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THE WOMEN OF THE TEN, TWENT', THIRT'

Popular Melodrama Theatre in Turn-of-the-Century New York

by

BARBARA MEREDITH WALDINGER

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

1999

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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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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BARBARA MEREDITH WALDINGER

Adviser: Professor Daniel Gerould

During the first decade of the twentieth century, when the population of New York City was growing by leaps and bounds because of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization, a short-lived theatre movement known as the "ten-twenty-thirty," or, more familiarly, the "ten, twent', thirt," was born. Originally named for the low prices of the tickets, the term came to encompass various types of touring companies that travelled throughout the country, resident stock companies, and hundreds of plays, mostly melodramas, written expressly for this movement. Created by enterprising producers, managers, and playwrights, the ten, twent', thirt' catered to the needs of the working-class public who demanded cheap and thrilling entertainment, in the years immediately preceding the explosion of film.

Although scholars have noted the achievements of males in this theatre, they have, for the most part, ignored the

important contributions of women. By focusing on actresses, female theatre managers, female playwright/producers and writers of novelizations, this study will attempt to re-establish the role played by women in the ten-twenty-thirty theatre. Beginning with an examination of the strategies used by theatre managers to increase the number of women in the audience, I will argue that these women exerted an influence on the plays produced, the nature of the female characters in them, and the actresses selected to interpret them. Some of the most successful actresses went on to manage theatres, and a few of them to write, produce, and star in their own plays, which contained stronger, more active roles for women.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

CHAPTER PAGE

1. Building a Female Audience 21

2. The Life of the Actress 53

3. Characters Written by Men, Performed by Women . 94

4. Women as Theatre Managers 138

5. Women as Writers 170

Conclusion: Where Did the Women Go? Decline of the Ten, Twent', Thirt'. 225

Illustrations 245

Bibliography 259

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

(The following were obtained from the files of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at Lincoln Center).

FIGURE		PAGE
Figure 1.	Adra Ainslee	245
	Top Right: in Hanlon's Superba Bottom Right: in Superba, Saturday Standard, March 1, 1902	
Figure 2.	Victory Bateman	246
	Top Left: New York Dramatic Mirror, July 16, 1898	
Figure 3.	Florence Bindley	247
	Left: 1897 Right: New York Dramatic News, December 25 (no year), title page, labelled "Forrester and Mittenthal Wish All A Merry Christmas and Happy New Year"	
Figure 4.	Edith Browning	248
	Top Left: in Edna, the Pretty Typewriter, Vanity Fair, 1907 Center and Right: in Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl, 1906	
Figure 5.	Selma Herman	249
	Top: in Wedded But No Wife, Fielding Amusement Company, Season 1904-5 Bottom: November, 1901	
Figure 6.	Lillian Mortimer	250
	Top Left: in No Mother to Guide Her at Burt's Theatre in Toledo, Ohio, April 8, 1906 Bottom Right: Vaudeville, Columbia Theatre, Cincinnati, Ohio, February 7, 1910, photo for Orpheum Circuit	

Figure 7. Julia Ralph 251
February, 1913

Figure 8. Etta Reed 252

Bottom: Standard, September, 1901

Figure 9. Blanche Shirley 253
in The Thief, Lyceum Theatre, Pittsburg (sic)

Figure 10. Cecil Spooner 254

Top Left: "Compliments of Cecil Spooner Stock Company," at the Metropolis Theatre, Season 1911, from the Chamberlain and Lyman Brown Theatrical Agency Collection

Top Right: in My Lady Peggy Goes to Town, November, 1902
Bottom: New York Dramatic Mirror, November 26, 1913

Figure 11. Edna May Spooner 255
1908

Figure 12. Mary Gibbs Spooner 256
Director, Spooner Stock Company

Figure 13. Lottie Williams 257

Top: November, 1907, My Tom-Boy Girl
Bottom: My Tom-Boy Girl, 1905

Figure 14. Kitty Wolfe and Harry Clay Blaney . . . 258

Top Left: in Across the Pacific, 1904
Bottom Right: labelled as a photo from The Boy Behind the Gun, October 4-7, 1916

Introduction

As we celebrate the one-hundred-year anniversary of the consolidation of the five boroughs into the City of New York, commemorative exhibitions have been planned to mark the occasion. Many of these were designed to take us back in time so that we might be able to appreciate and understand the forces that shaped the growth and development of the city. This study has a similar objective--to go back to the turn of the twentieth century in New York City, with a view towards recreating the excitement of a long-forgotten type of popular theatre (the "ten-twenty-thirty") and to recall the women who helped to establish it.

After placing theatre in the context of workplaces available to women, I will proceed to contrast the legitimate with the ten-twenty-thirty theatre, which was more than just a lower-priced entertainment. Scholars who have written about this theatre tend to emphasize the contributions of male producers and playwrights, spending few if any words on the many talented and hard-working women who devoted much of their lives to this movement. I hope to redress that omission.

At the turn of the twentieth century, women represented a growing sector of the labor force. Urbanization and

industrialization changed the face of cities across the country from the latter half of the nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth century. Historian David Nasaw states that "between 1870 and 1920, American cities flourished as never before. The urban population of the nation increased from under ten to over fifty-four million people."[1] Two explanations for this rapid growth were the change from an agrarian to an industrial society, and the waves of immigration from Europe to the United States. Factories accounted for "over nine-tenths of industrial production" between 1870-1900; "immigration reached a high point between 1901 and 1905 when more than three million Europeans swarmed onto the shores of the United States, grist for the mills of expanding industrialism."[2]

Most married urban women remained at home as they had always done, earning extra money for their families by such means as sewing and keeping boarders. According to Kathy Peiss, "in 1900, four-fifths of the 343,000 wage-earning women in New York were single and almost one-third were aged

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[1] David Nasaw, Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 3.

[2] Dorothy S. Pam, "Exploitation, Independence, and Solidarity: The Changing Role of American Working Women as Reflected in the Working-Girl Melodrama, 1870-1910," (Ph.D. Diss., New York University, 1980), 13, 16-17.

sixteen to twenty."[3] These women turned with increasing frequency from domestic service to work in the new factories, where they were hired as unskilled laborers to operate the machines at a fraction of the salary offered to men. Working conditions were often intolerable for the young and vulnerable women, unrelieved by squalid home lives in crowded and unhealthy tenements.

Personal accounts by women workers of the time testify to the distressing circumstances of their employment. In 1905 a New York collar starcher told her story to the Independent, a weekly edited by Hamilton Holt:

> practically all the laundry work was done by hand. There were no ironing machines and very few washing machines. . . . The collars come to us in bunches of a dozen each. We cut the string, dip the collars in a tub of scalding hot starch, throw them on the table, which is covered with a clean cloth, and with the tips of our fingers rub out all the bubbles and wrinkles and force the starch evenly through the linen. . . . It is possible to starch fifty dozen or more a day, depending on the style of collar. . . . By half-past six I am at work. Ten minutes' pause for lunch and I am hard at work again. Sometimes I work as late as eight o'clock . . . . In our factory all talking is strictly forbidden. You run the risk of instant dismissal if you even speak to the girl across the table. . . . a girl in our factory could make between eight and nine dollars a week the year round . . . to be docked two dollars a week is the commonest thing in the world . . . we expect it.[4]

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[3] Kathy Peiss, Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 34.

[4] Anonymous, "A Collar Starcher's Story," 10 August 1905, Workers Speak: Self-Portraits, Leon Stein and Philip Taft, eds. (New York: Arno and The New York Times, 1971) 77-82.

In the same year, a Fall River, Massachusetts worker spoke of her life in the mill:

> I must of been about fourteen when I went to weavin' and I learnt quick. . . . At first the noise is fierce, but you get used to it. Lots of us is deaf--weavers--that's one reason I couldn't get that second girl place. The lady said I couldn't hear the door bell if it would ring. . . . when. . . a girl gets hurt, you can't hear her shout--not if she just screams, you can't. She's got to wait 'till you see her. . . . Sickness is the worst. When you drive on eight looms all the time in busy season you get sort of 'spent,' and you catch cold easy. In winter they don't shovel off the paths half the time 'round them mills, and you got to go right out of the mill to your knees in snow. Some of the girls take sick awful sudden and never get back for their pay envelopes--they go that quick sometimes. . . . when they gave us twelve looms I didn't see that we could make out to live at all. . . . But that don't make no matter--there's plenty waitin' at the gates for our jobs.[5]

The above women worked in legal establishments, where these conditions were permitted.

The plight of women working in the "sweating system" was even worse. This system "thrives upon the newly-arrived immigrants, the miseries and misfortunes of the very poor and upon the helplessness of women and little children . . . pays no regular rate of wages and has no prescribed hours of work."[6] A sweatshop began with a workman with some cash who hired a room in a tenement house, which he outfitted with

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[5] Gertrude Barnum, "The Story of a Fall River Mill Girl," 2 February 1905, Workers Speak: Self-Portraits, 28-30.

[6] Ida Van Etten, "The Sweating System, Charity, and Organization," 8 December 1890, Root of Bitterness: Documents of the Social History of American Women, Nancy F. Cott, ed. (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1972), 327.

several machines, charging his employees three dollars a month for their use, and paying them for each piece of clothing they completed. Factory inspectors could not find these rooms, which were hidden away in garrets and cellars. In an address entitled "The Condition of Women Workers Under the Present Industrial System," delivered at the National Convention of the American Federation of Labor (1890), Ida M. Van Etten described this deplorable situation:

> One day last August I visited a tenement-house in Ludlow street, entirely given up to the "sweaters." In every room were crowded together from six to ten men and women, four or five machines, with a cooking-stove at white heat, for the use of the pressers. Women, with white, pinched faces, unkempt hair, dressed in ragged, dirty "unwomanly rags," were working from sixteen to eighteen hours a day for a pittance of from 50 to 75 cents. No words of mine can picture to you the horror of it--the dirt, the squalor, the food these people eat, the clothes they wear, the beds they sleep in, the air they breathe, and more pitiful than all, their weary faces, out of which all hope and joy had long since been banished. All make up a scene that would linger in the mind, like Doré's pictures of Dante's "Inferno."[7]

Driven by financial necessity, these women, untrained for work outside the home, knew of no other way to survive.

Were the women who entered the theatrical profession more skilled than the workers who suffered in the factories and sweatshops? Not necessarily--many of them learned on the job. There were obvious advantages to working on the stage. Stars of the ten-twenty-thirty theatre (so-called because of the prices of admission) enjoyed the kind of

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[7] Cott, 327-30.

adoration later reserved for film personalities. According to Marian Spitzer, who wrote about vaudeville and popular theatre:

> there is no actor or actress in the legitimate theater that can stir a multitude in the way that movie people can. . . . in a lesser degree the heroes of the ten-twenty-thirty had the same kind of following. They were personal idols, not merely revered and admired performers.[8]

In addition, actresses did not suffer the harrowing conditions described above, although they encountered different types of problems. However, the theatre was not open to all females. In order to embark on a career in the theatre, women needed certain physical characteristics--most actresses were judged on their looks and their charm. In addition, they were required to read and memorize lines, and to possess a varied wardrobe.

Some women who became successful actresses went on to manage their own theatres, as did Mrs. Mary Gibbs Spooner and her daughters Cecil and Edna May. Theatre management was a supervisory position in which women leased theatres, formed and directed their own companies in plays of their choosing, and oversaw every aspect of production and publicity. Women also headed their own touring companies, which combined the above jobs with the additional responsibility of transporting people and property to

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[8] Marian Spitzer, "Ten-Twenty-Thirty: The Passing of the Popular-Priced Circuit," Saturday Evening Post, 22 August 1925, 42.

theatres throughout the country, as did Lillian Mortimer, who also wrote plays and starred in them. Women wrote and published novelizations based on popular plays of the time, taught acting, advised other women who wanted to pursue stage careers, served as advance agents and press agents, and were the equals of men in prestige and fortune. The theatre was one of the few fields women could enter without previous training and succeed on a level with men.

Why didn't more women embark on a life in the theatre? The anti-theatrical prejudice, dating from Roman times, continued to taint the lives of nineteenth-century actresses. Claudia Johnson explains:

> In the United States, in her own time, the stigma attached to the nineteenth-century actress's profession was doubly strong because of the arm of New England Puritanism, still reaching out of its own grave, and because of the inordinate power of the Protestant church which had flatly declared the theater, with its illusion, emotion, and sensuality, to be the enemy of all religion. . . . In the eyes of many Americans, it also posed a constant threat to the sacred American home, to its fireside angel, the ideal American mother, and to the very fabric of the nation.[9]

Many women preferred to see their daughters toiling in the most menial and intolerable positions rather than prostitute themselves by entering the theatre.

But gradually conditions for women workers improved to the extent that they were able to have the time, money, and energy to attend the theatre as audience members. By 1900,

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[9] Claudia D. Johnson, American Actress: Perspective on the Nineteenth Century (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1984), 4.

expanding opportunities for women in offices, restaurants, and department stores helped to create a better working environment and more time for leisure.[10] An 1886 New York State statute prohibited "minors and women under twenty-one from working in manufacturing more than ten hours or sixty hours a week;" the restriction was extended to include all female factory workers in 1899. In 1912, women's manufacturing workday was further curtailed to nine hours and in 1914, "women's work in the city's mercantile stores" was likewise limited.[11]

These laws were not always enforced, but women found other ways to protect themselves: they began to join unions in the early twentieth century, such as the Women's Trade Union League, along with countless smaller unions throughout the country. Through unionization women fought for shorter hours, better conditions, and equal financial opportunities with men.[12] In 1909-10, 30,000 shirtwaist makers in New York, eighty per cent of whom were women, staged a five-week strike, which "at times seemed to be an expression of the woman's movement rather than the labor movement," because of the "emotional endurance, fearlessness and entire willingness" of these women, who had no trade-union

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[10] Peiss, 34, 38.

[11] Ibid., 42-43.

[12] Barbara Mayer Wertheimer, We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 265-95.

experience, to face danger and suffering for their cause.[13] Other strikes followed, leading to an increased awareness of the plight of unskilled workers.

With increasing leisure time and higher pay, the working-class population turned to the theatre for cheap entertainment. Nasaw argues that "the rise of public amusements was a by-product of the enormous expansion of the cities."[14] With the development and increased use of electric lights, which brightened the theatre districts, and electric trolleys and trains to transport the audience, the city became "as much a place of play as a place of work."[15]

The type of entertainment described in this study belongs to the category of popular, as opposed to legitimate, theatre. Lawrence W. Levine addresses the separation between the two types of culture in his book, Highbrow, Lowbrow. He maintains that "the process of divorcing popular entertainment from the legitimate stage, which had been gradually at work throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, came to fruition in the twentieth."[16] By the turn of the century, audiences were no

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[13] Rosalyn Baxandall, Linda Gordon, and Susan Reverby, America's Working Women (New York: Random House, 1976), 187-93.

[14] Nasaw, 3.

[15] Ibid., 9.

[16] Lawrence W. Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 78.

longer heterogeneous blends of "high, low, and folk cultures," but became increasingly fragmented, comprising a "series of discrete cultures that had less and less to do with one another."[17]

Luc Sante, in his book Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York, points out the "Broadway-Bowery polarity," distinguishing Broadway as the "theater of the bourgeoisie, the standard, the temple," and the Bowery as "the circus of the masses."[18] In their biography of Lew Fields, From the Bowery to Broadway, Armond and L. Marc Fields explain that the "Bowery was Broadway's antithesis; they were opposite sides of the same coin." They claim that the "art and business of modern Broadway" was born in the Bowery in the early 1880s, which had its "geographical starting point" at Chatham Square, where the Second and Third Avenue elevated railways met. The Fields identified the Bowery as a "catch-all term for the teeming Lower East Side neighborhoods where the immigrant hordes lived," representing "a cultural milieu: it had its own characteristic denizens (the lower-class immigrant), dwellings (the tenement), commerce . . . and most important of all, its own entertainments."[19]

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[17] Ibid., 207-08.

[18] Luc Sante, Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1991), 72.

[19] Armond Fields and L. Marc Fields, From the Bowery to Broadway: Lew Fields and the Roots of American Popular Theater (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4-5.

In order to differentiate between theatrical offerings on Broadway as opposed to the Bowery, one must observe the location of the theatres, the price of admission, the companies performing in them, and the types of plays produced. In the last years of the nineteenth century, when the Bowery theatres turned to foreign-language dramas, a new crop of theatre impresarios, determined to take advantage of the ever-increasing clientele, refurbished and leased theatres throughout Manhattan and Brooklyn. Many of these theatres, seeking to attract the working classes, sprang up in the lower part of Manhattan, including the Grand Street Theatre, the Academy of Music and the Fourteenth Street Theatres (both on Fourteenth Street), the Star (on Thirteenth), and the Grand Opera House (Twenty-third Street). Some theatres encroached on the midtown area, such as the Third Avenue (on Thirty-first Street) and the American (Forty-second); while others, like Blaney's Lincoln Square Theatre (on the sight of today's Lincoln Center), were located further uptown. There were several in Brooklyn, such as the Lee Avenue (Williamsburg), the Amphion (Bedford Avenue), the Bijou (Smith and Livingston Streets) and the Park (Fulton Street); and the Metropolis served the Bronx. Meanwhile, the high-class Broadway theatres moved uptown, closer to the location they now occupy. In the 1890s the term "the Gay White Way" came into currency, at that time defining an area from the Hoffman House at Twenty-

sixth Street to Rector's, between Forty--third and Forty-fourth Streets."[20] In New York's First Theatrical Center, John W. Frick notes:

> By the beginning of the twentieth century, Union Square had fallen victim to New York's unceasing march northward and had been superseded as the city's Rialto, first by Madison Square, and then by Long Acre Square (renamed Times Square in 1904). By 1900 there was a steadily growing cluster of theatres at Long Acre Square.[21]

Both the Broadway and working-class theatres became known for the type of entertainment they presented, and prices of admission were set accordingly.

Theatre producers of the time, realizing that there was a substantial population of New Yorkers who could not afford to pay the two-dollar price of admission to the high-class theatres, lowered their prices. Corse Payton, a highly successful and astute theatre impresario who opened a stock company on Lee Avenue in Brooklyn in 1900 is credited with having begun the "ten-twenty-thirty" price scale (probably suggested by his actor/brother Isaac).[22] His patrons paid ten cents to sit in the cheapest seats--the upper balcony or gallery--while the best seats cost no more than thirty cents. The idea immediately took off, as producers

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[20] Sante, 89.

[21] John W. Frick, New York's First Theatrical Center: The Rialto at Union Square (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 151.

[22] David Perkins, "'Ten, Twent,'Thirt'--The 'Golden Days' of Repertory," Equity Magazine, November 1959, 9.

scrambled to bring entertainment to the people at "popular prices." They did not always retain Payton's scale, often charging from twenty-five cents to a "dollar top," but they still undercut the high-priced houses.

Nasaw remarks:

> Theater owners across the country were . . . recognizing that it was far better to lower prices and play to full houses than to keep prices high and theaters half-empty. . . . The proliferation of popular-priced theaters made it easier than ever before for city folk to see live theater.[23]

Ten-twenty-thirty came to represent not merely a price scale but an entire movement of theatrical activity.

Marian Spitzer defined the term as a "catch phrase, a colloquialism used to describe several different varieties of low-priced entertainment."[24] For Don Wilmeth, ten-twenty-thirty comprised

> popular, sensational melodrama, so named originally because of the ticket prices of ten, twenty and thirty cents. By the late nineteenth century, it referred to companies performing popular melodrama of a stereotyped form in the smaller theatres throughout the country.[25]

Ten-twenty-thirty encompassed both stock or resident companies and touring companies. Tours were booked into theatres known as "combination houses," which did not have their own companies. While Spitzer dates the organization of the ten-twenty-thirty movement to about 1882, this study

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[23] Nasaw, 36-37.

[24] Spitzer, 40.

[25] Don B. Wilmeth, The Language of American Popular Entertainment (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 270.

will focus on the period between 1900, when Payton's theatre adopted its unusual price policy, and 1910, when the film industry began to appropriate the theatres. Frank Rahill, using 1900-1910 as his parameters for the heyday of the ten-twenty-thirty theatre, observes that this was the period when "cheap popular theatre emerged as an independent industry, self-sufficient in every department; it had its own repertory, acted by its own companies in its own houses, across the country as well as in New York."[26]

One type of touring company within the ten-twenty-thirty theatre was the "popular-priced road show," also called the "blood-and-thunder show." Its product was sensational melodrama, which often opened in New York City on the Lower East Side and then toured the country for about forty weeks. Each company had its own star or stars and played at a different theatre every week.[27] Thirty-five popular-priced theatres were owned or controlled by Stair and Havlin, whose "circuit" or "wheel" extended throughout the country.[28]

These melodramas proliferated during the first decade of the twentieth century, when producers, who regarded the theatre as big business, hired playwrights to churn them

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[26] Frank Rahill, The World of Melodrama (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), 271.

[27] Spitzer, 40.

[28] Owen Davis, My First Fifty Years in the Theatre (Boston: Walter H. Baker Company, 1950), 27.

out. Frank Rahill observes:

> gifted organizers, adroit financiers, born gamblers, and keen, unsentimental students of popular taste and psychology, they standardized the product they dealt in, promoted it sensationally and marketed it efficiently on a nationwide scale. And made it pay as it had never paid before.[29]

Brooks McNamara envisions this movement as the commercialization of an old form--melodrama, which began at the turn of the nineteenth century--in a new way by theatre impresarios at the turn of the twentieth century. He notes a similarity between the marketing strategies of ten-twenty-thirty producers and those in the legitimate theatre, such as the Shuberts, whose "chief product was entertainment," successfully packaged by applying merchandising techniques to attract audiences.[30]

A second type of popular-priced touring organization was the "rep show" or repertoire company, which Spitzer dubbed the "tomorrow-night-East-Lynne school of drama." These companies toured smaller towns and communities for a week at a time playing a different show each day, often performing in non-theatrical spaces: in "op'ry houses," town halls, academies of music or even barns.[31] There were also tent shows or "tent rep," for which companies supplied

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[29] Rahill, 274.

[30] Brooks McNarama, "The Shubert Brothers and the 'Box-Office' Play," paper presented at the Melodrama Conference (London: British Film Institute, 1992), 1-17; meeting with author, 2 April 1997.

[31] Spitzer, 40.

and set up their own large canvas tents (127 feet long and 60 feet wide) in each location.[32]

The repertoire companies did not limit their productions to melodramas, but chose their material from hundreds of standard plays. The melodramas they did produce were usually tried and true drawing cards such as The Two Orphans, East Lynne, Ten Nights in a Barroom, and The Octoroon. Other types of plays they presented were "Roman-shirt shows" such as Julius Caesar, Quo Vadis, Ingomar the Barbarian, and Virginius; recent New York productions that had been successful in high-class theatres (often pirated, or produced without permission); and dramatizations of popular novels. Actors in repertoire companies usually had to perform specialties between the acts while the scenery was changed ("olios"), and "double in brass," or play an instrument in band concerts to publicize the performances.[33] According to David Perkins, an actor who toured with a ten-twenty-thirty rep company, there were close to two hundred companies in the "Golden Days" of

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[32] See Theatre in a Tent by William L. Slout (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972) and Slout's pamphlet, "Plays of Repertoire and Stock 1920-1930," Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

[33] William A. Brady, Showman (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1937), 40-41. See also Billie Henderson Schuller, "Typical Musical Performances in Repertoire Theatre," paper presented at the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, 20 April 1996.

touring.[34]

The concept of the stock company, which had been slowly dying out in the last third of the nineteenth century, was reborn under the ten-twenty-thirty aegis.[35] "In many cities, enterprising theater owners, recognizing the potential in the 'untapped market for low-cost entertainment,' assembled stock companies to perform new and standard works at popular prices."[36] Harry P. Mawson, writing in Theatre, contended that this new type of stock company evolved from the repertoire shows. Managers realized that these shows earned profits even with their low admission prices and decided to lease theatres and set up resident companies. While stock did not flourish in Manhattan, it was alive and well in Brooklyn.[37] Edward William Mammen describes the differences between these turn-of-the-century stock companies and their nineteenth-century counterparts, like the Boston Museum. The new versions, which Mammen compares to the summer-stock companies of his day (1945), had "much smaller acting companies, cheaper admission prices, a weekly change of bill, and twelve

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[34] Perkins, 9.

[35] James C. Burge, Lines of Business: Casting Practice and Policy in the American Theatre 1752-1899 (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), 207-8, 239.

[36] Nasaw, 37.

[37] Harry P. Mawson, "Revival of the Stock Company," Theatre, February 1903, 38.

performances a week." The Boston Museum had only eight performances weekly, including two matinees.[38]

Resident stock companies offered every type of play, including melodramas, comedies, classical pieces, and farces. As with the repertoire companies, plays that were successful in the higher class theatres were performed in the ten-twenty-thirty theatres several seasons later, but for the most part the stock companies were in a better financial position and could pay royalties for them. David Nasaw states:

> If there was a hierarchical division between the high-priced and popular-priced audiences, it was not based on the contents of the shows. The only discernable difference was in timing. It took a season or two for current productions to reach the cheaper theaters.[39]

This overstates the case; there were hundreds of melodramas specifically written for the ten-twenty-thirty theatre.

This theatrical movement bloomed for a certain time and then disappeared entirely. Theatre historian Michael Booth comments, "the 10-20-30 school represents the climax and the glory of American melodrama," while George Jean Nathan, who knew the form because he was in the audience at the time, lamented: "And nothing like them, no fancy imitations, however improved, have seemed or probably ever will seem quite the same." Speaking of one of the most popular

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[38] Edward William Mammen, The Old Stock Company School of Acting: A Study of the Boston Museum (Boston: Trustees of the Public Library, 1945), 11.

[39] Nasaw, 41.

playwrights of the genre, Nathan added, "Theodore Kremer died with Santa Claus."[40] Although Garrett H. Leverton, who published several well-known melodramas of this school, was critical of the extremes of "emotion, characterization, sentiment and dialogue" in these plays, he admitted that

> in spite of all the indictments which can be piled up against the plays of the Ten-Twenty-Thirty theater, one rather challenging fact remains to disturb the scoffer . . . these plays still remain the show pieces of a theater which came closer to reaching a universal audience than any other theater in all of history.[41]

Comparing the popularity of film in her day (1925) to the ten-twenty-thirty theatre at the turn of the century, Marian Spitzer noted: "thousands attended the [legitimate] theater then, but hundreds of thousands attended the ten-twenty-thirty."[42] Yet this theatre died, and its plays along with it, victims to competition from nickelodeons, where a nickel bought access to a program of several silent films.

This study will attempt to rediscover the women of the ten-twenty-thirty theatre--who they were and how they rose to positions of power. I will argue that as women became more visible in theatre audiences, and managers began to

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[40] Michael Booth, ed., Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), 38; George Jean Nathan, Mr. George Jean Nathan Presents (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1917), 33.

