

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[34]Victor Jory interview, recorded 3 September 1966, tape #13, Freud Collection.

[35]Cornell, quoted in Deam, p. 98.

[36]These names have been taken from Deam's study, from an audiotape received from Victor Jory (September 1975), and from the Freud and Loughton (Seaton) interviews.

cities in which she worked with carefully mounted, well-acted productions--most of which were current Broadway releases--at a price well below the road productions which toured Buffalo and Detroit. Second, she had a talent for developing young actors, designers and directors, and when they had proven themselves to her, she sent them--with her blessings--to the New York stage. In these two ways her companies fulfilled the ideals of resident theatre. Katharine Cornell has described what this kind of stock theatre could mean to an actor:

> There is nothing like stock . . . to give you discipline, teach you your business. You learn all the tricks--to do them quickly. Of course, it can be dangerous. You can't go on setting your effects with counterfeits, using obvious devices. As you mature, and have time to develop a part, you've got to discriminate--decide what methods to use and what to discard. If you don't go on and learn to act creatively you are bound to become permanently stock--a ham. But, I repeat, there's nothing like it to start you off, give you a foundation. I'm sure of that.[37]

In 1932 the Detroit Civic Theatre was still in operation, but financial difficulties were mounting. Having put most of her personal fortune into the running of her theatre during the preceding few years, Bonstelle traveled to Hollywood to investigate an offer made her by the film-makers. It is uncertain what direction her career might have taken after this, for she died shortly after her return to Detroit.[38]

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[37]Cornell, quoted in Deam, p. 101.

[38]Deam, p. 188.

Stuart Walker

Most alumni of twenties stock in America rate Stuart Walker and Jessie Bonstelle together in both achievement and high quality. Walker had been raised in Cincinnati and received his academic schooling there. Later he graduated from The American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City, and worked for several years for David Belasco as actor, stage manager, play reader and director. He played with Bonstelle during the summer of 1914, and the following year devised his Portmanteau Theatre, which, as the name implies, consisted of a set of wall units and stage paraphernalia, which could be boxed for loading "on an ordinary hauling truck." This portable theatre could be easily assembled in any large hall, and was small enough to be set into the existing stage of a regular playhouse. The Portmanteau Theatre was introduced to New York City in 1915 and later toured the country.[39] The operation was successful, but Walker was interested in establishing a permanent resident company, and so in 1916 he installed a group of players in his native city of Cincinnati. This organization operated for several years as a "visiting" group, playing only during the summers. In 1922 the company began its

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[39]Edward Hale Bierstadt, Introd., Portmanteau Plays by Stuart Walker (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1917), pp. v-x, xxix-xxxi.

first season in Cincinnati as a permanent resident theatre, frequently interchanging productions with those of a second Walker company in Indianapolis. Over a period of time, Walker ran theatres in Dayton, Baltimore and Louisville, but the companies in Cincinnati and Indianapolis were the longest-lived and most successful.[40]

The Walker organizations, according to Harry Ellerbe who worked for him in Cincinnati for four years, were enormous. He kept at least thirty established Equity actors on his Cincinnati payroll per season in addition to a number of apprentices--known as "disciples"--whom Ellerbe believes were paid nothing.[41] Walker interviewed the young theatre aspirants from all over the country and chose his "disciples" from the large group of applicants--many of whom had been sent with recommendations from important people. They were not responsible, says Jean Inness, for performing the backstage duties of today's apprentices--sweeping up the theatre or nailing and painting flats.[42] They were, however, required to attend every

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[40]Stuart Walker Collection, Scrapbook #5898, no page. The Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

[41]Telephone interview with Harry Ellerbe, 15 February 1979. But Jean Inness, in Jean Inness interview (recorded 14 December 1965, tape #6, Freud Collection) states that "disciples" were paid 50¢ per performance when they were chosen to be included in the cast of a Walker production.

[42]Inness interview.

rehearsal, and were allowed to audition for "extra" parts in crowd scenes which Walker often enlarged to include them. There were frequent "disciple rehearsals," during which the young people presented scenes, giving the director an idea of what their talents might offer for future employment.[43] There were also opportunities for the apprentices to do their own productions, which were presented as complimentary performances for subscribers of the theatre or as benefits for some of the city's charities.[44] Walker himself explained:

> These youngsters work under directors every moment that they are not attending rehearsals. Last season they had a repertory of over seventy-five plays and sketches--full-length, short, modern, classic, dramatic, operatic. They give public performances frequently in towns hereabout and for the subscribers. They play for me whenever I have a few minutes to spare and then they get their criticisms from my viewpoint. They gave a number of old English interludes, miracles, mysteries and Elizabethan ballads last season. As they grow proficient they are given small parts--or even long ones--in our regular productions.[45]

In this way the young actors absorbed the basics of theatre over a period of time, not through formal study, but rather by spending most all of their waking hours in the theatre. As Ellerbe puts it, "Rubbing up against the real thing is more important than classroom study."[46]

Jory claims that Walker was "more important than anyone"

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[43]Inness interview.

[44]Stuart Walker Collection, Scrapbooks #5899 and #4232, no pages.

[45]Stuart Walker Collection, Scrapbook #5899, no page.

[46]Ellerbe telephone interview.

for training young actors.[47] And Ellerbe, who worked with Walker doing "bits" or "walk-ons" in over one hundred plays, concurs:

> His great love in the theatre was the development of young actors. He liked that better than anything else. And he sent many of them to New York and other places . . . . He was a very tough man to work for. He would tell you, "You're not ready to leave." He made me stay for four years. Then at the end of the fourth year he called me into his office and he said, "I don't want you back next season. You'd better get to New York and try your luck." I hadn't been in New York for more than three or four months before I landed the choice job of the season for a young actor, which was the title role in George Kelly's play, Philip Goes Forth.[48]

The young semi-professionals of Walker's company knew the value of a reputation with that group. The training was tough, but rewarding. In Ellerbe's words, "He and Jessie Bonstelle were the two leading [companies] of the country, and actors wanted to work for them because they learned so much."[49]

Both of these managers were demanding, and imposed a discipline much sterner than that experienced by the average hard-working company. But while Bonstelle was considered a "martinet," Walker was thought of by his actors as a tyrant of unpredictable temperamental outbursts. He was a man of high professional standards, but also of numerous eccentricities

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[47]Telephone interview with Victor Jory, 5 February 1979.

[48]Ellerbe telephone interview.

[49]Ellerbe telephone interview.

which were soon revealed to a new company member. It was his habit, for instance, to observe performances while reclining in a steamer chair positioned in the wings, and he required that his scalp and feet be massaged as he conducted rehearsals. This duty fell to the "disciples," so named, says Jory, because Walker's hovering mother frequently referred to him as her "Christ-like son."[50] Whether or not this "therapy" supplied him with extra energy, he was an indefatigable worker, and expected his company to follow suit. He had early discovered a unique method of disciplining his actors, both inside and outside of the theatre. While the usual stock company hired one stage manager who normally had an assistant, Walker kept from three to five stage managers on his payroll.[51] According to Jory:

> This stage management squad laboriously kept copious notes on every detail of a performance. They reported at length to their master even the private lives of the actors--their conduct on the stage and off. They lurked like television private eyes behind flats or hidden recesses of the theatre. They covered the backstage bulletin boards with notes authored by Stuart himself.[52]

Jory believes that the importance conferred on his stage managers was a result of his having worked for Belasco in that position.[53]

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[50] Jory telephone interview.

[51] This statement is supported by Jory and Ellerbe in their telephone interviews, and by the following individuals in the Freud Collection: Jean Inness, tape #6; Leon Ames, tape #6; Charles Lane, tape #5.

[52] Jory audiotape.

[53] Jory telephone interview.

Walker believed, in spite of a weekly change of bill, that it was possible for stock productions to equal the quality of most Broadway shows. By keeping on three to five stage managers, his cast members could be watched much more carefully than if he had been the only one to supervise rehearsals. The company ran from fall through spring; there were six evening performances and two matinees per week, and rehearsals were uncommonly long. During an "easy" week, rehearsals might run from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. With more difficult productions, work began at 9 a.m. and could continue until shortly before evening curtain time.[54] Ellerbe recalls:

> There was no Equity rule about length of rehearsal and very often he would completely forget about time, and you often rehearsed up until eight o'clock--a half hour before the current play. And if you were in that play, you were pretty much of a rag. There were very few complaints, and very often we'd have paper bags and cartons of food sent in, and eat while making up.[55]

Jory remembers that Walker sometimes called after-performance rehearsals, when he was not satisfied with the actors' progress on the upcoming show:

> These night rehearsals could go on four or five hours. Now the average company would have had a corporate nervous breakdown under a schedule such as this. However, Stuart, having a very large professional company [and] twenty to thirty young semi-professionals . . . was able to rehearse a company in next week's production to the point of exhaustion. He would then lay many of them off the following week, or give his principals, his leading

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[54] Jory telephone interview.

[55] Ellerbe telephone interview.

> people--smaller roles in the next production. Thus he was able to have a cast come to rehearsal with their lines practically learned, and he could really direct the play instead of doing a traffic job.[56]

Most of the actors who made up Walker's regular salaried group were hired from Broadway, or had established themselves as good professional actors. They were available to Walker because his theatre was respected and because he paid well. He refused, however, to have union rules imposed on him, and to demonstrate that his word was his bond, he never gave a player a contract.[57] Since his salaries were always fair and often generous, neither the actor nor Equity complained.[58] Jory states that he earned $350 per week as leading man for Walker, and that this was the highest salary he ever earned in stock.[59]

The Walker repertoire was eclectic and yet his audiences were apparently receptive to almost anything he offered. The largest number of offerings were recent New York hits, but as Ellerbe describes it, "He would often get away from the run-of-the-mill stuff.[60] "Getting away" meant productions

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[56]Jory audiotape.

[57]Jean Jory, "Victor Jory On Stage," Unpublished Masters thesis, The University of Utah, 1961, pp. 54-55.

[58]Jory telephone interview.

[59]Jory telephone interview.

[60]Ellerbe telephone interview.

by playwrights such as Shaw, Wilde, Pinero, Maeterlinck, Ibsen, Molnar, Galsworthy and Maugham, as well as Restoration comedies.[61] Many of the Broadway actors who worked for Walker must have done so because of the rare opportunity to play choice roles from the classics. Ellerbe's first job for Walker was "holding the script" for a production of Shaw's Candida. "All of the actors were established, and the production included a number of Broadway stars, including Peggy Wood, Morgan Farley, Elliott Cabot, and Elizabeth Patterson."[62] These were not guest stars, but part of the regular company who played that season. Inness remembers that during one season Walker had at least six established New York stars in his company--McKay Morris, George Gaul, Tom Powers, Beulah Bondi, Elizabeth Patterson, and Judith Lowry--along with the twenty or so other professional salaried actors.[63]

Walker also had a penchant for productions of a grand scale. As Ellerbe remembers it,

> He did the popular things, but he was different from a lot of them. He did the third production in this country--over a period of a hundred years, I guess--[of] a French play called L'Arlésienne and that required a full orchestra. . . . He had a full pit of musicians from the Cincinnati Symphony play that music. . . .[64]

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[61]Stuart Walker Collection, Scrapbook #5899, no page.

[62]Ellerbe telephone interview.

[63]Inness interview.

[64]Ellerbe telephone interview.

This was the Daudet drama, set to Bizet's music which was played by eighteen members of the Cincinnati Symphony.[65] Another such "special" was Alice in Wonderland, which included eighteen speaking roles "plus gardeners, soldiers and guests," and called for five "elaborate" settings. This production was done as an eight-performance benefit for a city charity and played to a total of 12,000 people.[66] Walker was better equipped to deal with difficult scenic problems than was the typical stock manager, for not only did he have a large stage crew, but also a warehouse in a building separate from the theatre where he stored an enormous number of sets from previous productions.[67]

As previously noted, the Walker company was unusually large. Unlike lesser resident groups however, Walker did not retain a large orchestra, except for unusual productions such as the L'Arlésienne work described by Ellerbe. He preferred a pit ensemble which consisted of two violins, one viola, one cello, one bass, an organ and a piano.[68] Examining a series of Walker theatre programs, one recalls Ellerbe's description of the music accompanying the productions.[69] For

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[65] Stuart Walker Collection, Scrapbook #5899, no page.

[66] Stuart Walker Collection, Scrapbook #5899, no page.

[67] Jory telephone interview.

[68] Stuart Walker Collection, #5900, program note, no page.

[69] See Chapter II, p. 52.

the week of December 15, 1930, for example, the Walker company in Cincinnati presented Broken Dishes--"one of the past season's most hilarious comedies. . . . 'He who cannot laugh at Broken Dishes had better see his physician,' counsels Stephen Rathbun, editor of The New York Sun.'"[70] The Ensemble's pre-curtain and inter-act musical program for that week featured Beethoven's Overture to "Prometheus," Sinding's Rustle of Spring and Marche Grotesque, with the last selection Delibes' Ballet Suite from Lakme.[71]

Even with Walker's large payroll at relatively high salaries, tickets remained reasonably priced, from .50 to 1.00 for matinees and from .50 to 1.50 for evening performances.[72] His theatres were unusually large for stock houses--the Murat in Indianapolis seating 1900 persons, and Cincinnati's Taft, 2600.[73] Inness, who worked for Walker during the mid-to-late twenties recalls, "He could fence [seating sections] off if business wasn't good, but he didn't often have to."[74] By 1930, when Jory played in Cincinnati, attendance was beginning to fall off. "When I was there he roped the whole thing off so you only played to about 1400 people."[75] This would have been

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[70]Stuart Walker Collection, #5900, program note, no page.

[71]Stuart Walker Collection, #5900, program note, no page.

[72]Stuart Walker Collection, Scrapbook #4232, no page.

[73]Stuart Walker Collection, Scrapbook #5899, no page.

[74]Inness interview.

[75]Jory, in Inness interview.

a huge audience for the ordinary stock house, but Walker was evidently aware and despairing of the injuries stock was suffering from the financial depression and the behemoth talkie. In 1931 he wrote, "This past season I have had to abandon nearly all the plays I had hoped to do. The public--what there is of it in this bank-troubled city--wants laughter and more laughter. Occasionally I have blushed for the fare I am giving."[76]

In 1931 Walker traveled the increasingly well-worn path to Hollywood where he spent his remaining working years as a director of talking pictures.[77]

Henry Jewett

Of the twenties stock companies which fell outside the definition of "typical," the Henry Jewett company in Boston was distinguished for its productions of the classics. Jewett was born in Australia in 1862, had been interested in theatre since childhood, and made his first professional acting appearance by the time he was eighteen years old. During the years that followed he was involved with theatrical companies which concentrated heavily on the classics, and it seems clear that this is how he established his preference for a repertoire of the old works. In Sidney, Australia, for example, he was

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[76] Stuart Walker Collection, Scrapbook #5899, no page.

[77] The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, 1953 ed., s.v. "Walker, Stuart."

leading man for the English actor, George Rignold, who kept him on in his stock company for five years playing Shakespeare and later classics--along with some melodramas popular during that era. By 1892 Jewett had emigrated to America, making San Francisco his first residence in this country. After thirty-four weeks as a leading man for the Stockwell stock company in that city, he traveled east where he played leading man to Julia Marlowe for several engagements, and three seasons with Richard Mansfield playing Shaw, Shakespeare and modern comedies. He also played leading roles with Ada Rehan, Fanny Davenport, Rose Coghlan, Viola Allen, and Bertha Kalich.[78]

Jewett became determined to offer the public high quality drama at reasonable prices, and by 1914 he had established himself in Boston where he ran a successful season of Shakespeare at the Boston Opera House. The following year he leased Boston's Copley Theatre and installed a company which he directed there for the following eight years. Between 1924 and 1925 Jewett erected a new theatre building which was christened The Repertory Theater of Boston. From its opening in November of 1925, the company was operated under the corporate ownership of the Jewett Repertory Theater Fund, Inc.[79] This

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[78]The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, 1932 ed., s.v. "Jewett, Henry."

[79]Obituary from The Boston Transcript, 24 June 1930, in portfolio in The Players Collection, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

organization was chartered under the Massachusetts educational act for "educational, literary and artistic purposes," and was exempted from federal, state, and city taxes on the basis that it was non-commercial and non-profit-sharing.[80] During its eight years at The Copley, the company maintained itself by means of box-office receipts, which included discount tickets for patrons of the subscription plan. Financial pressures were reduced for the Jewett Players in 1925, after they had settled into the new Repertory Theater of Boston. A Repertory Theater Club was established, and its 1,000 members paid annual dues ranging from $5.00 to $1,000 which allowed them use of clubrooms in the theatre in exchange for helping to subsidize the Jewett productions.[81]

While Jewett referred to his long-time Boston operation as a "repertory company," it ran according to a system which resembled stock as nearly as it did repertory. News items about the Jewett Players were placed in the "Dramatic Stock" sections of Billboard during the 1920s, and reviewers of the Jewett productions refer to his theatre as a "stock house." In 1929 Kenneth Macgowan wrote:

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[80] The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, 1932 ed., s.v. "Jewett, Henry."