[41] Garrett H. Leverton, ed., The Great Diamond Robbery & Other Recent Melodramas Vol. 8, America's Lost Plays (1940; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), vii-viii.

[42] Spitzer, 42.

understand the need to attract and keep these women as patrons, they were influenced by the tastes and desires of their female clientele. Thus, through the power of women in the marketplace, there were some changes in the product offered: women wanted to see females onstage with whom they could identify, influencing playwrights to create characters who reflected the concerns of women (for example, factory girls); they chose favorites among the actresses in the companies, who went on to demand and receive high salaries and enter into positions of authority as managers; women patrons expressed their preferences as to what plays they wanted to see, which encouraged a few female writers to create more active roles for the women in their plays; and because women were voracious consumers of popular novels, some female writers wrote and published novelizations of well-known melodramas.

I have organized the material thematically, considering the contribution of women in the following roles: audience members, actresses in male plays, theatre managers, writers of novelizations, and finally playwrights who produced and performed in their own work. From the outset it will be clear that the growing female presence was part of a social evolution that began with the vast qualitative and quantitative changes in New York City's populace at the dawn of the new century.

Chapter One: Building a Female Audience

In New York City, where the population skyrocketed 126.8 per cent between 1890 and 1900, there was an enormous market ripe for theatrical entertainment.[1] Both men and women who worked outside the home looked forward to amusements in their leisure time and were willing to spend some of their small earnings for their own enjoyment. The ten-twenty-thirty theatre was born when producers jumped in to fill this demand. David Nasaw observes that with the rise of these popular-priced theatres throughout the country, the inhabitants of the smaller cities who had "in the 1880s been starved for live entertainment were by the late 1890s and early 1900s visited by dozens of theatrical troupes all year long."[2]

Frank J. Beckman, who recorded his reminiscences of the ten-twenty-thirty theatre as a youth, witnessed many of the melodramas written for its audiences. He noted that by 1904 there were eighteen theatres in the Metropolitan area devoted to popular-priced melodrama, most of which had a

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[1] Ruth Rosen, The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 39.

[2] Nasaw, Going Out, 37-40.

seating capacity of fifteen hundred or more.[3] As to the patrons who attended these theatres between 1900 and 1910 Beckman writes:

> Nine million immigrants crowded through the gates of Ellis Island, the majority of whom wandered no further than New York's lower East Side. They were particularly attracted to the popular theatre whose plays were cheap and sensational, and they apparantly [sic] presented no language barrier, which was evident by the throngs that packed the houses each week, and almost every popular-priced theatre had a population of at least a quarter of a million souls within a radius of ten blocks of the theatre.[4]

But the theatre was not the only form of entertainment that beckoned to the masses. Other popular amusements included music-halls, concert-saloons, dance-halls, dime museums, and beer-gardens. Problems inherent in the growth and commercialization of leisure in American cities developed, such as drinking, gambling, and prostitution, encouraged by corrupt municipal governments.[5]

In their attempt to protect young working-class women, Progressive reformers searched for ways to save the family and eradicate prostitution. Mrs. Belle Moskowitz, head of the Committee on Amusement Resources for Working Class Girls, along with merchants, professors, settlement workers

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[3] Frank J. Beckman, "The Vanished Villains: An Exercise in Nostalgia," unpublished manuscript, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center (hereafter cited as Billy Rose Theatre Collection), 30.

[4] Beckman, 6-7.

[5] Foster Rhea Dulles, America Learns to Play: A History of Popular Recreation 1607-1940 (1940; reprint, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1963), 220.

and religious leaders formed the Committee of Fourteen, the major anti-vice organization in New York City after 1904. This group suggested a "three-pronged program": they wanted to rid popular amusements of their worst features (prostitution, liquor, salacious movies); to invent clean, well-regulated recreations; and to remove the monetary need for prostitution among young women by establishing minimum wage and by eliminating abuses in the factory, department store and domestic service.[6]

This chapter will analyze the attempts of theatre managers, producers, playwrights and performers to attract respectable working-class women to the popular-priced theatres. As early as 1881, Tony Pastor, singer and theatre impresario, opened the first "straight, clean variety show" ever offered in this country.[7] This innovation took place on October 24th in his "New Fourteenth Street Theatre," in what used to be Tammany Hall. Until that time, only males and "gals on the trampish side" attended variety theatres, but Pastor was determined to change the makeup of the audience. Douglas Gilbert argues that "Pastor's move was mainly (and frankly) for profit, a canny bid to double the audience by attracting respectable women--wives, sisters,

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[6] Lewis A. Erenberg, Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 63-65.

[7] Douglas Gilbert, American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times (New York: Dover Publications, 1940), 113.

sweethearts."[8]

Once he saw that women began to attend his theatre, Pastor offered them gifts to keep their interest. In an essay praising Pastor's ingenuity in capturing the attention of the ladies, Julius Bromberg remarked: "it took an offer of twenty-five dresses to break the ice and the women came in droves, and when he next offered twenty-five bonnets Pastor had to hire twenty-five police to keep order."[9] Bromberg cited James L. Ford's comment that "the most important moment in the history of the development of the theatre in this country was that in which Tony Pastor first gave away his coal, flour, and dress patterns to secure the patronage of respectable women."[10]

In her book Cheap Amusements, Kathy Peiss affirmed that Pastor also enticed women by running matinees and sponsoring "Ladies' Invitation Nights," to which females were admitted free.[11] Gradually other managers imitated Pastor, offering clean shows and eliminating the bar and the prostitutes that usually accompanied variety entertainments. Although Pastor was not financially astute enough to capitalize on his increased audiences, others, like Benjamin Franklin Keith,

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[8] Gilbert, 113-14.

[9] Julius Bromberg, Clipping File: Tony Pastor, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center (hereafter cited as Clipping File____, BRTC).

[10] Julius Bromberg, Clipping File: Tony Pastor, BRTC.

[11] Peiss, Cheap Amusements, 142.

Edward F. Albee, and F.F. Proctor were, turning variety into vaudeville and creating an entertainment empire.

In 1898 Keith explained:

> Two things I determined at the outset should prevail in the new scheme. One was that my fixed policy of cleanliness and order should be continued, and the other that the stage show must be free from vulgarisms and coarseness of any kind, so that the house and entertainment would directly appeal to the support of ladies and children--in fact that my playhouse must be as "homelike" an amusement resort as it was possible to make it. While a certain proportion of the male sex may favor stage performances of a risqué order, none of them would care to bring the female members of their families to witness an entertainment of that description, and I think that a majority of men who do visit playhouses where that sort of entertainment is provided have a feeling of shame when they get outside and the glamor is removed. In the early days of my business career, many worthy but mistaken people ridiculed the idea of a clean and respectable house and entertainment being conducted at the then price of admission (only ten cents), but I successfully demonstrated that such a thing was possible.[12]

Keith created "lavish vaudeville palaces," establishing a booking syndicate throughout the country featuring star performers. His theatres were known as the "Sunday-school Circuit."[13] In his "New Theatre" which opened in Boston in 1894, Keith offered magnificent foyers, reception rooms, and three "sumptuously furnished apartments reserved exclusively for the use of ladies."[14]

The insistence of Keith and his followers on

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[12] B. F. Keith, "The Vogue of the Vaudeville," American Vaudeville As Seen By Its Contemporaries, edited by Charles W. Stein (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 17-18.

[13] Peiss, 142-43.

[14] Nasaw, 29.

appropriate language and stage business was illustrated by the vaudeville playwright and performer, Edwin Milton Royle, who reproduced the "Notice to Performers" found on the backstage walls of the houses in which he played:

> You are hereby warned that your act must be free from all vulgarity and suggestiveness in words, action, and costume, while playing in any of Mr. -----'s houses, and all vulgar, double-meaning and profane words and songs must be cut out of your act before the first performance. If you are in doubt as to what is right or wrong, submit it to the resident manager at rehearsal.
>
> Such words as Liar, Slob, Son-of-a-Gun, Devil, Sucker, Damn, and all other words unfit for the ears of ladies and children, also any reference to questionable streets, resorts, localities, and barrooms, are prohibited under fine of instant discharge.
>
> GENERAL MANAGER[15]

Royle claimed he was told by a woman in the audience who felt safe bringing a young girl to the performances, that although vaudeville theatres "may offend the taste, they never offend one's sense of decency."[16]

F.F. Proctor, having leased a theatre on twenty-third street in walking distance to the "Ladies' Mile" department stores, advertised his "Ladies Club Theater," opening at eleven o'clock in the morning and playing continuously throughout the day. Publicity posters announced, "After Breakfast Go to Proctor's."[17] Vaudeville audiences included

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[15] Edwin Milton Royle, "The Vaudeville Theatre," American Vaudeville As Seen By Its Contemporaries, 24.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Nasaw, 23.

young shop girls and sales ladies, mothers, with or without their children, and suburban shoppers, visiting the city for a day.[18]

Vaudeville was not the only popular entertainment that attracted women at the turn of the century. Young women of the working classes sought theatrical amusements in growing numbers. In a 1903-5 survey of wage-earners living in a lower West Side neighborhood, Louise Bolard More found that although many of the working-class families could only afford to attend the theatre a few times a year, women in the more prosperous of these families "go regularly every week to Proctor's, Weber and Field's, or the Fourteenth Street Theatre, but rarely to an uptown theatre."[19]

Annie Marion MacLean's study of "Wage-Earning Women," conducted in 1907-8, found that more New York women (356 out of 1476) listed the theatre as their favorite amusement than any other pastime. These women were mostly single, living at home, under twenty-five years of age, and earned less than seven dollars per week.[20]

Michael Davis, in his 1911 study, The Exploitation of Pleasure, reported that in the low-priced theatres, which

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[18] Ibid., 26-27.

[19] Louise Bolard More, Wage-Earners' Budgets: A Study of Standards and Cost of Living in New York City (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1907), 142.

[20] Annie Marion MacLean, Wage-Earning Women (New York: Macmillan Company, 1910), 72.

included popular-priced plays, vaudeville and burlesque, one third of the audience members were women, and among children under sixteen, one-third were female. He found that "the majority of the audiences are of the working class, a minority of the clerical, and a minute remainder is made up of vagrants and leisure-class persons."[21]

By tapping into a market that had previously been ignored, astute theatre entrepreneurs greatly extended the size of their audiences. Respectable working-class women, who could not afford to attend the legitimate theatre but did not want to be degraded by questionable entertainments, flocked to the popular-priced theatres. Michael Davis, distinguishing between "cheap" or popular-priced and "standard" or legitimate theatres, observed that because the cheap theatres offered two to four times as many performances as the standard theatres, and the seating capacity of the former was twice as large, the weekly capacity of the popular-priced theatres more than quadrupled that of the legitimate.[22]

Corse Payton, the manager of a resident stock company in Brooklyn, mounted a successful campaign to attract women and children to his audience. Born in Centreville, Iowa in

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[21] Michael M. Davis, Jr. The Exploitation of Pleasure: A Study of Commercial Recreations in New York City (New York: Department of Child Hygiene of the Russell Sage Foundation, 1911), 28-29.

[22] Ibid., 24-27.

1868, Payton had performed in a touring repertoire company with members of his family, in which he acted, handled stage effects and props, and sold tickets.[23] He made his fortune as a theatrical manager and producer in Brooklyn, from which he launched several touring companies. Dubbed "The King of Williamsburg," he was forced to sell his famous Lee Avenue theatre in 1915 after fifteen years, because the city "ran a trolley right through my balcony," and he died penniless nineteen years later.[24]

Payton's theatres were clean and beautifully decorated. One article described his theatre as "a sort of family affair, where fathers and mothers take their children year after year and travel along with the members of the company, whom they look upon as old friends and love."[25] Performers were required to "comport themselves in private life as ladies and gentlemen."[26] Gertrude Nelson Andrews, an early biographer (1901) of Payton, observed:

> One of the greatest needs to-day of the big crowded metropolis is more wholesome amusements for the masses who have only lean pocketbooks out of which to pay for

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[23] Gertrude Nelson Andrews, The Romance of a Western Boy: The Story of Corse Payton (New York: The Andrews Press, 1901), 1-53.

[24] "Corse Payton Dies in Brooklyn at 66," New York Times, 24 February 1934.

[25] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Collection Envelope #1731: Corse Payton, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center (hereafter cited as Locke Envelope____).

[26] Harry P. Mawson, "In Stock," Theatre, July 1913, 29.

their pleasure.

> All honor. . . to Corse Payton, who is helping to fill this need. . . . Twice each day performances are given in his theater. The plays selected are from the very best written. The whole atmosphere of his house is clean and wholesome, and the prices of admission are within the reach of every one.[27]

When Payton first announced his low price scale, people were skeptical. He would advertise "thirty players for thirty cents; a cent an actor, and you can throw me in as a premium."[28] At the Academy of Music, which he leased in 1910, Payton put up signs, asking: "any manager can give a thirty cent show for two dollars but how many have the sand--or cash--to give a two dollar show for thirty cents?"[29] Payton, sometimes called the "Prince of Popular Prices," claimed to have turned away patrons at every performance.

Profit was the raison d'être of the ten-twenty-thirty theatre. In an article entitled "10-20-30 Melodrama Profits Brought Fortunes to Producers," Helen Ormsbee stated: "Although play production is supposed to be highly speculative, one form of it, the popular-priced melodrama, was an unfailing moneymaker for many years in the earlier part of the present century."[30] Because of the low ticket

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[27] Andrews, 121, 118.

[28] New York Times, 24 February 1934.

[29] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Envelope: Corse Payton.

[30] Helen Ormsbee, "10-20-30 Melodrama Profits Brought Fortunes to Producers," New York Herald Tribune, n.d., Clipping File: Drama: Types: Melodrama, BRTC.

prices, theatre managers could not afford to have empty houses. Reviewers did not often attend the popular-priced theatres, leaving the managers one option: they had to appeal directly to their audiences.

Payton chose his plays based on audience polls. He was famous for his curtain speeches before the last (fourth) act, in which he would greet the audience, advertise the next play, and ask what they wanted to see. Encouraging them to address him as "Corse," he invited them to visit him in his office, whose door was always open. Arthur Ruhl reproduced one of these speeches:

> Hello, audience! Next week we'll revive that grand old melodrama, "The Count of Monte Cristo." Splendid play --brings out the full strength of the company. After that, Mrs. Elinor Glyn's "Three Weeks." Beautiful scenic effects--good show--don't miss it. Prices same as usual--ten, twenty, and thirty cents. Dollar twenty a dozen. Ten cents admission--ten cents for "Three Weeks." Cheaper than room rent. . . . If there's anything you'd like, let us know. List of plays out in the lobby--a hundred of 'em. Pick out the one you like best and tell us about it. That's what we're here for. Pretty soon we're going to put on a revival of the greatest melodrama ever written, "The Two Orphans" . . . . Ten cents admission--five cents an orphan . . . . And if there's any play you want, just vote for it. We'll play it. We play anything from "Hamlet" to polo. Good-by people!. . . I'll come back![31]

If Payton happened to be playing a role in one of his productions, even if he were supposed to be dead, he would jump up to give his curtain speech. There is a story about his production of Hamlet, following which he ran under the

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[31] Arthur Ruhl, Second Nights: People and Ideas of the Theatre To-Day (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 161-62.

descending curtain to the apron of the stage in order to announce that the play would be performed at the usual price scale for the rest of the week.[32]

Payton was grateful to his loyal audiences.

> I have a class of patrons. . . best there is, and they are all my own. They have followed me through thick and thin, they have applauded me no matter what I have handed them and they have given me not only the reputation which I now proudly bear. . . but they have built up my pocketbook till it resembles a polar bear in seal time.[33]

He was generous to them in return. In 1906, the New York Star featured a photo of a Brooklyn dock filled with Payton and thousands of his New York and Brooklyn friends on the steamer Grand Republic, whom he had invited as his guests to travel up the Hudson for the day to Oscawana Island, near West Point.[34] Two thousand three hundred men, women and children took advantage of his generosity. His actress/wife Etta Reed entertained the wives and daughters on board with fruit, ices, and tea, while Payton played poker with the men. According to the newspaper, even he "was unprepared for the enthusiasm with which his Payton outing was taken up."[35]

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[32] New York Morning Telegraph, 9 July 1910, Locke Envelope: Corse Payton.

[33] New York Morning Telegraph, 27 January 1910, Locke Envelope: Corse Payton.

[34] New York Star, 26 June 1909, Locke Envelope: Corse Payton.

[35] New York Morning Telegraph, 18 June 1909, Locke Envelope: Corse Payton.

Manager Charles E. Blaney inaugurated a cab system to transport patrons to see his protégé Cecil Spooner at his Lincoln Square Theatre. For twenty-five cents per person he would have them driven from as far north as 125th Street, and as far south as Canal Street to the present site of Lincoln Center.[36]

In another attempt to ingratiate themselves with local communities, managers offered their resident theatres for charitable functions. On Christmas Day, 1906, managers of the popular-priced theatres in Brooklyn held a special event for poor children. Payton lent his theatre to the Sunshine Christmas Tree Association for a vaudeville performance; his half-sister, Mrs. Mary Gibbs Spooner, at her Bijou Theatre, distributed presents to the children, assisted by the Spooner Sunshine Society, and Charles E. Blaney offered the use of his Brooklyn Theatre to the Christmas Tree fund.[37]

The profitability of the touring melodrama companies also depended on their capacity to please their audiences. Every aspect of the popular-priced theatre was dedicated to that purpose, from the manipulation of the emotions and the use of stock characters in the plays, to the sensational aspect of the spectacular productions, to the lurid

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[36] "Cabs to Carry you to see Cecil," New York Telegram, 6 June 1907, Locke Envelope #2136: Cecil Spooner.

[37] "Managers as Santa Claus; Brooklyn's Poor Children Will Be Well Taken Care Of," New York Morning Telegraph, 25 December 1906, Locke Envelope: Corse Payton.

publicity posters. Indeed, Marian Spitzer believed that "the chief claim to recognition of the ten-twenty-thirty lies in the fact that it was in its day the purveyor of entertainment to the multitude."[38]

Both Owen Davis and Theodore Kremer, the two most successful and prolific melodramatists of this theatre, demonstrated that their plays were written with the audience in mind. Davis believed that "plays were always written to dramatize the composite emotion of an audience--to give an audience what it wanted, and to make the last act of your play come out as the people out front wanted it to come out.[39]

Davis learned his playwriting technique by going

> every night . . . to the fifteen-cent gallery of one of the popular-priced houses, making a real study, not of the plays but of the audiences. When the very hard-boiled gentleman who sat next to me wept or laughed or applauded, I wasn't at first always sure of his reason, my duller mind not at that time responding to the sentimental dramatic or comedy cue as quickly as his trained intelligence, and I made a point of falling into conversation with my neighbors in an effort to share as fully in the delight of those present as was possible for an unfortunate inhibited by a Harvard background.[40]

Theodore Kremer also sought input from his potential audience:

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[38] Spitzer, Saturday Evening Post, 42.

[39] Marguerite Tazelaar, "Owen Davis Looks at His Record," New York Herald Tribune, 20 March 1938.

[40] Owen Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1931), 35-36.

> Before I produce a play I invite my barber, my bootblack, my butcher and a few kindred souls, and to them I read my play. I watch them closely. If they are interested, good. If they begin to yawn and look about. . . then out comes the blue pencil.[41]

Both men understood that their primary responsibility was to write for an unsophisticated, working-class audience.

Kremer noted that the audiences were "all from Missouri"--they had to be shown everything. There had to be a certain logic, or "the instant you overstep the invisible line a fraction of an inch you will hear the gallery crowd yell and hoot." Kremer explained that had he wanted to stage Peter Pan, he would have had to provide a flying machine, and if he were to rewrite Hamlet for the ten-twenty-thirty audience, "Hamlet would have to deal a solar plexus to the King of Denmark every now and again, for the people I write for want realism, and they want it strong and clear."[42] In this theatre, nothing could be taken for granted.

Mega-producers like Al H. Woods and Charles E. Blaney, known as "The King of Melodrama," and "The Napoleon of Melodrama," respectively, developed plays by inventing a title, then ordering the lithographs for large publicity posters, and finally requesting writers to weave a narrative

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[41] Fort Wayne Journal, 25 November 1906, Locke Envelope #1067: Theodore Kremer.

[42] New York Herald, 26 January 1908, Clipping File: Theodore Kremer, Harvard Theatre Collection.

that connected the frightening pictures of physical peril.[43] Because of their ability to grab the attention of the intended theatre audiences, posters were vital to the success of a production. There was intense competition to cover every available inch of space with these advertisements. Beckman maintained that "no sooner had one billposter succeeded in slapping up a series of posters from his attraction, when a rival would appear out of nowhere and rapidly cover his competitors' lithographs with a line of paper from his own show."[44]

Posters had bright colors and big type to attract passers-by. based on the adage, "He who runs may read." They came in different sizes, according to Dwight Taylor, whose father Charles A. Taylor wrote and produced his share of melodramas:

> the one sheet, the three sheet, and the twenty-four sheet, which was nearly twenty feet in length and over eight feet high. The smallest size was for putting on ash cans, or, during the night, quickly slipping onto the side of a building where it said POST NO BILLS![45]

The posters, which identified the play in bold lettering, illustrated sensation scenes--daring rescues, horrific

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[43] George Herriman, Los Angeles Examiner, 9 February 1908, Robinson Locke Collection of Dramatic Scrapbooks ser. 2, vol. 308: Woods, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center (hereafter cited as Locke Scrapbook____); Holly Brooke Blaney, interviews with author, 16 June 1998 and 24 June 1998.

[44] Beckman, 54-5.

[45] Dwight Taylor, Blood-and-Thunder (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 13.

torture scenes, murders--under which was a caption with a thrilling line from the play. They could be found everywhere: telephone poles, windows of saloons, rooftops, abandoned buildings, fences, unguarded garbage cans, and on special stands or cases built for them "which in 1900 occupied three out of four corners of almost every street of New York's lower East Side."[46] There is even a story about a bill poster, most of whom earned three cents per sheet, who posted bills on his horse after it died from overwork.[47]

Ben Singer argued that one reason for the instant identification of the audience with melodrama was the fact that the dangers enacted onstage and depicted in the posters were replicated in their daily lives. They lived with horrors caused by electric trolley and automobile accidents, injuries caused by factory equipment, falls from buildings and bridges, and fires. Glaring headlines in the newspapers announced these disasters.[48]

Montrose Moses remarked that "melodramatic accessories" like trap doors, bridges to be blown up, walls to be scaled, torture-chambers, trains, and elevators were already constructed so that "there was little shaping done after the

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[46] Beckman, 55.

[47] Wells Hawks, "The Bill Poster," Theatre, May 1904, 151-52.

[48] Ben Singer, "A New and Urgent Need for Stimuli: Sensational Melodrama and Urban Modernity," paper presented at the Melodrama Conference (London: British Film Institute, 1992), 1-29.

situations were decided upon. The only thing left for the dramatist was to fill up the gaps with conversations which led, however irrelevantly, to the situations themselves."[49]

Melodramas written for the ten-twenty-thirty theatre presented characters that mirrored the audiences. Beckman noted that

> [the plays] were expressly written for the teeming masses of our great cities and they spoke the language of the men and women for whom they were set down. . . . [they] reflected the lives of the viewers with such lucidity that the spectators were able to identify themselves and their next-door neighbors.[50]

Immigrants from different countries were written into the melodramas, featuring characters that were Irish, Hebrew or Chinese, as well as typical American types like the familiar "Bowery B'hoy" and "G'hal," with their particular language and culture, sometimes known as "flash."[51] Denizens of the Bowery could also be seen in books of the time, from the adventure stories of Horatio Alger to Stephen Crane's exposé, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets. In the theatre, one could see these colorful characters both on the stage and in the audience, as the patrons cheered their alter egos, and hissed those who tried to thwart them.

Melodrama audiences were famous for their vocal participation in the plays. The boys who sat in the

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[49] Montrose J. Moses, The American Dramatist (1925; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), 303.

[50] Beckman, 4-7.

[51] Sante, Low Life, 78.

galleries often had to be reprimanded by a policeman who was hired to keep order. Many writers mocked the audiences for their naïveté, and their willingness to accept everything they were shown at face value. Porter Emerson Browne commented:

> the audience has no taste, no discrimination, no sense of the ridiculous to obscure or destroy appreciation. It cannot tell pathos from bathos, and to it the exaggerated, affected acting and mannerisms and enunciation of the players; the dull, tawdry absurdity of the scenery; the glaring inconsistencies in both production and text; the utter lack of logic; the hopeless impossibility of situation, convey only the impression of actual things that actually exist.[52]

Yet Browne admitted a certain envy of melodrama audiences, whom he called the "children of the theatre--the Peter Pans of stageland," because of "that infinite capacity for enjoyment that is theirs."[53] These audiences gave back to the actors as much as they received.

Charles T. Aldrich, a melodrama actor, claimed that performers in this type of play had to reverse

> the process of ordinary acting. . . . Instead of getting his reality and convincingness from the lines he must first convince the audience and then through them convince himself. You go for your gallery and the melodrama gallery gets more for its money than any other audience in the world. It is hard to cater to them for you can fail in two ways; either by being too good or by being too bad.[54]

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[52] Porter Emerson Browne, "The Mellowdrammer," Everybody's Magazine, September 1909, 354.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Jules Eckert Goodman, "The Lure of the Melodrama," Bohemian Magazine, February 1908, 191.

Another actor and playwright, Howard Hall, maintained that the melodrama audience "plays so big a part that the author puts in cues for it."[55] Playwrights, actors, and audiences were all aware of their responsibilities in the performance of a melodrama, and it was their combined contributions that ensured the success of the genre.

A key to audience participation was identification with the characters. With more and more women in the audience, plays had to include women that were recognizable types. Dorothy Pam's doctoral dissertation, "Exploitation, Independence, and Solidarity: The Changing Role of American Working Women as Reflected in the Working-Girl Melodrama, 1870-1910," explores the way in which the concerns of the popular theatre match those of the working women in the audience. Melodramas were written in which the heroines were working girls. This must have appealed to the growing number of women in the audience who lived through similar experiences in their own lives and found that the struggles of the heroines who fought for their rights paralleled their own. The titles of the melodramas indicate the position of the heroine, such as: Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl Adele, the Saleslady, Lottie, the Poor Saleslady, A Working Girl's Wrongs, The Factory Girl, Only a Shopgirl, Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model, and Edna, the Pretty

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[55] Ibid., 192.

Typewriter.[56]

The theatre of the time had the power to affect the outlook of its patrons. Elizabeth McCracken, a social worker in a New York City settlement house, spoke to women who admitted that their behavior changed as a result of the plays they saw.

> They go from their tenements to see plays: they see, and they feel, and they think, and they effectually remember. They are influenced; they are made greater or less; and simple as the influence may be, its result is surely felt by their associates and their surroundings.
>
> They go not once, but often,--as often as they can buy tickets of admission to the galleries. The majority of them work throughout the day, and they go to the gallery in the evening. So much does the experience mean to them that many times they save for their suppers portions of the lunches brought in the morning to the shops and factories in which they work, and thus, enabled to go directly from their work to the theatre, they gain another hour in which to await the opening of the doors leading to the gallery.[57]

Davis said of the audiences who idolized the characters in his melodramas: "I have known instances where they have modeled their lives after them."[58]

In the melodrama theatre, if not in life, justice was strictly meted out. Virtuous and sympathetic characters always triumphed over their enemies, the villains. Speaking

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[56] See Dorothy S. Pam, "Working-Girl Melodrama," Ph.D. Diss.

[57] Elizabeth McCracken, "The Play and the Gallery," Atlantic Monthly, April 1902, 499.

[58] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Clipping File: Owen Davis, 18 August 1907, Harvard Theatre Collection.

of the heroine, Davis explained why the melodramatists of the day could not depart from this inevitable outcome:

> Our audiences would not stand for any but a happy ending with love and wealth bestowed upon the girl. This was bad art, but it always seemed to me to be pretty good sense, as the theater to them meant not life as it was but life as they wanted it to be, and the young girl in our audiences who thrilled for an hour over the wealth and luxury and the ideal love that always came to the fictitious character she had for a time exchanged places with had little chance of remaining in this fairyland for long.[59]

Given the living and working conditions of the audiences at the time, the theatre was a place they visited for respite, hope, and escapism. Harry James Smith observes the

> large number of shop girls who have come arrayed in their choicest finery, and accompanied by their "steadies." Three brief hours of enchantment ahead of them, a time when their five or six dollars a week, and the long day behind the counter or at the machine, can be forgotten. Every one of the magic moments must be realized. . . . never was heroine so horribly persecuted, yet so often and so wonderfully rescued.[60]

While delivering the thrills demanded by escapist entertainment, melodrama also taught morality.

Rollin Lynde Hartt, who attended melodramas at the Grand Theatre in 1909, referred to the moral preaching of the genre as "The Ten Commandments in red fire."[61] Although there were numerous attempts by the villain to

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[59] Owen Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, 102-3.

[60] Harry James Smith, "The Melodrama," Atlantic Monthly, March 1907, 322.

[61] Rollin Lynde Hartt, The People at Play (1909; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1975), 191.

extract sexual favors from the heroine, he was never successful. Charles E. Blaney, playwright/producer and theatre owner, autographed his portrait as the "Author of clean plays." He boasted: "I have never written a suggestive line, never allowed vice or wrong-doing to seem even temporarily to be in the ascendant!"[62] According to Lewis Erenberg, melodrama attracted women as well as men because "it broadcast the official values of the age within a sentimental mold." As in the circus, where the hero-producer triumphed over the forces of untamed nature through self-discipline, the male hero in melodrama

> incarnated the ascetic individual who triumphed over himself and over nature in order to advance upward through the social order. . . . The chaste hero and heroine always served civilization and the family. . . . Because of their gentility, melodrama and the circus fit familial values, and thus made it possible for women to attend.[63]

Owen Davis emphasized that "America in the 1890s was still dominated by a Puritan tradition, and its drama was based on a stern Puritan creed and an almost equally uncomfortable sentimentality."[64]

The sentimental aspect of the plays was labelled "heart interest" by the advertisements for popular melodramas aiming to please the women in the audience. Al

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[62] Ibid., 171.

[63] Erenberg, 16-17.

[64] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 2 March 1941, Clipping File: Owen Davis, Harvard Theatre Collection.

H. Woods insisted that his playwrights include the following elements, in order of importance:

> First--heart interest; a love story
> Second--New York life. Characters you see on the streets. People the audience see in everyday life.
> Third--An unconventional plot, or at least an unused theme or manner of treatment. Novelty.
> Fourth--Strong, rapid action.
> Fifth--A punch in every act.[65]

An actress who played in the melodrama Within the Law (1914) offered this explanation for the sentimental appeal of the genre to women:

> I remember when I was a child, wondering why ladies cried when my mother took me to the matinee to see East Lynne. I know now that they cry because they enjoy not only the play but the crying itself. Women are emotional creatures, as all of us know who read the tactics of militant suffragettes. But even those of the fair sex who do not go in for emotional insanity of that kind enjoy it in a milder form. Why, in Within the Law I love to watch the audience weep over poor Mary Turner's trials and tribulations, because I know that all of these dear women are having the time of their lives. Of course, you know the story of the matinee girl who said to her family after seeing a sob drama, "Oh, yes, we had the nicest time at the play; I never enjoyed anything so much in my life--I just cried and cried and cried!"
>
> Just as musical comedies are written for the tired business man, so the sob drama is produced for women. Eve was the original sob sister and since then every sort and condition of "she" has followed in her wake. A certain New York theatrical manager says that ninety-five per cent of his matinee audience is feminine and seventy-five of the night audience is the same. Is it any wonder then that if girls want to cry at the play that the manager is going to see that they are afforded

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[65] Edward H. Smith, "Al. H. Woods's Musts for a Good Play," New York World, 9 December 1917, Locke Scrapbook ser. 2, vol. 308: Woods.

the opportunity?[66]

Female audiences at matinees were so common that the New York Dramatic Mirror featured a column called "The Matinee Girl," which printed news of the theatres (mostly those of a higher class) and the stars.

Impresario Corse Payton realized that "Brooklyn women would a great deal rather cry than laugh." To advertise his production of a tear-jerker (East Lynne), he announced to the audience, "If Aunt Maria comes up from the country to spend the day with you to-morrow, bring her along with you to the matinee. Nothing rejuvenates and enlivens an old lady more than a good cry."[67]

Managers of resident stock companies could not confine their seasons solely to melodramas. They had a steady clientele for whom they had to provide a different play each week, and knew that variety in their choice of plays was essential to their success. They could not depend on the attractions of melodrama to bring in female audiences, so they had to exhibit incredible ingenuity in order to entice women to their theatres. This is illustrated by the friendly rivalry between Corse Payton and his half-sister Mary Gibbs Spooner in Brooklyn.

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[66] Marie Fitzgerald, "Why Women Love to Cry," Baltimore American, 21 February 1914, Locke Scrapbook ser. 3, vol. 481: Marie Fitzgerald.

[67] Evening Sun, 28 March 1901, Locke Envelope: Corse Payton.

Payton, who referred to himself with pride as America's "Best Bad Actor," used his looks and his charm to capture female audiences. A handsome man, he was an "an object to be gazed at . . . attired in an Inverness cape, a silk hat, diamonds, light gloves, boutonniere, patent leather shoes and a Corse Payton smile."[68] He even paid ninety dollars for a full page portrait of himself dressed as "a stage gentleman" in the New York Dramatic Mirror. Marian Spitzer maintained:

> No Drew or Barrymore was ever so personally worshiped as he was. . . . His every appearance on the stage was the signal for rapturous cheers and storms of applause, and when he walked on the streets he was followed by idolatrous crowds of small boys, giggling matinee girls and moonstruck matrons.[69]

Mary Gibbs Spooner, after years of performing in touring repertoire companies, came to Brooklyn a year after the arrival of her brother, where she managed first the Park and then the larger Bijou Theatre. An older woman with grown children, she appealed to her public as if she were its mother, hence her nickname, "Mamma Spooner."

A 1906 article, characterizing Mrs. Spooner's Bijou Theatre, said it "radiates a home atmosphere." In her curtain speeches, Mary Gibbs Spooner addressed the audience as she "would chat to a group of friends at a sewing-circle,

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[68] This and subsequent quotation from Binghampton Chronicle, n.d., Clipping File: Corse Payton, Harvard Theatre Collection.

[69] Spitzer, 42.

telling them all the news."[70] She would talk about her daughters, Edna May and Cecil, who starred in her productions and would go on to manage their own theatres, and she would discuss new projects and new costumes, which were of major interest to the audiences of the time. Mrs. Spooner's patrons were mostly middle-class female homemakers, which is probably why her matinees were compared to "a Sunday school picnic, or a sewing society's session."[71] According to Leslie Weekly, the Bijou had "the greatest popularity and the largest following of any theatre in Brooklyn."[72]

Both Spooner and Payton held weekly receptions onstage, where they would serve tea for the entire audience after the matinee performance. Mary Gibbs and her daughters, who were still in costume, would serve as hostesses, while at Payton's theatre, his wife, Etta Reed, the leading lady of his stock company, would do the honors. Because of these well-attended receptions, the resident companies were known as the "pink-tea society" of the popular-priced houses.[73]

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[70] Leslie Weekly, 17 December 1906, Locke Scrapbook ser. 2, vol. 293: Spooner.

[71] Alice M. Robinson, Vera Mowry Roberts, and Milly S. Barranger, eds. Notable Women in the American Theatre (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1989), 819, 821; unidentified newspaper clipping, 26 May 1907, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

[72] Leslie Weekly, Locke Scrapbook: Spooner.

[73] Lewin A. Goff, "The Popular Priced Melodrama in America 1890 to 1910 With Its Origins and Development to

Pink lemonade, strawberryade, lady fingers, and charlotte russes were among the delicacies served. Sometimes a policeman was needed "to keep the women in check and to prevent them rushing pell-mell on the stage in order to shake hands with a real actress."[74] Ruth W. Sedgwick reported that the audience at these receptions on matinee days "usually consisted of one thousand, nine hundred and ninety-seven women and three men."[75]

Cecil Spooner, an actress/playwright/manager, noted that her mother, "the finest business woman in the profession," decided to hold stage receptions because she did not have the time to accept all of the invitations she received to visit the audiences at their homes. Cecil added:

> It makes the public feel a personal, almost a possessive interest, in the actors, and it enables mother to get an idea of what the people really like best in the way of plays. Every one that comes up has some suggestion and when you put them all together you get a pretty accurate idea of what the public likes best.[76]

Cecil continued to hold receptions when she managed her own theatre, shaking hands with "young girls, young women,

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1890" (Ph.D. Diss., Western Reserve University, 1948), 137-38.

[74] Mawson, "In Stock," 28.

[75] Ruth W. Sedgwick, "Those Dear Dead Days of Melodrama," Stage Magazine, August 1935, 39.

[76] W. E. Sage, unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

middle-aged women and old," believing that

> it brings me in closer touch with them. I learn whether or not they like my work and it serves to encourage me to better things. It seems to me like a hand across the footlights and in its clasp there is a world of fellow feeling that makes you the better for having felt it.[77]

Both the Spooners and the Paytons claimed to have originated the custom.

Another weekly occasion in both theatres was the distribution of souvenirs to audience members after a matinee performance. Souvenirs included pins, and photos of popular actors and actresses in the companies. Prior to his well-publicized production of East Lynne at the Academy of Music, Payton mailed the ladies combination invitations and souvenirs in the form of linen handkerchiefs, on which were stamped: "Be sure and take me along, as you will need me, at the grand revival of East Lynne."[78] Descriptions of souvenirs were posted in the advertisements for the week's play in local newspapers. One source explained that loyal Lee Avenue theatre patrons had a "Payton room" in their homes. "The steady customers at Tuesday Payton performances have collected sufficient souvenirs to decorate one room with them."[79]

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[77] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

[78] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 27 August 1910, Locke Envelope: Corse Payton.

[79] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Envelope: Corse Payton.

Patrons reciprocated by bringing all kinds of gifts to their hosts, a common practice of the time. Mrs. Spooner and her daughters, who distributed souvenirs after the Friday matinee, received everything from live animals to silver loving-cups and embroidered slippers.[80] At one performance, it was reported that they received "enough flowers and gifts to stock a department store."[81]

Payton made special arrangements for his female patrons with young children. He set up a nursery in his theatre, where women could bring their babies one afternoon a week, secure in the knowledge that they would be safe and happy.

> Around [the nursery's] sides stand a number of small white cribs. Baby jumpers hang from the ceiling. Scattered over the floor are all kinds of playthings in various stages of dilapidation, showing the marks of blessed baby fingers. Two good natured nursery maids, in white aprons and caps, watch over the contented little community of "gooers" while the mothers enjoy the play. Then, between acts comes a fluttering flock of mammas to see if all be well.[82]

In addition, Payton staged an annual baby show. Mothers would dress their babies in all their finery and bring them up on the stage of his Brooklyn theatre for a photograph.[83] He acknowledged:

> My sister, Mrs. Spooner, and myself have succeeded in giving the residents of Brooklyn for many years a look-in on the best of the dramatic productions of the

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[80] Mawson, "Revival of the Stock Company," 40.

[81] Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 7 June 1910.

[82] Andrews, 118-19.

[83] Mawson, "Revival of the Stock Company," 41.

country.[84]

Much of the prosperity of these stock companies was due to the preponderance of women in the audience. The managers accomplished what they intended.

Statistics demonstrate the number of women attending performances at the popular-priced theatres. According to Harry P. Mawson,

> After any matinee at one of these stock houses a number of women may be seen about the stage door waiting for the leading man to make his exit. And when he comes their admiration takes the form of silent adoration and not uncommonly an humble posey thrown at his feet. These women are on a par in lunacy with the "johnnies" who frequent the stage door of the musical shows.[85]

Reviewing a matinee of The Fatal Wedding at New York's Grand Opera House, the New York Evening Sun claimed that "there were over 3,000 women and children and eight men packed, jammed, sardined and shoe-horned" into the theatre.[86] The New York Morning Telegraph noted that "the largest audience in history"--3,380 people, mostly women and children--attended a July, 1910 matinee of Payton's production of The Two Orphans at the Academy of Music on Fourteenth Street.[87]

In 1915, Jessie Bonstelle, actress, theatre manager and

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[84] New York Telegraph, 15 February 1907, Locke Envelope: Corse Payton.

[85] Mawson, "In Stock," 28-29.

[86] New York Evening Sun, 31 October 1901, Clipping File: The Fatal Wedding, BRTC.

[87] New York Morning Telegraph, July 1910, Locke Envelope: Corse Payton.

director, wrote: "Women should have more to do with the theatre. Since two-thirds of theatre audiences are women, it stands to reason that women know better what women want than men do."[88]

Because the theatre managers targeted women and were successful in bringing them into the audience, they had to contend with the needs and desires of this new population. Women became influential in the choice of plays and helped to catapult performers to stardom. They demanded to see plays with roles for women, and regarded their favorite actresses as role models, writing to them for advice about plans to go on the stage, which will be shown in the following chapter. Consequently, actresses developed in influence and power, as competition for the best ones forced theatre managers to recognize their talents. The hardships they faced were daunting, but the financial rewards for those who succeeded were beyond the wildest dreams of women in any other field at the time.

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[88] Notable Women in the American Theatre, 80.

Chapter Two: The Life of the Actress

Because of the tremendous increase in the number of audience members demanding theatrical entertainments at the turn of the century, there was a constant need for actors and actresses. Local newspapers printed countless advertisements seeking new theatres, productions to fill them, and actors to star in them. A 1902 notice from George MacNichol of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania proclaimed: "Wanted--At Once. Theatre in town of from 30,000 to 50,000. What have you to offer! Prefer the East."[1] In 1904, "strong attractions" were sought by the Hartford Opera House and the New Majestic Theatre in New Britain, Connecticut, while the Capital Theatre in Little Rock, Arkansas advertised "Open Time" for one night stands or repertoire companies in September.[2] In 1907, the Walter H. Stull Company in Merchantsville, New Jersey requested "Repertoire People: Leading Woman; Heavy Woman; Character Woman; Soubrette with singing and dancing specialty; utility woman; Comedian with specialty; Character Man; Heavy Man; General Business Man; all must have first class wardrobe."[3] When a

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[1] New York Dramatic Mirror, 29 November 1902.

[2] Ibid., 30 July 1904.

[3] Ibid., 25 May 1907.

performer had free time, she advertised, as did Selma Herman in 1898: "Selma Herman, Leads. Cyrano de Bergerac. Brady Stock Company, Cincinnati, Ohio. At Liberty. Address: Grand Hotel."[4] Herman then quoted a review of her interpretation of Roxane. She went on to be a star in the ten-twenty-thirty theatre.

The theatre offered a unique opportunity for women at a time when more of them than ever were seeking jobs. According to the United States Census, the percentage of women over sixteen years of age gainfully employed increased from 14.7 per cent in 1870 to 25.5 per cent in 1910.[5] As the number of females in the audience increased, and plays were written to reflect the makeup of that audience, the demand for actresses rose.

Tracy C. Davis, in Actresses as Working Women, maintains that "compared to teaching, the civil service, seamstressing, idleness, marriage or obscurity, the theatre was a powerful lure for thousands of women (including those without capital, experience, or artistic talent) who entered the profession at all levels."[6] She points out that women entered the theatre from every class of society, noting that

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[4] Ibid., 10 December 1898.

[5] Joseph A. Hill, Women in Gainful Occupations: 1870-1920 (Washington: United States Government Print Office, 1929), 16.

[6] Tracy C. Davis, Actresses as Working Women: Their social identity in Victorian culture (London and New York, Routledge, 1991), 16.

the education of middle-class women in the nineteenth century, which inculcated the "virtue of industriousness, the study of literature, languages and music, and the preoccupation with dress and personal appearance" was equally valuable in "drawing and dressing rooms."[7]

Although stage work seemed glamorous, especially when contrasted with jobs in factories and domestic service, the two fields that employed the most women at the time, the life of the ten-twenty-thirty actress was certainly not an easy one. This chapter will explore some of the difficulties faced by actresses in the popular-priced theatre: the identification of the actress with the prostitute and the problem that created in the search for a husband; the differing but demanding requirements of both stock and touring companies; the physical dangers of performing in melodrama; the mockery of reviewers; and the expense of keeping up a wardrobe. However, there were ample rewards awaiting those who overcame these hardships.

Ever since actresses were permitted on a stage, they were linked in the public's mind with prostitutes. Well into the nineteenth century, the latter had been provided with a special section in the audience (the third tier of boxes, which, in some theatres, had a separate entrance, exit, stairway and bar), enabling them to "transact

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[7] Ibid.

business."[8] Claudia D. Johnson, author of American Actress, believes this to be the major reason why "virtually every Protestant sect in America, with the exception of the Episcopal church, officially and unequivocally declared the theater to be the haunt of sinners."[9]

Many reformers believed that the nation was facing a moral decline because of the dissolution of the home associated with industrialization. Women were forced to leave the sanctuary of the family and to seek employment in the outside world, where they came face to face with various temptations, particularly the remuneration of work in the theatre and the brothel. Tracy Davis compares the two professions, concluding that "no other occupations could be so financially rewarding for single, independent Victorian women of outgoing character, fine build, and attractive features."[10] Ruth Rosen, examining the causes of prostitution in America from 1900-1918, remarks that when a working-class woman became a prostitute her "weekly earnings soared. The average brothel inmate or streetwalker received from one to five dollars a 'trick,' earning in one evening what other working women made in a week."[11] She worked

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[8] Nasaw, 11.

[9] Claudia D. Johnson, American Actress: Perspective on the Nineteenth Century (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1984), 7.

[10] Tracy Davis, 84.

[11] Rosen, The Lost Sisterhood, 148, 157.

shorter hours, and enjoyed a higher standard of living.

Scholars agree that there was no way for the actress to rid herself of the image of the prostitute. Faye E. Dudden confirms in Women in the American Theatre that "the actress has been equated with the whore so persistently that no amount of clean living and rectitude among actual performers has ever served to cancel the equation." She explains that because acting is an "embodied art" (the body of the actress must be present when she works and is viewed by the public), "acting is a particularly acute case of the general phenomenon of woman being reduced to sexual object."[12] According to Tracy Davis, "for a large section of society, the similarities between the actress's life and the prostitute's . . . were unforgettable and overruled all other evidence about respectability."[13] Actresses were identified with prostitutes not only because they exhibited their bodies to public view and were paid to amuse an audience, but also because they enjoyed a freedom unknown to women in other occupations. They worked in a "co-sexual" environment, where they gained "worldly knowledge, self-sufficiency, mobility, and the freedom to interact with men as colleagues, admirers, pursuers, and economic equals."[14]

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[12] Faye E. Dudden, Women in the American Theatre: Actresses & Audiences 1790-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 2.

[13] Tracy Davis, 69.

[14] Ibid., 16.

The literature of the time was filled with warnings about the moral hazards of life on the stage. Even those who did not condemn the life of the actress felt the need to justify her choice of profession. The actress Olive Logan ended her autobiography (1871) by reproducing a sermon given by the Reverend Dr. Bellows at the New York Academy of Music. Dr. Bellows had tried to reconcile a theatrical career, which was "morally perilous" for an actress because "it is a public life" with the fact that

> there may be reasons for adopting it which are imperative--such as a strong constitutional proclivity, making any other course exceedingly difficult; an early education fitting for nothing else; a powerful combination of providential circumstances leading up to that path; or a parental will which had shaped that course before responsibility began.[15]

Claudia Johnson refers to the "ambiguity of the actress's position: she was able to anticipate professional rewards which few other women in the age enjoyed, but only at considerable sacrifice of intangibles precious to nineteenth-century woman--personal esteem and social acceptability."[16]

An actor named Vince O'Brien tells the story of his grandmother, a woman of social ambitions, who offered the celebrated impresario, Corse Payton, a room in her home for a couple of summer seasons (1907-8) in New Britain,

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[15] Olive Logan, The Mimic World, and Public Exhibitions: Their History, Their Morals, and Effects (Philadelphia: New-World Publishing Company, 1871), 588.

[16] Johnson, 4.

Connecticut. Encountering his landlady's daughter, Marguerite Crane, Payton invited her to fill in as an actress with his local company for the summer. Following the 1908 season Payton, impressed with her skills, suggested that the eighteen-year-old Marguerite join the company for a full-season tour. Her mother's response was to expel Payton from the house immediately. Marguerite Crane had nothing more to do with the theatre for over fifty years, until she performed with a church company directed by her son.[17]

In By the Stage Door, a 1902 book co-authored by the actress Victory Bateman and the newspaperwoman Ada Patterson, there is a story entitled "Grimston's School of Acting," about an actor who opens an acting school to pay his debts. One of his pupils is a wife whose husband is opposed to her plans for a stage career. After several lessons, the would-be actress becomes disillusioned with the artificiality of the stage and returns home with a headache. The husband, delighted to see that she is losing her desire to enter the theatre, advances the teacher the fifty dollars for the next quarter's tuition, so that she will continue to be dissuaded from her unacceptable path.[18]

Actresses often had a difficult time accomplishing what was still considered to be their major goal: finding

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[17] Vince O'Brien, telephone call to author, May 1998.

[18] Ada Patterson and Victory Bateman, By the Stage Door (New York: Grafton Press, 1902), 103-21.

husbands. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the natural order of events in virtually every woman's life was to marry and have a family. In her comprehensive study, An Economic History of Women in America, Julie A. Matthaei reports that the majority of working women were single. Based on United States Census statistics she claims that in 1900 only 5.6% of married women worked for income either in factories or in the home, while single women accounted for 45.9% of the labor force.[19] Annie Marion MacLean, in her 1907-8 study of wage-earning women, concluded that society must protect women workers by legislating shorter working days and higher wages, because after five years of factory work a girl of twenty-one is "nearly or quite a physical wreck, so far as normal functioning is concerned." This makes her unfit for her primary duty, "the perpetuating of the race."[20]

The struggles of the feminist movement for higher education for women resulted in the establishment of women's and coeducational colleges by 1900, but the knowledge there promulgated was meant to help the students to become better wives and homemakers. According to Matthaei:

> For most females . . . labor force participation was an adolescent "stage" which, they hoped, would pass.

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[19] Julie A. Matthaei, An Economic History of Women in America: Women's Work, the Sexual Division of Labor, and the Development of Capitalism (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 141-42.

[20] MacLean, Wage-Earning Women, 178.

> Maturity, for a woman, was marriage, and marriage meant undertaking the vocation of homemaking and motherhood.[21]

Because homemaking was considered a full-time job, the only way for women to engage in any other profession was to do so before getting married. In 1907 President Eliot of Smith College for Women said: "The prime motive of the higher education of women should be recognized as the development in women of the capacities and powers which will fit them to make family life more productive in every sense, physically, mentally, and spiritually."[22]

Actresses, most of whom had been brought up assuming they would marry, complained time and again in interviews and stories about their diminished prospects. Victory Bateman, a niece of Edwin Booth, was a stock actress who played with numerous companies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries--both popular-priced and legitimate. Born in 1865 to actor-parents in Philadelphia, she performed every type of role, with a particular penchant for Shakespeare. At the age of eight, she began her career on the road in her mother's company. In an article entitled: "Victory Bateman on Stage Life," she offered advice to young women who dreamed of becoming actresses.

> You ask me if you should go on the stage? Yes and no. First: Do you have to earn your own living? Then I say by all means go on the stage. It is a great and

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[21] Matthaei, 150.

[22] Ibid., 262.

> glorious profession, and one who has talent is truly a child of God (at least born so, even if in after life they let their talent be the means of helping them to the devil). There is no profession where a woman can be so well shielded from all insults and the thousand and one slights that perhaps a girl who stands behind a counter is subjected to. . . . If she is worthy her life lies in her own hands. But it means work--hard work--every moment of your life, even to the end. Don't fancy it is all sunshine--I mean for the girl without money, the girl who has no friends--to go to the managers and ask the favor of a position, at least a start . . . .

After a frank, pessimistic discussion of some of the hardships of the profession, Bateman ended the article with this desire:

> I wish I could take every girl I know who is stagestruck and place her hand in the hand of some good man and have it in my power to awaken true love of content. Then I would shut the door tight, and bless them forever and forever, in wedded bliss.[23]

Many of the actresses in this study would agree with her. Julia Ralph, known for her roles as an adventuress in melodramas, offers the same advice.

Ralph wrote about a gardener who reluctantly asked her to give his daughter some points on acting. He confided:

> She ain't fit for nothin' else, so I suppose I'll have to let her try play-actin'. There's a nice young feller wants to marry her, but she don't know nothin' about housekeepin'.

Instead of teaching her acting, Ralph told her they would be rehearsing for the role of a poor man's daughter who must clean his home. The daughter practiced the part, and the next day the actress told her:

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[23] "Victory Bateman on Stage Life," Unidentified source, Clipping File: Victory Bateman, BRTC.

> Take my advice, marry that fine young fellow who thinks you are all the heroines in the world rolled into one. You will then be playing a really great part all the year around and with no fear of the always dreaded "two weeks" notice.

And Ralph reported that she did.[24] Whether or not the actress actually took the time to do what she described, her message about the uncertainties of life in the theatre was clear.