[81] Kenneth Macgowan, Footlights Across America (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929), p. 78.

> The Boston Repertory Theater is . . . a venture that must be described either as a stock company animated by little theater ideals or as a little theater that has sprung full-armed professionally from the barrenness of the road. . . . It is not, of course, a repertory theater in the strict sense. It has merely adopted the English term for an idealistic stock company.[82]

As with both stock and repertory companies, Jewett hired actors who were permanent [for at least one season] members of his company. A 1918 theatrical news article describes his policies in some detail, noting that Jewett did not hire actors according to "lines of business," but engaged only those performers who were qualified to play a wide variety of roles. Furthermore, the star system was eschewed by this manager who insisted on an ensemble company concept.[83] This statement is confirmed by Donald Marshall Call, who worked for some time as Jewett's stage manager. "One of his policies that we approved of was that the leading man might find himself the butler or the hired man the next week, and so you got a lot of variety of experience. There was no hiring according to 'lines of business.'"[84] For this reason, according to Call, the quality of acting in the company was above average, and the dangers of becoming "stocky" were avoided because of

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[82]Macgowan, pp. 78-79.

[83]"Henry Jewett," in Robinson Locke scrapbook, series 2, p. 200, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

[84]Audiotape received from Donald Marshall Call, January 1978.

the many types of parts each actor was required to play.[85]

By the time Jewett had begun his career in Boston he was a veteran of stock theatre and adopted--in theory at least--a weekly-change-of-bill policy in the stock theatre tradition. As with many resident companies in the country, a very successful production was sometimes given a slightly longer run. Unlike the typical resident company, however, the majority of plays done by the Jewett Players were classics or dramas of relatively high quality. Thus is Jewett noted for productions of "Shakespeare, a group of the old comedies, and plays by Shaw, Barrie, Pinero, Wilde, Galsworthy, Jones, Milne, Dunsany, Ibsen, Toller, Sudermann and Sardou."[86] Call remembers that some commercial plays were done on rare occasions, mainly for the purpose of bringing in more money than usual so that the theatre's budget was increased for other productions.[87] But this was infrequent because the audiences were generally receptive to the usual Jewett choices. According to Call, the houses were nearly always full, and there were consistently large subscription lists; newspaper publicity was well-handled and the critics' reviews were generally

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[85]Call audiotape.

[86]<u>The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography</u>, 1932 ed., s.v. "Jewett, Henry."

[87]Call audiotape.

favorable.[88]

Although Jewett retained an unusually large company--between eighteen and twenty regular players--he economized by paying relatively low salaries. Since he rarely produced recent commercial successes, his royalty costs were negligible. The stage settings, in Call's recollection, were "unimpressive," consisting mainly of repainted flats, which minimized the costs of scenic design and construction.[89] As with all stock companies of the period, the actors were responsible for furnishing their own costumes when a contemporary play was produced, but Jewett kept a large collection of costumes which were needed for the many period plays he favored. In Call's words, "The wardrobe mistress was busy all the time because most of our plays were with period costumes."[90]

The Jewett Players did nine performances a week--six nightly and three matinees. They neither rehearsed nor performed on Sundays--then a predictable policy for a Boston company.[91]

Although Jewett had spent the first half of his professional career as a classical actor, his years at the Copley and The Repertory Theater were almost entirely devoted to direct-

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[88]Call audiotape.

[89]Call audiotape.

[90]Call audiotape.

[91]Call audiotape.

ing. After 1915 he rarely appeared on stage himself, and he did his own directing entirely. The success of his Boston productions, however, must surely have been the result of his earlier training--the work methods he had adopted and the discipline he had acquired through the years. The Gallery of Players describes him at the age of thirty-three:

> Mr. Jewett possesses, in addition to very wide experience, a superb physique, a manly bearing, with strongly-defined classic features, and is gifted with a rich voice of wonderful resonance which is tempted sometimes to exploit a little too much. His methods of study are unique. Not alone does he become roughly conversant with the character which he is to assume, but he gives particular attention to the characters with which he is to come in contact in the action of the play, and he is one of the few actors who commits his lines to memory from the manuscript, and not, as is usually the custom, from his own written part. He thereby becomes familiar with the context, and is enabled to evolve a better idea of his own impersonation.[92]

These "unique" study methods sound much like the basic tenets of today's acting schools and were not consciously followed by the average stock actor. Where Mrs. Fiske had ventured that "personality" is everything for the actor, Jewett claimed that

> . . . while personality is never entirely lost sight of, characterization is of the utmost importance. . . . Characterization must come from the "inner man, must be a result of mentality; a man must feel and be a certain character before he can play it convincingly.[93]

Jewett tried to teach his players the standards he had set for himself. His dress rehearsals, Call remembers, "were

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[92]"Henry Jewett," in Robinson Locke scrapbook, p. 199.

[93]"Henry Jewett," in Robinson Locke scrapbook, p. 201.

like perfect performances. He was tough and exacting. He insisted on perfection and kept at you until he got it."[94]

In the fall of 1927, Jewett was honored at a $100-a-plate dinner given at Boston's Copley-Plaza. In attendance were Dr. George E. Vincent, president of the Rockefeller Foundation; patron of the arts Otto Kahn; and Frank Gillmore, executive-secretary of Equity:

> Mr. Gillmore told [sic] that actors welcomed the repertory theatre because it would give future playgoers the same delight experienced by our fathers and grandfathers, bringing to the stage of today the classic style, exalted moods and passions. The Jewett Repertory Theater's aims are noble.[95]

The Repertory Theater of Boston continued under the direction of Jewett until his death in June of 1930.

Henry Duffy

Henry "Terry" Duffy is important to stock theatre history for three reasons. First, while a number of managers ran more than one company simultaneously with others, and a few ran a string of theatres covering a certain part of the country, Duffy outdid them all. The actual figures concerning Duffy's operations vary somewhat. Variety cites him as "the foremost stock company entrepreneur in the twenties when he

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[94]Call audiotape.

[95]The Boston Transcript, 25 October 1927, no page, in "Henry Jewett," portfolio in The Players Collection.

operated as many as twenty-one companies simultaneously,"[96] while the Los Angeles Times writes, "From 1924 until 1930 Duffy was the stock company king of the country, with as many as fourteen companies playing in West Coast cities at one time and eight shows touring."[97] During the early twenties Duffy had organized a chain of companies on the East Coast, but his fame as "stock company king" derives from his career after 1924, when he moved his operations to the West Coast and created a theatre empire stretching from Los Angeles to Vancouver, B.C. The second reason for Duffy's prominence is that he was able to draw to his companies some of the best talent of the West Coast as well as many Broadway actors for "stock-starring" engagements. Third, he was scrupulous in his choice of fare. He attempted a consistent offering of recent Broadway successes, and these were always "light" entertainments--comedies, romances, or mysteries. Camille Bokar notes that, "Duffy admitted that his plays were not intended to educate the public. He had concluded several years earlier that 'highbrow drama' neither attracted an audience nor paid costs."[98] Above all, he insisted that every play he handled must be "clean and wholesome" family fare.

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[96] Variety, 22 November 1961.

[97] Los Angeles Times, 2 November 1947, quoted by Muriel Mouring, "Henry 'Terry' Duffy: The West Coast's Leading Actor-Producer," Unpublished Masters thesis, The University of California, Los Angeles, 1969, p. 4.

[98] Camille Naomi Rezutko Bokar, "An Historical Study of the Legitimate Theatre in Los Angeles: 1920-1929 and Its Relation to the National Theatrical Scene," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles 1973), p. 417.

It is for this reason, explains Muriel Mouring, that Duffy "was what one might think of as the Walt Disney of legitimate theatre."[99] A good stock manager was also a shrewd businessman who was alert to the importance of the church and its interest in preserving the morals of the community. Duffy seemed especially appreciative of the relationship between full houses and church approval. Today, most actors from twenties stock remember their offerings as "family fare." Jory, for example, recalls that "most companies had the backing of the churches--often from the pulpit. . . . It was certainly the exception when the Lord's name was taken in vain in a play."[100] And Agnes Young adds, "They never used swear words, or vulgar words. . . . A lot might depend on the director . . . if there was something near a vulgar word he might say, 'Cut that one out.'"[101] Frank McHugh claims that in stock, nothing indiscreet ever happened during the play, and that the most risque kind of event to take place would be the on-stage discovery of an undergarment.[102] Yet Duffy refused to produce many of the shows other stock groups presented. "The Walt Disney of legitimate theatre" thus seems to describe him well.

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[99]Mouring, p. 68.

[100]Jory audiotape.

[101]Personal interview with Agnes Young, 9 March 1977.

[102]Personal interview with Frank McHugh, 8 March 1977.

Duffy, born in 1890, had become stage-struck as a child. By the time he was thirteen he was performing numerous odd-jobs, including some acting, with an Omaha stock company. A resourceful young man, he had organized his own repertoire company by 1907, and during the next several years performed in and managed numerous stock companies. By the time he was twenty-six, Duffy was on Broadway and had met and married playwright Anne Nichols, who is best known for Abie's Irish Rose. He played several New York shows and organized, between engagements, stock companies in Pittsburgh, Washington D.C., Baltimore, Brooklyn, and Montreal. His marriage to Miss Nichols was short-lived, and in 1923 he married actress Dale Winter who was to become one of his important leading ladies.[103]

In 1920, before his appearances on Broadway, Duffy became familiar with the California stock scene. During the summer of that year he played several shows in Los Angeles for Oliver Morosco's company.[104] The West Coast appealed to Duffy, and when he learned, in 1923, that the Wilkes brothers were giving up the Alcazar theatre in San Francisco, he quickly arranged to take it over. The Wilkeses had been unable to keep the theatre operating at a profit in spite of--or perhaps because of--a fixed $1.50 admission policy they had instituted.[105] Confident that polished productions at popular

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[103]This brief summary of Duffy's early years is taken from Mouring, pp. 6-15.

[104]Bokar, p. 100.

[105]Bokar, p. 209.

prices would revive the Alcazar's success, Duffy sank $22,000 into a face-lift for the theatre and opened his first show in late 1924.[106] A standard scale of admission would be instituted at all of Duffy's theatres: matinees--25¢, 50¢, 75¢; evenings--35¢, 50¢, 75¢, $1.00, and $1.25.[107] The enormous success of this first season convinced Duffy he should expand his operations and within the year he acquired three additional theatres, one each in Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco.[108] By 1928 he had added to his chain companies in Vancouver, B.C., Oakland, and Los Angeles. Duffy reasoned that if he could successfully run a string of companies along the Pacific Coast, he would be able to ensure enough employment for the best actors in the West to discourage them traveling to New York for employment. In this way, the theatres in the West and the actors in the West would support each other.[109]

Duffy's theatres in the Northwest operated on a system somewhat different from his California enterprises, and more closely in line with the policies of a "typical" stock company. A weekly change of bill was standard, although his Portland productions sometimes ran longer.[110] While he con-

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[106]Mouring, p. 20.

[107]Mouring, p. 30.

[108]Bokar, p. 617.

[109]Mouring, p. 26.

[110]Mouring, pp. 32-34.

tinued to present the most recent Broadway plays he could find, it was in the Northwest theatres that he sometimes slipped in a play that was ten or fifteen years older.[111] The Duffy theatres in California ran each show for as many weeks as was profitable, and frequently the runs were long.

Eastern play brokers and authors soon recognized Duffy's startling achievements and became willing, if not eager, to work with him. His California houses sometimes featured plays which were currently running on Broadway.[112] Important actors on the West Coast were eager to appear in these productions and his California casts were consistently strong, including such names as Leo Carillo, Jason Robards, Sr., Gladys George, Dean Jagger, Joe E. Brown, May Robson, Guy Bates Post, and Charlotte Greenwood. Duffy often played leads with his own companies, as did his wife, Dale Winter--both apparently ingratiating themselves with their audiences. When Duffy could not show a play concurrently with its New York run, he was frequently able to import the original Broadway cast for its first production outside of New York. And it was Duffy who first introduced the "guest-star" concept to the Northwest theatres. Mary Rohrer comments, "During the whole history

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[111] Mary Katherine Rohrer, _The History of Seattle Stock Companies from Their Beginnings to 1934_ (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1945), Appendix B.

[112] Mouring, p. 28.

of Seattle stock, the only theatre to make a regular practice of using guest stars was the President [Duffy's]. . . . A few of these guest stars were Florence Roberts, Marjorie Rambeau, and May Robson.[113]

The success of Duffy's ventures before the end of the decade has been attributed to his talents as both actor and director, his canniness in play selection, and his own personal drive to create an empire. Jessie Bonstelle, Stuart Walker, and Henry Jewett also ran prestigious companies, but they are remembered, to a large extent, for their training of young actors. As part of this training, a discipline was imposed which labeled these managers "martinets" and "tyrants." Duffy was a gentle man of great personal charm, and the ease with which he drew established actors to his companies relieved him of the role of task-master. The performers that he used were in agreement with his high standards, and his audiences were loyal because he was sincere in his concern for them. Actress Dorothy Spencer recalls that he catered to his audiences in a very personal way. On one occasion, an elderly couple--both hard-of-hearing--inquired at the box-office about the seats they were buying for that evening's performance. Duffy overheard their conversation and insisted on ushering them into the theatre to let them see exactly where they would be

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[113]Rohrer, p. 28.

placed.[114] His dedication to the theatre was complete. He directed many of his productions, acted in many, and ruled his domain twenty hours out of each day.[115]

By 1930 the blight that all stock was suffering affected the Duffy chain. The financial depression was hard on his expanded interests and the talkies were buying up any Broadway plays which might otherwise have been available to stock. By the middle of the year Duffy was bankrupt. Although he lost his own theatres, he continued his career by directing, producing and acting for others. Predictably, a number of these undertakings were connected with movie studios which were willing to lend their stars for plays which might prove adaptable to the screen.[116]

Duffy remained active in various areas of theatre until the mid-fifties, but treasured memories of earlier days. In 1947 he commented, "The collapse of stock companies was a bad thing for theatre. Nothing has replaced it as a training school, not only for actors, but for everyone else in theatre."[117]

The Wilkes Family

If Henry Duffy was "king of stock," the Wilkes family came close to equaling his achievements with the chain of theatres

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[114] Personal interview with Dorothy Spencer, 15 February 1977.

[115] Mouring, p. 33.

[116] Mouring, pp. 42-43, p. 47, p. 49.

[117] Mouring, p. 57.

it operated in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sacramento, Seattle, Salt Lake City, and Denver. Brothers Thomas, Alfred and Ernest Wilkes, along with their sister Willamene, began their involvement with their own theatres in 1914. Ernest had been playing as a young actor in San Francisco's Fillmore stock company but complained to his brothers that he was unhappy with his constant assignments of small roles. Thomas, who was interested in theatrical management, and Alfred who had a talent for finance and promotion, decided to buy the theatre so that Ernest could play the leads he coveted. It seemed quite natural that Willamene should direct the new company, as she had worked in this capacity for Bonstelle in Buffalo, and had studied abroad with Ellen Terry and others. Her husband, Dickson Morgan, claims that with this assignment, Willamene Wilkes became the first woman stage director on the West Coast.[118] This was the beginning of the Wilkes theatre empire. Morgan states that the Wilkeses took over the Majestic theatre in Los Angeles in 1916.[119] Oliver Morosco was then running his own stock company

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[118] Dickson Morgan interview, recorded 19 January 1966, tape #13, Freud Collection. Perhaps Morgan is thinking in terms of a true regisseur. There was at least one other woman who managed a West Coast theatre before Willamene Wilkes--Catherine Sinclair, the former wife of Edwin Forrest, who opened San Francisco's second legitimate playhouse in 1853.

[119] Bokar gives 1919 as the date the Wilkeses first produced at the Majestic. (See Bokar, p. 77.)

in Los Angeles, representing the Wilkeses' main competition. Until 1920 the Wilkes Majestic presented a change of bill each week, in the tradition of the "typical" stock company. Morosco, on the other hand, had already begun to run his shows for two or more weeks. The Wilkes business improved after the first year, according to Morgan, when the company broke through its one-a-week policy. The publicity given to extended runs convinced the public they should not miss those offerings, and the Majestic began to play each show for two to four weeks.[120]

Bokar relates that through 1924 the success of the Majestic company was due, in large part, to its leading man, Edward Everett Horton, who joined the company at the end of 1919. "In conjunction with Willamene Wilkes, the artistic director of the Wilkes theatres, and Dickson Morgan, the designer-stage manager, Horton built the Wilkes Stock Company into one of 'the best paying stock propositions that there are in the country.'"[121] By 1920, Horton was joined by Evelyn Varden as leading lady, and Alice Elliott, Franklin Pangborn, Forrest Seabury, Marie Curtis, and Garry Garrity, among others.[122]

> During the year, the length-of-run for most plays was extended to an expected two weeks, with a healthy indi-

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[120]Morgan interview.