Cecil Spooner's 1910 novelization of her play, The Fortunes of Betty, provides numerous illustrations of the stigmas against actresses that had to be overcome in order for these women to secure husbands. The title character (played by Miss Spooner), formerly a soubrette on the ten-twenty-thirty stage, is in love with a gentleman. Her wealthy rival, Maude Burton, dissuades Betty from any thoughts of marrying the man they both adore, Phil Logan:

> You poor silly little thing, you could not have dared to think that he would want to marry you. He is a gentleman, and will look in his own class for a wife--you see I treat you as simply a foolish child, and not as an adventuress as some might think after you have been so long on the stage.[25]

Later that evening, Maude's father makes unjust accusations against the honest and innocent Betty:

> When you were a child in short skirts, even then you

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[24] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Collection Envelope #1825: Julia Ralph.

[25] Cecil Spooner, The Fortunes of Betty: A Sweet and Tender Romance of an Old Soldier's Daughter, novelized from the successful play of the same name (New York: J. S. Ogilvie Publishing Company, 1910), 176. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically.

> tried to snare my child into a trap so he would have to marry you or else get some of my money to buy you off. Well, God was good enough to save him and take you away, where you could better play your wiles and sell your charms for a price. You became an actress, but they soon tired of you and you had to come back and try it all over again, but you didn't get him. He was older, he knew better, and was too much of a man to be caught by the charms of an actress, of a painted thing who plays for money. (191)

But Betty does not love Maude's brother, and she wonders how to persuade the man she does love that she is worthy of him. She believes that he

> deplored the years she had spent on the stage. . . . She knew that she had been and always would be the same honest, true hearted, and pure hearted girl that she had ever been, but how could she tell him that, and how show him that she was all that a good girl should be? (97)

The need for the actress to prove that her life has been a moral one informs many plays and novels of the period. Lillian Mortimer's The Gate to Happiness, discussed in a later chapter, deals with similar issues. Tracy Davis maintains that actresses were condemned no matter what course they chose: "actresses had to overcome the perceptions that they 'de-classed' themselves by acting and that they schemed to social climb through the self-advertising vehicle of the stage."[26] They were stigmatized by the prejudice of the public against their profession.

This prejudice was detailed in Bateman and Patterson's book, By the Stage Door, whose introduction by the actress Annie Adams, mother of Maude, confirmed that its eleven

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[26] Tracy Davis, 71.

stories were true: "As fiction it would be superior to most of the output of the day, but it is not fiction; it is fact. Every incident has happened."[27] Although the names were changed, and doubtless the material was reworked to fit the short-story format, Adams insisted that the theatre community recognized the identity of the characters. In the story "He Married An Actress," a writer named George Carleton, who swore that he would never marry a business or professional woman of any sort, preferring one who had been reared in the "sheltered twilight of home," does indeed choose an actress for his wife. His many preconceptions against women in the theatre are shattered, one by one: his wife wears black, as opposed to "vermilion hair and screaming costumes," she never wears jewelry, she rarely goes out or receives anyone, and she buys some land in the country with her own earnings, so that he can write in peace and quiet. In the end, he apologizes to her for "for any foolish suspicions I may have ever had because you had not had a home, nor a home influence."[28]

On the subject of marriage, Blanche Shirley, a popular-priced actress with a college education, believed:

> Actresses should marry; so should other women. There I am separating women of the stage into a class by themselves as different from other women, just the thing that I object to have other people do. Managers

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[27] Patterson and Bateman, Introduction.

[28] Patterson and Bateman, "He Married An Actress," By the Stage Door, 143-149.

> no longer file the serious objection to married couples appearing in the same company that was formerly heard . . . . We all need homes, they are a part of our lives, and while the actress may have a home without a husband, she is more likely to possess both than one. Her life is necessarily one of too much hotel, too much travel and too much artificiality. The actress who is married and has a home looks upon the world with more charitable and loving eyes.
>
> A word about the husband. I am frank in admitting that the husband of the actress often has a hard time of it. The actress has often been spoiled. She has become aware of the fact that she has the ability to please people, thus she has doubtless become more difficult than other women to please. Her husband must love more than the husbands of others.[29]

The problem of a "spoiled" spouse also existed when an actress married someone in her own profession. Edna May Spooner, an "emotional actress" in the ten-twenty-thirty theatre, warned women not to marry an actor. She gave a bitter description of her husband, Arthur Behrens Whaley, who left her in 1915 after a three-year marriage:

> An actor wants to be served with a quart of intoxicating adulation with his coffee and toast every morning, a round of well-seasoned praise at lunch and a hot filter of flattery at dinner. Sandwiches of un-minced worship may be offered him at five o'clock as he leaves his matinee to appease his growing boy's appetite.
>
> He, Arthur Behrens, as he was known to hundreds of hero-worshipping idolaters, was being treated, at home, quite like any other husband might have been.[30]

Yet women who married producers often fared very well, benefiting by their marriages to further their acting

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[29] Pittsburg Leader, 28 August 1910, Locke Collection Envelope #2092: Blanche Shirley.

[30] Unidentified newspaper clipping, from the files of Mildred I. Watt, letter to the author, 12 June 1998.

careers, like Cecil Spooner, sister of Edna May, who married the playwright/producer Charles E. Blaney. He wrote starring roles in his melodramas for her, she was a partner in his theatrical and film companies, and she managed several theatres that he leased for her. Etta Reed became her husband Corse Payton's leading lady and managed her own theatre for a short time. Mrs. Al H. Woods, formerly the actress Louise Beaton, starred in and staged some of her husband's productions. After her marriage, she performed rarely, preferring to spend her time travelling to Europe, helping to manage her husband's overseas businesses, and enjoying the life of a wealthy woman. Kitty Wolfe married the actor Harry Clay Blaney, brother of Charles E. Blaney, who starred them in his melodramas, in which they developed a large and loyal following on their cross-country tours. As a child bride, Loretta Cooney (Laurette Taylor) became the third wife of playwright/producer Charles Taylor, who wrote melodramas in which she performed and toured. Some of these marriages ended in divorce (Woods and Taylor) and others survived. But the question of marriage and/or career was of great concern to the actress in the popular-priced theatre.

The demands of their work schedule presented untold hardships for actresses of the time, whether they were members of stock companies or spent their lives on tour, or both. Victory Bateman wrote about the differences between

the two, and the disadvantages of each.

> After the performance you go to the hotel, to your little room above. After all the applause and curtain calls (if you are a success), you have no home, no family to which you can return. That is impossible on the road, and that is why so many people do "stock work," where they change the play once a week. That, of course, means work, but members of the company can have at least a home for one season, and actors are strange people. All, no matter how high or low in the profession, will tell you they would be better if they had had home ties. Let me beg of you--you who are reading this--if you have a home, do not stray from it for the stage.
>
> As the seasons pass, of course, you will advance--and "no mind will stand the strain long." After five years you will know all the foundation of your profession. Then you must try for a production under some good stage manager, where you can perfect the part you are to play, for in stock work you can not perfect--you can only "get through"--and just as the week is over and you have to play another part, you begin to see what you could have done with that part if you had only had time.[31]

The two advantages to stock companies, as Bateman suggests, were that they provided a training ground for actresses because they offered a variety of roles, and they provided steady work in one place.

Cecil Spooner preferred stock to touring because "if I were to play the same part for more than a period of two weeks again I would become a wreck. I simply love to play new characters and create parts."[32] Her uncle Corse Payton, whose stock actors stayed with him for years, attributed the success of his theatre to his loyal company of talented

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[31] "Victory Bateman on Stage Life," Clipping File: Victory Bateman, BRTC.

[32] New York Dramatic Mirror, 2 April 1913.

players. Comparing the theatre audience to baseball fans, Payton felt that the audience would rather see the same players over a period of years than a company that frequently changed actors. Whereas travelling companies depended on the reputation of the play, resident stock companies had "the great asset of being able to present actors well liked by their particular public."[33]

For each week's play, Payton had four rehearsals: Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, with a Monday opening. He seldom produced new plays because they would require about six weeks of rehearsal and rewrites. He defended his company's hectic schedule:

> In some respects stock work is very trying and nerve-wracking, yet in others it is very pleasant. You have people say "Oh, I wouldn't work in stock under any circumstances; it is simply killing--a new play each week and always rehearsing for the week to come." But they forget these points: actors in stock can live at home, they can be sure one week they are going to have an engagement the next, they are not constantly jumping from one town to another doing one-night stands, not sure but the show will close the next night.
>
> The members of the company alternate. For instance, one week the leading woman is relieved by a light comedy in which the ingenue takes the lead, and it is the same with the men.[34]

This was the producer's point of view, but how did the actors respond to this schedule?

Arthur Ruhl, in an interview of Minna Phillips, who was one of two leading ladies with Payton, the other being his

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[33] New York Dramatic Mirror, 10 July 1912.

[34] Ibid.

wife, outlined her activities as a company member. Arthur Ruhl described Phillips's playing as a "sort of emotional undertone until the curtain, or some other necessary climax, pulls out all the stops." Ruhl believed that she underplayed except when necessary because she had to conserve her energy due to her rigorous schedule: up at eight in the morning "as regularly as any office slave," rehearsing the following week's play by ten, lunch in her dressing room or outside if there were time, then the matinee began. On Fridays, she "must jump out of her costume directly the last curtain falls and into street clothes, and, by the time the simple-minded herd out in front have climbed on the stage, be standing behind a refreshment table dispensing lady's fingers and pink lemonade." Following that was dinner and the evening performance. "Lines, lines, lines to be learned, and a working-day that lasts from ten in the morning until eleven at night." She admitted that her life was busy, but it was

> better than the road and better than free-lancing . . . . She could make more money in stock than she could out of it. It wasn't so bad when you got into the routine; and the great thing, of course, was being in New York all the year round, practically, and having a home.

The company was "like a happy family." They had to be, because they were together for twelve performances a week and morning rehearsals. "If they didn't get along they'd scratch out each other's eyes. And no sweethearting,

either--everybody minded his own business."[35]

The strain of stock work was more than some actresses could stand. In 1907 Etta Reed suffered a paralytic stroke during or in preparation for a performance of Trilby and thereafter acted only intermittently until her death in 1915, at the age of forty-four.[36] A 1904 article reported that Cecil Spooner fainted onstage at the Bijou Theatre, adding that the "rehearsing of two plays in one week with two daily matinees proves too much."[37] In 1898, Victory Bateman suffered a mental collapse during a performance of Cyrano de Bergerac in Chicago. Bateman returned to the apartment of her mother (the actress Lizzie Creese) in New York, was treated at New York's Bellevue Hospital, and then spent some time in a sanitarium in Stamford, Connecticut. Many newspaper and magazine articles analyzed her illness. The New York Journal announced "The Breakdown of the Marvellous Mind of Victory Bateman, the Actress, Who Memorized 140,000 Words--15,000 More Than in Webster's Unabridged Dictionary--and Could Play at a Moment's Notice the Principal Female Role of Nearly all the Popular-Priced

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[35] Ruhl, Second Nights, 151-55.

[36] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 11 October 1915, Locke Envelope: Corse Payton; unidentified newspaper clipping, 31 March 1907, Locke Envelope: Payton.

[37] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 28 December 1904, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

Plays."[38]

Theresa Temple's article in the New England Home Magazine was entitled: "A Brain That Failed. Victory Bateman and Her Amazing Feat of Memory." Temple claimed that the cause of the collapse was the memorization of a new leading role every week for twenty weeks. She explained:

> Miss Bateman has been a tireless worker. She played "Young Mrs. Winthrop" eight times the first week of the season, and she rehearsed Flordilisia in "The Fool's Revenge" every day during that week. After the rehearsals and the night performance, however, she went home and studied the lines of Flordilisia. Blank verse is not easy to learn.
>
> It would take a person of average intelligence at least two weeks of almost constant study to memorize that part. Miss Bateman learned it perfectly in a few hours snatched from her sleep. . . .
>
> There was not one day of rest in between these days of frightful work. There was not one hour of relief from the anxiety which hovers over a conscientious actress like a pall all the time she's trying to "work up" a new part. . .
>
> The nervous strain of the acting left out, the constant bodily fatigue unconsidered, the stimulation of the emotions entirely uncounted, the lack of sleep, the lack of exercise, the lack of any one of the simple balances that hold the wheel of reason in its place--all these things left out of the reckoning, still there remains an appalling task for any human brain to master. The wonder is not that Miss Bateman's brain is tired, but that it held out under the strain so long.[39]

One of the stories in By the Stage Door, "Autobiography of an Actress," is Bateman's account of her own career in the

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[38] New York Journal, 4 December 1898, Clipping File: Victory Bateman, BRTC.

[39] Theresa Temple, "A Brain That Failed. Victory Bateman and Her Amazing Feat of Memory," New England Home Magazine, December 1898, 427.

theatre, although she did not use her name. She listed all of the characters she played in an average season of twenty weeks, performing twice a day.[40]

Weren't most stock actresses under the same pressure? Another observer, offering less sympathy for Bateman than did Temple, noted that old-time stock actors had repertoires that dwarfed those of today (1898) "into insignificance." He blamed the actress, rather than the demands of the theatre. Writing for the Chicago Inter Ocean, this journalist cited Bateman's description of her method of memorization, just prior to her collapse:

> I have never adopted a memory "system." I improve my memory by constant study. Macauley, it is said, could repeat an entire page after having read it but once. I have not reached that stage yet, but I consider my memory excellent. It never for an instant deserted me. Some actors like to play one bill through the entire season, but I prefer the change, though it requires more work. . . . Still it is not wise to undertake too much, and I believe I have reached the limit.[41]

The writer suggested that if Bateman hadn't clogged up her memory "with a lot of useless material" but remembered only what she needed for each role she would have fared better. He praised May Hosmer, a leading stock actress who learned 275 roles in her stage career, because she allowed herself to forget roles when she no longer needed them. In this way the brain, which might not be able to stand the strain, left

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[40] Patterson and Bateman, "Autobiography of an Actress," By the Stage Door, 41-42.

[41] Chicago Inter Ocean, 4 December 1898, Clipping File: Victory Bateman, BRTC.

the job to the memory, which, "like the muscles, may be cultivated to a marvelous degree and still be obedient to the will."[42]

One of the tasks of every stock actress was to find her own system of memorizing a large number of roles in very little time. Blanche Shirley, who was a member of several different stock companies, was known as a "quick study," a prerequisite for success in the theatre. Shirley acknowledged:

> I "swallow" a part as they say . . . . After reading a part over a couple of times I felt pretty safe in going on and getting through it without much trouble. That faculty has stood me in good stead several times when I was suddenly called upon at the eleventh hour to go and play some part with which I was not familiar.
>
> Stock work is not so very hard. Two shows a day is the trying thing about it, not the memorizing lines of a part. One trains his mind to do a certain thing and after a bit it becomes a sort of second nature. A stock actor's business is to learn parts, and if he can't do that he has no business in that line of work. The average stock actor is only required to learn the lines of the part assigned him and the stage manager does the thinking. That may be rank heresy but it is true.[43]

Laurette Taylor was never a good study, but her daughter, Marguerite Courtney, revealed her mother's system, which she perfected in her early stock days and used throughout her career:

> With a different part to learn each week while giving two shows a day there was never time to learn the lines

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 22 November 1903, Locke Envelope: Blanche Shirley.

> verbatim, even if she had had the aptitude. She worked instead to get the general sense of each scene, achieve a consistent character, and let the words fall where they would. Mumbling the gist of a speech, feeling out "business," watching the other players, seeming more intent upon their parts than her own, she was establishing a relationship--a very real relationship--between the character she played and those which were contingent upon it. She bothered not at all with the precise script until these relationships, the motivations of scenes and speeches, were well rooted in her mind. Then at the last minute, if necessary, she would sit up all night and work away at the actual lines as though she were finishing off the last details of an edifice already solidly standing on its foundation.[44]

In addition to stock work, Taylor spent the first years of her married life touring with her husband's company. The life of an actress on tour could be exhausting and harrowing.

Taylor's daughter describes the agony of her mother's experiences on the popular-priced circuit when a play was unsuccessful:

> The fifty-cents circuits could be the slowest death in the world because as long as a half a dozen customers paid the fifty cents you played the show. Maybe you skipped town afterward, leaving the hotel bill unpaid, and had to soothe the unpaid actors with promises of riches in the next town, but you played the show.[45]

Given the transience of the life of Charles and Laurette Taylor, their son, Dwight Taylor, born in 1901 as their penniless parents were fleeing a sheriff, comments: "how mother managed to take care of me, learn her lines and give

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[44] Marguerite Courtney, Laurette (New York: Atheneum House, 1968), 59.

[45] Ibid., 42.

her performances, I will never know." She was barely eighteen when he was born, and took him on tour with her, where he would awake to find himself in strange surroundings, wondering "where I was this time."[46] His mother believed that "a leading lady without children was of much greater interest to the public, and that if she did have children, it was better for them to remain little and picturesque."[47] Taylor's children do not remember this period fondly, nor did their mother, who "looked upon it as a sort of armor to fit me for the fighting I expected and still expect to do . . . working hard, never shirking [I looked] upon its hardships as the test of my ambition, its quality and its quantity."[48]

Touring companies either travelled with one show (road shows) or a week's worth of different shows ("rep" companies) to be performed in each town. Because of the variety of audiences, Lillian Mortimer preferred touring:

> The main difference between a stock company and a road show is this: Jealousy, especially among the women of the company, is unknown on the road, and is always developing in stock companies. . . . On the road, where you meet a new audience every week, the players have no time to acquire an individual clientele. It is one week, and then away. In a stock company only a few weeks--sometimes only a few days--elapse before each player has his special, individual following. Pretty soon each begins to think the house is his special

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[46] Dwight Taylor, "My Mother Laurette," Saturday Evening Post, 17 December 1960, 26-27, 62.

[47] Ibid., 64.

[48] Courtney, 47.

> property. Then come the rows and the resignations . . . . That's why it is easier to get along in a traveling company.[49]

While solving the problem of competition for the same audience, touring presented a variety of other difficulties, not least of which was the physical wear and tear on the actress.

Performers often faced unsanitary, uncomfortable conditions, according to Philip C. Lewis in his book Trouping: How the Show Came to Town. He notes that in 1905 touring performers ("troupers") were entirely at the mercy of trains for their transportation. They were not paid when trains did not arrive on time for performances, which was common, and they had to stay at hotels near railroad stations so that if they overslept they would not be far from the train. Their accommodations were

> faded, frequently filthy ("Don't look under the bed") rooms, with temperatures at extremes, where the electric light was small improvement on the candle; places noisy with drunks, singing chambermaids in the halls, doors crashing; beds with sags, lumps or thinly covered springs; broken window shades, broken windows, no closets, no bath--and, despite prayers, sometimes bugs that made acquaintance in the middle of the night. There were places where the players had to accept these accommodations in bitterness because the "reputable" places did not accept "show people."[50]

As for the food, Lewis maintains that "the actor of any duration in those years needed a digestive system made of

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[49] Chicago Journal, 12 March 1908, Locke Envelope #1553: Lillian Mortimer.

[50] Philip C. Lewis, Trouping: How the Show Came to Town (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 112-14.

noncorrosive metal." Also, because their hours were so irregular, restaurants were not usually open when the actors needed to eat.[51]

It was inevitable that these performers would be subject to diseases. Frank J. Beckman discusses this risk and the consequences:

> During the early years of the century the scourge of Typhoid ran rampant across the nation and traveling members of the actors' profession became easy victims to this dread disease. Their crack-of-dawn waits on snowy and windswept railway depots, draughty stages and dressing rooms and inadequate sanitary conditions caused many of the players to become stricken. Inasmuch as not many of them could afford the loss of their engagements or costly hospitalization, in the truest tradition of Show Business they continued to play their roles, while the raging fires of the fever all but consumed them.[52]

Not only did they suffer physically but, like Victory Bateman, actresses had mental breakdowns. In an article entitled: "Why Do Actresses Go Insane? Constant Strain on the Emotions and the Irregular Hours Exacted by Their Profession," the hardships of life in the theatre were enumerated. They included the lack of a home; the grind of constant rehearsals and performances; the long journeys and hotel stays on the road; poisons in the air, water, the dyes and the makeup, to which women are more susceptible than men, and the addictive stimulants taken for quick energy. To combat all of the above, one needed "a quick brain, a

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[51] Ibid., 116.

[52] Beckman, "The Vanished Villains," 151-52.

good constitution, and a firm will."[53]

If the ten-twenty-thirty actress had the mental and physical stamina to survive stock work and/or touring, she found herself risking life and limb when she played in sensational melodramas. Leila Davis, one of the most well-known women villains, played a leading role in The Queen of the Highbinders. She admitted that she was "black and blue from the falls and blows she received," while the actress playing the unfortunate heroine, who was tossed onto the stage by several heavies and choked at every performance, said she would join a circus when she finished the run. "I am doing acrobatic stunts all the time. See me escape by the human ladder." Not to be outdone, Davis exclaimed: "see me shoot a couple of men and hang backward from a top-story window."[54]

Edith Browning, star of many popular melodramas under the management of Al H. Woods, found that her athletic training was vital to her roles. Labelled "An Acrobatic Actress" by the Toledo Blade, Browning lists the stunts she had to perform as a heroine, while on a break during the run of Edna, the Pretty Typewriter:

> It seems that I am always cast for the persecuted heroine who has to do acrobatic stunts . . . . since I have been under Mr. Wood's management there has been no rest for me.

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[53] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Clipping File: Victory Bateman, BRTC.

[54] Goodman, "The Lure of the Melodrama," 188-89.

> When I played in Tracked Around the World he must have seen that I was not afraid to tackle anything, and after that they began writing them for me. In Chinatown Charlie I had to cross from one building to another over a bridge of human bodies. This required some nerve at first, but I soon got used to it. You see, I have had a gymnasium training to fit me for this work, as my father was the proprietor of the German Turn-Verien of the West Side in Chicago when I was a child, and I was brought up in the gymnasium, which I used for a playground.
>
> Before Chinatown Charlie I was in Secret Service Sam, where they used to shoot me through a trap, bound to a chair. In Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl, which I created last year, I had to jump over several sewing machines and out of a window, and in the third act I had to climb a ladder during a fire scene and rescue my sister out of a burning building. I used to jump with her in my arms, into a life-net held by firemen below, and it was actually twenty-two feet to the stage. Once, in Philadelphia, we fell outside the net, and I limped for weeks with a broken toe.
>
> Next, they wrote a play where I was supposed to be bound to a windmill which went round and round, carrying me with it. I read a description of this scene and balked. As long as I keep on my feet I am all right, but I couldn't see this 'Human Pin-Wheel' thing. They gave me Edna then, and I have been playing it all season. It is really not so hard on the muscles as it is on the voice. You see I have a bad attack of hoarseness now. . . .
>
> Excuse me . . . . I have to be blown out of the safe.[55]

As this interview began, Browning was gasping for breath "after having jumped from the roof of a building onto a moving elevated train."[56]

In the early part of the century, when there were no unions to protect actresses, they had to accept the physical

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[55] "An Acrobatic Actress," Toledo Blade, 8 January 1908, Clipping File: Edith Browning, BRTC.

[56] Ibid.

demands of the roles they were offered. Interviews with melodrama actresses reveal frightening stunts and numerous injuries. As a child, Dwight Taylor claimed that he lived in fear that his mother would not survive her husband's plays. He tells horror stories of actresses hospitalized, animals killed, the time his mother was severely burned and nearly electrocuted in full view of the audience, and the like.[57] Marian Spitzer remembered one of Laurette Taylor's stories about a role she played during which she had to swing herself over the side of a railroad bridge and hang from the ties until the train came. Once, after the train failed to arrive, she raised herself up to peer into the wings to see what the trouble was, and the train suddenly "shot out," knocking her unconscious.[58]

Selma Herman, who performed in several plays written by the melodramatist Theodore Kremer, commented:

> I wonder what will be required of me in the next play in which I appear. . . . You know, every season some new and unheard of situation is devised, and Mr. Kremer . . . can conjure up the most sensational ideas of any melodramatist that I have ever heard of.[59]

Some of these included milking a real cow and turning a complete somersault "while fixed in a picture frame," in The Queen of the Convicts (1905), said to have been written

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[57] Taylor, Blood-and-Thunder, 25-33.

[58] Spitzer, 48.

[59] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Scrapbook #269: Selma Herman.

for her. In another of Kremer's plays, For Her Children's Sake, which will be considered in the next chapter, Herman portrayed an equestrienne who fell from her horse. At the first rehearsal she "fell heavily to the stage" directly under the horse's feet, injuring her right arm and side.[60] Robinson Locke wrote in the Toledo Blade: "Selma Herman, unfortunately, has been Kremerized," meaning that she appeared in melodramas he termed "rubbish."[61]

Locke was not the only critic to react negatively to popular-priced melodramas. Many reviewers did not attend these plays at all. Arthur Ruhl admired the tenacity of the ten-twenty-thirty performers "whose skill or awkwardness will receive no word of praise or blame in tomorrow's papers."[62] Some critics took the opportunity to caricature the play, the production, and the actors. The playwright Owen Davis angrily complained that members of the audience

> feel keenly hurt when they pick up the paper that they swear by . . . and find therein the dramatic critic treating the play they viewed and considered inspiring to their souls a humorous disconnected lot of thrilling adventures of stagy actors. This is wrong.[63]

Davis felt that "serious criticism of them [the plays] was

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[60] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 4 September 1902, Locke Scrapbook: Selma Herman.

[61] Toledo Blade, 7 April 1906, Locke Scrapbook: Selma Herman.

[62] Ruhl, 144.

[63] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 18 August 1907, Clipping File: Owen Davis, Harvard Theatre Collection.

never attempted. The one reason why newspaper men were sent to cover them was to poke fun at them the next day."[64]

The English critic Alan Dale was among this group. A typical example of his type of review was his comment about Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model, one of the most successful of Davis's plays. Dale did not stay until the end.

> When I left, there was still another act to be perpetrated, but I don't see any fun in a B.M.C. [Beautiful Cloak Model] who has such a prejudice against being made away with. I call it immoral. If such a hardworking, ingenious person as the carusoic mustache [the villain] cannot kill a mere Cloak Model, what is the use of human endeavor?[65]

Although Dale's reviews were very funny, Davis, who understood that his plays were formulaic pieces for the masses, took pride in his work nonetheless, as did the actors and actresses who performed it.

Margaret Dodd, writing in the Green Book Album about Lillian Mortimer, deplored the fact that she was "unknown to critics."

> To work as hard and as well as Miss Mortimer does to please her audience, and then to wake up the next morning and find no mention of her efforts in the papers, is a deprivation of no mean proportion to one

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[64] Owen Davis in Montrose Moses, The American Dramatist, 300.

[65] Alan Dale, "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model not beautiful." New York American, 4 January 1907, Clipping File: Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model, BRTC (hereafter cited as "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model not beautiful").

of the actor-profession.[66]

Reviewers who did attend the melodramas made it clear that actresses would be wise to switch to the legitimate stage, a sentiment expressed not only by Robinson Locke, but also by Lewis C. Strang in his 1902 article entitled "Selma Herman's Future."

> I go to see her in her new part, wondering why I do it, and also wondering why she doesn't quit the melodramatic and take an artistic flyer on the chance of alighting on some good thing. . . it is disheartening to see what appears to be good histrionic material tobogganing. After all, it isn't any great accomplishment to act the heroines of perfunctory melodrama--no great accomplishment, that is to say, for an actress whose emotional appeal is temperamentally potent and whose voice positively reeks with sincerity . . . I would like to see her do things, such things as Ibsen and Sudermann and Hauptmann and Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones and even Clyde Fitch. It would be a shame if so much sincerity should be forever wasted.[67]

Yet Herman and many others like her preferred to cast her lot with melodramas until the genre lost its theatrical appeal.

Despite all the negatives, actresses continued to pour into the profession. Joseph A. Hill, in his study, Women in Gainful Occupations: 1870-1920, based on the United States Census, looked at the number of females engaged in "the principal professional pursuits for women" (the leading contenders being teaching and nursing) and determined that

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[66] Margaret Dodd, "Mistress of All She Surveys," Green Book Album, March 1909, 655.

[67] Lewis C. Strang, "Selma Herman's Future," Boston Sunday Journal, 25 October 1902, Locke Scrapbook #269: Selma Herman.

in 1870, out of nearly 92,000 professional women, 692 were actresses, while in 1910, the number had risen to 11,992 out of over 700,000.[68] Yet female performers who had achieved success felt it their duty to warn women about the difficulties of life on the stage. Blanche Shirley, who received letters from women in all walks of life, from factory workers to members of society, wrote:

> There are few of the actresses on the stage today prominent in those charmed circles where the real artist reigns who have not had their hardships, untold sorrows and tribulations before winning their coveted laurels. The young, aspiring girl, who desires to adopt the stage as a vocation pictures life upon the stage as one long holiday. She thinks how wonderful it is to be a great success, to be sought after, to see life, to travel, to gain applause. Usually she sits down and writes to her favorite actress and asks advice and perhaps aid.
>
> To the actress answering a letter from an inexperienced girl there is a grave feeling of responsibility. She perhaps points out that there are few more important requisites for a stage career than talent. There are ceaseless work and study. The public must be pleased, not tonight, but every night, and there are the successes and failures on the stage, mostly failures. Some girls who want to go on the stage will not think of the privations and hard work. But to the girl with talent, who will study hard, encouragement should be extended, so you see to answer these letters with a conscience is not a task to be taken lightly.[69]

Many of the actresses in this study reported that they tried whenever possible to answer the sometimes overwhelming

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[68] Hill, Women in Gainful Occupations, 41-43. Tracy Davis reports a similar trend in England, Scotland and Wales from 1871 to 1911. She observes that so many women entered the profession that by the end of the nineteenth century, "actresses were chronically over supplied." (Davis, 11-12)

[69] Pittsburg Leader, 27 December 1912, Locke Envelope: Blanche Shirley.

requests for advice received from stage-struck young women, to warn them of the problems and struggles ahead.

Why were women willing to face the hardships of life in the ten-twenty-thirty theatre? Two answers suggest themselves: the loyalty of the audiences, and the remuneration. These are mutually dependent because as long as the audiences continued to support the productions, the stars were able to extract high salaries from the managers. According to Selma Herman:

> They are very loyal, the popular-price audiences. . . I suppose that's one reason I stick to melodrama. The people all show they like me, and it is good to be liked a lot. I think the audiences in the popular-price houses have a keener sensibility as regards pathos and the emotions than the attendants at the two-dollar houses. . . . The poorer classes are unrestrained in their expressions of approval. I have such a fuss made over me, I declare it's enough to turn my head. The women and children always crowd around the stage door, waiting for me to come out. Then they want to kiss me and show their appreciation in other impulsive ways. This usually runs to gifts. . . . And then I letters I get. You should see them.[70]

One of the best-loved soubrettes in the popular theatre was Lottie Williams, who often starred in the plays of Charles E. Blaney. Following are her reasons for having stayed with melodrama for a number of years:

> When one becomes almost a part and parcel of the audiences she plays to, it is almost impossible to leave. Nearly every year they try to get me to forsake my old friends and go into musical comedy in other houses, but it was in the melodrama houses that I made all my money, and all my reputation, and as long as they continue being so kind, I am going to stick to

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[70] New York Morning Telegraph, 9 September 1906, Locke Scrapbook: Selma Herman.

them.

> I have played these houses so often that I know nearly all those employed in each one and know many of the clientele personally, and to ask me to leave these houses is to ask me to leave home.[71]

These women and others like them became indispensable to the managers and producers. The success of the plays depended on them; stars were identifiable and could not easily be replaced.

With the continual demand for talented performers by the audiences who loved them, actresses could and did command high salaries. Although there is little agreement as to the exact amount earned by actresses in the popular-priced theatre because there were so many variables, some producers and contemporaries have offered estimates. Based on a 1910 article in the American Magazine, Lewin Goff stated that between 1890 and 1910 actors' salaries increased "some 400 per cent, averaging between forty and one hundred dollars per week."[72] Writers of the time, like Jules Eckert Goodman, claimed that actors/actresses in melodrama earned as much as $125 per week. This salary remained constant for the season, whether the performer played in stock or on a forty-week tour.[73] H. Clay Blaney reported that in 1907, when villains were scarce, they could command as much as

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[71] Toledo Times, 12 December 1908, Locke Envelope #2604: Lottie Williams.

[72] Goff, "The Popular Priced Melodrama," 191-92.

[73] Goodman, 188.

$100-$125 per week, but a more usual salary for leading players was $60-$75 per week.[74] According to Corse Payton: "I pay my leading woman $200 a week; she lives at her home and now and then has a week's vacation, during the season, when she can go where she pleases, so long as she is back in time for the next week, and her salary goes on just the same."[75]

Successful managers and producers became wealthy on the popular-priced circuit and could afford to pay their stars well. Owen Davis claimed to have earned a profit of "twenty thousand a year from each show" during the eight years when his plays were in the highest demand. Every year he and his producer Al H. Woods had from seven to thirteen productions touring on the Stair and Havlin circuit of thirty-five theatres throughout the country.[76] In addition, Woods, who told a reporter that he earned between $50,000 and $250,000 per play, produced the works of other playwrights such as Theodore Kremer and Hal Reid, previous to and during an exclusive contract with Davis that began in 1905.[77]

Charles E. Blaney quipped that he married his wives because it was cheaper than paying their salaries. His

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[74] Holly Brooke Blaney, interviews with author.

[75] New York Dramatic Mirror, 10 July 1912.

[76] Owen Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, 90.

[77] Herriman, Los Angeles Examiner, 1908, Locke Scrapbook: Woods.

second wife was Lizzie Melrose, the "$100,000 Bareback Beauty," star attraction of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, and his third was Cecil Spooner, star of the ten-twenty-thirty theatre.[78] One of the reasons given by Blanche Shirley for the inability of actresses to secure husbands was the high salary earned by these women: "The actress is self-supporting, she is able to earn more money perhaps than the ordinary man, so the husband must offer enough in return to repay her for taking the step to matrimony, but she and other women should take the step."[79]

Salaries of actresses compared favorably with those of their sisters working in other fields. MacLean, who determined that 661 of the 1476 New York City women workers in factories and department stores interviewed for her study earned less than seven dollars a week during this period, listed no salary higher than twenty-three dollars.[80] Claudia Johnson explains that for every job except for the stage, there was one "fundamental reality, so widespread and longstanding as scarcely to be noted: [women] would inevitably receive far less money than would men for the same kind and quality of work."[81] This was true whether the

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[78] Blaney, interviews with author.

[79] Blanche Shirley, Pittsburg Leader, 28 August, 1910, Locke Envelope: Blanche Shirley.

[80] MacLean, 31-48.

[81] Johnson, 45.

woman was skilled or not.

But women who worked in the theatre, claims Johnson, found that "opportunities for financial regard, professional status and even a surprising measure of equality with men were within reach as they were almost nowhere else."[82] Tracy Davis reports that male and female actors generally received equal pay for work of equal value.[83] If there were differences in salary, Johnson finds them to have been based on talent and public demand, not sex.[84] Theatre managers needed actresses for their plays; it was no longer acceptable to audiences for men to play women's roles, as in classical Greek and Elizabethan theatre. Indeed, the reverse was true: the assignment of male roles (breeches parts) to females, dating back to the English Restoration, became, according to Johnson, a "particular phenomenon of the nineteenth-century American stage."[85]

Philip Lewis argues that "whatever the statistics as to the number of actresses compared to actors on tour in 1905, we know they were equal." He refers to the stage as "the world's first profession with absolute sexual equality." "No one ever attempted to say the actor was more essential than the actress, and all the discrimination outside the

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[82] Ibid., 46.

[83] T. Davis, 18 (on 19th-century British actresses).

[84] Johnson, 57 (on 19th-century American actresses).

[85] Johnson, 59.

theatre with respect to employment was nonsense to those on stage."[86] Davis states categorically that the stage offered "better wages than any other legitimate occupation freely accessible to a woman."[87]

High pay was tempered by an expense peculiar to the profession: the actress of the popular-priced theatre was responsible for the accumulation and maintenance of her own costumes. In the early part of the century, the costumes of the actress could be one of her major selling points. Women vied for the distinction of owning the most expensive, exclusive, or extensive wardrobes. Corse Payton advertised in his theatre program (1898-99) that "Etta Reed would wear during the week sixty different gowns, count them." She claimed to have the largest and most costly wardrobe of any American actress. The following season Payton had to raise the number because while abroad Reed bought so many new gowns that "the number of trunks that it now takes to transport her wardrobe is greater than the total baggage carried by many companies."[88]

Florence Bindley, who played soubrette roles, was known for her trademark "diamond dress." Made for her in Paris and said to be valued at $7,000, the knee-length dress

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[86] Lewis, 120.

[87] Tracy Davis, 19.

[88] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 12 August, 1899, Locke Envelope: Corse Payton.

weighed forty pounds and was covered with "brilliants" which were blinding under the lights. Reported stolen from her dressing room in 1907, "Flo's mascot" turned up again for each of her new starring roles.[89]

In melodramas, there were frequent costume changes; spectacular productions needed spectacular costumes. Publicity for the productions would include information about the costumes of the women. Leila Davis, whom Beckman describes as "one of the best heavy women in Show Business as well as the best-dressed," needed nine complete changes for The Queen of the Highbinders.[90] Selma Herman had eleven changes of clothing in The Queen of the Convicts. Her mother, who accompanied her most of the time, dressed her and helped to design her gowns. Considering that these actresses performed two shows a day, it is not surprising that Herman's fictitious title for a tragedy she might someday write was No Mother to Dress Her, from Lillian Mortimer's best-known melodrama No Mother to Guide Her.[91] From time to time scenery as well as costumes were destroyed in train wrecks or fires, and actresses would have to start accumulating them again. Victory Bateman, who suffered a

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[89] "Actress Robbed of $7,000 Dress," New York Morning Telegraph, 14 April 1907, Clipping File: Florence Bindley, BRTC.

[90] Beckman, 147; Goodman, 188.

[91] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Scrapbook: Selma Herman.

run of bad luck, lost her entire wardrobe (fourteen trunks) in a Nashville fire.[92]

Notwithstanding the expenditures, successful actresses did quite well; many earned enough money for extravagances. Some bought expensive summer homes on Long Island, like Lottie Williams, who also purchased a yacht; Blanche Shirley, who owned and maintained a duck farm; and Lillian Mortimer, who kept horses and dogs on the grounds of her Port Washington abode and dreamed of becoming a landscape artist. In her 1909 interview with Mortimer, Margaret Dodd pointed out that the actress had more than enough money to retire from acting and writing, although she continued for another two decades.[93]

Women who devoted their lives to the theatre and survived its rigors could reap substantial rewards, both material and professional. In a society in which females were denied the vote, the theatre offered actresses a chance to co-exist with men on their own level. On the other hand, the plays were, for the most part, written by men, and promoted a male viewpoint. But the leading female performers managed to utilize their talents and growing popular appeal to leave their mark on stereotyped roles by dint of their magnetic personalities and star power.

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[92] New York Morning Telegraph, 13 December 1906, Clipping File: Victory Bateman, BRTC.

[93] Dodd, 655.

Chapter Three: Characters Written by Men, Performed by Women

Most melodramas written for the ten-twenty-thirty theatre (as well as the legitimate theatre) were written by men. The roles they created were strictly defined by convention. Playwright Owen Davis complained about the rigidity of this system:

> In the days of which I am writing, the characters of our popular-priced plays were as sturdily founded upon a conventional mold as the most dogmatic creed of the most narrow-minded religous fanatics of the day, and any stepping aside upon a more flowery path was sternly frowned upon.[1]

David Grimsted adds, in his study of melodrama in the first half of the nineteenth century, that "so slight was the writer's personal impress on productions that one competent dramatist's plays were scarcely distinguishable from another's, at least in character, structure, and sentiment." He argues that "behind its [melodrama's] many changes of costume, its facade of variety, lay a heart, like that of its heroines, of undeviating character, purpose, and purity."[2]

The popular-priced theatre did not originate the idea

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[1] Owen Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again 100-101.

[2] David Grimsted, Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture 1800-1850 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 171.

of performers who specialized in particular character types, or "lines of business." This term, carried over from the British system into the American theatre, is defined by James C. Burge in his book about American casting practices as "the systematic distribution of parts within the given repertoires of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century stock company."[3] Edward W. Mammen, enumerating the roles for women at the Boston Museum, one of the most successful nineteenth-century stock companies, mentions the "'leading lady;' a 'second lady' or 'juvenile lead;' an 'old woman;' perhaps a 'heavy,' though this line might be combined with that of 'old woman;' one or two 'singing chambermaids,' the pert young things today [1945] known as soubrettes; perhaps a 'character actress;'" and utility performers, who filled in wherever they were needed, playing a wide variety of roles in each play.[4]

After a glimpse at the character types played by women in melodramas of the time, I will present the views of some current feminist scholars regarding stereotyped roles written for women by men, followed by an examination of the female roles and the actresses who played them in three of the most popular ten-twenty-thirty melodramas. I will argue that despite a genre known for its ironclad types, which

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[3] Burge, Lines of Business, 3.

[4] Edward William Mammen, The Old Stock Company School of Acting, 20.

presented formidable obstacles to the actress who tried to be an individual, the most successful performers rose to the challenge.

In the ten-twenty-thirty theatre, there were four major female roles: the heroine, the soubrette (a comedienne who served the heroine and was possessed of singing and dancing abilities), the heavy (an adventuress or society woman), and the character woman. Various other performers played multiple roles, among whom might be included juveniles, old women who assisted the male villain, or townspeople.

Actresses who played rigid characters had very little choice in how they were to be interpreted. Stock roles diminished the ability of female performers to express themselves. Women were presented as passive, unless they were villainesses or silly comics. Only then could they take an active role in their own destinies. In this way the melodramas both reflected the public view of women and furthered it.

There is an inherent contradiction between the freedom enjoyed by women who have chosen careers in the theatre and the limitations on the characters they played. According to Helen Krich Chinoy:

> Although their profession permits them greater personal liberty off stage, their sexual attractiveness, their dominant histrionic power, and their vibrant personalities are used on stage to convey the social stereotypes fashioned for conventional patrons mostly, although not exclusively, by male dramatists. . . .
>
> [The actress] has been used, manipulated, exploited for

> her talents in a theatre that has allowed her little say about what she does. The structure of show business has provided the actress few opportunities to express her sense of self despite the control her magnetism can exercise over audiences.[5]

Chinoy's statement is supported by the turn-of-the-century actress Mary Shaw, a champion of women's rights and pioneer in the work of Ibsen and Shaw, who wrote that the woman's point of view was not respected "by manager, producer or actor," resulting in the onstage characters behaving "not as real women would, but as men think that women ought to talk and act."[6] In effect actresses were playing "man-made women caricatures."[7]

Gay Cima, who analyzes female characters in male plays from Ibsen to Shepard in her book Performing Women, describes recent studies examining the relationship between male playwrights and female characters. These tend either to use psychoanalysis to explain how males treat female characters as victims, or try to prove that some brilliant male playwrights are able to rise above stereotypes to

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[5] Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins, eds. Women in American Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, 1981), 58-59.

[6] Ellen Donkin, "Mrs. Siddons Looks Back in Anger: Feminist Historiography for Eighteenth-Century British Theater," Critical Theory and Performance, edited by Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 277.

[7] Women in American Theatre, 59.

create "universal" women characters.[8]

Ellen Donkin, in her essay on Mrs. Siddons in the eighteenth century, could well be describing theatrical conditions at the turn of the twentieth century. Donkin distinguishes between the notion of "Woman," which was created by a male point of view and publicly reinforced by the actress onstage, and "women" in the audience, whose self-image was influenced by the performances they witnessed. The cultural expectations of the "very vocal audience" then "circled back to the actress," which completed the closed system.[9]

An examination of the females roles in three typical melodramas of the ten-twenty-thirty theatre demonstrates this idea of "Woman" as created by the playwrights Owen Davis and Theodore Kremer. I have chosen Davis's Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model, Kremer's The Fatal Wedding and its companion piece, For Her Children's Sake, because they were probably the most profitable and most well-loved melodramas of the decade. They all began in New York and toured for years. Further, the similarity of the female characters in these plays is representative of the theatrical strait-jacket into which the actresses who played in popular melodramas were placed.

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[8] Gay Gibson Cima, Performing Women: Female Character, Male Playwrights, and the Modern Stage (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), Introduction.

[9] Donkin, 278.

Despite the fact that critics and scholars dismissed the melodramas of Kremer and Davis for lack of literary merit, these men were well-educated, capable writers, who had the ability to create more complex characters. Kremer (1871-1923) left his native Germany to join Boucicault's company in Australia, where he played dialect roles, then sailed to San Francisco, and finally came to New York City, where he performed in his play, The Nihilists, at the People's Theater in 1886. The dawning of the new century found Kremer, poor and ill, recruited by the neophyte producer, Al H. Woods, to write his first melodrama, The Bowery After Dark. Earlier I referred to the enormously profitable contract between Davis and Woods, who became known as the "King of Melodrama." After earning their fortunes, Kremer, an opera-lover, left melodrama in its heyday, while Davis (1874-1956) stayed to the bitter end, following which he turned to the legitimate theatre where he ultimately won a Pulitzer Prize for Icebound (1923).

Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model, the "prototype of the Davidrama," opened in 1906, played for more than five seasons on New York's lower East Side and spawned several "Super-Special" road companies, with high expenses and high profits.[10] In spite of the play's spectacular success, Davis would not allow revivals of this or any other of his

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[10] Jack Kendall Wann, "The Career of Owen Davis (1874-1956) in the American Theatre," (Ph.D. Diss., University of Louisville, 1979), 57-58; Davis, 91.

one hundred twenty-nine melodramas:

> "Nellie" was really a big show, with twenty-one scenes and a very large company; its business was sensational and both Mr. Woods and I were very proud of it, although the time came when it hung very heavily about my neck. Nowadays I am in receipt of many offers for its revival or for its inclusion in some publication of famous melodramas. Many inquiries have come from directors of "Little Theatres" who obviously want to put it under a microscope. . . . My answer to all these requests is that by some tragic accident the last existing copy of "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model" was destroyed in a horrible fire in which there was great loss of life. I am a man who treasures the truth too highly to waste it upon the undeserving. Nobody is ever going to see "Nellie" again--I got away with it once and I see no reason in tempting providence. As a matter of fact, I don't allow any of the old melodramas to be played any more; the audiences of today [1950] couldn't enjoy them, the actors of today couldn't play them, and the stage directors of today would have no idea at all of how to put them on.[11]

Davis makes a valid point here: both he and Kremer not only wrote plays, but they also directed them. In an interview with Kremer, a journalist for the New York Morning Telegraph referred to the playwright as the "champion heavyweight rehearser of the world, bar none," adding that Kremer "knows how each line should be interpreted. . . the performers know that he knows how it should be done--and--they follow instructions."[12] Unfortunately, we will never see how each of these playwrights interpreted his own work.

Davis's efforts to hide his manuscripts, which remain

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[11] Owen Davis, My First Fifty Years in the Theatre, 39-40.

[12] "'Strenuous Teddy' of the Melodrama Is He," New York Morning Telegraph, 23 August 1903, Clipping File: Theodore Kremer, BRTC.

unpublished, were not entirely successful--copies of Nellie and others are obtainable. Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model tells the story of Mrs. Margaret Horton, who was widowed as a young woman after a short but secret marriage. She was forced by her father to give up her newborn baby daughter and to marry Mr. Horton, the millionaire who loved her. Now, after many years, she is widowed again, and asks her nephew, Walter, whom she has brought up, to help her find her daughter. This is not in his interest, as he has always counted on inheriting Mrs. Horton's entire fortune himself. But Walter promises to cooperate since his aunt threatens to stop supporting him if he does not. Thus Walter is determined either to marry Nellie, the long-lost daughter, or to murder her.

The major female roles in the play are the heroine, Nellie Grey, the "heavy woman" or adventuress, Hortense Drake, the comic soubrette, Polly Joy, and the character woman, Margaret Horton. Nellie has to fight off the villain's advances in order to preserve her honor and attempt to survive his myriad attempts on her life. Late one night, Walter and his accomplice, Hortense Drake, forewoman of the Cloak Department where Nellie is employed, arrange for Nellie to work alone. Walter sneaks in, intending to ruin Nellie, which would disgrace her in the eyes of her mother, but he does not count on her iron resolve to remain pure.

> Walter: (Crosses very slowly as he speaks) All is fair in love and war they say. Your kisses are sweet. I will have more of them. (He springs at her)
> Nellie: No! No! (She runs up stairs. He follows her on the balcony. She turns and throws big window open and jumps up on casement)
> Walter: (Still on stairs-steps) Look out! You will fall! Good God! What are you doing?
> Nellie: Sooner than let you kiss me again I'll jump to the street below.[13]

Concerning the character of a heroine, Davis commented:

> Our heroine must be pure at any cost, or else she must die. There could be no temporizing with the "the wages of sin are death" slogan. In all my experience I never once saw it successfully defied. The heroine must, of course, always marry the hero. Our audiences would not stand for any but a happy ending with love and wealth bestowed upon the girl.[14]

Even the costume of the heroine was predetermined. Frank J. Beckman, who attended many of the melodramas of the time and even worked in some of them as a supernumerary or extra, spoke of the heroine's "golden ringlets." He described her appearance:

> The leading woman was attired in modest frocks of gingham, or shirt-waist-and-skirt and her wardrobe always included that inevitable long, black coat, which made its apperance [sic] in Act III when she is rescued from a watery grave into which she had plunged herslef [sic] while eluding the villain's clutches.[15]

Each of the female characters is defined by a particular set of rules, behaviors, and costumes.

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[13] Owen Davis, Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model, unpublished manuscript (Chicago: University of Chicago Library, n.d.), 1.1.23-24. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically.

[14] Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, 102-3.

[15] Beckman, "The Vanished Villains," 80-81.

Hortense Drake, the adventuress, loves Walter and will stop at nothing to win and keep his love. She fires Nellie, hoping that "poverty will tempt her--once she is lured into the gay life of New York--alone--and poor, she will do as they all do--die or disappear" (1.1.11). It is she who suggests to Walter that he ruin Nellie ("Make love to her, if you must, but you shall not marry her"), and when he fails in the attempt, that he murder the girl.

Beckman pictured an adventuress as she

> stalked across the boards and levelled her lorgnette at all and sundry. In her left hand she waved a contemptuously-held cigarette and beneath her garter she concealed a poisonous-looking stiletto. The villainess, no matter where the locale or time of day trailed about the stage with several yards of crimson velvet or black sequins billowing in her wake.[16]

Harry James Smith noted that the "audience would not part with her, and the play could not." He spoke of her

> raven-black hair, her dark reptilian eyes. . . her beautiful but wicked mouth, and those astonishing one-color-effect gowns of hers with their sweeping trains and frou-frou of silk petticoats,--it is something to marvel at, to shudder at.[17]

Rollin Lynde Hartt referred to this type as "the terrible, man-eating adventuress" who wears "a diabolical red gown, a nefarious plumed hat, and exceedingly devilish high-heeled slippers."[18] David Belasco found that the actresses who played the adventuress "were beautiful women, and . . .

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[16] Beckman, 83.

[17] Harry James Smith, "The Melodrama," 322.

[18] Hartt, The People at Play, 167.

contributed a great deal to the fashions of their days."[19]

In contrast, Owen Davis depicted her appearance differently, distinguishing between

> the haughty lady of wealth and social position, quite naturally the instinctive enemy of our audiences, and the "bad woman" who in these days was spoken of in a hushed whisper. I recall some successful heavy women who had dark hair, but these were always cast in the society women parts. The real bad ones had to be blondes and they averaged a good hundred and sixty pounds.[20]

Davis noted that these ladies could either be in love with the hero or the villain, "but never happily."[21]

The classic comic soubrette, the aptly named Polly Joy, serves as "the cash girl" in the Cloak Department where Nellie works. Polly and her boyfriend, Ike Otto, a porter in the same establishment, befriend Nellie, and the couple save her from multiple disasters. Polly and Ike are responsible for the humor in the play. Polly is determined to become an actress, since the women she knows in the theatre claim to own a million dollars worth of diamonds and promise to find her a high-paying job ($100 per week) with a ballet company. Even Ike enters the business when he is asked to be a spear carrier at the Comedy Theatre where Nellie sings to earn extra money after she has lost her

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[19] David Belasco, "Stage Realism of the Future," Theatre, September 1913, 87.

[20] Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, 104.

[21] Davis, "Why I Quit Writing Melodrama," American Magazine, September 1914, 29.

position in the Cloak Department. In a vaudevillian scene between Ike and the stage manager, Davis satirizes the common road-show practice of recruiting locals to be "supers" (supernumeraries):

> Lance: . . . you yell--"Down with Cassius" "Down with Augustus Caesar." Now, have you got it?
> Ike: We ain't got the fifty cents.
> Lance: Forget the fifty cents. Ready--try it. . . .
> Ike: If this is acting, take me back to the sausage factory!
> Lance: Well, they said something. That's more than you did! Why didn't you join in?
> Ike: I was too bashful.
> Lance: Well, if you are so darned bashful you won't get the fifty cents. Go on now, try it. Down with Cassius--Down with Augustus Caesar!
> Ike: (Very dramatic) Down with Hash House, Down with Augusta Georgia!
> Lance: NO! NO! NO! Don't! Don't! For God's sake remember you are a Roman!
> Ike: You're a liar, I'm a Jew!
> Lance: This is not real! This is acting!
> Ike: Is the fifty cents real?
> Lance: Yes, yes. Now can't you pay attention!
> Ike: Can't you pay the fifty cents! (4.1.3-4).