[121]Bokar, p. 81.

[122]Bokar, p. 81.

> cation that longer runs would be supported if the play suited the talents of the company's leading man . . . and/or a special star engaged for a special show. . . . Thomas Wilkes showed that he intended to make his company at the The Majestic a paying organization by staging popular light comedies and an occasional mystery, and by building up a skillful company of talented actors with engaging personalities. He also indicated (or allowed his sister to do so) his willingness to break the conventional mode to stage a serious play, a classic, or a new work.[123]

As the Wilkes name took on stature, guest stars, such as Holbrook Blinn, Marjorie Rambeau and Richard Bennett were brought into the Majestic in Los Angeles and the Alcazar in San Francisco to head up shows which eventually ran as long as fourteen weeks.

The Wilkes theatres set up in Seattle, Denver, and Salt Lake City maintained the one-a-week policy, as long as they were in existence, of the typical stock company. While the theatres in all three cities had been playing to warm houses, the companies in Seattle and Salt Lake began experiencing financial difficulties in the early twenties--according to Jory, because Tom Wilkes was "spreading himself too thin."[124] By 1922 the Seattle and Salt Lake theatres were leased to other managers, and the Denver company became the Wilkeses' main one-a-week stock house. This theatre, known as the Denham, was run according to traditional stock company policy,

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[123]Bokar, p. 84.

[124]Jory telephone interview.

and was representative of the well-run average resident company.[125] Part of the theatre's continuing success resulted from Denver's being a "sleeper-jump" town for patrons of the railroad. Touring companies which hit Denver had spent the entire previous day and night in transit, since there were no cities either side of Denver large enough to book a road production. Because it was expensive for the producer to pay his company's railroad travel while it was idle, it became usual to send only prestigious "star" productions, of quality apart from the average stock repertoire, to ensure good business in the sleeper-jump towns. As a result, the local groups were not seriously threatened, and the Denver audiences enjoyed a larger choice of theatre entertainments. Elitch's Gardens, a summer stock company renowned for its long-time excellence, was a prime beneficiary, since the sleeper-jump companies discouraged its competition.

A Denham season combined the usual recent Broadway releases--light comedies, romances and mysteries, an occasional musical, a classic or neo-classic by playwrights such as Shaw or Molnar, with perhaps one new original play. Rehearsals, according to Jory, were in line with those of most resident groups--10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on all days except those on which matinees were played, when only mornings were available for work on the upcoming show.[126] There were seven evening per-

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[125]Jory telephone interview.

[126]Jory telephone interview.

formances each week in addition to two or three matinees.[127] Tickets ran from 35¢ to $1.50, with the "peanut gallery" doing the best business, and the company operated on an average gross of $4,500, while a very good week might bring in as much as $7,000.[128] The Denham's orchestra played offstage in the wings, rather than in the pit.[129]

While the Denham did well in the face of stiff Denver competition--Elitch's Gardens, as well as a very good musical stock company, and two road show houses--clearly Tom Wilkes was most concerned with the family's theatres in Los Angeles and San Francisco. The operation of theatres in "sophisticated" California cities offered several advantages over those outside these areas. First, it was easier to draw "name" actors who were film stars, sometimes with a Broadway background. Salaries for well-known players such as Edward Everett Horton--who earned at least $500 per week at the Wilkes Majestic--were higher than those paid at their provincial companies, but the Wilkeses' productions ran longer in Los Angeles and San Francisco, thus reducing the costs that would be required to mount a new production each week.[130] And since film-makers were constantly on the look-out for stage plays which might

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[127] Morgan interview.

[128] Jory telephone interview.

[129] Jory telephone interview.

[130] Jory telephone interview.

be adapted to the screen, the Wilkeses tried out many new works--especially in Los Angeles--and this cut down their royalty costs. For the reasons cited above--longer runs and reduced royalty fees--the Los Angeles Wilkes could operate on a gross no larger than the Denver theatre.[131] Still, admission prices for the Wilkeses' Los Angeles theatres in the mid-twenties were slightly higher than their Denver theatre. California in the twenties was a "boom" state, and its residents had both the means and the will to pay to see actors who had made names for themselves. In addition, they could see premiere engagements of New York shows and first stock-rights productions, giving them an edge over residents of provincial areas. Much of this was the result of an alliance between Tom Wilkes and producer Sam Harris in New York.

> During 1922 and 1923, no one person did more in legitimate theatre . . . [in Los Angeles] than Thomas Wilkes who premiered ten new works, presented two new plays unveiled earlier at his theatre in San Francisco, staged five plays with stars--some of whom had appeared in the particular work in New York--mounted seven stock company productions--three of which were viewed in Los Angeles for the first time--and, in association with Sam H. Harris of New York, organized coast companies in recent Broadway hits.[132]

The Harris alliance proved beneficial for Tom Wilkes in other ways. In 1923, Harris asked Wilkes to help him out of a diffi-

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[131]Jory telephone interview.

[132]Bokar, p. 198.

cult spot. He had signed a pair of women--the Duncan sisters--but discovering he could not use them, asked Wilkes to put them to work. Vivian and Rosetta Duncan wanted to do a musical version of Uncle Tom's Cabin, and Tom Wilkes agreed. Within five weeks the music, book and orchestration were written and the sets built. Topsy and Eva, as the adaptation was called, opened at the Alcazar. Morgan claims that its run there, and in other cities they toured, made millions for the Wilkeses.[133]

By 1925 the Majestic had been torn down and Tom Wilkes took over The Grand Auditorium which he remodeled and christened The Orange Grove.[134] Bokar notes that it was during Wilkes' stay there that he abandoned his former stock company policies and,

> . . . he was no longer bound by the tastes of a stock company audience. All of the works he presented, with the possible exclusion of The Duchess of Pittsburgh and The Fall Guy, showed a degree of sophistication toward relations between men and women. These plays expressed points of view regarding intellectual, social, religious, personal, and sexual vanities which were original or, at best, thought-provoking, and removed from the run-of-the-mill Pollyanna philosophy, whether exaggerated with a satirical brush as in Meet the Wife, The Eternal Masculine, Playthings, and Honeymoon House; or probed with near-clinic psychology, as in Hell-Bent fer Heaven, and Desire Under the Elms; or enveloped in the gaudy cellophane of sensationalism as in White Cargo. Most of the productions featured star performers surrounded by a cast of local actors.[135]

Wilkes' last production at The Orange Grove was Desire Under the Elms which opened in February of 1926, and ran for eleven

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[133] Morgan interview.

[134] Morgan interview.

[135] Bokar, p. 285.

weeks.

Tom Wilkes had taken short-term leases, during the decade, on various Los Angeles theatres. Special productions were done at these theatres when the Majestic or the Orange Grove were engaged in other productions. But the death of Willamene Wilkes in 1925 robbed the Wilkes enterprises of much of the artistic excellence which had blessed their productions. Throughout his career, Thomas had been a colorful theatrical figure, but his drinking problems and shady business dealings increasingly damaged his reputation. Alfred, who had served as the financial "brains" of the family, was to be sent to prison on mail fraud charges connected with the Doheny oil scandals.[136] In December of 1927, Tom Wilkes opened The Vortex at the Music Box in Los Angeles. It ran for five weeks, and "was the last production Thomas Wilkes presented in Los Angeles and the final theatrical involvement for any member of the Wilkes family."[137]

Had the Wilkes brothers not become involved with personal and legal problems by 1928, they might have kept their theatres in Los Angeles for a longer time. In all probability they would have served as a stepping-stone for actors and playwrights to the talkies, as Edward Belasco did after them.

The Los Angeles Belasco Theatre

While the talkies were in the process of consuming actors, directors, playwrights, designers and even the build-

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[136] Morgan interview.

[137] Bokar, p. 433.

ings of Broadway, stock and vaudeville, a few legitimate theatres on the West Coast were in some ways helped by the intoduction of sound pictures. The Belasco Theatre in Los Angeles enjoyed greater success for a longer period of time than any of the other companies in the area because it was able to develop the most effective reciprocal relationship with films. The Belasco ran according to the policies of those few companies known as "super-stocks" which played a show for as many weeks as was profitable, and routinely imported Broadway stars to head up productions. For as long as the film-makers could look "next-door" for promising actors and screen material, they were willing to lend out to the Belasco contract players not currently being used in a picture.

Marvin Kirschman's "A Historical Study of the Belasco Theatre in Los Angeles and the Forces that Shaped Its History: 1927-1933" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Southern California, 1971) provides us with a detailed picture of this operation. I am indebted to this work for the information provided regarding the theatre's history and how it served many members of live theatre as a stepping-stone to the talkies. Since the Belasco did not open until 1926--just a year before the screen's Jazz Singer sensation--the Kirschman study focuses on those crucial years which saw sound pictures ravage live theatre. The remainder of this chapter is based on Kirschman's work.

David Belasco had made the family name famous from the time he had successfully established himself on Broadway in the last decade of the nineteenth century. He was the first

of ten children born to his parents, and his theatrical achievements prompted the second-oldest son, Fred, to try his luck in the field. Fred became an expert in California theatre management, and began training his youngest brother, Edward for "front-of-house" operations. These two brothers worked together closely until Fred's sudden death in 1921. By that time Edward had not only become proficient in the business, but also had made numerous valuable connections with other members of the theatre world.

Edward Belasco was unemployed in 1926 when he heard that oil magnate E.L. Doheny was building a new theatre in Los Angeles. Belasco joined forces with two other men--Fred Butler and Gerhold O. Davis--and the trio persuaded Doheny to give them a long-term lease on his new theatre. Butler was to direct the productions, Davis to take care of promotional work, while Belasco would give the theatre his name, and his expertise in front-of-house matters.

From the time of its opening in late 1926, the Belasco catered to a carriage trade, and admissions were much higher than those of an ordinary stock company. Evening ticket prices began at $2.50 and ranged downward to 50¢ for a seat in the last row of the balcony; matinees ran from 50¢ to $1.00, while opening nights and special productions brought in as much as $5.00. Tickets could be purchased at any one of thirty-five box-office branches set up throughout Los Angeles and its suburbs--a system which helped to fill a house which seated over 1100 patrons. For the first five

years of its existence, the Belasco was open six days per week, from Monday through Saturday, with Sundays dark. There were usually two matinees per week--Wednesdays and Saturdays.

There were a number of reasons for the Belasco succeeding with the "class" patrons who were willing to pay unusually high prices for their tickets. As the management had no doubt intended, the public assumed a connection between this Los Angeles theatre and David Belasco of New York fame. While brother David did agree to transfer some of his New York successes to Edward's theatre, the terms were strictly businesslike. The great age difference between the eldest and youngest of ten siblings had, with other family problems, created a distance of more than physical space between them. Nonetheless, negotiations were carried on, and a recently released David Belasco production in Los Angeles generated interest in a great number of sophisticated western theatre-goers. Other New York producers became impressed with the West Coast Belasco productions and offered their properties for Los Angeles production. These too were appealing to a public which could afford to see the most recent Broadway releases.

The Belasco team had instituted a three-way production policy. First, when an agreement could be made with a New York producer, the entire production of his Broadway hit would be transported intact to the Belasco where it played as a road show. The eastern producer demanded a high percentage of the "take," but the Belasco was spared the costs and stresses of preparing the show. Another means of drawing a

monied, "class" audience to the theatre was by doing Broadway hits with a cast assembled on the West Coast. The rights to such plays required an initial cash outlay which often ran into many thousands of dollars, but the Belasco management was allowed to keep a much larger percentage of the profits than those of the road show importations. When a David Belasco success was bought, the West Coast managers did all they could to reproduce in the smallest detail the original settings of the famous New York producer. This feature of the production was, of course, highly publicized. The third type of production done at the Belasco involved new and as yet untried plays, and the enormous success of the theatre's first original play, The Great Necker, lent the policy prestige. The movie industry looked even more closely at Belasco productions of new plays, and theatre patrons were drawn to openings labeled "Premiere Engagement."

During 1927 the Belasco managers enhanced their prospects of success by forming an agreement with San Francisco producers Homer Curran and Louis B. Lurie, to exchange productions. Acting as a triumvirate, they were more influential with New York producers than if working independently, and the arrangement minimized the dangers of their theatres going dark for any length of time.

All stock companies bought rights to whatever late Broadway successes they could afford. The Belasco patrons, however, also paid to see New York stars, who were eager to exhibit their talents at a prestigious theatre next door to film studios

which might take notice of them. The Belasco and the few Los Angeles theatres like it frequently lost these New York players to films before the production had finished its run. Playwrights too, were interested in attracting the attention of the movie-makers. As Kirschman describes it, most of the plays done at the Belasco between 1926 and 1927 were transferred to the screen before the next year was out.

With a successful first year to launch its activities, the Belasco trio looked forward to surpassing itself in 1928. It was indeed to prove a good year, because Hollywood was in a state of confusion over the newly-introduced talkie, and Broadway producers, stars, directors, designers and playwrights were all eager to use the Belasco as a showcase for their talents.

During this year, Lurie's association with Belasco and Curran was severed, and the latter two men formed a stronger agreement which stipulated that all costs of the shows they were to exchange would be shared equally--an arrangement which lasted until 1933.

The film industry had recognized that sound pictures would wipe out the silents, and so Hollywood producers frantically turned out films with noise--slip-shod products which only sent discerning audiences back to live theatre. Although it was a good year for Broadway in terms of "production weeks," participants of New York theatre easily felt insecurity resulting from quick closings. Their dedication to live theatre was compromised by the salaries the film industry offered,

and so they flocked westward, most often to the Belasco--if it would have them--to make their presence known. In Hollywood, actors were greatest in demand, since the silent film stars were the first to be replaced in the talkie revolution. Edward G. Robinson, Frederic March, Pauline Frederick, Basil Rathbone, Joan Bennett, Thomas Mitchell, and Jane Cowl are only a few of those stage personalities picked up at the Belasco by Hollywood during 1928. The number of road shows--and therefore the number of imported stars--had increased during the year because the Belasco management was intent on keeping up the "class" image that justified high ticket prices. As the number of road productions increased, the runs became shorter--between five and eight weeks. Fortunately for the Belasco, most of the year's shows were successful and the theatre's grosses and production weeks outstripped all other Los Angeles companies.

Davis had resigned from his management position in 1928, and Fred Butler died suddenly in early 1929, leaving Belasco to run the theatre by himself. Butler's directorial genius was missed, but it was not difficult for Belasco to find other top-notch directors who were eager to have the filmmakers see their work.

Without Butler, Belasco was obliged to make lone decisions on play selection, and his choices were not always good ones. Still, his theatre fared better than the others in Los Angeles because the talkies still needed it. However, the theatre's "take" for 1929 fell well below that of the

previous year, largely because the movie industry had begun to recover from the chaos involved in the switch to sound, and was turning out a better product.

By 1930 vast advances had been made in the film industry, but movie tickets remained as cheap as they had been before the market crash the year previous. Many of the live stage houses in Los Angeles were forced to go out of business. While the Belasco could depend on its wealthier patrons to keep its door open, it was obliged to cut production costs. The risky "premiere engagements" were done away with; productions with low overhead were sought; some older plays with cheaper royalties were brought in. As time went on, a new emphasis was placed on Coast-assembled productions, although Belasco maintained a policy of bringing in at least one star for each new show, and continued to impress his patrons with elegant sets. He was able to hold the price of his best seats at $2.50, but by 1931 was playing on Sundays, which had previously been dark. During this year the theatre retained its image as a prestige house, although not with the profits previously enjoyed.

When the movies began to suffer from the depression in 1932 they appealed to the bargain-basement proclivities of their economy-minded patrons. Two-for-one tickets, discount prices, free kiddie matinees and "Gift Nites" increased their business. But the Belasco and the few remaining legitimate houses in Los Angeles were most hurt by the live stage acts added on to the movie bill. The tab shows--mini productions

of stage plays--were especially damaging. There were fewer Broadway hits to buy, and road shows had become increasingly sparse because of the high costs of sending them out. For the Belasco, production of original plays seemed the most feasible in terms both of economy and availability, but the theatre's 1932 season of premieres was disappointing. It was saved only by two last-minute New York hits--The Grand Hotel and The Cat and the Fiddle--both requiring elaborate settings and complicated set changes. These productions were unusually costly to mount, and much of the reason for this had to do with the success of films, which the live stage was emulating. Live theatre managements were intent on creating cinematic, or "quick-change" effects which necessitated the installation of expensive stage floor mechanisms. Not only were the devices costly, but large stage crews were needed to be hired--and paid--to make them work.