In his column for Theatre, Harry Mawson pitied the poor stage manager of a touring stock company: "You may teach a horse his part in three days, but a lot of supers, recruited from grocery boys, etc., are just plain everyday lunkheads."[22]

The character woman in Nellie is Margaret Horton, a mother whose search for her unknown daughter, for whom she instinctively feels a kinship, sets the whole chain of events into motion. When Mrs. Horton sees Nellie, who is a stranger to her, homeless and suffering, she offers to take

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[22] Mawson, "In Stock," 30.

Nellie into her own home, saying "You are a motherless girl, I am a childless woman, I should like to help you." The girl refuses to go because she is searching for her abused young crippled cousin, but Mrs. Horton offers money and her card, in case she needs a friend. Nellie tells her she cannot repay it, to which Mrs. Horton replies: "You can pay it by being worthy of it, by living in this great city the life of a good, pure woman" (3.1.4-5). Nellie follows her advice, and of course ends up with a mother and a husband.

The most successful melodrama of the ten-twenty-thirty theatre, Theodore Kremer's The Fatal Wedding, or The Little Mother, repeats the same female character types as those in Nellie, with one notable exception: the role of Jessie. Frank J. Beckman found that "no play on the Popular-Priced Circuit achieved the popularity that was accorded The Fatal Wedding."[23] Garrett H. Leverton, who tried in vain to obtain permission to publish this play, refers to it as "one of the most characteristic" of the melodramas, and "a leading box-office success throughout most of this period." According to a 1903 advertisement in the New York Dramatic Mirror, there were five companies of The Fatal Wedding touring "the Continent"--one in Australia, one in South Africa, and three in England--in addition to four companies in the United States.[24]

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[23] Beckman, 119.

[24] New York Dramatic Mirror, 12 December 1903.

While Montrose Moses regards Davis's plays as "fraught with the vigor of the masculine," he finds that Kremer's work "dealt with the feminine."[25] A 1904 article stated that Kremer "knows all the strings which reach the heart--particularly the feminine heart--and he plays them with great skill. He undertakes to run the gamut of human emotions."[26] Opening at New York's Grand Opera House on October 28, 1901, The Fatal Wedding is less sensational than many of the popular-priced melodramas, but it is filled with "heart-interest." Beckman called the play a "Niagara among tear-jerkers."[27]

The Fatal Wedding is about Cora Williams' attempt to prove to the man she loves, Howard Wilson, that his wife Mabel is unfaithful to him. To this end, she persuades the villain, Robert Curtis, to seduce Mabel, offering him an I.O.U. for $20,000, payable upon Cora's marriage to Howard. The seduction fails, but Howard believes otherwise. Threatened with divorce, Mabel abducts her two children, Jessie, "the little mother" (so-called because she cares for small children in the tenement in which she lives, and also nurses her sick mother and brother), and Frank. They live in abject poverty for years, until the children are reunited

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[25] Moses, The American Dramatist, 302.

[26] "Something About the Kremer Drama," unidentified newspaper clipping, 1 January 1904, Locke Envelope #1067: Theodore Kremer.

[27] Beckman, 119.

with their wealthy father, who has been searching for them. Mabel is proven innocent by means of the I.O.U., produced by the heroic efforts of Jessie and the comedy team of Bridget and Toto, just as the wedding vows of Cora and Howard are about to be exchanged.

The heroine struggles against the advances of the villain, endures poverty and illness while trying to support her children, and survives an attempt on her life by Cora. In the first scene of the prologue, Robert Curtis confesses his love to Mabel in order to disgrace her in the eyes of her husband:

> Robert: . . . I must tell you how my love for you is consuming my very life! I---
> Mabel: (Furiously) Enough! How dare you speak to me like this? Your vile passionate declaration is the greatest insult you can offer me. Leave this house instantly!
> Robert: (Whispers) Not without a kiss from those voluptuous lips! (Wants to embrace her)
> Mabel: Have you lost all sense of shame? If nothing else will appeal to your honor, your manhood, remember I am a wife--a mother![28]

There are echoes here of Nellie's fight to preserve her honor, except this time the heroine must protect her children as well as herself.

In the second act, after the children have been returned to their home, Mabel begs her husband to allow her to stay with her son Frank, who is deathly ill, but Cora has

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[28] Theodore Kremer, The Fatal Wedding, or The Little Mother, unpublished manuscript (Columbia: University of Missouri, n.d.), Prologue.1.18. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically.

other ideas:

> Cora: Howard, this woman's audacity is beyond description! Command her to depart!
> Mabel: (Hysterically, R. hand round Frank and with L. appealing) Howard, for mercy's sake, don't be inhuman! Let me stay with him till the end! I'll never molest you, or darken your threshold again but don't send me away--now! (Sobbing) No, not now, not now! (2.1.46).

Unable to struggle against the pleading of Jessie and Mabel's resolve ("only death can tear him out of my arms!"), Howard agrees to allow his wife to stay. Rollin Lynde Hartt, a member of the melodrama audience in 1909, emphasized the difference between the weakness of the heroine in her attempts at self-defense and her strength when it comes to defending her child:

> She is "in-no-cent." With "quivering lips and moistened eye, her hands clasped meekly across her breast as though life was too heavy to bear," she tremulously reiterates the fact. Yet upon her, despite that aureole of angelic hair, those eyes so virtuously limpid, that rounded, maidenly figure, and the madonna-like sweetness of her ways. . . . she is driven from home and kin. . . . As the plot thickens, she grows eloquent. "Oh misery, misery!" she sobs. "I am alone forever! The thought will drive me frantic!. . . . What is left to me now but the deepest, darkest despair? Oh, I cannot bear it! My heart will break! Why do I not die?". . . She has life in her, though; lots of it. Wait till the villain sets about feeding her baby to the stone-crusher. It is with no little vigor, then, that she shrieks, "Me child! Me chi-i-i-ild!!!"[29]

Despite Hartt's parodistic approach to the character-types of melodrama, he accurately portrayed their stereotypical reactions and exaggerated vocal emphases.

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[29] Hartt, 162-63.

Meanwhile, consumed by jealousy of the heroine, Cora stops at nothing to rid herself of her rival. In the prologue, she accuses Mabel of having stolen Howard from her:

> He would have married me had you not suddenly stepped between us, like an accursed shadow. We were brought up together, even at school we were sweethearts; he never cared for anyone else. He loved me till you---yes, you, came and tore us asunder with your artful smiles. (Panting for breath) (Prologue.1.5)

Later, after an unsuccessful attempt to poison Mabel, Cora has murderous designs on Robert, who blackmails her with the I.O.U. Cora has written to him and demands double the money in their agreement or he will destroy her. As he leaves, laughing, Cora rages:

> Oh, I could strangle him! But until I get that paper I'm completely in his power!
> (Looks at Jess, who has been watching her, but quickly closes her eyes) [she pretends to be sleeping] Will Howard ever love me? As long as his children live--no! Well, the boy is half-dead already, and as regards this hussy--some day she might meet with a fatal accident.
> (Laughs harshly and exits) (2.1.34).

The plot is driven by the murderous fury of the adventuress, who must prevent a union (in this case a reunion) between the man she loves and the heroine at any cost. In each of the plays discussed here, it is she who rules the villain; the female heavy begins the action against the heroine and the male follows. She orchestrates the events, and although foiled in the end, she has had a chance to fight for her man and to show her superiority in a world of men.

Elaine Aston and Ian Clarke explore this character in

plays written and produced by the Melville brothers (Frederick and Walter) in England, who, according to Frank Rahill, provided the models for the ten-twenty-thirty melodramas.[30] The villainess was the chief attraction of their plays. Aston and Clarke argue that the Melvilles used the concept of the "New Woman" who emerged in the 1890s as the prototype for the adventuress.[31] Elaine Showalter believes that this woman engendered hostility in men because she was educated, sexually liberated, self-sufficient, and "threatened to turn the world upside down and to be on top in a wild carnival of social and sexual misrule."[32] In the melodramas of the day, maintain Aston and Clarke, the "New Woman" was assigned the role of the evil female while "a weak and passive heroine was a good woman."

As the alternate title of The Fatal Wedding suggests, The Little Mother is the most important character. Jessie functions both as a daughter and a mother. Kremer lists her age as ten; she was played by a child actress, yet she takes charge of the physical, emotional, and financial needs of her mother and brother. When they live in the tenement Jessie sells newspapers to earn money. After returning to her father's comfortable home, she demands to be allowed to

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[30] Rahill, The World of Melodrama, 279.

[31] Elaine Aston and Ian Clarke, "The Dangerous Woman of Melvillean Melodrama," New Theatre Quarterly 12 (1996): 31.

[32] Elaine Showalter, Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 38.

see her mother:

> Howard: Now Jessie, you must promise never to attempt to run away.
> Jessie: I will, father, dear, but you must promise me to let me see my darling mother as often as I like--every day!
> Howard: But--
> Jessie: (Emphatically) EVERY DAY! If you don't the first chance I get I shall clear out.
> Howard: Oh, but you mustn't!
> Jessie: (Imitating his tone playfully) Oh, but I will--You--and a thousand cops couldn't keep me away from my mother!
> Howard: Supposing we locked you up?
> Jessie: I'd jump out of the window. You better promise (2.1.8).

Over the objections of Cora, Howard does promise.

In the closing tableau of the second act, when Mabel receives permission to stay with her dying son, Jessie, who sees her mother fall "sobbing over Frank's breast," tries to reconcile her parents in a powerful bit of stage business:

> ([Jessie] looks at her [Mabel], then at her father, goes softly to him, raises his head, and, taking his hands, gently compells [sic] him to rise and cross to R.C., pointing appealingly to her mother. He crosses to other side of cot, kneels and puts his L. arm gently around Mabel and Frank, wiping his eyes with R. hand. Jess, heaving a sigh of relief, looks at Cora, who is hardly able to control her rage, smiles, and says softly and quietly)
> Good night, Aunt Cora!
> (Cora exits furiously D.L. with Jess looking triumphantly after her as scene closes in) (2.1.47).

Jessie resembles a soubrette in that she is gutsy, has a sense of humor, and is instrumental in saving her parents' marriage; yet she also resembles the character woman because she acts like the mother of the family and employs the loyal servants to prove her mother's innocence. It is not

uncommon for children in melodramas to do everything within their power to bring their parents together, but the ingenuity of the young Jessie is what makes this play unique, and the character difficult to categorize.

The comedy soubrette is Bridget O'Flanagan, the Irish "lady cook." Davis draws a distinction between the comic team of the soubrette and her male counterpart, the "light comedy boy," and the "comedian," who was either Jewish, Irish, or German, and was, according to Davis, the most important and highest paid member of the company.[33] Usually soubrettes and their male counterparts were young people in love with one another who served as loyal allies of the hero and heroine, while comedians were older and not necessarily attached. Although Bridget and her boyfriend Toto are older, I would still identify them as soubrette and light comedy boy. Bridget is the servant in the Wilson house, maintains her loyalty throughout the play to Jessie and her mother, and with the help of Toto, the French butler, saves the honor and the very life of Mabel. From the prologue, when Toto refers to Bridget as a "fat Irish Venus," and Bridget calls him a "Frinch infidel," to the last act, when Bridget tells Jessie she will marry Toto, "an' we are going to buy a restaurant an' make heaps of money, an' then we're to live in one of them suits up-town," they provide the laughter in between the tears (3.11).

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[33] Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, 104-5.

When Mabel and her children have been located, and Bridget and Toto meet again after eight years, Bridget "appropriates" some of Howard's champagne to celebrate. Toto is worried because Cora has just told him that in the interim, Bridget married and "finished" a man named "Moike."

> Toto: My dear Mrs. O'Flanagan, you are getting better looking as you grow older. Your beauty appears to have doubled.
> Bridget: (Indignantly) Do you mane me shape's doubled? If ye do I'll fix ye right here!
> Toto: (Aside, slowly rising) She finished 'im.
> Bridget: Pulling him back into seat) Ah, sit down! (Kittenishly) But don't make love to me, for Oi am too weak to resist ye! (She drinks again)
> Toto: (Puts his hand on hers, sighing) Oh Bridget!
> Bridget: Don't! If ye grab me hand with so much emotion there's no knowin' what moight happen! (Howard [who overhears them] bursts out laughing, but checks himself)
> (To Toto) If ye laugh at me noble sintiments, I'll hit ye in the eye! (2.1.18-19).

As is the case with most Irish servant roles, Bridget is powerful, brave, and feisty, and though her love life may end well, it is always a struggle along the way.

Kremer wrote a companion piece to The Fatal Wedding, also hugely successful, For Her Children's Sake (1902). In this melodrama, the adventuress, Florence Ogden, upon hearing of the engagement of the man she loves, Dr. Horace Parker, to Edna Kingsley, is willing to destroy her own reputation in order to prevent the wedding. She offers her lover, Gilbert Harcourt, $20,000 (again) to help her prove that Dr. Parker ruined her and cannot then marry anyone else. The Rev. Robert Kingsley, believing this story, throws out the doctor ("Begone! There is the door") and

banishes his daughter because she insists on following her fiancé. She tells him she is going "to the man I love. To the man you turned from your doors, because you preferred to believe the lying words of the infamous, shameless woman rather than his cry of outraged honor." To which her father replies: "Edna, if you step over that threshold tonight you shall never again enter this house."[34]

During a ten-year period, Edna, believing her fiancé to have drowned, marries a circus performer who dies on the trapeze, leaving her with two children. In desperation she marries the villain, Roland Ashton, a child-beating circus owner who forces her to perform dangerous tricks on horseback or else he will put her children into a tumbling act. She prefers to ride although she is not well, rather than allow her children "to embrace a profession that makes their mother the slave of an exacting public. . . . I will appear--if it kills me" (act 2). It nearly does kill her--Edna is at death's door after a riding accident during her act in her home town. The play ends with a reconciliation between Edna, Horace (her beloved doctor), and her father, who begs her forgiveness. The comedy is provided by the German servant, Mina, who stays with Edna through thick and thin, and Jonathan, who finally proposes to Mina after their long separation.

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[34] Theodore Kremer, For Her Children's Sake, unpublished manuscript, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, act 1. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically.

The characters and situations are quite similar to those in The Fatal Wedding: the female roles include the heroine/mother who protects and defends her children, the adventuress who will stoop to murder in order to marry the fiancé/husband of the heroine, and the comic servant. Like Bridget, the Irish servant in The Fatal Wedding, the German Mina Schimmelbusch speaks with a comic dialect that is written into the script. She is also an older soubrette, but strong in defense of Edna and her children. Soubrettes are never afraid to stand up to villains. When Ashton threatens to beat the children, Mina stops him:

> I'll make you wish you vas a thousand miles away from Mina Schimmelbusch. I give you fair warning. Don't you lay your hand on these childrens again (act 2).

(The "w" and "v" sounds are not consistently interchangeable.)

When Mina sees Dr. Parker after many years have passed, she is shocked: "You was dead! Yah, at the bottom of the Atlantical oceans" (2.1). At the close of the third act, Edna's son Robbie actually shoots Ashton, who has raised a whip to strike his mother and then the boy. Although he is arrested, Mina says they won't take him away from his mother: "Everybody knows that he shot that schwarzkopf in defension of his mother and his own life" (act 4).

As the characters of these plays seem somewhat interchangeable, so do the actresses who played them, if one can judge by newspaper reviews. The comments of the critics

do not provide significant evidence of differentiation in the playing of the female roles. Reata Winfield garnered praise in the title role of Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model from the New York Dramatic Mirror, which lauded her "natural and spirited rendering of her role," and from the New York Morning Telegraph, which acknowledged her "charming manner and natural grace," adding that she "won the sympathy of the audience from the very start of her troubles."[35] The New York Dramatic Mirror accorded top honors to Ola Humphreys as the heroine in The Fatal Wedding:

> The best impersonation was that of Ola Humphreys in the very trying emotional role of Mabel Wilson, the wife against whom false accusations lead to her divorce from her husband. She invested the character with considerable womanliness and played the extremely intense scenes as naturally as was possible under the circumstances.[36]

Acton Davies, in the New York Sun, found Selma Herman in For Her Children's Sake to be "excellent as the much married heroine," in a flawless cast about whom he stated "it is rarely that even Broadway sees so good an all round company."[37] The New York Dramatic Mirror referred to Herman as "girlish, womanly and strong by turns, as the play

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[35] New York Dramatic Mirror, 12 January 1907; New York Morning Telegraph, 1 January 1907, Clipping File: Reata Winfield, BRTC.

[36] New York Dramatic Mirror, 2 November 1901.

[37] Acton Davies, New York Sun, September 1902, Locke Scrapbook vol. 269: Selma Herman.

progressed. She acted with confidence throughout."[38]

Another reviewer states:

> It may be well to say that Miss Herman's audience last evening was never estranged from her. She "entangled," "enmeshed," or "entwined" herself in the affections of the throng quite as effectually as the villain entrapped her in the first act and was himself foiled in the last.[39]

Finally, Alan Dale managed some words of praise amidst his mockery:

> But Miss Herman does her work well, and if anything artistic can be said to have a place in this Eighth Avenue corker, Miss Herman supplies it. She has greatly improved, and, although it is a difficult matter to weave romance around a lady who has so many better halves that they are almost quarters, this actress nearly does it. And when you leave her--convinced that she will live happily ever afterward, you feel sorry.[40]

Critics consistently describe the heroine in terms of her looks, charm, "womanliness," and ability to win the sympathy of the audience. In the opinion of many reviewers, this character's appearance affects the quality of her performance.

Indeed, the playwright, the producer, and the male reviewers of Nellie decided that the leading actress was to be judged by her physical attributes. The title itself

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[38] New York Dramatic Mirror, 27 September 1902.

[39] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 16 September 1902, Locke Scrapbook: Selma Herman.

[40] Alan Dale, "For Her Children's Sake is such a scorcher it blackens the very boards," 18 September 1902, unidentified source, Locke Scrapbook: Selma Herman (hereafter cited as "For Her Children's Sake is a scorcher").

invites observations on her beauty. Dale, whose review of Reata Winfield as Nellie was entitled: "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model, not beautiful," said of her: "Miss Reata Winfield . . . played the B.C.M., and if she thinks she is B, well, I'm satisfied."[41] Charles Darnton in the New York World did not believe that Nellie had a "be-yoo-tee-ful figger" but a "good, serviceable" one that

> was proof against an L train, a freight elevator, a dynamite bomb, the North River, the East River and a double-initialled corset "used exclusively in this production." Nothing could ruin Nellie's figure.

He maintained that she was "laced up to the last curtain." For him, the most beautiful thing about her was her "beautiful open-work English," such as her preference for "paw-verty" over the wealth the villain could offer her.[42]

An article in the New York Morning Telegraph explains the manner in which the producer, Woods, cast the role of Nellie. In his advertisement for an actress, he demanded a woman who "combined the form of the Venus de Medici, the beauty of Helen of Troy, the fascination of Cleopatra, the seductiveness of Du Barry, and the winsomeness of Marie Antoinette," including the measurements of the Medicean Venus. Among the applicants were artists' models, art students, women who were endorsed by a beauty expert, and

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[41] Dale, "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model not beautiful."

[42] Charles Darnton, "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model Wears Well," New York World, 16 January 1907, Clipping File: Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model, BRTC.

"graduates from laundries, kitchens and soda water fountains." Reata Winfield won over four finalists with ninety-six and one-half points out of a possible one hundred. "The extra one-half point was thrown into the measure for a dimple."[43] A newspaper photograph of Winfield with her back to the camera shows her hourglass figure wrapped tightly in a strapless gown, under which is the caption, "She Has Been Rehearsing for the Role of Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model, Under the Direction of a Costumer With a Tape Measure."[44] Woods understood how to capture the attention of his future patrons, whether he was displaying a gory lithograph or a beautiful woman.

Who was the unknown Reata Winfield, alias Myrtle Canady? According to the Englishman Sir Thomas Lipton, who saved her when he found her out of work and starving on a visit to England, she was "one of the most gifted violinists I have ever had the pleasure of listening to."[45] The actress had much more to offer than her looks, a fact ignored by those involved in the production.

In addition to appearance, actresses cast as the

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[43] "Lipton's Protégé Wins By a Dimple and Several Points of Measurement Over at Least 114 Rivals," New York Morning Telegraph, 24 November 1906, Locke Envelope #2626: Reata Winfield.

[44] "Miss Reata Winfield," 9 December 1906, unidentified newspaper clipping, Clipping File: Reata Winfield, BRTC.

[45] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 26 July 1903, Locke Envelope: Reata Winfield.

heroine also had to have ability in order to win over the audience, as explained by Michael Booth:

> More interest attaches to the acting of the heroine than to the acting of any other type, except perhaps the villain. It is the heroine who is the principal object of the villain's designs. Therefore, since she is at the very centre of melodramatic action and suffers the villain's attention and pursuit, the hero's degradation, the good old man's wrath, the distress of hungry children, and the extremes of cold and poverty, she must act terror, pathos, tenderness, courage, outraged innocence, despair, exhaustion, and maternal love--a far wider range than any other character in melodrama.[46]

If the actress did not convince her audiences, they were not reticent about expressing their dissatisfaction. This was especially true for the patrons who sat in the gallery, the cheapest seats because they were farthest from the stage. Many of these "gallery gods" were newsboys, adolescents who voiced their opinions about everything that happened in the play. Performers knew they had to please these young people or they would be shouted off the stage. One reviewer, writing about the actress Lottie Williams, a favorite with the gallery, remarked: "more eminent players than she have watched the gallery with fear and trembling, and with all their efforts not be half as sure of its liking as is she."[47] Al H. Woods, known for his pithy phrases, used the following criterion to judge the success of his productions:

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[46] Michael Booth, English Melodrama (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), 201.

[47] Boston Transcript, 15 September 1908, Locke Envelope #2604: Lottie Williams.

"If they don't please the gallery, it's no go."[48]

The role of the adventuress, much hissed by the gallery, was played by Emma Curran in Nellie. The New York Dramatic Mirror grouped Curran and the male heavy, J. Irving White, together as "the two conspiring villains" who performed "in a most melodramatic fashion."[49] Alan Dale referred to Curran as unusually "simple" and "ingenuous" for an adventuress, describing the way in which she instructed the villain to disgrace Nellie:

> She said "Make an outcast of her" in the tone she would have used to remark, "Make that coat flat across the back, and buttoned down the front." I rather liked the easy nonchalance of her black velours manner. It put one at one's ease.[50]

Julia Ralph received unanimous praise for her role as the adventuress in The Fatal Wedding, a characterization she played over 1,700 times.[51] The New York Dramatic Mirror remarked that Ralph and her well-known co-conspirator, John E. Miltern, "furnished villainy deep enough to suit the audience's most exacting requirements,"[52] while Dale reported in the New York Journal: "the adventuress was

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[48] Smith, "Al. H. Woods's Musts for a Good Play," Locke Scrapbook: Woods.

[49] New York Dramatic Mirror, 12 January 1907.

[50] Dale, "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model not beautiful."

[51] Toledo Blade, 10 February 1913, Locke Envelope #1825: Julia Ralph.

[52] New York Dramatic Mirror, 2 November 1901.

Julia Ralph, who gave a good performance and was hissed on and off the stage without turning a hair."[53] Reviewing a matinee, the New York Evening Sun declared:

> Of Cora's duplicity there could be no question, for she wore spangles on her gown and talked in a liquid English basement contralto which sounded so deep and underground that it might have just been tunnelled by a Subway gang. . . . Miss Julia Ralph is one of the best adventuresses that have appeared in some time. She has good looks, an air of distinction, and her remarkable voice gives weight to even her lightest comment.[54]

Beckman related his reactions to Ralph's performance:

> Miss Ralph was endowed with a voice of such timbre it made the throaty utterances of the late Ethel Barrymore sound like a whisper in comparison. With such unremitting relentlessness did Miss Ralph play her role that the gallery gods would waylay her at the stage door in order to continue their denunciations. In those days Miss Ralph played right along with us. She would emerge from the theatre, sweep us with a superciliously-lifted brow, gather her furs about her and brush by us with a chuckle and an exposure of her lovely teeth.[55]

In July, 1907, Julia Ralph, again engaged to play Cora Williams, drove a pair of zebras hitched to a dogcart through Central Park as a publicity stunt for the play. Although the managers refused to allow her to drive or even ride one of them onto the stage, "she maintains, and with reason that a zebra should always be the means of locomotion for a stage adventuress or the villain in a play, because

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[53] New York Journal, 13 September 1902, Locke Envelope: Julia Ralph.

[54] New York Evening Sun, 31 October 1901, Locke Envelope: Julia Ralph.

[55] Beckman, 137-38.

the zebra wears stripes."[56]

Although Ralph seemed to enjoy the publicity she received from her various roles as a villainess, she complained about its negative influence on her daily life:

> It is incredible, this impression that is carried from the stage to the street! So many people have seen the play. . . that it is difficult for me to visit a store or enter a restaurant without being recognized. In the latter place the waitress will sidle up and begin serving me with an air of timidity that would create the impression that I am some strange, untamed animal. Yet I am always trying to be pleasant, and soon the girls express . . . wonder that I am really agreeable and womanly. . . . There is certainly no danger of a matrimonial romance, and altogether, it is a distressing condition which confronts a woman doing this sort of stage work, especially if she is a womanly woman. Oh, how I long for the day when I shall play some sweet emotional part where I shall be a lovable woman, whom every one will want to know.[57]

The actress wanted to be "womanly," an adjective that has been shown to refer to the passive heroine. At the end of the play For Her Children's Sake, in which Adra Ainslee played the adventuress, the hero, Dr. Horace Parker, admonishes her with the words: "I am ashamed that such creatures as you are permitted to call themselves women." (act 4) Aggressive women do not fit the male definition of "Woman."

Ainslee was praised by the New York Dramatic Mirror as "an excellent adventuress," while Davies in the New York Sun

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[56] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 18 July 1907, Locke Envelope: Julia Ralph.

[57] "The Perils of Playing Mothers-in-law," Chicago Herald, 10 June 1906, Locke Envelope: Julia Ralph.

referred to her as "the double dyed villainess [who] has a melodious voice with delightful caresses in it."[58] Dale called her a "charming creature" with "a low-necked dress and much lower-necked manners."[59] The adventuress needed to be striking, from her magnificent costumes, to her resonant voice, to her capacity for treachery.

Like the female heavy, the comic woman is another strong female character. Couched in humor and song this woman takes control of events, coming to the rescue of the heroine and often the hero as well. Owen Davis refers to her as "a working girl with bad manners and a good heart."[60] The actresses who played the soubrette in these three plays were Blanche Henshaw as Polly Joy, Louise K. Quinten as Bridget O'Flanagan, and Kate Medinger as Mina Schimmelbasch. The New York Dramatic Mirror alluded to the comedy work of Henshaw and Paul Burns (Ike) in Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model, which "earned many a laugh."[61] In 1924, a film of Nellie was released, which was extensively based on the play. A review in Variety said that Mae Busch as Polly "walks away with the movie."[62] The Fatal Wedding review in

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[58] New York Dramatic Mirror, 27 September 1902; Acton Davies, New York Sun, September 1902, Locke Scrapbook: Selma Herman.