During 1933 the movies and the legitimate stage were both suffering, but the movies could scale down the price of their seats, add live acts, and still stay alive. The Belasco raised its top price during this year from $2.50 to $2.75, ostensibly to keep its "class" status. The managers decided that year to concentrate on musicals, which were expensive to produce, and these costs could be partly offset by the hike in ticket prices. The decision to feature song-and-dance shows was based partly on the previous year's Cat and the Fiddle success, and also in imitation of the many musicals being turned out by screenland. The policy was a

failure, and the 1933 season marked the end of Belasco's career at the theatre which bore his name. A few years later he died in obscurity. The Belasco presented plays under various independent producers until 1936, when it was used as a Federal Theatre Project house, and again after 1939 when the FTP was put out of business. During its last years as a theatre the Belasco featured erotic "girlie" shows on its stage and screen. In June of 1950 the Immanuel Gospel Temple bought the building which was "born again" as a church.

CHAPTER IV

THE SILENTS

As early as the 1820s scientists were experimenting with optical devices which created the illusion of movement. The various instruments developed were based on the same idea--that a series of small, painted pictures would appear as an animated image when spun before the viewer's eye. During the same years, the science of photography was making progress, and it was only a matter of time before the authentic images of the camera would be "put into motion." In 1889 Thomas Edison launched his kinetoscope, a machine which, by using lights, shutters and lenses with bands of film, automated the movement of photographed pictures.

If this was an age of scientific inquiry, so was it one of business enterprise. Within a few years Americans were being lured into the proliferating "penny arcades" where a coin in the slot activated the machine, into which the customer peeped at his own private moving picture. It was a crude kind of entertainment, but so popular that efforts at its technical development were immediate. 1896 marks the beginning of the moving picture industry as mass entertainment, for it was during this year that the peephole effect of the kinetoscope gave way to Edison's vitascope, which projected its moving images on a wall before an entire audience who could remain

more or less comfortably seated. The initial appeal of the movies was, apparently, simply the novelty of seeing "reality" reproduced in motion on film, for the quality of the images was poor and the content generally insignificant. But soon moving trains and waterfalls gave way to mini-newsreels and brief adventure stories. By 1905 the nickelodeons were showing, for five cents admission, The Great Train Robbery-- a cops-and-robbers thriller which combined motion and melodrama. Movie parlors featuring similar "chase" dramas sprang up across the nation, and by 1909 there were at least 8,000 nickelodeons in the United States.[1]

The very early movies, according to Abel Green and Joe Laurie, were "patronizingly referred to in 1905 as 'the tape' and 'the poor man's amusement,' slowing attract[ing] a brand-new strata of theatre-goers who rarely, if ever, patronized flesh-and-blood entertainment."[2] It is not surprising that the first films drew the tenement-house dwellers as their patrons. Admission was so cheap that even very low-income families could find the means to attend. There were large numbers

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[1]Garff Wilson, Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre: From Ye Bare and Ye Cubb to Hair (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1973), p. 351.

[2]Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., Showbiz: From Vaude to Video (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1951), p. 48

of foreign-born who had migrated to this country and found a place in the labor market despite their lack of English. For them, the "picturized" stories of the movies held great appeal.

The success of The Great Train Robbery caused a demand for moving pictures with a story line, but there were no real advances in filming techniques until D.W. Griffith began directing movies in 1908. Ironically, Griffith's greatest ambition was to become a great playwright, and in order to learn the stagecraft which would contribute to his writing, he had spent some time working as an actor in resident stock and touring companies. He was able to sell only one stage play and that promptly folded. In desperation he went to work for Biograph movie studios, supplying film scripts for fifteen dollars each.[3] The studios were constantly looking for new stories, but they recognized the greater need for finding inventive ways to present them. Impressed with Griffith's clever script ideas, Biograph decided to try him as a director. His daring experiments with the camera terrified his employers but thrilled the spectator of the silent film. The innovations which he introduced were soon to become standard in the movie-making industry.

As improvements were made in the quality and content of the silents, the theatres in which they were shown were made

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[3]Lillian Gish, The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), pp. 47-56.

more comfortable, and by 1912 films were beginning to draw a middle-class audience. With competititon growing ever stronger between studios, a "star craze" developed. Some actors earning fifteen dollars a day before 1910 could demand $2,000 per week in 1914.[4] With the help of Griffith and other film-makers of his caliber, the silent movies were becoming a kind of art form and appealed to a larger segment of the public. Admission fees remained reasonable, and the new medium began to create some competition for the live theatre.

In 1917 Brander Matthews wrote, "It is because the moving picture has perforce to do without the potent appeal of the spoken word that it can never really be a rival to the drama."[5] There was a difference between these types of entertainment, and apparently, an audience for each. The "appeal of the spoken word" was no doubt a potent force, but the electricity of a "flesh-and-blood" performance must also have accounted for the continuing health of live theatre. Still, some patrons of the legitimate stage were weaned away, over a period of time, to the marvels of films. This was accomplished, in part, by adapting modern plays, novels, and operas to the silent screen. Matthews has commented on these film treatments in the following way:

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[4]Arthur Knight, The Liveliest Art (New York: Macmillan Co., 1957), p. 40.

[5]Brander Matthews, "Are the Movies a Menace to the Drama?" North American Review, 205 (March, 1917), p. 453.

> The moving picture . . . has made these picturizations long enough to provide entertainment for a whole evening. And it has discovered that it can present a story with an amplitude of effect not possible in the theatre. It has at its command resources impossible to the regular drama. Where the dramatist has to content himself by telling the audience how the hero saved the heroine's life by catching her runaway horse or by snatching her from before the locomotive or bringing her down from the burning building, the director of the moving picture is able to show the heroic deed itself, visible to all spectators.[6]

While Matthews would not believe that live theatre could die, he conceded that ". . . it is beyond question that the movie can satisfy the ruder likings of the mob for coarse-grained happenings far more successfully than the most inventive and ingenious stage-manager can ever hope to do."[7]

The idea that the spoken drama would always survive was dependent on faith in the human intellect. The silents' patrons had only to watch the screen to "experience" the events. As Alfred Bernheim describes it, with films "We need not take in abstract words and translate them into ideas in our minds, as in the spoken drama which depends for its effect at least as much upon the ear as upon the eye."[8] The combination of the cheap admissions and the direct appeal to the emotions was, in Bernheim's mind, irresistible. He concluded that ". . . the movies come much closer toward a perfect corre-

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[6]Matthews, p. 449.

[7]Matthews, p. 450.

[8]Alfred L. Bernheim, The Business of Theatre: An Economic History of the American Theatre, 1750-1932 (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1932; reprint ed., 1964), p. 88.

lation with the intelligence level of the country than do the legitimates."[9]

Knight has observed that

> . . . the theater of the nineteenth century, both in this country and in England, did much to create what might be termed a "climate of acceptance" for the movies when they finally did appear. Both in choice of themes and in manner of staging--an emphasis on melodrama, a leaning toward realism--the theater was preparing its audience for precisely the sort of thing that movies could do better.[10]

The nineteenth century theatre's scenic artists had applied themselves to the task of translating the ideas of the romantic playwrights into a spectacular realism. Pictorial values took priority. As a former actor and playwright, Griffith was well aware of the relationship between the play script and the manner in which it was acted. As he experimented with various camera techniques which clarified the silent's story-line, he saw a different relationship between the film scenario and the ways in which the actors communicated the events. Nicholas Vardac describes the concept as "graphic realism." Long-shots, full-shots, wide-angle shots and close-ups looked at the picture like a spectator who would change his angle of viewing to get a better look. Full shots and close-ups allowed more restrained acting. Cross-cuts provided continuity with suspense, and subjective revelation of character.[11]

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[9]Bernheim, p. 88.

[10]Knight, p. 10.

[11]Nicholas Vardac, Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1949), p. 203.

As Griffith was making his filming discoveries he explained:

> We are forced to develop a new technique of acting before the camera. People who come to me from the theatre use the quick broad gestures and movements they have employed on the stage. I am trying to develop realism in pictures by teaching the value of deliberation and repose.[12]

Vardac comments that this "realism" in acting "carried restraint to the point where all emotion was expressed by means of a 'long, level stare,'" which would signify any number of emotions felt by the character.[13]

> Actually, it was more conventional than real and automatically set up a barrier against any attempt at realistic characterization. Character on the screen tended to remain impersonal. . . . This conventionality in acting drove the film farther into melodrama and spectacle as the only two sources through which character could achieve dramatic significance upon the screen.[14]

Matthews adds that since the silent picture was

> . . . deprived of the aid of the human voice, it takes from the actor his most powerful resource. It demands only that its performers shall be able to make the gestures indicate and to "register" the emotions called for; and although it is luring to its aid not a few actors of prominence, it is often finding that they are not always as satisfactory when seen on the screen as novices young enough to be able to respond to the summary training which the movie directors can bestow hurriedly in their own studios.
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> Pantomime is only one of the means of expression at the command of a competent actor; and when he is suddenly

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[12]D.W. Griffith quoted in Lillian Gish, Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me, p. 66.

[13]Vardac, p. 218.

[14]Vardac, p. 218.

> forced to deprive himself of all his other means and limit himself to what can be expressed by gestures and grimace he is likely to reveal himself as sore bereft.[15]

For this reason Griffith looked for potential film stars who had no stage experience--people he would train himself. There was, of course, a number of good stage actors who could adapt themselves to the new medium, but some of filmland's brightest stars had no experience save that before the camera. Many of them would become useless to the subsequent "talking" pictures.

If the movie screen could create a kind of realism which the live theatre could not, it was nonetheless, only two-dimensional. Matthews argues that the silent films were unable to deal with the "soul of man." The worthwhile spoken drama uses situation to reveal the character of individuals and deal with their psychological subtleties. He notes that, "When a play is put upon the screen, it is necessarily reduced to the pantomime which should be no more than its supporting skeleton, and it has necessarily to be stripped of its flesh--of all that made it more than a mere story."[16]

And so according to Bernheim, Matthews, and other defenders of the spoken drama, the intellect would always require some tending, and the silents were not equipped to do

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[15]Matthews, p. 454.

[16]Matthews, p. 452.

this. Certainly much of what was being done in live theatre was pap and did nothing to ennoble the spirit, but the audiences in the legitimate theatres were nonetheless required to translate the words they heard into ideas. And many theatre-goers would not be satisfied with the two-dimensional environment of the celluloids, however low the price. Film audiences continued to expand, but not always at the expense of live theatre. As Bernheim remarks, "Just as the tabloid newspapers have made readers out of hundreds of thousands who seldom before their advent bought a daily paper, so the movies have introduced the drama to millions who before could not be lured into a theatre."[17]

Certainly the movie industry was constantly trying to capture the country's amusement dollar, and these efforts contributed to the decline of the traveling road companies. The expansion of railroads earlier had encouraged the development of traveling shows which, by 1910, were suffering from the rising costs of rail travel. The price of a road show ticket then went up, and the quality of many productions went down as producers looked for ways to cut corners. The gap between picture and touring show prices grew wider, and the general public made its choice. The film-makers encouraged the trend by appealing to the businessmen of a town. Jack Poggi points out that local theatre managers were offered larger splits of the gross receipts from the film bookings than they were from

[17]Bernheim, p. 87.

the road engagements.[18] And Bernheim describes the efforts made to convince the local citizens that attending the silent pictures was almost patriotic:

> The motion picture industry . . . is propagandizing the good citizens of where-you-will against the road show, telling them to patronize their home industry, the movie, which spends its income in their own town, and to taboo the foreign article, the road show, which takes the money with it. To be sure, the local motion picture house is more likely to be owned by an out-of-town corporation, in which case its receipts do not remain in the home town either but are remitted to the place of business of the head office. Besides, the resident staff of a legitimate house and the casts of visiting plays are apt to spend more money in the town than the smaller staffs and celluloid actors of the motion picture theatre. But an argument based on local pride is generally not so carefully questioned and is often successful in inducing the governing bodies of the communities to close the municipal auditoriums to the road shows, to raise the taxes and license fees of legitimate houses, to bar or tax out of existence the traveling tent shows. Such a move usually has the support of the local paper, often no doubt because its editor is sincerely convinced of the merits of the screen's contention; sometimes, perhaps, because he cannot afford to risk the regular income of the picture houses advertising for the uncertain revenue from the legitimate road shows.[19]

The movie industry was given a further boost with the advent of the war which forced the European film-makers virtually to cease operations. Much of the foreign talent, unable to continue work abroad, was transported here by the American film-makers, so that "Eventually, the enormous economic power of the film industry was concentrated in the hands of a few company heads who dominated dictatorially not only the production

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[18] Jack Poggi, Theatre in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 42.

[19] Bernheim, p. 89.

but also the distribution--an unbeatable monopoly."[20]

Where films had begun as "the poor man's amusement" they gradually shifted their appeal to the middle class. The war caused other changes in the content of the silents. For a brief period, the movie industry was to become a propaganda arm for the American government. Lewis Jacobs reports:

> The businessman's government unofficially enlisted the aid of the motion pictures, now that their war duties were ended, to do their bit in upholding capitalism. . . . It was reported in The New York Times for January 12, 1920: "The movies will be used to combat Bolshevik propaganda . . . . Mr. Lane (Secretary of the Interior) emphasized in his address the necessity of showing films depicting the great opportunities which industrious immigrants may find in this country, and of stories of poor men who have risen high. He suggested that the industry organize immediately to spread throughout the country the story of America as exemplified in the story of Lincoln.". . . . A steady and emphatic stream of movies pointed out the need for the laborer and employer to get together and cooperate against the mutual foe, Bolshevism.[21]

And during the economic slump of 1920-21, the government encouraged film stories which avoided the subject of poverty and instead played on the hopes of the poor becoming rich.[22] With the restraints of war-time life finished, and adjustments to

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[20]George Amberg, The New York Times Film Reviews: A One Volume Selection, 1913-1970. (United States: Arno Press, 1970), p. 15.

[21]Lewis Jacobs, The Rise and Fall of the American Film: A Critical History (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1939), pp. 377-79.

[22]Eric Rhode, A History of the Cinema from Its Origins to 1970 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), p. 222.

post-war problems in progress, the public was ready for entertainment which would allow it to forget about these trials. The silents promptly obliged with stories which allowed their viewers to "escape." Jacobs points to the "red-hot romances" and dramas of the "great throbbing desert"--Arabian Love, Burning Sands, One Stolen Night, When the Desert Calls, Tents of Allah, and Sons of the Desert which provided an entry into the dream worlds of the twenties. Romanticism and sentimentality were offered up in the story-book films of The Thief of Bagdad, Robin Hood, The Mark of Zorro, The Three Musketeers, Smilin' Through, Little Old New York, If I Were Queen, and others which encouraged the public to lose its problems in the movie house.[23]

As Europe was recovering from the war, its film-makers were allowed to go back to their profession. The American industry, fully aware of the quality of the talents they had imported from abroad before the war, were concerned about the competition posed by films from other countries. Variety rose to the occasion when it printed:

> There will be the occasional foreign picture brought over that may make a hit with the public and the exhibitors, but any thought that pix produced in England, France and Germany, or any part of Europe, will ever make a dent in the American market, is poppycock.[24]

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[23]Jacobs, pp. 402-03.

[24]Variety quoted in Green and Laurie, p. 252.

On the other hand, the films which this country was sending overseas seem to reflect the uniquely American entertainment tastes:

> England of 1925 wasn't too well pleased with the Hollywood product. G.A. Atkinson, radio critic for the BBC and termed by Variety "the most powerful and influential newspaper and radio critic the world has ever seen," lashed out at American films to 7,000,000 BBC listeners.
>
> "A torrent of sophisticated barbarism," were his biting words. If Americans were truly reflected by the screen, he challenged, they were "non-moral," weakening marriage ideals, scoffing at parenthood, despising decency, and worshipping no god but the dollar.[25]

With President Harding's promises for prosperity becoming reality, the movies shifted easily into stories about the leisure class. Hip flasks, speakeasies, adultery, petting parties, golddigging and racketeering were not the regular pursuits of the average American, but made glamorous by the movies they titillated the film-goers seeking vicarious thrills.

While the movies helped to discourage road show business, Broadway and stock productions prospered until the late twenties. To be sure, there was continuing "talk" about the rivalry between the silents and the legitimate stage. In 1926 Lee Shubert wrote:

> Seriously, the theatre is quite safe. It has little to fear from the movies, if you consider it broadly as a whole. The spoken drama is not dead, it is not going to die. The movies can't kill it. Nothing can kill it but a complete change in human nature and I don't see any signs of such a change. As a theatre owner and producer, I certainly am not afraid of the motion pictures, nor do I see why anybody else should

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[25]Green and Laurie, p. 252.

> be. The movies--and other factors--have <u>changed</u> the theatre, of course. They have made necessary many shifts of emphasis and altered the system of production and booking.[26]

What were these alterations of which Shubert speaks? Robert McLaughlin discusses the "deals" which Broadway was forced to make with Hollywood. From the time the movie-makers produced full-length feature films, they looked to Broadway for plays which could be transferred to the screen. Bidding on rights to stage plays became so highly competitive between the studios that the eastern producers could not ignore the huge sums which the movies were willing to pay for stories.[27] The choice of plays to be done in New York therefore depended more and more on their potential for filming well.

Most Broadway successes were considered good film material, so New York producers would often keep a poor play running, even at a loss, in hopes of making a sale to movie-makers. Broadway investors became increasingly concerned with putting their money in shows which would interest Hollywood.[28]

The film companies watched the road carefully, and booked films into cities where a stage production of the same story was playing. Occasionally, movie stars on tour found

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[26]Lee Shubert, "All's Right with the Theatrical World," <u>Vanity Fair</u>, 26 (June 1926): 48.

[27]Robert McLaughlin, <u>Broadway and Hollywood: A History of Economic Interaction</u> (New York: Arno Press, 1974), pp. 68-69.

[28]McLaughlin, pp. 56-59.

themselves playing in competition with themselves when the movie house down the street showed their film for ten cents admission. For this reason, Broadway producers became wary of hiring stars who had made a movie.[29]

1927-28 is usually cited as Broadway's biggest year, one which turned out 264 productions, but Poggi claims the 1925-26 season as the healthiest New York season. His conclusions are based on the number of "theatre weeks" of that season--one "theatre week" representing one week that one production played in one theatre--as opposed to the total number of plays that opened that year.[30] While the season of 1927-28 boasted the largest number of New York openings, many of them were quick failures.

The founders of filmland, by this time firmly based in Hollywood, continued their efforts to monopolize the entertainment world. They had few problems with money, but they needed to find a steady source of novel ideas to excite the public. Movies remained cheap, the theatres that showed them increased in elegance, but there was a different entertainment which people could enjoy at home. After the one-time initial cost, the radio became known as "something for nothing." Political conventions, symphony concerts, exercise programs, plays, comedy shows and a wide variety of other events filled the

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[29] McLaughlin, pp. 40-41.

[30] Poggi, p. 49.

leisure-time hours of many Americans who sat in their living-rooms with their eyes glued to the dial. Whether due to the radio, to the automobile, or to the alluring "thrill" fiction available in town, movies suffered a drop-off in attendance in 1926 and 1927. Bosley Crowther relates:

> The standard economy measure of salary cuts was ordered in the studios. Personnel troubles developed, and, for the first time, Hollywood had a major labor crisis on its hands . . . . The illusions of soundless movies had prevailed as entertainment and as art so long as the public was unaccustomed to being stimulated by mechanical music and voice. But as soon as the public's ears were opened by the device of radio, as they were, during the mid-1920s, to an extent that was profound, and people's minds were stimulated to create images to match what they heard, a vague sense of the lack of aural content in motion pictures began to be felt. A subtle psychological rejection of the incongruity of the silent screen occurred.[31]

But the silents were not about to go out of business, and they fought back in any way they could. There was little they could do about radio competition, but they could do battle with the stage. Since money was a relatively small problem, Hollywood began buying up theatre buildings across the nation. "It is buying its rivals' theatres," writes Bernheim, "even where it cannot use them itself. Better to close them up or turn them into banks or clothing stores than to let them draw a dollar away from their own cash boxes."[32] The theatres that the movies used, if not new, were renovated to pamper the patron:

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[31]Bosley Crowther, <u>The Lion's Share: The Story of an Entertainment Empire</u> (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1957), pp. 142-43.

[32]Bernheim, p. 89.

> The film industry showed a "know-how" vastly superior to its hoary and tottering rival, vaudeville. Keith-Albee had spent $6,000,000 on one theatre, but hadn't thought of a cooling system. Movie theatres not only installed cooling systems, but gave out with that "Roxy service," such as free checking, and prospered fabulously.[33]

Service "a la Roxy" was, as Green and Laurie define it, "a show business package tied with a blue silk bow. . . . a combination of luxurious pleasures including a comfortable seat in super-gorgeous surroundings . . . a thunderous symphony orchestra . . . a lavish and spectacular stage show; a master of ceremonies; and a film which, with a little luck, might turn out to be passably good."[34]

Bernheim, too, was impressed with the "Roxy service":

> The picture houses usually are manned by efficient and courteous ticket sellers, ticket takers, and ushers, and they offer a musical program which is almost always acceptable and sometimes outstandingly excellent. All these conditions are too often lacking in our legitimate houses. In short, the picture houses create an atmosphere which tends to put the audience in a frame of mind to enjoy the performance, whatever it is, while the atmosphere surrounding a legitimate theatre is only too often so repellent that it engenders in the spectator an unconscious feeling of hostility before the curtain rises.[35]

The "lavish and spectacular stage show" of the Roxy was imitated, in varying degrees of elegance, in motion picture palaces across the country. The multi-feature bill became standard, and if the film was "barely passable," there were compensations for the patron:

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[33]Green and Laurie, p. 247.

[34]Green and Laurie, p. 251.

[35]Bernheim, p. 88.

> It was Marcus Loew who found that when his film attaction was a turkey, the box-office line could still be held by stage presentations to bolster the bill. So it was that the man who gradually killed vaudeville became the inheritor of many of vaudeville's biggest acts. By 1927, still operating on the principle of movies-plus, Loew's Capitol was offering big-name bands as well as vaude.[36]

Obviously then, it was the addition of live entertainment that kept up the silents' box-office receipts. It had a kind of grab-bag sales appeal.

Poggi claims that Broadway's decline began in 1927. During those late twenties years, the costs of production were manifold. Theatre unions were demanding high wages; prices were inflated, production standards were necessitating more detailed work on the part of the scenic artist and the advertising departments; ticket prices could not be raised in proportion to production costs. And theatre owners were becoming more and more willing to lease their properties to movie interests which insured a greater financial return.[37]

When the road show declined, stock theatre became economically healthier. There was still a demand for legitimate dramatic entertainment, and stock could provide this. Resident theatres were smaller and lacked the luxury of the movie palaces, but their ticket prices were far lower than those of the road shows and within the range of many film patrons. There are

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[36]Green and Laurie, p. 251.

[37]Poggi, pp. 68-69.

varying figures for the number of stock companies that were operating in the United States during the twenties. Equity magazine gives 257 as the highest number;[38] Ward Morehouse's estimate is less clear because his conjecture of "more than 400" covers both the United States and Canada;[39] Ralph Bellamy counts 212;[40] Victor Jory claims that there were over 400, "not counting rotary stocks . . . Toby shows . . . tent shows . . . tab shows."[41] So many local companies had not existed at one time since the period prior to 1870--before the combination system had decimated stock. Some resident companies, which might have succeeded without movie competition, could not survive. Billboard notices attest to the reality of the competition. In December of 1920 the Park Players of Utica, New York announced that the Park Theatre was ending its live stock performances and would reopen as a motion picture house.[42] Other companies reporting closing notices offered excuses which, in the light of movie rivalry, seem transparent. Cleveland's Leffingwell Players, for instance, announced that the company was

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[38]Kenneth Macgowan, Footlights Across America (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929), p. 79.

[39]Ward Morehouse, Matinee Tomorrow (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949), p. 135.

[40]Bellamy interview, recorded 17 November 1965, tape #11, Ralph Freud Collection.

[41]Victor Jory, in interview with Frances Hall, recorded December 31, 1965, tape #5, Ralph Freud Collection.

[42]Billboard, 25 December 1920, p. 15.

folding due to poor receipts. The manager of the midtown theatre complained that it was impossible to lure play-goers off the street once they were headed for "downtown."[43] The Garrick Players of Ottowa, Canada, claimed that their theatre was forced to close because Daylight Savings Time offended the patrons who refused to go to the theatre until after dark.[44] The Cormican Players of New Britain, Connecticut, produced Smilin' Through "in competition with the film version of the same play being presented at another local house. The offering was beautifully done by the stock company, but failed to 'get over.' Unofficially, Mr. Cormican is planning to operate pictures and vaudeville for the summer."[45]

If these companies were lacking in quality, and failed for that reason, others could not get started because of the maneuverings of the film industry, which had "captured" many of the available theatres. In Chicago it was reported:

> That there are ten theatrical managers of his acquaintance who would put on permanent stock companies if they could get the theatres for that purpose, was the statement made by Robert J. Sherman, playwright and play broker today.
> "The fact that not a single failure in stock has been reported in this section of the country this season indicates the trend of the times and the tendency of theatre patrons to patronize stock companies," said Mr. Sherman . . . . There would be even a lot more permanent stock companies running now if there were theatres available. It appears that when a stock company goes into a town and makes conspicuously good, the picture interests buy

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[43]Billboard, 2 July 1921, p. 14.

[44]Billboard, 10 June 1922, p. 24.

[45]Billboard, 10 June 1922, p. 24.

> up the theatre as soon as stock closes its season and stock cannot come back again.[46]

When theatres were available, a good stock company could make money. But they had, of necessity, to beware of the film competition. Ralph Bellamy, who ran companies in Des Moines, Iowa; Evanston, Illinois; and Nashville, Tennessee, talks about the problems his stock company encountered with Paramount Pictures' "Publix circuit":

> I had my company in Des Moines and . . . something began to happen to our business. We had a steady sell-out business, and had had for a long time. Families would come and sit in the same seats on the same night each week. And all of a sudden, it dropped off a little bit. Not to any alarming proportion, and not to any extent that would cause a loss, but something was happening. So one evening before curtain time--considerably before, maybe an hour before--I pulled up my collar and pulled down my hat and followed groups around and found they were "shopping" from theatre to theatre. In those days in Des Moines there were two vaudeville houses, a burlesque house, three moving picture houses and the big one with the Publix circuit. Well, they'd go into the lobby, look at the prices, look at the pictures, talk about what they saw last, and almost invariably they ended up--the bulk of them anyway--at the theatre with the Publix circuit presentation. It was three or four hours of entertainment--a picture and a show. And this was the beginning of it.[47]

This was the motion picture "palace" that Bellamy remembers, even while the pictures were still silent--a huge theatre with comfortable seats and a symphony orchestra. The live show which accompanied the film included, "a 'personality boy'--an emcee--who's unknown but a good-looking young fellow who could

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[46] Billboard, 3 July 1926, p. 30.

[47] Victor Jory, in interview with Ralph Bellamy, recorded 17 November 1965, tape #7, Freud Collection.

sing and tell jokes . . . a line of twenty or thirty girls and a couple of comedians and a couple of acts."[48]

Vaudeville was faltering by the mid-twenties, and many of the acts which would otherwise be unemployed found work as the "supporting" stage shows of the movie palaces. By 1926 the films were more important than the live acts that accompanied them. In the words of Marcus Loew, "It's the film that draws 'em, and the vaudeville that fills in."[49] Green and Laurie report that by 1928

> There were only four theatres left in the nation offering vaudeville without films--New York's Palace, Keith's Philadelphia, Chicago's Palace and Los Angeles' Orpheum . . . . National Vaudeville Artists . . . the once powerful company union . . . now passed into the hands of film interests, in a move sponsored by William Fox. Symbolically, the new president of the N.V.A. was an actor who had been a great vaudeville star and was now rising to new fame in Hollywood--Eddie Cantor.[50]

This was the situation in 1928, before the depression, before the launching of talking pictures. Broadway was ending one of its biggest years, and stock companies were managing to survive. What more could films have done without sound?

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[48]Bellamy interview.

[49]Marcus Loew quoted by Green and Laurie, p. 271.

[50]Green and Laurie, pp. 272-73.

CHAPTER V

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TALKIES

Vaudeville star Al Jolson was known as an "ad libber." His usual act was "song with patter." In 1927, when Warner Brothers starred him in The Jazz Singer, he finished one of his songs and then called out to his audience, "You ain't heard nothin' yet!" With this impromptu line he was unwittingly forecasting the coming of talkies. The producers had planned only a musical score to accompany the picture, but intrigued by Jolson's ad lib, they decided to keep it and add a scene of dialogue. It was the first time that the characters of a feature-length film story could be heard speaking.

The idea of wedding sound to film goes back to the early days of Edison's Kinetoscope which, for a short time, supplied phonograph music to accompany the peep show. By 1913 more than a dozen other inventions had been tried, both in this country and abroad, experimenting with the synchronization of sound and movement. All of these processes were plagued by technical problems apparently too complex to be solved at that time. In January of 1913, Edison unveiled the Kinetophone--a talking, moving picture which promised a revolution in the motion picture industry. His laboratory demonstration was so successful tht the process was quickly installed in four New York

Keith-Orpheum vaudeville theatres.[1] The first presentation was a sensation:

> The expectant audience was treated to the synchronized sight and sound of a lecturer who began by praising Edison's wizardry. Adding dramatic evidence to back his glowing tribute, the lecturer then smashed a plate, played the violin, and had his dog bark, all to demonstrate the volume and versatility of the system. A minstrel show, a tenor singing "Silver Threads Among the Gold," and a choral finale of "The Star-Spangled Banner" brought the demonstration to a stirring close. The ecstatic audience applauded for fully fifteen minutes.[2]

But in later demonstrations, Kinetophone performed erratically, sometimes producing sound so far out of synchronization with the film that the audiences left the theatre in protest. Within a year the apparatus was rejected as a failure.[3]

Ten years later another major film process was introduced. Named Phonofilm by its inventor Lee DeForest, its particular merit was that the sound was photographed on the film itself, obviating problems with synchronization. Reproducing sound on film had been tried before, but without much success. DeForest was the first to develop a system whereby the words were clear enough to be understood. The alternate method was to play a phonograph disc of music or a human voice and to

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[1] J. Douglas Gomery, "The Coming of the Talkies: Invention, Innovation, and Diffusion," in The American Film Industry, ed. Tino Balio (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), p. 196.

[2] Gomery, p. 196.

[3] Gomery, p. 196.

attempt to unite it with film movements. J. Douglas Gomery describes DeForest's Phonofilm as "a highly sophisticated system" one which worked well, and might have become a great success but for the inventor's failings in business acumen and showmanship.[4] He was a brilliant scientist, as evidenced by his work in the laboratory, but lacked the talent to deal with the financial problems in marketing his product, or the salesmanship to win support among film industry leaders. Furthermore, in terms of demonstrating his process, he made a pathetic error. He had created a machine which guaranteed the synchronization of sound and movement, but he failed to show how this could work. "Phonofilm made its public debut on April 15, 1923, at New York's Rivoli theatre. The program consisted of three shorts: Fokima performing her swan dance, a string quartet, and another dance number. The musical accompaniment in each was *nonsynchronous* (italics mine)."[5]

During the next two years DeForest exhibited a number of short subjects on his Phonofilm, but they failed to make any real impression on leaders of the movie industry.

Whatever DeForest's failures were with his Phonofilm, it should be noted that he had developed, many years earlier, a system of amplification to magnify sound. The movie palaces accommodated huge numbers of patrons who would naturally demand that they be able to hear, without straining, the sounds that

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[4]Gomery, p. 197.

[5]Gomery, p. 197.

were to accompany the films. Without DeForest's audion tube, no talkie system could have been successful.

At the same time that DeForest was struggling to capture the attention of the movie barons, scientists working for the manufacturers of electrical equipment were conducting their own research. Macgowan notes that General Electric, the Bell Telephone Laboratories, Western Electric and Westinghouse, as well as a trio of German scientists abroad, were all involved in experiments uniting sound with film.[6] It was Western Electric who was the first to enter into the commercial world of talkies when, in 1925 it introduced the Vitaphone, a sound-on-disc operation. Apparently distrustful of DeForest's sound-on-film, Western Electric counted on the progress that had been made in synchronizing phonograph sounds with moving pictures. In addition, the microphone and loud speaker had been improved, as had the discs used for recording. The result was greater clarity of voice reproduction. Confident of the potential of their product, Western Electric offered it to all of the major movie studios. None was interested. The demonstration of sound film could not have failed to catch the attention of the studios, and they no doubt found it interesting--but as a novelty which would not last. Their fortunes were sunk into silent films, and they were preoccupied with the problems of making these products more exciting to the public. As a last resort, Western

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[6]Kenneth Macgowan, Behind the Screen: The History and Techniques of the Motion Picture (New York: Delacorte Press, 1965), p. 181.