[59] Dale, "For Her Children's Sake is a scorcher."

[60] Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, 104.

[61] New York Dramatic Mirror, 12 January 1907.

[62] Fred, Variety, 1924, Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

the New York Dramatic Mirror credited Louise K. Quinten and the comic males with having "successfully cared for" the "comedy element," and praised Kate Medinger's Mina and the comics in For Her Children's Sake as "uniformly capable portrayals."[63] Alan Dale felt that Mina "is really an amusing character," but objected to her crude language: "the chief comedy person, who is a woman, uses language--to get laughs--that you occasionally hear from the lips of car conductors. Again, I admit that this really does cause ripples of merriment, but that is no justification."[64] He speaks specifically of her "references to Hades and her big, big D's." It is entirely possible that Medinger ad libbed, because her lines, though filled with comic pronunciations and references, were not, for the most part, crude.

Soubrettes and light comedy boys were sometimes recruited from the vaudeville stage for their singing, dancing, and comic abilities. They performed "specialties" during and in between the scenes and acts of the melodramas. The costumes of the soubrette could be outrageous, which added to the comedy. Smith mentioned "red stockings and pigtail hair," but when it came to her devotion to the heroine, she was "true blue."[65] Once Davis made the mistake

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[63] New York Dramatic Mirror, 2 November 1901 and 27 September 1902.

[64] Dale, "For Her Children's Sake is a scorcher."

[65] Smith, 323-24.

of pairing the light comedy boy with another woman in the cast, other than the soubrette, "but I had to rewrite the play. The audience got too bewildered."[66] Davis was clear about the fact that he had no options--he had to please his audience or his plays would fail.

The reviews give no clear indication of what the performances were like, nor any clue as to distinctive elements in the portrayals of the female characters. Concerning the character woman, whom Beckman called the "war-horse of melodrama:"

> she was often called upon to double or triple her roles. Aside from appearing as the conventional Irish biddy or German Hausfrau, the character woman assumed the roles of blind mothers, as well as those with a 20/20 vision. She played the roles of dignified grandes dames as well as skittish dowagers, Negro Mammies, Hags.[67]

Although Victory Bateman, who played Margaret Horton, the character woman in Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model, was widely praised, no specifics are offered about her portrayal. The New York Morning Telegraph reviewer, who was prejudiced in her favor because of her past work, declared that Bateman was

> an actress of splendid ability and [was] at one time known as perhaps the most accomplished leading woman in Shakespearian productions in this country. . . . Miss Bateman gave an admirable performance of this trying

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[66] Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, 105.

[67] Beckman, 84.

role.[68]

Local newspapers marked Bateman's fall from grace, chronicled in Chapter Two, resulting in her appearance in a lowly melodrama.[69] The New York Dramatic Mirror noted that her performance was marked by "clearness and dignity."[70]

The role of Jessie in The Fatal Wedding was played by a child actress--"Little" Cora Quinten, the daughter of Louise K. Quinten. Because her mother was with her on the road, Cora was able to travel with the company. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle called her

> the best-known child actress on the stage. . . . She practically was the star of The Fatal Wedding, in which the role of the child was one of the strongest of the play, and which she enacted for three seasons.[71]

The New York Evening Sun also praised her performance:

> Cora Quinten . . . plays "the little mother" extremely well. Her hit with the house at yesterday's performance was something tremendous. She is really the star of the organization.[72]

The New York Dramatic Mirror added: "Cora Quinten, a clever

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[68] "Nellie Given Fine Production: Al Woods Outdoes Himself in Providing Elaborate Scenery for His New Thriller," New York Morning Telegraph, 1 January 1907, Clipping File: Victory Bateman, BRTC.

[69] "Victory Bateman, Once a Broadway [Star] Returns to New York in a Melodrama," 13 December 1906, Clipping File: Victory Bateman, BRTC.

[70] New York Dramatic Mirror, 12 January 1907.

[71] Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 6 April 1909.

[72] New York Evening Sun, 31 October 1901, Locke Envelope #1816: Cora Quinten.

actress, achieved a hit as Jessie."[73] A 1902 article said of her:

> The past season the principal feature with The Fatal Wedding Company, not having lost one single performance and pronounced by the press of every city where she has appeared as not only a PHENOMENAL WONDER but THE attraction with that company, has been re-engaged for the coming season with The Fatal Wedding Company and is to be starred.[74]

I have found no indication of Cora's age when she played Jessie, but newspaper articles of the time suggest that she was close to the age of the character (ten) or a little younger. Beckman revealed that Mary Pickford, billed as "Little Gladys Smith," appeared onstage in a western company of this play.[75]

Based on an analysis of the major female character types, and the reviews of the actresses who performed them in three of the most profitable of the popular-priced plays authored by men, there has been no clear evidence of individuality by women either on the page or on the stage. In a theatre created by males, can the inner voice of the actress be heard? Gay Cima and Ellen Donkin both offer positive responses to this question. Cima stresses the influence of performance styles on the way female actors interpret male-created characters. She believes that:

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[73] New York Dramatic Mirror, 2 November 1901.

[74] Unidentifed newspaper clipping, 2 May 1902, Locke Envelope: Cora Quinten.

[75] Beckman, 120.

> despite the undeniable power of male playwrights and the theatrical and cultural systems they at once reflect and enforce, female actors since the late nineteenth century have actually assumed a collaborative and potentially disruptive role in creating new ways of performing the idea of woman.[76]

Cima feels that it is useful for feminists to examine not only the script and the acting style of the performer, but also to place these factors in their historical context.

Donkin suggests two possibilities. The first, like Cima's, is based on the differences between the text and the performance. Although audiences demanded that the text subscribe to the "norms of Womanhood," they responded to the actress's own contribution--what Donkin refers to as "female subjectivity." She means that during a performance, especially in the most intensely emotional scenes, the actress, instead of serving merely as an object to be watched, became the subject who registered "the contradictions, the anger, the desire, the humor, the powerlessness, and the perspective of the female." The audience was given a "glimpse of the power inside" of the actress at certain moments, which allowed these scenes the function of "pry bars" through which women, rather than Woman, could be heard onstage. Secondly, audiences had the power to modify performances by their responses. Donkin refers to the eighteenth-century theatregoers as "shouting" audiences, who could provoke and cement instant changes

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[76] Cima, 7.

because of their reactions.[77] This was also true of melodrama audiences.

Another way the individual qualities of the actress might stand apart from the play occurred when the dramatist wrote his script around the particular talents of the woman who would play a starring role. For example, melodramas were written for the soubrettes Cecil Spooner and Lottie Williams by Charles E. Blaney, for Florence Bindley by the playwright Hal Reid, and for Laurette Taylor by her husband, Charles A. Taylor. Blaney believed that the "main idea" in putting together a successful melodrama was to "fit his star."[78] The publicity and reviews for Lottie Williams offer a clear picture of her drawing-power. In Blaney's Only a Shop Girl, Williams played Josie, another "Little Mother," a tough girl (in the soubrette role) who rescues the heroine and performs musical specialities in a department store scene.[79] As the lead in Blaney's My Tom-Boy Girl, Williams, playing an abducted heiress, dressed as a boy for self-protection in the dual breeches roles of Josie, the tom-boy girl, and Captain Charley, "rescuer of

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[77] Donkin, 278-79.

[78] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Clipping File: Charles E. Blaney, BRTC.

[79] Toledo Blade, 3 December 1904, Locke Collection Envelope: Lottie Williams.

abducted women and nightmare of bandit braves."[80] As Tennessee Tess, Queen of the Moonshiners, another of Blaney's works specifically written for Williams, the actress played a gun-toting, singing, and dancing champion of everyone who was dear to her. One reviewer used the medium of poetry to critique her performance, titling his article: "Heroine not a beauty, but handy with a gun."

Tennessee Tess
Wore a hick'ry dress'
An' her grammar was on the blink;
She lived with a bloke
Who was wont to soak
His hide full of pizen ink'
She was shy on grace
An' as fer face
Hers wasn't a strikin' one,
But she could shoot--
She was handy at drawin' a gun.

Tennessee Tess
As you might guess,
Was the idol of Forty Pines;
The lumber jacks
Never made no cracks
That wasn't the proper kinds'
An' when one popped
He immedjit stopped
When she reckoned he'd better be done'
They never got gay
When she turned 'em away--
She was handy at drawin' a gun.

Tennessee Tess
Made a life success
By totin' a pistol right'
She won her mate
By aimin' straight
An' puttin' his foes to flight.
She was short on the looks
That the story books
Hand out to a hairowun--

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[80] Boston Transcript, 2 October 1906, Locke Envelope: Lottie Williams.

> But she made some noise,
> An' she got there, boys,
> Bein' handy at drawin' a gun![81]

The Toledo Blade wrote about Williams: "She could star in a funeral dirge and make it earn money." She held all attendance records at Burt's Theatre in Toledo.[82]

A 1904 advertisement in the New York Dramatic Mirror announcing Charles E. Blaney's present and future attractions in his theatres displayed two photos of Lottie Williams: one as Josie and one as Capt. Charley, proclaiming

> Next Season Charles E. Blaney presents America's Favorite Comedienne, LOTTIE WILLIAMS in the Dual Role of Josie and Capt. Charley in Mr. Blaney's Latest Success "MY TOM-BOY GIRL GIRL," 100 People/ A Play of the South. Now in her Third Season to SRO Everywhere: "ONLY A SHOP GIRL."[83]

Following this are comments by reviewers about the actress, including one from the Boston Transcript: "Without a doubt the best Soubrette on the American stage," and another from the New York Times: "A clever little bundle of comic animation is Lottie Williams, playing at all times with absolute sincerity and truth."

Hal Reid, father of the film star Wallace Reid, was

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[81] Guy F. Lee, "Heroine not a beauty but handy with a gun," Chicago Record, 11 January 1909, Locke Envelope: Lottie Williams.

[82] Toledo Blade, 12 December 1908, Locke Envelope: Lottie Williams.

[83] This and subsequent quotations from the New York Dramatic Mirror, 25 December 1904.

also a prolific melodramatist, claiming to have written some one hundred and seventeen plays by 1910. He often gave them a rural setting and emphasized the pathetic element.[84] He wrote several plays for Florence Bindley, a favorite in popular-priced theatres, who began her career as a three-year-old child in her father's company in Brooklyn. Hal Reid's The Street Singer contains an unusual combination of music (with a chorus of twenty females), vaudeville, and melodrama written for Bindley's many talents. In the play, Florence Bindley, a "diminutive, plump and pleasing comedienne," became a street singer to earn some money, rather than live with the decrepit husband she married to save her father from prison. It was reported that after each performance the actress donated the coins the audience tossed into her tambourine to charity.[85] Bindley sang in a Bowery music hall to support her aged mother in Reid's A Midnight Marriage; and The Girl and the Gambler gave her the opportunity to sing, dance, play a variety of instruments, do clever imitations, foil the villain, and wear her trademark "diamond dress." In a review of The Girl and the Gambler, the New York Dramatic Mirror wrote about Bindley that "Hal Reid has fitted to her personality a melodrama of his usual type, but with various trimmings calculated to

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[84] Goff, "The Popular Priced Melodrama," 267-68.

[85] "Versatile Comedienne is Florence Bindley," The Daily Post-Standard, Clipping File: Florence Bindley, BRTC.

give the star greater opportunities than the simple reciting of lines or throwing villains about."[86]

In the ten-twenty-thirty theatre, rigid conventions established specific character types into which the actresses of the time were pigeonholed. They knew what was expected of them and how to create the desired effects. James Burge argues that melodrama was not a genre that created stars. He maintains that while it had an "irresistible appeal for managers" of stock companies because of the multitude of roles for everyone in the company and a huge box-office success, melodrama was rejected by many leading players. These actors and actresses often insisted upon a clause in their contracts exempting them from having to perform in melodramas, because the stars refused to take second place to action and sensationalism. "As an actor's status rose, his inclination for melodrama declined. . . . Melodrama, then, was emphatically the province of companies without stars."[87]

Yet, the popular-priced melodrama theatre did create stars. Their names became synonymous with certain roles and they had equal billing with the play itself. Audiences who were unfamiliar with the material would buy tickets in order to see the performers they admired. These actresses were

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[86] New York Dramatic Mirror, 22 September 1906.

[87] Burge, 124-25.

able to transcend the strict classifications of the system and become very much in demand. They had particular talents that managers had to recognize because audiences clamored for them. They could sing and dance, and/or they were specialists in comedy and vaudeville routines, in dialects, in daring stunts; they could capture audiences with their boldness, their unusual abilities, and their charm. These women knew how to play directly to a public who offered clear and immediate feedback.

Given the constant ribbing by reviewers like Alan Dale and the bias of the critical establishment, the success of the formulaic melodrama often depended on the ability of the actress to interpret her role in a believable way. Many actresses had the skill to put over the most stilted dialogue and gain the sympathy of the audience, who had definite favorites among them. It might be argued that the ten-twenty-thirty patrons did not have much theatrical sophistication, but they would certainly have had no qualms about expressing negative responses. Time and again performers admitted their fears to interviewers concerning the reception of the gallery to their work. They could not allow these trepidations to be seen by an audience who, like children, did not believe in polite applause.

Some actresses overcame the severe limitations placed upon them, gained their own following and achieved a certain stature and wealth. Consequently they found themselves able

to move to higher level positions in the theatre.

Chapter Four: Women as Theatre Managers

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, women's place in society was distinctly separate from and unequal to that of men. In Womanhood and America Mary Ryan, addressing this separation, refers to the "notion of women's sphere," which "not only assigned distinctive roles, characteristics, and spaces to the female sex, but also construed this sexual division as a principal safeguard of social order."[1] As the industrial revolution separated the home from the workplace, men spent most of their time outside of the home while women remained "secluded and almost immobilized" within it.

Women of the time held widely divergent views concerning their role in society, and particularly in the home. After exploring two opposing viewpoints with regard to the duties of women as homemakers, I will show that even females who chose to seek outside employment were restricted in their choice of careers. Only in the theatre were they able to enjoy the same advantages and independence as men. This chapter will discuss the different concerns and

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[1] Mary P. Ryan, Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present, 2nd ed. (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975), 77. Following quotation, ibid.

responsibilities of women who managed theatres and/or touring companies, as well as some who served as press agents and advance agents. These women seemed to be as effective in the administration of their duties as men in equivalent positions.

But elsewhere women were not given the opportunity to prove that they could be successful in business. They were taught to accept their place, and even to regard their position as guardian of home and family as equal to that of men in the outside world. As Julie A. Matthaei explains, "the cult of domesticity, by distinguishing and elevating woman's work, made way for a conception of the sexes as different but equal, heading two different but important spheres."[2] To this end, the "scientific homemaking movement," begun by Catherine Beecher in the nineteenth century, "reached its zenith in the early twentieth century."[3] Beecher's Treatise on Domestic Economy first published in 1841, was expanded in 1869 into an extensive guidebook for homemakers, written by Beecher and her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, bearing the ambitious title: The American Woman's Home: Principles of Domestic Science: A Guide to the Formation and Maintenance of Economical, Healthful, Beautiful and Christian Homes. Spanning over

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[2] Matthaei, An Economic History of Women in America, 116.

[3] Ibid., 158.

four hundred pages, the book is an in-depth examination of a wide variety of topics concerning the home, from proper ventilation and warming to health care, food, domestic exercise, home decoration, manners, cleanliness, clothing, charity, child care, economy of time and expense, domestic amusements, care of the aged, the homeless, the sick and the servants, and care of plants, fruit, and animals. The aim of the book is to train women for their domestic duties so as

> to elevate both the honor and the remuneration of all the employments that sustain the many difficult and sacred duties of the family state, and thus to render each department of woman's true profession as much desired and respected as are the most honored professions of men.[4]

The authors hoped that by providing a manual that would prepare and guide women in the skills necessary to run a home and family, they could compensate for the fact that "the other sex" trained for "nearly ten of the best years of life" to prepare for professions such as law, medicine, and divinity.[5]

On the opposite end of the spectrum were the proponents of the women's movement, one of the most fascinating of whom was Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Her books on Women and Economics and The Home provided a scathing if coolly

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[4] Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, The American Woman's Home: Principles of Domestic Science (New York: J. B. Ford and Company, 1869), 13.

[5] Ibid., 13-14.

rational argument against the lack of options available to women, who were forced to remain at home and depend on men for their economic security.

Gilman, ironically the grandniece of Harriet Beecher Stowe, demonstrated in Women and Economics (1898) that the traditional view of women in society resulted in the condition that

> women, as a class, neither produce nor distribute wealth; that women, as individuals, labor mainly as house servants, are not paid as such, and would not be satisfied with such an economic status if they were so paid; that wives are not business partners or co-producers of wealth with their husbands, unless they actually practise the same profession; that they are not salaried as mothers, and that it would be unspeakably degrading if they were.[6]

Perkins added that "so inordinate is the sex-distinction of the human race that the whole field of human progress has been considered a masculine prerogative," and that "each woman born. . . has had to live over again in her own person the same process of restriction, repression, denial."[7]

In The Home: Its Work and Influence (1903), Gilman, who claimed that the purpose of her book was "to maintain and improve the home," was not afraid to attack the myths associated with it, understanding that many people would be scandalized by her approach: "'What! Scrutinise the home,

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[6] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution (1898; reprint, New York: Torchbooks, 1966), 17.

[7] Ibid., 52, 70.

that sacred institution, and even question it? Sacrilegious!'"[8] She maintained that there was no privacy in the home, that domestic economy and labor were enormously wasteful, that maternal instinct without training was the most dangerous of all myths, and that the two main home industries, preparation of food and care of children, should be centered outside of the home, like any other industry. Finally, she believed that the home exerted a negative influence on every member of the family, from the wife who was forced to give up any claim to self-fulfillment to the husband who chose to spend very little time there to the children who were brought up to continue in this tradition.

When women finally did enter the world of work, they faced the same type of sex divisions as they did at home. According to Mary Ryan, sixty per cent of American working women served as domestic servants in 1890, earning very little more than their room and board for a nearly twenty-four-hour-a-day service. The second most common type of work was manufacturing, where women "entered a segment of the industrial work force that was clearly labeled female. Although a great variety of industries employed them, women's status, wages, and working conditions designated a secondary status."[9]

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[8] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Home: Its Work and Influence (1903; reprint, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 38.

[9] Ryan, 120-21.

Many women in the middle and upper classes volunteered their time in clubs or leagues in an attempt to reform the ills of society (i.e. alcoholism and prostitution), and/or operated Settlement Houses to serve poor immigrant populations. Matthaei refers to this movement as "social homemaking" because "present or future homemakers" moved out of the home to practice their skills in the public sphere.[10] Other women entered what Matthaei terms "sex-typed jobs," becoming nurses, librarians, teachers, and social workers, which were logical extensions of their duties at home. They tried to change these fields into professions that required higher levels of skill and better pay.[11] Matthaei argues that these "new feminine professions" differed from the "older, masculine professions" (doctors, lawyers, college professors, clergymen), in that men worked to advance themselves, increasing their "knowledge and power," while women subordinated themselves to the needs of others. For that reason, social scientists sometimes referred to women's professions as "semi" or "sub" professions.[12]

But in the theatre, not only were actresses as valuable and as well-paid as men, but some of these women used their earnings to take charge of their own companies. Claudia

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[10] Matthaei, 173.

[11] Ibid., 206.

[12] Ibid., 208-9.

Johnson notes that "at the same time that other businesses and professions were closing their doors to women, the theater was slowly opening up . . . managerial positions to women as never before." Johnson refers to the nineteenth century as "the age of the female theatrical manager." [13] Indeed J. K. Curry documents the careers of over fifty women managers in her book Nineteenth-Century American Women Theatre Managers. Curry points out women's "relative ease of entry to the profession." She concludes that "absolute barriers to women's participation in the profession of theatrical management did not exist."[14] She suggests that since most of these women were leading actresses they did not face insurmountable obstacles because they had already broken the barrier against women in commerce by entering the theatre in the first place. Further, "working as an actress, a woman had plenty of opportunity to observe theatre managers at work and to prepare for a management career essentially the same way a man would."[15]

Women managers were in the position of employers who assumed responsibility for personnel decisions, including the choice of male and female performers and staff; artistic decisions, involving the selection and staging of plays and

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[13] Johnson, American Actress, 64.

[14] Jane Kathleen Curry, Nineteenth-Century American Women Theatre Managers (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press: 1994), 4, 6.

[15] Ibid., 4.

supervision of every aspect of production; and financial decisions, determining salaries, leasing theatres, and providing the capital to mount and publicize productions. Vera Mowry Roberts, pointing out that the word "'manager' encompassed a great deal more than it has in modern times," adds that "all these activities for the nineteenth-century mind were clearly male activities, not proper for women to engage in."[16] Yet women were challenging the status quo and succeeding in this profession in the popular-priced theatre as well as the legitimate.

In the ten-twenty-thirty theatre, both stock and touring companies were managed by women. Mrs. Mary Gibbs Spooner was one of the most successful of the stock company managers. Born in Iowa, the daughter of a clergyman, she married B. S. (Spurgeon) Spooner, and without any previous theatrical experience, she went on the stage with her husband's traveling company in the 1870s, touring the midwest and the east.[17] For a time they joined the Spooner Brothers Comedy Company, composed of Spurgeon and two of his brothers, their wives, children and Corse Payton, half-brother of Mary Spooner, but eventually each brother formed

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[16] Vera Mowry Roberts, "'Lady-managers' in nineteenth-century American theatre," The American Stage: Social and economic issues from the colonial period to the present, edited by Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 31.

[17] Notable Women in the American Theatre, 819. This source lists the husband of Mary Gibbs as "Sprague" Spooner.

his own company, presenting between twelve and fourteen different plays per week.[18] Mary, Spurgeon, their two daughters, Edna May and Cecil, and their son Robert continued to tour until the death of Spurgeon in 1900.

With her earnings in hand, Mary Gibbs Spooner went to Brooklyn, where Corse Payton had established his popular Lee Avenue Theatre. She approached the owners of the Park Theatre, Hyde and Behman, who had vowed never to rent their theatre to a woman. However, because she had cash in hand and made them an offer they could not refuse, they acceded to her demands.[19] Within a week of leasing the small Park Theatre (1901), Mary Spooner's company began performances, and after a highly successful year, they moved to the considerably larger Bijou Theatre. In 1903, Harry Mawson listed the rival Spooner and Payton Theatres as the two most prominent in Brooklyn, out of six stock companies.[20] In 1904, Mrs. Spooner leased the Amphion Theatre, making it possible for both of her daughters to appear onstage in different theatres at the same time.

In 1907, she left Brooklyn to be the only female manager of the time on Broadway, transferring her company to the prestigious Fifth Avenue Theatre. According to a 1906 article, Mary Gibbs Spooner was the "only woman manager in

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[18] Mildred I. Watt, family files.

[19] Notable Women in the American Theatre, 819.

[20] Mawson, "Revival of the Stock Company," 40.

America who has been admitted as an active member to the Theatrical Managers' Association."[21] In August of 1908, she returned to the Park Theatre in her beloved Brooklyn for a brief period until the theatre burned down, after which she managed theatres for her daughter Cecil and son-in-law, Charles Blaney, finally retiring to live on the Blaney estate in New Canaan, Connecticut.

In order to maintain a home and a theatre, women managers sometimes combined the two or moved their homes into their theatres. Mrs. Spooner had three children to support and a theatre to run. Finding it nearly impossible for herself and her actress-daughters to travel back and forth from a hotel to the theatre at all hours of the day and night, Mary Gibbs Spooner set up a nine-room apartment on the second floor of the Bijou Theatre, complete with bedrooms for all, a library/ office, drawing room, kitchen, sewing room, and servant's room. Home and theatre were separated by "a little flight of stairs and a sort of zig-zag passage through the wings," connected by an electric call-bell.[22] Mrs. Spooner explained:

> The girls and I run back and forth in the most comfortable sort of fashion, in our wrappers, the girls in their make-up between the acts for a cup of tea, or even for a bit of a nap, if there is a long wait.

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[21] Leslie Weekly, 17 December 1906, Locke Scrapbook: Spooner.

[22] This and subsequent quotations from Mrs. M. G. Spooner, "A Flat Behind the Scenes," Broadway Magazine, 1 December 1903, 210.

Before leasing the Bijou, Mrs. Spooner had checked out the second floor to see if living accommodations were possible and then arranged for the renovations as a surprise for her family. She stated:

> I don't believe we could have stood the strain of our stock work if it were not for this unique arrangement. We save at least three hours a day in actual time, not to mention the priceless economy of vitality. . . . We live sanely and with leisure.

In this way, Mrs. Spooner was able to maintain the health of her daughters and live "with the same method and sincerity as one works."

The actress Selma Herman, who starred in touring melodrama companies in the early 1900s throughout the theatrical season, set up her own stock company in Ohio every summer, staging and arranging for a new play each week. With her hectic schedule, Herman needed a touch of home. A 1905 article revealed her secret: "A room tha[t] can be folded up and carried in a good sized suit case and yet, when placed in position makes an apartment almost twelve feet long by five feet wide."[23] In this room were:

> a folding divan. . . a folding mirror, one arranged on a series of hinges, a collapsable [sic] powder receptacle, chairs which can be folded up into an incredibly small space; a dressing table which also folded up and strangest of all a collapsable trunk, which, when empty of its trays, can be used for a footstool or can be placed in a corner of the dressing room, out of the way.

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[23] This and subsequent quotation from "Selma's New Home," New Jersey Evening Times, 1 March 1905, Locke Scrapbook: Selma Herman.

Herman called this room her "Rent Saver."

In addition to the physical conveniences of home, Herman had the comfort of a mother who traveled with her wherever she went. At a luncheon given by the Chicago Working Girls' Club, Herman spoke about the benefits of such an arrangement:

> I have had fewer [trials] than most young actresses, for I have had the very best of assistance--that of a mother who has taken the greatest interest in my work, has devoted her time to my wants and surrounded me with a love so abundant that it has shielded me from a multitude of trials and temptations which continually beset the young actress striving to win a place in the hearts of the great public.[24]

In her correspondence with Robinson Locke, theatre critic of the Toledo Blade and a great fan of Herman's work, documented in a scrapbook devoted to the actress, Herman always sent her mother's regards to Locke. In her final letter to him, she explained that the death of her mother several years earlier caused Herman's early retirement from the stage: "somehow since my dear Mother passed away I've lost my nerve."[25] Her husband/manager, C.L. Nagely, tried to revive her interest in going on the stage, to no avail.

Lillian Mortimer, who wrote and starred in her own plays, produced by her husband, also brought a bit of home with her on tour. She always "carries her workshop along

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[24] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Scrapbook: Selma Herman.