Electric approached Warner Brothers--the industry's least moneyed studio. The four Warner Brothers--Sam, Jack, Harry and Albert--had begun their enterprise with the nickelodeon business, and eventually moved to Hollywood. While they could not compete with the major studios, they had somehow been able to win contracts with two important box-office attractions--John Barrymore and the dog-star Rin-Tin-Tin. Nonetheless, their position in filmland was tenuous, mainly due to their shaky contacts with the world of finance. Sam Warner, the most adventuresome of the brothers, was convinced they should turn their attention to sound films. His idea was quite a practical one. Live musical performances and vaudeville acts to accompany the films were expensive. If they could entertain an audience with "canned" entertainments of this kind, they would save money. The other brothers were finally convinced, and a contract for Vitaphone was arranged with Western Electric:

> Vitaphone unveiled its marvel on August 6, 1926 at the Warner's Theatre in New York. The first-nighters who packed the house paid up to ten dollars for tickets. The program began with eight "Vitaphone Preludes." In the first Will Hays congratulated the Warner brothers and Western Electric for their pioneering efforts. At the end, to create the illusion of the stage, Hays bowed to the audience anticipating the applause. Then conductor Henry Hadley led the New York Philharmonic in the overture to *Tannhauser*. He too bowed at the end. The acts that followed consisted primarily of operatic and concert performances: tenor Giovanni Martinelli sang an aria from *I Pagliacci*, violinist Mischa Elman played "Humoresque," and soprano Anna Case sang a number supported by the Metropolitan Opera chorus. Only one prelude broke the serious tone of the evening, and that featured Roy Smeck, a vaudeville comic and musician. Warner Brothers played it conservatively.
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> *Don Juan* followed after a ten minute intermission. The musical accompaniment caused no great stir. However,

> the industry leaders in the audience--Adolph Zukor, William Fox, and Nicholas Schenck among them--were impressed, if not by the evening's performance, then by the potential of the medium that the performance revealed to them. All in all, Vitaphone's reception was warm.[7]

Don Juan was not a talkie, but starring John Barrymore in a feature-length film with music synchronized with the action, it amounted to a notable evening's entertainment. And so the major studios' tycoons were impressed, but none--with the exception of William Fox--to the point where they would consider changing their current operations.

While DeForest had been working to develop his Phonofilm system, he had begun an association with another scientist by the name of Theodore Case. They experimented separately, but agreed to a free exchange of ideas. This casual working relationship was later to lead to court suits when Case, with or without ideas stolen from DeForest, sold his sound-film process, in 1926, to William Fox--that one who had shown special interest in the Don Juan presentation. Like the Warner brothers, Fox had not achieved the stature of Adolph Zukor or Marcus Loew, and was willing to gamble on the uncertain future of the talkies. Since Case had collaborated with DeForest, it is not surprising that the system he sold to Fox was one of the sound photographed on film--unlike the Vitaphone used by Warners, which was sound-on-disc synchronized with film.[8]

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[7] Gomery, pp. 201-202.

[8] Gerald Mast, A Short History of the Movies (New York: Pegasus, 1971), p. 228.

Fox called his process Fox-Movietone, and began specializing in the production of newsreels. Fox and Warner Brothers were now in competition. Both companies continued producing "shorts" which featured comedy acts, musical numbers, and news events.

Early in 1927 George Jessel was starring on Broadway in Samson Raphaelson's play, The Jazz Singer. Warner Brothers bought the rights for a screen version and negotiated with Jessel to repeat his role for the projected sound picture. When disputes between Jessel and the film company could not be resolved, the Warners approached Al Jolson, who agreed to star in the film version. The Jazz Singer is listed in film books as "part-talkie." There were, in fact, only a few lines of dialogue, but their unique application to the story captivated the viewers. Gerald Mast explains:

> The Jazz Singer was neither the first sound film nor the first film to synchronize picture with human speech and song. It was, however, the first film to use synchronized sound as a means of telling a story. Most of the film was shot silent and the musical score later synchronized with the finished picture. In this respect Warners' Jazz Singer went no further than their earlier Don Juan. But two sequences used synchronized speech . . . . the vitality, the acting, the spirit of the film is infinitely superior in the sound sections than in the silent. Jolson was a poor mime, with hammy, overstated gestures and expressions. But when the actor acquires a voice, the warmth and excitement, the vibrations of it suddenly converts the over-gesturing hands and overactive eyes into a performance that really sparkles. The addition of a Vitaphone voice revealed the particular qualities of Al Jolson that made him a star.[9]

[9] Mast, pp. 228-29.

The "sparkle" of The Jazz Singer earned Warner Brothers over $3,000,000 and caused the major studios to reconsider their investments.[10] Capitalizing on Jolson's success in the first part-talkie, Warners starred him in another, The Singing Fool, the following year. That too was a huge success, but talkies were on their way with or without Al Jolson. Five of the biggest companies--Loew's (MGM), Universal, First National, Paramount, and Producers Distributing Corporation waited for several months after The Jazz Singer to decide their future commitments. They had agreed, in February of 1927, that their actions regarding sound pictures would be based on a mutual decision. As Gomery describes it:

> The Big Five agreement . . . recognized that there were several sound systems on the market, but also that the inability to interchange this equipment would be a hindrance to the wide distribution of pictures. These companies, therefore, agreed not to adopt any system unless their specially appointed committee certified that it was the best for the industry. As further protection, they agreed not to employ any system unless it was made available to all producers, distributors, and exhibitors on reasonable terms, and that for one year none would adopt sound unless all did.[11]

When the agreement expired in February of 1928, the Big Five decided to convert to sound, and selected Movietone as their system.[12] The decision was easy only because Warners and Fox had become a threat with new products which appeared

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[10]Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., Showbiz: From Vaude to Video (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1951), p. 263

[11]Gomery, p. 208.

[12]Gomery, p. 206

to be something more to the public than a passing fad. From the beginning the studios had cast about for ways to introduce screen novelties to their audiences. While they may well have recognized the potential appeal of sound film, its use was a menace to the industry's financial structure. By the mid-twenties movie production was largely controlled by companies that owned big theatre circuits. If the big film-makers encouraged the promotion of sound, they would become obliged to spend huge sums in the exploratory process alone, and if these tests indicated that sound films might become successful, the companies would have to spend even greater amounts of money to re-equip their studios and theatres with the means to handle sound pictures. They were further concerned about the competition this new medium might create with their stock of silent pictures, in which they had invested everything. Lovette and Watkins point out that the industry had signed many of its film stars to expensive long term contracts, and most of these actors

> . . . knew no dramatic technique except that of pantomime. . . . Moreover, world-wide foreign markets had been established for silent films. To serve these markets, it was merely necessary to translate the words printed upon the film from English to any language desired. Finding stars and supporting casts who spoke the various languages of the world, or finding ways to give the illusion of their speaking them, appeared to be an insuperable task.[13]

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[13]Frank H. Lovette and Stanley Watkins, "Twenty Years of 'Talking Movies': an Anniversary," Bell Telephone Magazine. Summer 1946, p. 18, cols. 1-2.

The 1926 fall-off in movie attendance seems to indicate that the studios were losing their audiences to other diversions the twenties culture was offering. Competition between studios increased, and they continued to add expensive live acts to their silent film presentations so that even "neighborhood theaters, striving to maintain attendance at high admittance prices, added orchestra and vaudeville to their program."[14] This financially slim year for pictures was one in which legitimate theatre, stock included, prospered. Here the drama could be seen and heard. The radio, as previously noted, had opened the ears of the country. Except for their literal movement, pictures were becoming stagnant. There were a few exceptions, the most notable being those starring "the silent clowns," whose artistry depended on mute performance. Even among these, only Chaplin was to survive. Hampton notes:

> A first-run theater's regular receipts of $20,000 to $30,000 a week might rise to $60,000 a week during the run of a Charlie Chaplin film or another attractive picture, only to drop back when the film completed its showing. In neighborhood theaters, conditions were similar . . . . Even well-known stars ceased to be a drawing card if the picture itself were inferior.[15]

Not only were the audiences becoming more discriminating, but they were, as Hampton suggests, "unconsciously hungering for sound when the talkies arrived. The phonograph and the radio had created a gigantic appetite for canned noise . . . . "[16]

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[14]Benjamin B. Hampton, History of the American Film Industry: From Its Beginnings to 1931 (New York: Dover Publications, 1970 (abridged and corrected republication of A History of the Movies, New York: Covici, Friede, 1931), p. 373.

[15]Hampton, pp. 369-70.

[16]Hampton, p. 383.

Besides, almost from the beginning the silents had provided some kind of musical accompaniment, if only that of the pianist in the orchestra pit. Now the public wanted more.

When the industry finally surrendered to sound it made all-out efforts to convert as quickly and effectively as possible. Various bodies were set up by the trade to handle legal, distribution and production problems. The manufacturers of sound equipment worked feverishly to produce the systems which were quickly installed in the theatres. Gomery reports that a theatre could be wired for sound between midnight and five o'clock the next afternoon.[17] Schools were set up to train projectionists; district offices were opened to service and repair equipment.[18] As the studios reaped the huge profits of the new industry, smaller companies were bought up by the major firms and various mergers took place so that by 1930 Warner Brothers, Paramount, Fox, Loew's and RKO dominated the field. Big business had become bigger business, with traditionally conservative banks and investment houses becoming ever more deeply involved. As early as 1927, when the money-lenders were beginning to awaken to the potential of talkies investment broker Halsey, Stuart and Co. stated in its prospectus, "It does not seem extravagant to prophesy that the motion picture will come to be regarded as almost necessary

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[17]Gomery, p. 209.

[18]Gomery, p. 209.

to healthful living as the food which the people eat and the clothes they wear."[19] With this kind of confidence in its operations, Hollywood rushed to meet the new challenge. Background noises were added to silents just completed; bits of dialogue and musical background were incorporated into films in progress; plans were formulated for new films to be produced which could be labeled at least "part-talkie." Short on story-lines, the producers looked for the quickest ways to get new film products to the public. In an attempt to salvage part of their earlier investments, some silent films were completely re-shot as talkies. Saturday Night Kid, for instance, had originated on Broadway as Love 'Em and Leave 'Em. Paramount had starred Clara Bow in the silent screen version, and now remade it as a talkie. Variety's review noted that, "Selecting a moderately good program silent release to be remade with dialog is a hazardous venture, but this lines up as entertaining stuff for the big Bow crowd, including those who never saw it as a silent."[20] Lillian Gish, who, with a theatre background had more options than Miss Bow, was less cooperative with the producers. "When sound came in I made my first talkie, One Romantic Night, and they were so pleased that my voice registered well that they said now I could remake all my movies. That thought sent me right back to the theatre, so while many

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[19]"The Motion Picture Industry as a Basis for Bond Financing," Prospectus of Halsey, Stuart & Co., 27 May 1927 in Balio, p. 188.

[20]Variety, 30 November 1929, p. 30.

Broadway actors were headed west I was headed east . . . ."[21]

Many volumes dealing with Hollywoood's history tell us that the silents were dead by 1929, but there were, in fact, non-dialogue films turned out after that. With the introduction of talkies, Variety's film reviewers began specifying the percentage of dialogue in each picture covered. Those films which failed to carry an "all-dialog" tag were not necessarily shoestring productions. In November 1929, Greta Garbo starred in The Kiss, a silent accompanied by music. Variety commented, "Though this is silent it may be stronger that way than with dialog."[22] In December 1929, Lionel Barrymore starred in Mysterious Island, which Variety labelled "5% dialog," with the note that with this nearly all-silent film, "conversion to foreign understanding is easily accomplished."[23] Some studios quite naturally maintained an interest in producing films, such as Mysterious Island, which transcended language barriers, but it seems clear that in the rush to compete in the talkie market, other pictures were shot as silents with dialog added later. In December of 1929 Janet Gaynor and Rudolph Schildkraut completed Christina, a twenty-percent "tacked-on" dialogue. Variety's reviewer was very much aware of the titters of the audience when the otherwise silent film

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[21]Personal letter from Lillian Gish, 18 March 1977.

[22]Variety, 30 November 1929, p. 30.

[23]Variety, 25 December 1929, p. 30.

suddenly became a talkie during the last seventeen minutes of the film. "Silence is broken without warning when, in the story, Christina returns to her home after being tricked into believing her wounded sweetheart is drunk. From then on . . . all is chatter."[24] As late as February 1930, Universal studios unveiled a "35% dialog" version of Phantom of the Opera starring Lon Chaney. The producers had dug out the old silent-shop negative and dubbed in some dialog.[25] There were, according to Variety, several thousand theatres in America which were still unwired for sound in 1930, and "in these the old established silent star still cut an undisturbed figure."[26]

By spring of 1930 the studios' conversion to sound seems to have been complete. The few remaining reviews in Variety of films not "all-dialog" were mostly foreign products, and as time wore on, the transatlantic countries made their conversion to talkies complete.

In 1926, approximately fifty million Americans had attended the movies. By 1930, that number had risen to ninety million.[27] A vast number of problems existed for those parts

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[24]Variety, 25 December 1929, p. 32.

[25]Variety, 12 February 1930, p. 19

[26]Variety, 8 January 1930, p. 80.

[27]Robert McLaughlin, Broadway and Hollywood: A History of Economic Interaction (New York: Arno Press, 1974), p. 91. McLaughlin is citing Film Daily, but notes that these figures are conservative compared to some other reports of the same period.

of the industry "behind the screen," but the extraordinary appeal of the new amusement was to tide over the trade while solutions were found.

CHAPTER VI

STOCK DWINDLES AS THE TALKIES TAKE OVER

Experience had taught the film-makers that time quickly dulls the sparkle of innovation. Better technical and artistic methods would have to be found before interest in the primitive talkies began to flag. While the studios continued to grind out any new film which "talked," which featured "names" the public revered, and which included the standard romance/suspense ingredients, it became increasingly apparent that merely inserting dialogue into the story was not enough. The scenarios written for silent films did not adapt well to sound films; many of the screen's silent stars could not speak effectively; directors with an understanding of the new problems were needed; Hollywood had yet to find the best ways to use sound.

Some movie producers had recognized sound merely as an interesting complement to the usual silent film feature. Theme music could enhance the mood, and occasional sound effects--such as thunder, machine-gun fire, the roar of machines--might be used to add realistic touches without changing the basic filming routine. Since it was easier to add music than dialogue to film, the industry began turning out song-and-dance pictures. Theatre history had long since recorded the appeal of "leg art" and movie producers quickly caught on to the idea

of using pretty girls as the principal attraction for their musical productions. The response of the public was so enthusiastic that Hollywood began imitating the lavish stage spectacles of Florenz Ziegfeld's Follies, Earl Carroll's Vanities, and George White's Scandals--time-proven extravaganzas featuring beautiful showgirls adorned in acres of sequins and feathers. In Hampton's words, "The whole country seemed to have gone chorus girl mad," and was enjoying a totally new type of film fare.[1] From 1907, when Ziegfeld produced his first Broadway Follies, chorus girls shared the common ambition of landing a job with the "revue king." When Broadway began suffering hard times in the late twenties, the song-and-dance contingent was only too delighted to answer Hollywood's call. The composers and lyricists creating the music for these elaborate affairs flocked westward with the show-girls.

The large number of pictures ground out by this formula afforded the greatest employment ever for songwriters, but orchestra musicians became victims of the events, since music in the theatre now became "canned." The major "live" feature of silent presentations had been that of the "pit" which, in hundreds of theatres, had employed full orchestras. Hampton notes that, "Even before the talkies had gone far in the reproduction of the human voice, Movietone, Vitaphone, and other

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[1]Benjamin B. Hampton, History of the American Film Industry: From Its Beginnings to 1931 (New York: Dover Publications, 1970. Abridged and corrected republication of A History of the Movies, New York: Covici, Friede, 1931), p. 400.

sound devices were selling orchestral programs, from opening overture through the feature and to closing selection."[2]

Within two years the public's craze for Follies type spectacles abated. At the same time, the movie-makers were learning how to cope with the production of "regular" story films, and so the lavish musicals lost their vogue. As a result, great numbers of the performers so recently in demand were now out of work, along with the "tune-smiths" who were no longer vital to movie production.[3]

During the time that musical revues were keeping the film public amused, the industry was struggling with the problems of finding stories which could be adapted to the sound screen. The scenarists of silent films had needed only to work out a plot-line and then compose the inter-scene titles which clarified the dramatic action. The language used for these inter-titles was entirely inappropriate for talkies. First, it had been reduced to the simplest possible sentences to accommodate the inexpert reader; second, it was too often in narrative form rather than dialogue. The quickest solution, so it seemed to film producers, was to look once again to Broadway stage material. Live theatre had served as a source of story ideas for the silents, but now scripts were bought for their

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[2]Hampton, p. 404.

[3]Hampton, p. 405.

dialogue as well. As Jacobs describes it, "Stage plays were transplanted from Broadway and photographed almost without alteration, the playwrights, casts, and scene designers being transported wholesale to record the plays for the camera and the microphone."[4] The scenarists of the silents had spent their years in the industry learning how to tell a story through photography. Quite naturally they were unable to achieve an instantaneous proficiency in becoming dialogue writers for the talkies, and so playwrights--especially those from Broadway--became an important part of the Hollywood scene. Budd Schulberg was one of these writers, and recalls that, "An S-O-S was beamed to the East, a hurry-up call for what was then described as real writers, to distinguish them from the continuity boys, the gagmen, the idea men, and the rest of the colorful if somewhat illiterate silent contingent."[5] The photographed screenplays appeared little different from the Broadway productions which had been transferred directly onto celluloid.

For the first two or three years of talkies there were two groups of talent that dominated the film industry--the writers who supplied the plot and dialogue, and the engineers who controlled the quality of sound. Screen director King Vidor recalls, ". . . we were hit with this sound thing, and

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[4]Lewis Jacobs, The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1939), p. 438.

[5]Budd Schulberg quoted in Robert McLaughlin's Broadway and Hollywood: A History of Economic Interaction (New York: Arno Press, 1974), p. 108.

the technicians began to dominate the scene. 'You can't do that, you can't move there, you can't speak with your head down.'"[6] and Frank Capra adds:

> Men like L.B. Mayer, powerful men who were in the habit of telling everyone in Hollywood what to do, were suddenly sitting in their offices, completely stunned. They didn't understand what the hell was going on, and so they lost control of the studios to the engineers. Soon the soundmen were telling everyone what to do.[7]

It gradually became apparent that talkies should take on their own identity rather than continuing to appear merely as filmed theatre. If the silents' scenarists had been limited by their experience, so, in many ways, were the established playwrights now plying their trade in Hollywood. Geduld explains the evolution that took place:

> They were to be followed . . . by a generation of screenwriters who understood that cinematic dialogue requires an idiom of its own. The screen-plays of Norman Krasna, Ben Hecht, Walter Reisch, Gene Markey, Donald Ogden Stewart, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Charles Lederer, Dudley Nichols, Robert E. Sherwood, Kubec Glasmon, Francis Faragoh, Morrie Ryskind, and Nunnally Johnson--all of whom wrote their first Hollywood scripts between 1929 and 1934--were full of brief, vivid scenes and characters who spoke a language that was concise, racy, and dynamic, echoing the ceaseless, teeming vitality of America's burgeoning cities.[8]

When Hollywood began buying Broadway productions to be carried west for filming, the directors of those plays frequently

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[6]King Vidor quoted in Guy Flatley's "The Sound That Shook Hollywood," The New York Times Magazine, 25 September 1977, p. 88.

[7]Frank Capra quoted by Flatley, p. 84.

[8]Harry M. Geduld, The Birth of the Talkies: From Edison to Jolson (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1975), p. 261.

traveled with them. McLaughlin reports that, ". . . in 1929 it was estimated that seventeen directors were contracted full time to major film studios."[9] Since a number of silent film directors were retained by the studios, even after the conversion to sound, there were two schools of thought which emerged in regard to the balance of dialogue and action. Jacobs describes this problem as either "taking the stage dialogue and emphasizing the action," or "taking the screen action and emphasizing the dialogue."[10] John Ford, for instance, who had established himself as a director of silent pictures, was able to adapt himself to directing talkies but retained his concept of the picture taking priority over sound. "I use a minimum of dialogue. . . . I believe the movies are primarily pictures so I play them that way. Let the pictures do the talking for you."[11] Nor were all directors from Broadway in favor of mere "canned" theatre. Rouben Mamoulian, brought to Hollywood in 1929, encouraged experimentation in finding different ways to use sound. There was more to the talkies, he believed, than dialogue synchronized with lip movement.

Regardless of which artistic concepts the directors of

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[9]McLaughlin, p. 108.

[10]Jacobs, p. 437.

[11]John Ford quoted in A.R. Fulton's <u>Motion Pictures: The Development of an Art from Silent Films to the Age of Television</u> (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1960), pp. 172-73.

talking pictures favored, there were certain problems common to them all. Silent films had developed a broad, pantomimic style of acting. Even before sound came in, inter-titles were regarded as necessary, and if not evil, at least a part of the film which bowed to the action. If the idea of the story could be communicated through the screen images, the spectator would be spared the task of reading. Furthermore, titles could be distracting. Looking back on the days of transition, Vidor recalls, "Sometimes there were what we used to call readers in the audience, people who would annoy us by reading the titles out loud, but when sound came in, they stopped reading and nobody had to concentrate so much on the screen any more."[12] In order to avoid using titles, silent screen actors had learned to emphasize actions for the sake of clarifying the events. And so directors of the sound films had to teach their casts to trim away the excesses of pantomime on which they had previously relied. John Gilbert was one of the famous stars of the silents who was unable to adapt himself to talking pictures. Crowther speaks of the actor's 1929 film, His Glorious Night:

> When it was released . . . audiences laughed at Gilbert. They laughed at the strangeness of his voice. But they also laughed at the extravagance of his love-making with Renee Adoree. It was ludicrous when done to a flow of language. Suddenly the great silent lover was

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[12]Vidor quoted by Flatley, pp. 86-87.

made to appear clumsy and verbose. They hadn't yet come to realize that "talking pictures" were not just silents with words.[13]

By the time the major studios had given themselves over to producing talkies, the squeaks, groans, and static of the sound systems had all but been eliminated. Those problems once solved, the engineers proceeded to wrestle with others. We have heard how Broadway plays were transported to Hollywood and filmed, and we have heard these described as "canned theatre"--mere static reproductions of the stage versions. In truth, they were even more static than the descriptions imply. Where a live theatre production allowed the actors to move freely around the stage, the screen version required that they be grouped together so that they could "speak to" the microphone hidden in a central place on the set. Furthermore, there was no way the cameras could move to photograph "takes" from a different vantage point. As Crowther describes it:

> The rigidness of the scenes with dialogue was forced, to a large extent, by the bulk and immobility of the early sound equipment. The cameras were set inside "greenhouses"--big glass-enclosed, soundproof booths, designed to muffle the whir of cameras so it would not be picked up by the microphones. . . . The things were so heavy and cumbersome that they could not be moved during a shot. Each "take" had to be made from a fixed position with the cameras held steadily on the scene.[14]

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[13]Bosley Crowther, The Lion's Share: The Story of an Entertainment Empire (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1957), p. 179.

[14]Crowther, p. 149.

The "claustrophobic tombs," as Guy Flatley calls them, were set up not only to "muffle the whir of the cameras," but also to resist the sound systems "whose microphones were so sensitive that they picked up every sound, converting burps into cannon blasts."[15] Frank Capra recalls that the result was visual paralysis:

> Silent cameramen had been free as a bird, but suddenly the freedom to photograph from any position was taken away. In the silent days, cameras sounded like coffee grinders, so that when talkies began, we had to put them into a big, ugly, immovable, monstrous box with a window in the front. There was a door at the back through which the cameraman climbed, and once it was closed behind him, he found himself in an insulated, soundproof room, with no air vents of any kind. There was more air in the cameraman's lungs than in the booth. Sometimes, we used three cameras, suitably positioned to the action, and we'd edit it later to give the illusion of movement.[16]

As movie technology advanced, the restrictions of the early sound systems were lifted. According to Capra:

> . . . most of the problems that came in with sound were solved within a year. A quieter camera was made, and we were able to throw those awful booths away, and the technicians put together a movable boom that could follow the action around overhead, freeing the actors from the tyranny of that one mike hidden in the flowers.[17]

The hiring of silent picture actors had depended on their abilities to effectively picturize emotions. Lillian Gish recounts her first audition for D.W. Griffith, when, after a brief, initial interview, he tested Lillian and her sister Dorothy by submitting them to an improvised emotional

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[15]Flatley, p. 37.

[16]Capra quoted by Flatley, p. 86.

[17]Capra quoted by Flatley, p. 86.

scene, during which he shouted directions as to their psychological states during the chaos demanded by the scenario. The results were good enough to secure Lillian and Dorothy immediate employment with Griffith.[18] The Gish sisters, like other actors who had begun their careers in live theatre, were able to adapt easily to both silent and talking films, but most silent film actors were not so flexible. Long, careful rehearsals became part of the production of the talking films. In Hampton's words, "The talkies banished laziness and carelessness. Now every role, large or small, had to be read and rehearsed until each actor and actress in the cast was proficient in acting and voice."[19] The director was then obliged to remain silent and rely on the preparation which he had worked out with the actors previous to shooting.

Where problems with dialogue could not be solved on the set, directors learned to deal with the "post-shooting" dialogue process--where voices and sounds were more effectively synchronized after the actual "takes." This allowed greater flexibility for the director who was still limited by technical restrictions.

Some of the greatest difficulties of the new industry fell upon the actors of the silent films. Those who had never had any experience in live theatre were especially vulnerable,

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[18]Lillian Gish, The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), pp. 35-37.

[19]Hampton, p. 397.

since they had never been required to concern themselves with voice training. The studios began testing the voices of their screen actors to determine which of them would be likely to make the adjustment to talkies and, as Hampton writes, "Producers were very cautious about renewing contracts or giving new ones. They could not be sure who would or would not be accepted by the public in this new sound era, and their uncertainty spread misery through the ranks of the players."[20] Buddy Rogers speaks of his experiences during this period:

> We knew that Jolson had a voice, but we didn't know if we did. So we were taken to the sound studio . . . to find out who had a voice and who didn't. Each day, they'd bring in a famous star, and he'd be in there as long as three hours. One day, Wallace Beery was in there for an extra long time, and we all waited around to hear the verdict. Finally, at 3 in the afternoon, a boy came running out of the studios yelling, "Wally Beery has a voice!" To find out how the public would react to my voice, the studio put me in a movie called 'Variety,' in which I was the star football player. It had a 12-minute talking sequence, and I don't mind telling you those were pretty serious moments for me. . . . we had our voice coaches with whom we'd meet regularly so they could teach us to e-nun-ci-ate. They also brought out a lot of people from the New York stage, actors who knew how to project their voices--people like Ruth Chatterton and Clive Brook.[21]

In Geduld's words, "Among silent stars without stage experience an elocution teacher suddenly became much more of a necessity than a swimming pool or a new Rolls-Royce. (Mrs.

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[20]Hampton, p. 396.

[21]Buddy Rogers quoted by Flatley, pp. 82-84.

Patrick Campbell was imported to coach Norma Shearer; Gloria Swanson's teacher was Laura Hope Crewes; while Constance Collier was hired to improve the diction of Colleen Moore.)"[22]

Buddy Rogers had been an important actor in silent films, and one can understand why he speaks with a hint of scorn about having to learn to "e-nun-ci-ate." But the truth is that during the twenties--much more than today--the quality of an actor's voice and diction were paid close heed by the critics. The Dramatic Stock pages of Billboard featured, each week during the twenties, a column entitled "The Spoken Word" written by one Windsor P. Daggett who evaluated the enunciation, rhythms, lilts, and pronunciations of various stage actors in performance. Ralph Freud describes the column as "Quite popular with actors of the period because this man analyzed speech from the actors' point of view."[23] One may infer from Freud's remarks, and also from the endurance of the column, that the theatre-going public, as well as the actors, regarded good speech as one of the actor's most important tools. Ralph Bellamy comments, ". . . a thing you learned, whether you knew it or not, was the thing I find lacking today. . . . You had to enunciate. By this I don't mean any kind of affected speech. But you had to speak so that the audience could under-

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[22]Geduld, p. 261.

[23]Ralph Freud interview, recorded 1 March 1966, tape #1, Freud Collection.

stand you, and I find I don't understand even close-ups today, with the microphone six inches away."[24]

Where elocution lessons could not cure all voice problems, the dials of the sound equipment could sometimes conceal flaws of voice pitch and timbre. Hampton explains how this method could strengthen or soften harsh tones.[25] Soundmen could also ruin the reproduced voice of the actor. When Buddy Rogers teamed up with Douglas Fairbanks to make one of the last expensive silent movies, they decided that Fairbanks should deliver a speaking prologue and epilogue--the film thus eligible to be labeled "part-talkie." Rogers recalls his horror when, "Doug--who had a good voice--came up sounding like a tinhorn tenor. The soundmen hadn't checked for decibels, so another man, with a deeper voice, read the prologue and epilogue, and the audience accepted it as Doug."[26] Aprocrypha has it that John Gilbert was ruined by Louis B. Mayer who disliked him and made certain the sound equipment distorted his voice. While Gilbert's family and many of his friends in the profession remember him as speaking in tones within the usual "masculine" norm, his first talkie seemed to prove that he was a soprano, and could not hold on to his matinee idol image when he was required to be heard, as well as seen.

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[24]Ralph Bellamy interview, recorded 17 November 1965, tape #11, Freud Collection.

[25]Hampton, p. 396.

[26]Rogers quoted by Flatley, p. 98.

Other film luminaries, such as Vilma Banky, were dropped from the scene because they could not speak English; others, like Norma Talmadge, because they were unable to rid themselves of unappealing regional accents. The art of Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton depended on a highly specialized pantomime form, and they too, could not successfully transfer their skills to sound film.[27] As Green and Laurie Colorfully report the Hollywood panic, "They're all trying to chisel an angle that will save that pink swimming pool and Hispano-Suiza. Actors . . . are ruining all the house parties reciting 'The Blue Velvet Band' or 'Gunga Din.'"[28]

Some of the supporting players of the silent films were young and flexible enough to teach themselves the requirements of sound film. Others with "long ago" stage experience saved their film careers by renewing their contacts with live theatre. In Hampton's words:

> . . . the microphone concealed on the set in front of the cage was a horror and a nightmare to the players. The mention of it gave them cold shivers and to endure the test of talking into the little contrivance brought attacks of stage fright worse than an appearance before an audience of ten-thousand people. A few girls, Bessie Love, Lois Wilson, and one or two others, took advantage of the lull in the studios to jump to vaudeville stage or stock companies, and obtain work as troupers back of the footlights. They were very wise; their several months of brushing up their voices enabled them to return to the studios and promptly win positions in the talkies.[29]

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[27]Walter Kerr, The Silent Clowns (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), pp. 336-38.

[28]Abel Green and Joe Laurie Jr., Showbiz: From Vaude to Video (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1951), p. 266.

[29]Hampton, p. 396.

During the silent film period, many stage actors had thought of screen jobs as an anathema, and the maverick medium as something to be scorned. Even though film jobs offered large salaries to actors, some players of live theatre opted to avoid Hollywood. One of this group was Katharine Cornell, who had begun her career in resident stock theatre. Tad Mosel speaks of his admiration of Miss Cornell's purposefulness when he writes:

> Movies were taking audiences away from the theatre in the twenties and thirties. Other actors and actresses managed to divide their loyalties between the stage and screen--John Barrymore, Ina Claire, Jeanne Eagels, Helen Hayes, etc.--but Miss Cornell was fierce in her determination not to desert the stage. . . . only once did she appear on film, to honor the American Theatre Wing in Stage Door Canteen during World War II.[30]

Possibly Miss Cornell sensed that the screen was not her medium--that she might not photograph well. Whatever her reasons, few of the participants of live theatre would remain so indomitable. Broadway was declining, and the money Hollywood was offering stage actors was too great a temptation for most of them to ignore. Poggi cites the following figures as evidence: while the top salary for Broadway actors in 1928 was about $1,000, featured players in films were earning $3,000, and the stars of talkies could demand as much as $7,500 per week.[31]

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[30] Tad Mosel, "Katharine Cornell," Playbill, November 1978, pp. 14-21.

[31] Jack Poggi, Theatre in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968) p. 83.

Little wonder at the Broadway exodus. And money was only part of the lure for actors of live theatre. Film jobs appealed to the ego of players whose performances would be viewed across the nation in movie houses.

The enchantment of Hollywood was not only for Broadway actors. The talkie tycoons began to turn out films with casts so enormous that they also drew actors from resident stock theatre. In Jory's words, "Broadway alone couldn't even begin to supply the talent that would shortly be needed to fulfill the casts of over 700 in talking films that they would be making every year in the thirties and forties."[32] And so many stock actors, as well as those on Broadway made the trip to Hollywood. Some of Hollywood's best character actors in films of the thirties came from stock. Many of the glamorous young movie stars who were given top billing did not have the artistic strength to carry the pictures themselves, and needed the support of experienced stage actors.

The easiest adjustment to talkies was made by those actors who had solid experience both in live theatre and silent pictures. Lionel Barrymore, for instance, had become a successful Broadway actor early in the century. But silent film acting also interested him, and his admiration of Griffith's work led him to Biograph studios where he made a number

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[32] Audiotape received from Victor Jory, September 1975.

of pictures between stage engagements. By 1925 he had opted for a career in Hollywood where he was firmly established by 1928 when the talkies' version of The Lion and the Mouse opened, and The New York Times reviewer commented:

> Mr. Barrymore's knowledge of diction, linked with his splendid acting, overwhelmed the other players who were evidently handicapped . . . by the fact that they were aware that they also had to be heard . . . William Collier Jr., May McAvoy and even Alec Francis appear merely to speak their lines so that they can be heard. Mr. Barrymore is marvellously natural and in speaking he really enhances his characterization. But it is quite disappointing to hear the trite and ineffectual words of his colleagues . . . . It is quite obvious from this Vitaphoned picture that the ordinary screen players, who have been noted for their agreeable presence, will find it necessary to go through a course of stage training before they can deliver competent performances in a Vitaphoned feature.[33]

Marie Dressler was another player whose combined experience in live theatre and in the silents ensured her success in talking pictures. She had established herself as a stage comedienne at the start of the century, and found additional success in films between 1912 and 1914. Hampton gives this account of her career in the years that followed:

> Returning to the spoken stage, she enjoyed popularity for years, finding the way back to Hollywood in 1926, when the stage no longer offered her high positions and large compensation. Like many artists, she had been liberal with money in the years of easy income, and now in middle age she needed work--and work was hard to get. There were parts, occasionally, for short periods, and the salaries were modest. All in all, the prospect was discouraging; and then sound pictures came, and her splendid acting and strenuous, vibrant voice struck a responsive note

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[33]New York Times review quoted in Geduld, pp. 200-01.

with audiences.[34]

Miss Dressler thus became a big box-office figure at film houses. Rather suddenly the romantic stars lost status as the audience grew to appreciate expert character actors. Hampton observes:

> The competition of silent pictures had made serious inroads on the stage and the talkies were now working such injury to stage receipts that the "legitimate" drama was having a hard struggle to live. George Arliss and other stage stars who had never been conspicuous in silent films, transferred their talents to the talking screen, and more and more people were deserting the theater for the bright lure of the talkies.[35]

Warner Brothers had built its first sound studio in 1927, and the other major organizations quickly followed suit. The next step was equipping the theatres for talkies. The incredible speed with which this was done is indicated by the figures cited by McLaughlin. By July 1928, 220 theatres in the United States had been wired for sound; by the end of that year, 1,000 theatres had been converted; by the end of 1929, over 10,000; and by 1931 over 20,000 of the country's 23,500 movie houses were fitted out for talkies.[36] As noted earlier, 1928 was the high point for Broadway in terms of the number of plays produced there, but many of them were quick failures. The enormous theatrical activity of earlier seasons had created a demand for additional theatre buildings, so that from 1924 to 1929, twenty-six new buildings were constructed

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[34]Hampton, p. 402.

[35]Hampton, p. 404.

[36]McLaughlin, p. 90.

or converted to playhouses.[37] With the decline of Broadway, beginning in 1928, many theatre owners became willing to turn their houses over to film interests. At the same time, some theatre chains stopped renting their buildings to stock companies across the country. The formation of the Theatrical Stock Managers' Association in April of 1928 raised hopes that consolidated efforts would preserve the health of local companies. But it soon became apparent that the tide could not be turned. Geduld writes:

> Theatre critics objected that Hollywood was robbing Broadway of its talent. . . . Theater managers were divided between those, like J.J. Shubert, who maintained that talking pictures posed no threat to legitimate theater at its best, and those involved with stock companies who suddenly found their profits dwindling as talkies began invading the suburbs and the provinces. In June, 1929, twenty out of twenty-two theater managers at the annual convention of the Theatrical Stock Managers' Association complained that talking pictures were destroying business for their companies in the U.S. A New York Times editorial offered them cold comfort by observing that while Talking pictures can never completely take the place of real people on a real stage . . . in their imitation of actual plays and musical shows the talkies are taking the essence of Broadway to every hamlet in the land.[38]

The talkies were therefore usurping the powers that stock had held in "taking the essence of Broadway" to Americans across the country. If the Theatrical Stock Managers' Association

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[37] Poggi, p. 46.

[38] Geduld, p. 253.

held out hopes for the survival of resident companies, their players may have been more realistic about the situation. Agnes Young, for example, a member of a Massachusetts company at the time, recalls joining some fellow actors in 1927 to attend one of the first talkies:

> We went to see, on a Sunday night, in Brockton, a talking picture . . . and it was good. But you never saw such downcast people in your life. . . . We saw the handwriting on the wall. We went back to our apartment and I can remember we all just sat there . . . . All of the actors knew that this was the end of an era.[39]

By the end of 1929 Variety gave "official" recognition to the triumph of talkies over stock theatre:

> Theatrical stock managers, with a few isolated exceptions, are shaking a collective head over the condition of their business. Shaking the head speaks eloquently of anything disastrous. In this instance it may be interpreted as a "Tsk, tsk--those talking pictures." . . . Even with top admission down to $1, stock is poorly equipped to combat the modern common-man's theatre--the picture house. Dialog added to the screen was the greatest blow.[40]

Alfred Bernheim's study dealing with the economics of theatre involves itself with resident stock only up to the introduction of talkies, even though the volume claims to cover "the business" of theatre through 1932. Bernheim's failure to update his stock theatre information resulted in the following remarks:

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[39] Personal interview with Agnes Young, 9 March 1977.

[40] Variety, 13 November 1929, p. 70.

> Stock, if properly helped and encouraged, has a bright future ahead. . . . Stock and repertoire will act as the distributors of the drama throughout the country, especially into those places which the combination system no longer reaches. They will be an influence in preserving for the drama a national flavor. They will be some check against the tendency toward concentration. Their significance for our theatre is therefore great.[41]

But stock was not about to be "properly helped and encouraged." Talking films were quickly killing it, and it seemed that nothing--not even the financial depression which began in 1929--could stop the monstrous new industry from growing. Wall Street investors, noting the continuing profits of sound pictures, concluded that this industry was immune to depression, and offered it yet more capital. The President's Research Committee on Recent Social Trends in the United States reported that movie theatre attendance and capital doubled between 1926 and 1932:

> This rapid advance, which was 75 percent greater than during the five year period immediately preceding 1926, is believed to be due to the installation of sound and talking equipment. . . . The popularity of the motion picture is shown by the fact that it has continued to attract large crowds in spite of the financial depression. It is apparently a necessary luxury, slow to feel cuts in the family budget. The important role it plays in the leisure time of the masses can hardly be exaggerated. Moderate in cost and almost universal in its appeal, it provides an easily accessible form of recreation--especially adapted for a temporary

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[41]Alfred L. Bernheim, The Business of Theatre: An Economic History of the American Theatre, 1750-1932 (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1932), p. 97.

escape from the routine daily life.[42]

According to Green and Laurie, there had been over 200 stock companies in the United States during 1929; by 1939 there were only five Equity stock groups left in the country.[43]

There are some today who still mourn the loss of resident theatre. Dickson Morgan, recalling the value of his days in stock, says, "This same kind of theatre should be done today. Unfortunately . . . the competition of "canned" theatre . . . is the competition that ruined theatre."[44] Jory supports Morgan when he speaks about his last days in stock with the Bainbridge Players in Minneapolis, where Jory was making a good salary on paper, but was receiving no actual wages.

> There was nothing we could do. The talkies had us whipped . . . . It was costing Mr. Bainbridge around $7,000 a week to operate his company. Motion pictures--talkies--were playing all over town, and they could operate in a theatre--their costs weren't any more than ours--and they could seat four times as many people, and they were charging just as much. And great favorites had come into being--Garbo and various people. And so finally at the end of our run there--as far as I was concerned--stock was over. I believe there were a few companies that opened the next year in 1933 . . . in 1934 there were

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[42] Recent Social Trends in the United States: Report of the President's Research Committee on Social Trends (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., Inc., 1933), II, 940-41.

[43] Green and Laurie, p. 426.

[44] Dickson Morgan interview, recorded 25 August 1966, tape #13, Freud Collection.

a few less. In 1936 I think the last two went.[45]

Jory's figures regarding the last stock companies differ slightly from those of Green and Abel, but in any case, the death of stock was a fact.

Today, production costs are high, both in live theatre and in films. The regional theatre companies which have taken the place of resident stock as decentralized theatre are able to survive only with the help of federal and state funds along with money from private foundations. Quite appropriately, the grants that these theatres receive are contingent on a "quality" repertoire. In addition, many company members of regional theatre are "on their way" to Broadway or television, and the permanence of the twenties stock company is missing. Rehearsal periods in these regional companies are much longer than those of twenties stock, and while the additional preparation time might, on occasion, produce more polished productions, the participants of regional theatre are deprived of the week-to-week discipline required of the twenties stock members, regardless of the choice of fare. While regional theatre, operating through grants, may frequently offer the public productions of higher quality--both in subject matter and execution--the universal appeal to audiences, the catholicity of the twenties stock fare has been taken over by the

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[45]Victor Jory interview, recorded 3 September 1966, tape #13, Freud Collection.

movies. Resident stock lived out its life, marking the end of a form of theatre which is not likely to reappear.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The resident theatre groups which began emerging after the turn of the century consistently increased in number well into the twenties of the new century. The popularity of these groups grew as the road show declined, but stock theatre also provided a reasonable alternative to those devotees of the live stage who could not afford touring show ticket prices. There is no reliable evidence as to the specific number of stock companies operating at any one time in America, but there are indications that there were more in 1926 and 1927 than at any other time. The ten or twelve years following 1920, therefore, find stock theatre first in its years of greatest efficiency and later in final decline.

Since the country enjoyed a general prosperity during the decade following World War I, great numbers of people were able to maintain an entertainment budget not possible earlier. Leisure time was now frequently spent on paid amusements such as sports and games, dance bands, circuses, silent films and the theatre. The automobile, which was becoming increasingly accessible to the average family, was not only an amusement in itself, but an easy means of transporting patrons to the various recreational centers.

Technological advances allowed increased leisure time for many citizens. The housewife was freed from much of her routine toil with the introduction of electrical appliances. Many women now had permission of society, and the time to take jobs outside the home which increased the family income and encouraged the twenties female to consider the merits of hair-bobs and shorter skirts. The "emancipation" of women was encouraged in many ways; big business became an ideal for the common man seeking success; new forms of recreation were pursued as Americans elected administrations which relieved them of worry over government policy, and allowed the country to ride along on the wave of prosperity.

During a decade in which the American psychology was undergoing such changes, the drama of the period kept apace with the country's trends. Competing with other diversions of the twenties, new comedies were written to supply the public with the light entertainment demanded, while commenting favorably--if somewhat light-heartedly--on the liberation of women, the merits of divorce, and the innocence of moderate Prohibition drinking. Stock theatre patrons in cities and towns outside of New York did not see Broadway releases of new plays until one to three years after their New York runs, and were thus given some time to adjust to the "modern ideas" introduced by eastern playwrights.

The typical stock company operating in an average-sized city produced these new comedies as often as it could afford the royalties. Current "serious" dramas were next in

demand, followed in popularity by mystery-thrillers and an occasional musical. Most companies were obliged to produce some older non-royalty or low-royalty plays from time to time, in order to preserve their budgets. On special holidays, such as Christmas or Easter, religious works were often presented, and at other times, children's plays were done for a very young audience or as "family fare." The atypical, prestigious companies did some classics, but the average resident group maintained a lighter repertoire.

Most companies employed ten or eleven actors, with the stage manager and director taking on small roles. The backstage crews, front-office workers and the company's orchestra brought the total number of paid employees in the average company up to forty. For productions calling for very large casts, members of the community were brought in to take over "bit" or "extra" parts.

One of the most common features of the typical company was a weekly change of bill, which resulted in an exhausting work schedule. Sides for the next show were usually issued after the opening night performance of the current one, and the company generally rehearsed from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. every day excepting those on which matinees were performed. With an average nine to ten weekly performances of the current show, it was often difficult for leading actors to find time for line-study on the upcoming production.

Actors with some stock experience behind them frequently were able to find work in a better quality group, either by

way of their own reputations or the aid of stock company agents who knew of them. Many amateurs were hired as "bit" players or "extras" and worked their way up. While the average organization retained the same cast throughout the season, a few "jobbed in" established actors for a limited number of weeks, sometimes "stock-starring" a lead of the original New York cast.

After the actors' strike of 1919, Equity players in stock were assured of certain job guarantees which offered them a reasonably comfortable semi-permanent home in the community. The average company paid its members at least a living wage, and some stock actors earned excellent salaries. A good part of a player's income, however, was applied to wardrobe, since the actors were responsible for all costumes in contemporary plays.

Clearly, the members of these resident groups had little leisure time, but many of the hours spent away from the theatre were devoted to enhancing a friendly relationship with the community in which they worked. The efficient theatre manager nurtured the public's affection for his company while offering tickets at reasonable prices. When a company succeeded, the play-goers considered the actors their own, and looked forward to attending each week's new production.

Since a resident company usually had only one week in which to prepare a new show, it could not hope to achieve the polish of a Broadway production. Still, some local manager-directors were able to maintain a high level of excellence for

their patrons. The organizations run by Jessie Bonstelle and Stuart Walker were far above average, primarily because these two managers demanded more of their companies, could draw better talent, afford better scenery, and catered to audiences with a taste for "better" drama. A kind of "art stock" theatre was to run in Boston by Henry Jewett, serving that city for many years with a steady diet of the classics. Jewett, too, is remembered as a director unusually demanding on his actors. Both Henry Duffy and Thomas Wilkes ran chains of theatres along the West Coast. Their California companies, in particular, were of a caliber approximating Broadway's since they were able to hire many well-established stage actors and sometimes, the entire casts of Broadway shows being done at their theatres. The Belasco theatre in Los Angeles began its operations just before the talkie revolution, and soon found itself both competing against and cooperating with the movie industry. Film-makers were searching frantically for actors who could handle dialogue, and plays which could be adapted to the screen. The Belasco supplied both, in exchange for the use of film stars who were "between pictures." Many artists from the New York stage were eager to be seen at the Belasco, which served as a showcase and a stepping-stone to the talkies.

While stock theatre had felt the competition from films for some years, as long as the movies were silent the drama of the live stage held a special appeal to the public. The picture industry recognized this fact, and attempted to capture some of the magic of live theatre by filming stage

plays and adding live acts to their programs--all for a cheaper admission than even stock companies could manage. By 1927 the screen actors could be heard as well as seen by the film patron, and Hollywood began the big rush to take over the amusement world. The development of sound films was fraught with problems, but many of these were solved by buying up the talents of the legitimate stage--playwrights, directors and actors who knew how to deal with the spoken word. Broadway alone could not supply the enormous demands of Hollywood and so many stock theatre people joined the migration to filmland. As Wall Street investors ever more enthusiastically lent support to the dazzling new industry, the movie studios bought up huge numbers of the nation's theatre buildings, some to be converted to film houses, others to stand vacant or to be leased out to other kinds of businesses, to help eliminate the competition. Hollywood's canned product could be sold to the public for a cheap price, even when marketed in movie palaces with the added enticement of live acts and "dish nites." By the early thirties the hundreds of American stock theatres had vanished; Hollywood had taken over "the essence of Broadway."

The movies needed stage actors for talkies--attractive performers whose voices would register favorably on sound equipment, whose words could be clearly understood by the patron, and who could credibly relate the dialogue to the action. In 1930 Burns Mantle commented on Hollywood's demand for these theatre people:

> Actors who have for years been making the dreary rounds of agents' and producers' offices, without substantial encouragement, have found themselves suddenly again in demand. . . . To realize that they do know more of the art of acting, of characterization, and of reading, than the children of the screen have had either the time or the wit to learn, has been soul stimulating to the players.[1]

When screenland captured stage players of unusual talent and charm, stars were born on film. The movie idol craze was a major part of the film business for as long as the studios marketed glitter. Today film stars continue to draw business, but Hollywood spends much less time and money on the magic and myth of their personalities. Production is much too costly.

Television is today what radio was in the twenties--once paid for, a something-for-nothing entertainment competing with theatre and films. But producers for the home screen are also plagued with inflated costs. It is interesting to note that they have discovered--as the movie producers had--that legitimate stage actors can solve some of these problems. Until recently, even a half-hour television play was "shot" in many segments, a costly, time-consuming process of starting, stopping, re-setting, and starting again. Of late, however, new camera techniques have been devised whereby the full script can be taped in one continuous action, thus saving time and lowering production costs. For this process the television director needs actors who can sustain a role for

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[1] Burns Mantle, ed., The Best Plays of 1929-1930 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1930), p. v.

the length of the script--a problem for many performers who lack stage experience. And so actors from Broadway, off-Broadway, and regional theatre once again are being called upon to perform a job for which "children of the screen" have not been educated.

With the financial help from private foundations and federal and state councils, decentralized theatre has been reintroduced to America, and for this we are grateful. In many ways these new theatres in our communities are far superior to twenties stock productions. Always to be missed, however, is the excitement of a dedicated, close-knit group working entirely by its own wits and resources on a schedule and under a discipline scarcely to be believed by today's theatre world.

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