[25] Herman to Locke, 25 January 1917, New York, Locke Scrapbook: Selman Herman.

with her," in the form of a specially built desk with all of her papers in pigeonholes so that she could find them easily. In this way, Mortimer could write in her dressing room between shows and/or rehearsals.[26] A great lover of animals, Mortimer also took her pets with her whenever possible. Because hotels objected to her dogs, and theatre managers didn't allow dressing rooms to be used as kennels, Mortimer told an interviewer her solution:

> That house I had constructed upon my own plans. You see it is in a measure portable and expanding. . . . when I reach the theater, I expand it to the size you see and it makes capital quarters for my pets.[27]

These conscientious and hard-working managers had to find a way to fulfill their needs as women, to connect to a home they had been brought up to occupy. In a sort of amalgam of the views of Beecher and of Gilman, they broke into the business world and brought their homes with them. Male managers lived more simply--they lived in hotels or boarding houses maintained by women, or in homes run by their wives.

Despite the feminine touches brought by women managers into their theatres, when it came to the performance of their various duties, they differed little from men.

It was the manager's responsibility to see to it that her theatre obtained suitable newspaper publicity, which

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[26] "Mortimer a Hard Working Player," Unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Envelope #1553: Lillian Mortimer.

[27] "Difficulties with Dogs," Pittsburg Post, n.d., Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

could go far to fill the seats. Mrs. Spooner hired a top-notch press representative--Marie V. Fitzgerald--whose business it was to bombard the press with positive publicity about the success of the company and the Spooner women. Following are examples of the newspaper coverage of this theatre.

A 1902 headline screamed, "Two Thousand People Turned Away From Brooklyn Theatres," which occurred because the Fire Commissioner had decided not to allow standing room audiences. The article explained:

> the problem used to be to get people into a Brooklyn theater. Now it is to find room for all who wish to go. At least a third more people in this borough must be habitual playgoers this season than ever before, and what is more to the point, they are usually delighted with the entertainment when they have seen it. . . .
>
> Mrs. Spooner. . . will complete her first year at the Park Theater next week. She has kept her theater open forty-one weeks of that time, with her stock company, and has not played a losing week, to say nothing of the many in which she has turned people away.[28]

A review of Cecil Spooner in My Lady Peggy Goes to Town included these enthusiastic statements:

> If it had been a celebration of the opening of the Williamsburg bridge, the crowd. . . could not have gone wilder. . . . And the best of it was the whole thing was genuine. The Spooners following at the Bijou is big enough for a political party.[29]

Because publicity engenders crowds and crowds engender publicity, the Spooners had a large and loyal subscription

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[28] Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 2 February 1902.

[29] Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 2 December 1902.

audience who ordered tickets far in advance of the productions.

When Cecil returned to Brooklyn after joining the Blaney organization to appear in Blaney's The Girl Raffles, Brooklynites planned fireworks, balloon ascensions, parades, and public holidays. A 1906 article reported that 487 babies in Brooklyn were given the name of Cecil Spooner, adding: "Brooklyn regards Miss Spooner as several points superior to Sarah Bernhardt and a fitting example for Duse to emulate."[30]

Women theatre managers sometimes found unique and novel ways to promote their companies. Mrs. Spooner's pink tea receptions with her daughters onstage after matinees, discussed in an earlier chapter, as well as her curtain speeches, resulted in a strong bond with the audience. Her daughter, Cecil Spooner, and sister-in-law, Etta Reed, held audience receptions in their theatres as well. Harry Mawson ascribed the enormous success of Mrs. Spooner's theatre to

> personality, always a tremendous factor in matters theatrical, sound business methods, clever and bold advertising, a very good company and high-class plays at low prices. . . she possesses the American genius of knowing how to advertise the "show" in a manner that will carry conviction to the public.[31]

But in some respects Mary and Cecil Spooner differed widely in their approaches to publicity. Mrs. Spooner's theatre

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[30] "Brooklyn Clamors for Cecil," 12 September 1906, unidentified source, Locke Envelope #2136: Cecil Spooner.

[31] Mawson, "Revival of the Stock Company," 40-41.

was "known especially for its exceedingly moral and respectable dramas."[32] Mary Spooner was involved in charitable work and in local organizations: she was on the National Board of Directors of the State Sunshine Day Nursery, originated the Spooner branch of the Sunshine Society, was active in the Stella Chapter of the Brooklyn Order of the Eastern Star, and was president of the Brooklyn Chapter of the Actors' Church Alliance, where she argued in favor of Sunday theatrical performances.[33]

The New York Morning Telegraph described Mrs. Spooner as a

> woman possessed of wonderful business ability, while as to diplomacy she is unsurpassed. She has been known to bridge over a controversy in so delicate and tactful a manner that the parties in dispute have been unaware as to how an amicable arrangement has been effected.[34]

By joining local groups, Mary Gibbs Spooner became acquainted with her constituents in a variety of different capacities, and they with her. Perhaps her experience in these organizations helped to develop her diplomacy. Although her agenda as manager was always to promote her daughters, who rose to the status of stars, Mrs. Spooner maintained a certain decorum and dignity in her profession

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[32] Notable Women in the American Theatre, 819.

[33] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 24 July 1908, Locke Envelope #2137: Mary Gibbs Spooner; Notable Women in the American Theatre, 819.

[34] New York Morning Telegraph, 17 December 1905, Locke Envelope: Mary Gibbs Spooner.

that commanded respect from her audiences.

In contrast Cecil Spooner, who referred to her mother as "the finest business woman in the profession," was primarily concerned with promoting herself.[35] Unlike Mary Spooner, her daughter never gave up her acting career, even as a manager of her own stock company. Charles E. Blaney, a weekly visitor to the Spooner productions, wrote the first of several melodramas for Cecil, The Girl Raffles, in 1906. When he refused to sell the play to her, she entered into an agreement to become a "Blaney star," which led to a secret marriage between them in 1909, the year of his second wife's early death after a divorce the year before. Critic Rennold Wolf commented: "Charles E. Blaney had ruthlessly snatched from the Bijou Theatre's faithful clientele Cecil Spooner, and will bring her to New York and send her over the hills and far away, unaccompanied by the remainder of the family."[36]

But this arrangement led to Cecil's career as an actor/manager. In 1910, the Blaney-Spooner Amusement Company was formed in New York City. Its aim was to "own and manage theatres" and to "exploit dramatic and operatic productions." The directors were Charles E. Blaney, his

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[35] W. E. Sage, interview with Cecil Spooner, unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

[36] Rennold Wolf, unidentified source, 3 March 1906, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

brother Harry Clay Blaney, Cecil Spooner Blaney, and attorney Mayer C. Goldman.[37] Blaney leased the Metropolis Theatre in the Bronx for Cecil, where the Cecil Spooner Stock Company remained for about three years. An article in Variety reports that the theatre made enormous profits, running four matinees at prices up to fifty cents and six evening shows with top prices at one dollar, earning $5000 per week.[38]

Cecil cast herself in the plays at the Metropolis, marvelling: "I am like a child with a new toy when I am handed a new part every week."[39] Frank J. Beckman offered fascinating accounts of the publicity Cecil attracted by her performances in various roles. He found her billing as "Dainty Cecil" to be ironic in light of some of the characters she played. His description of Cecil's appearance and behavior in the dramatization of Elinor Glyn's "sizzling" novel, Three Weeks, illustrates his point:

> Topped off in a carrot-colored wig . . . Mlle. Spooner uttered her sultry lines and cavorted from a red-velvet sofa to a huge white bear-skin rug on the stage with her lover (Rowden Hall), histrionics which caused the customers to clutch their seats, eyes agape and mouths adrool.

Following the production of Salomé at the Metropolitan

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[37] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

[38] Variety, 13 May 1911, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

[39] "When Dreams Come True," New York Dramatic Mirror, 2 April 1913.

Opera, there was a "Salomé craze" during which every popular actress gave her own interpretation of the "Dance of the Seven Veils." Beckman reported that between acts of different productions having nothing to do with the Salomé story, Cecil

> rendered her own highly exaggerated version of the Strauss aphrodisiac, culminating in the presentation of the largest, goriest head of John the Baptist that mortal man had ever created, Cecil actually staggered beneath the weight of her bloody tray.
>
> Publicity is the theatre's life-stream, its bread-and-butter . . . and no one knew the value of publicity better than Dainty Cecil.[40]

A further detail was offered by an article stating that between the third and fourth acts of the Blaney melodrama, The Girl and the Detective, in which Cecil played a tough Bowery girl, a "red velvet curtain, with C.S. embossed in eighteen-carat-gold letters, will fall after the dead and injured of the third act have been swept from the stage, and when it is raised Miss Spooner will be disclosed as Salomé." It was noted that she "trained down" for the dance, weighing ninety pounds.[41] Perhaps it was her minuscule size, rather than her refinement, that accounted for her nickname.

A further example of the kind of publicity Cecil sought took place on December 9, 1913, when she was arrested in her dressing room and arraigned in Morrissania Police Court on

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[40] Beckman, "The Vanished Villains," 141-142.

[41] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

the charge of producing an immoral and obscene play at her theatre--a dramatization of Reginald Wright Kaufman's novel, The House of Bondage, about white slavery. It is unclear whether the warrant for her arrest was obtained as a result of complaints by the residents of the Bronx, lewd posters, the viewing of the production, or a publicity stunt by Charles Blaney, who, it was said, "arranged to have the cast arrested and bundled into a black maria to the nearest police station."[42]

Spooner's attorney, Mayer C. Goldman, complained that instead of leaving the audience in their seats awaiting the first act, the police should have allowed the performance to be played, while Cecil Spooner, "her diamonds dazzling the court, shook her head and snapped her fingers in agreement." She was charged with a misdemeanor and released on $500 bail. Blaney commented: "This is a form of persecution from which many artists are obliged to suffer." After it was shut down in the Bronx, the play continued, in modified form, at the Longacre Theatre in Manhattan in 1914.[43]

Because Cecil was so successful at the Metropolis, Blaney was able to build a huge new theatre (2000 seats) for her, the Cecil Spooner Theatre, located on Southern

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[42] New York Herald, 10 December 1913, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner; New York Herald Tribune, 22 October 1944, obituary: Charles Blaney.

[43] New York Herald, 10 December 1913 and unidentified newspaper clipping, 20 January 1914, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

Boulevard and 163rd Street in the upper Bronx. The theatre was decorated in

> deep red and gold, its handsome furnishings, ample foyer space and the unique architecture by which there are no boxes on the ground floor, is alike pretentious and cozy. . . . There is a tearoom on the second floor, where it will be the practice of Miss Spooner occasionally to hold receptions.[44]

After Cecil Spooner left the Bronx, she returned once more to Brooklyn in 1917, where her stock company leased the Grand Opera House, and her delighted fans welcomed her back.

Publicity brought the audiences into the theatre, but managers had to know which plays to produce to keep their patrons. Considering that there was a change of bill every week, a wide variety of plays had to be made ready for production. One question that often arose was whether to produce old favorites, which the audience knew and loved, or to attempt original plays. Some managers, like Corse Payton, would not produce original work because it involved too much rehearsal time. Mary Spooner, however, presented some new productions every season; she was one of the few managers who gave new playwrights a chance. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle noted:

> Mrs. Spooner's enterprise has shown itself in many ways since she came to Brooklyn, nearly a year ago, but in no way is it more evidenced than in her securing plays new to Brooklyn. This as much as anything, has contributed to her success.[45]

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[44] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

[45] Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 12 January 1902.

In 1907, her older daughter, Edna May Spooner, who performed the company's more serious "emotional roles," announced a prize to the American playwright who succeeded in writing the best drama of the time and was overwhelmed with scripts.[46] Cecil Spooner also encouraged new playwrights, producing one new play per month at her Metropolis Theatre.

This is not to say that managers ignored play requests from their patrons. Indeed they encouraged audiences to tell them what they wanted to see. But, unlike Corse Payton, who would present whatever his audience wanted, Mrs. Spooner was determined to present high quality plays. Although she listened to her audiences, Mrs. Spooner also played what she thought they ought to see. A 1906 headline about Edna May stated: "Young Brooklyn Actress Has Educated an Entire Community Up to an Appreciation of the Best in Emotional Art."[47] But this strategy did not always work. At the Bijou Theatre during a 1907 production of Othello, Mrs. Spooner offered to return the money to those patrons who could not restrain their laughter. Ironically, the gigglers were in the higher-priced orchestra seats, not the gallery.[48]

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[46] New York Morning Telegraph, 7 December 1907, Locke Envelope #2137: Edna May Spooner.

[47] New York Morning Telegraph, 30 September 1906, Locke Envelope: Edna May Spooner.

[48] Unidentified newspaper clipping, 1907, Locke Envelope: Mary Gibbs Spooner.

Another factor to be considered in the choice of plays was that many women managers were also actresses and cast themselves in the leading roles. When Selma Herman wanted to play a more challenging role than those for which she was cast by other managers, she would cast herself in a role such as Camille (Marguerite Gautier). A 1909 article pointed out that she hadn't played the part in several years, but had decided to perform it in her stock company. She "went at the task with her usual enthusiasm, rehearsed the company and made all the necessary preparations on the stage, seeing to it personally that everything needed for a perfect presentation was on hand." The play was received so well that she vowed to offer "one of the familiar semi-classic plays a couple of times each week. . . . There is a lot of money to be gathered by the actress."[49] Edna May Spooner, who managed her own companies, also selected plays for herself to perform. In the late nineteenth century, Edna May joined the comedian Johnnie Pringle in 1895-96 to form the Pringle-May Company, and then, having bought him out, she changed its name to the Edna May Company.[50] In 1909-1911, the Edna May Spooner Stock Company, in which she was the leading performer, played in New Orleans and at the

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[49] Cleveland Post, 5 February 1909, Locke Scrapbook: Selma Herman.

[50] Charles Lauterbach, E-mail to author, 17 July 1998; Mildred I. Watt, family file.

Orpheum Theatre in Jersey City.[51]

One manager who occupied more of her time discovering new talent than promoting her own was Jessie Bonstelle. Most of her life was spent in the theatre, beginning as an actress in the Kremer melodrama, Bertha, the Beautiful Sewing Machine Girl, and going on to manage her own companies in Buffalo, Rochester, and Detroit, while acting and directing in New York during the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1920 she opened the Bonstelle Playhouse, which became one of the first civic theatres in America: the Detroit Civic Theatre, offering classes and outreach programs in the community. Meanwhile, Bonstelle staged plays at New York's Harlem Opera House as tryouts for Broadway producers (1923), and in 1932, the year of her death, she was involved in negotiations in Hollywood to become a film director. Bonstelle, who believed that actors were given their best training in stock companies, was known as a "Maker of Stars," to whom many successful performers, like Ann Harding, Katharine Cornell, and Melvyn Douglas, as well as future directors, like Guthrie McClintic, were indebted over the years.[52]

Bonstelle was one of several managers who directed their own productions. Corse Payton hired an independent

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[51] Notable Women in the American Theatre, 820.

[52] "Jessie Bonstelle, Actress, is Dead," New York Times, 15 October 1932; Notable Women in the American Theatre, 77-81.

director, but the Spooner women kept their duties en famille. In addition to her other talents, Edna May was a capable stage director, a job that differed from our current understanding of the term. Often "director," "stage manager," and "stager" were synonymous. Mawson remarked that the stage manager in stock houses was "about the hardest-worked individual of the entire organization." Cast entirely from within the company, the play had to be rehearsed in less than a week while another play was going up. The manager was concerned with blocking, scenery, property and lighting plots, and music cues, elements which might or might not be furnished with the manuscripts, and costumes, which could be leased, along with the sets.[53] Actors were left to their own devices, with the leading men and women bearing the principal responsibility for the triumph or failure of the play. Mrs. Spooner declared: "If an actor can't take a part on Tuesday and play it properly on Monday, I have no use for him in any company of mine."[54]

The New York Dramatic Mirror, praising the versatility of Edna May Spooner during the company's Broadway residency, observed:

> Her achievements are considered marvelous, and her histrionic triumphs merit the recognition accorded her. During her stay on the Great White Way, Miss Spooner has played 564 consecutive performances, appeared in

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[53] Mawson, "In Stock," 30; Mawson, "Revival of the Stock Company," 41.

[54] Goff, "The Popular Priced Melodrama," 142.

> forty-nine different and varied roles, staged every play under her personal direction, and has for twelve weeks been the only woman star playing on Broadway. She has played continuously, without a week's respite from her arduous labors, since August 18, 1906, or eighty-seven weeks in all, during which time she has appeared 957 times, without losing a single performance.[55]

A 1904 article enumerating the businesswomen in the Spooner Company named Edna May as the stage manager, who performed six nights and three matinees a week, while directing rehearsals and attending to stage matters every morning; Mary Gibbs as the director-manager; Cecil as the soubrette, costume designer and specialties manager, who shared the management of the Spooner stage with her sister; Cora E. Morlan, Mrs. Spooner's personal representative in the business of the two theatres and her affairs in general, who occasionally understudied Edna May in order to allow the actress a wink of sleep; and Marie V. Fitzgerald, the press representative. Together they constituted "The Mrs. Spooner Big Five."[56] Mrs. Spooner surrounded herself with capable women.

A 1907 article about Marie V. Fitzgerald, who began her career as a newspaperwoman, asked: "What would the Spooners do without her?" and then answered:

> The imagination pales with terror at the thought, for the lady in question is Miss Marie V. Fitzgerald, the pretty press agent and newspaper woman who svengalis

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[55] New York Dramatic Mirror, 23 May 1908.

[56] Standard and Vanity Fair, 7 October 1904, n.p., Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

> the dramatic editors into printing paragraphs of Edna and Cecil Spooner and their respected ma whenever any of those three actresses are in the neighborhood of said editors. All Miss Fitzgerald has to do is to smile, and the editors grab their pens with feverish anxiety and exclaim: "Tell us, we prithee, something about the Spooners!" Then Miss Fitzgerald graciously complies.[57]

Despite the tone of this article, there was a good deal of skill and training behind the smile of Fitzgerald.

When Marie Fitzgerald first announced her intention to enter the newspaper world, her uncle asked, "what are you going to do, sell the papers?" After attending Normal College, she began writing for Brooklyn newspapers, becoming an art editor for the Standard Union. In 1907, after working for years as press representative for Mary Gibbs Spooner, she was appointed general press agent by Percy G. Williams for the five theatres managed by him: the Colonial and Alhambra Theatres in Manhattan, and the Orpheum, Gotham, and Greenpoint Theatres in Brooklyn.[58] The following summer, Fitzgerald resigned because of ill health and sailed for Europe. Upon her return, she wrote a play, Women and Why, which was produced by Corse Payton at his Lee Avenue Theatre. She continued as a playwright and newspaperwoman, adding a book, Epigrams of a Playwright, to her body of work. For a time she served as the executive head of

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[57] "What Would the Spooners Do Without Her?" Vanity Fair, 15 March 1907, n.p., Locke Scrapbook ser. 3, vol. 481: Marie V. Fitzgerald.

[58] New York Mirror, 14 August 1907, Locke Scrapbook: Marie V. Fitzgerald.

William A. Brady's Fair Play Agency, which required her to be a play broker: to read scripts and recommend them to Brady, who produced both popular-priced and legitimate attractions.[59]

Fitzgerald's definition of a press agent was "a person possessed of perpetual patience who always lives in hope, so far as the blue pencil and the man at the desk are concerned, being an optimist in the truest sense of the word."[60] At an earlier interview, she explained:

> When I write a story I have a long talk with myself, saying:--"Now will it or won't it take?" And then I await the papers in the morning. It is like vaccination. Sometimes it takes, sometimes it doesn't, and then again it is betwixt and between. It is my motto: "Laugh--no matter what happens." To be a press agent in every sense of the term one must have the losing instinct well developed.[61]

A 1908 article praised this capacity in Fitzgerald:

> It was not long before the stunning Marie had shown every one that she was strictly on the job and understood the game thoroughly. She had a faculty of both finding out what different papers wanted and giving them just that instead of what might possibly have impressed her as being much better. . . . She did not sulk when all she wrote failed to find its way into print. Instead she tapped out something more on her typewriter to take the place of whatever happened to pass unnoticed. . . . If something failed to go the

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[59] New York Morning Telegraph, 12 July 1908 and 5 January 1910, Locke Scrapbook: Marie V. Fitzgerald. There were several women play brokers at the time. One of the best known, also an author's agent, was Alice Kauser, who worked with Brady among others.

[60] New York Dramatic News, 1 June 1912, Locke Scrapbook: Marie V. Fitzgerald.

[61] New York Evening Telegraph, 26 March 1908, Locke Scrapbook: Marie V. Fitzgerald.

> first time, she kept sending it along in varied form until finally the man with the vaudeville assignment simply had to run it to save himself from reading one story throughout his copy-reading career.[62]

The journalist concluded: "Miss Fitzgerald is a shining example of the fact that the woman press agent is all right."

Rarely did males take the risk of offering publicity jobs to women. Akin to the press agent was the advance agent, a position consistently filled by men. M.B. Leavitt, whose book Fifty Years in Theatrical Management documented his work in the theatre at great length, offered a list of some 180 of the best-known advance agents, which contains no female names.[63] But there is evidence that women could handle this job. The headline of a 1902 interview in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle proclaimed: "Woman Advance Agent a Success: Miss Tessie Haynes Learns by Experience That She Can Do the Work Ahead of the Show Quite as Well as Any Man." The article explained:

> Miss Tessie Haynes [is] the best known woman advance agent in the country. Miss Haynes tours the states from Maine to the Gulf, from New York to the Pacific, interviewing managers, bargaining with theater proprietors [and] arranging notices with press agents.[64]

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[62] New York Morning Telegraph, 12 July 1908, Locke Scrapbook: Marie V. Fitzgerald.

[63] M. B. Leavitt, Fifty Years in Theatrical Management: 1859-1909 (New York: Broadway Publishing Co., 1912), 272-76.

[64] "Woman Advance Agent a Success," Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 2 November 1902.

The Eagle states that Haynes travelled ahead of the company she represented in order to work out all of the myriad details of a tour, including arrangements with railroad men and hotel keepers. She was in charge of advertising and publicity arrangements and had to keep in contact with dramatic editors in every city:

> On her vigilance depends much of the success of the show which is to follow. She has been eminently successful in all lines of the business, showing the fitness of such work for those women who find it attractive. When the petite young woman, daintily clad, calls into opera houses or theater, the manager, if that is his first acquaintance with her, is perhaps somewhat astonished at her self-possessed claim of being the advance agent of some flourishing theatrical company. But when she goes briskly ahead, soliciting time and place, arranging details, making notes, disposing rapidly of all questions of ways and means, the managerial distrust gives way to hearty liking and respect. "She's a stunner," one was known to say. "Just the work for a woman when she does it right."[65]

Haynes explained why she loved the job: "no two days just alike, and then I meet so many people and know just what is going on all through the theatrical world."

Haynes began this career accidentally, by taking the place of an agent who failed in his duties for her opera company. She was praised by Mr. Harris, "the well-known theatrical man," who laughingly told her she would make a good advance agent. Some time later, his advance agent left suddenly and he offered the position to Haynes.[66]

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[65] Ibid.

[66] Although there is no definitive proof that Haynes worked in the popular-priced theatre, this Mr. Harris may well have been Sam Harris, who, as a partner of Al H. Woods,

Charles Lauterbach, professor of Theatre at Boise State University in Idaho, has done extensive research on actress/manager Della Pringle, who toured the West between 1895-1914. He writes that "it would have been extremely rare for a female to be an advance agent given the circumstances of the position, long and solitary travel--often in unfamiliar towns and dealing with 'good old boy' newspaper reporters and editors."[67]

As a press agent, Marie V. Fitzgerald worked within a limited area, but as an advance/press agent, Haynes claimed to have travelled extensively. Considering how adept these women were as promoters it is impossible to tell how much of the publicity about their accomplishments came from their own pens.

Nevertheless, women proved to be as brave and astute in business as men, if they were given the opportunity. J. K. Curry argues that women managers were usually actresses dependent on public approval, so that even though they were performing male jobs, they did not want their public to see them as militant feminists. She notes:

> They presented themselves not as part of a large-scale movement to change socially controlled gender roles, but as individual women, who, through personal industry and artistic ability, were qualified to manage the

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produced ten-twenty-thirty melodramas until 1904, when he began a long association with George M. Cohan. (Clipping File: Sam H. Harris, BRTC)

[67] Charles Lauterbach, E-mail to author, 18 July 1998.

> public's entertainment. While women theatre managers were highly visible examples of women holding responsible, powerful positions, providing a sign of hope for other ambitious women, they did not, for the most part, encourage other women to follow their example.[68]

Because they were not trying to make a statement, women managers performed their tasks "no differently than men did." Curry points out that the plays they presented were the same or similar to those in theatres managed by men, they "worked in the same theatrical spaces," "hired the same stars," and avoided producing "overtly feminist drama."[69]

Since plays presented in theatres run by women were for the most part written by men, audiences were still subject to a male vision of the world. This vision could only change when women's plays found an audience. Some female managers took the step of writing and then producing their own plays, which brought a woman's point of view onto the stage of the popular-priced theatres.

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[68] Curry, 5.

[69] Ibid., 132.

Chapter Five: Women as Writers

I have thus far argued that in the ten-twenty-thirty theatre women rose to positions of power because they were able to gain economic independence. Women managers ran their own theatres, competing successfully with men in the world of business. At the same time, female managers often performed leading roles in their own companies. However, the plays in which they starred, written, for the most part, by men, continued to stereotype women in roles similar to those analyzed in Chapter Three. Although these stock characters may well have satisfied the bulk of the audiences, managers, and actresses, they were not acceptable to some. The next step was for women to create their own more active characters who took a greater control of their destiny.

Two of the most successful actress/managers/playwrights in the ten-twenty-thirty theatre were Lillian Mortimer and Cecil Spooner. Beginning as performers, these women became managers and playwrights who produced their own work. Mortimer wrote and starred in plays originating in New York and then toured with her company throughout the country, while Spooner, who also did her share of touring, spent much of her time playing leading roles in the resident theatres

she managed, sometimes writing parts for herself to showcase her talents. These dynamic women created female characters who were strong, independent, and self-motivated. I will return to Mortimer and Spooner after identifying their place in the context of popular literature written by women, specifically domestic novels and novelizations of ten-twenty-thirty plays.

During the nineteenth century, more and more women turned to literary pursuits. Ann Douglas notes that "while a female author at the beginning of the nineteenth century was considered by definition an aberration from her sex, by its close she occupied an established if not a respected place."[1] According to Helen Waite Papashvily, the 1840s to 1880s saw the development and flourishing of the "domestic novel."

> Hundreds of authors turned out thousands of titles that sold millions of copies. . . . The domestic, or, according to its critics, the sentimental novel was . . . a tale of contemporary domestic life, ostensibly sentimental in tone and with few exceptions almost always written by women for women.[2]

As was the case with the ten-twenty-thirty theatre, this popular product, with no pretensions of great artistry, had an enormous following and proved to be quite profitable for its writers. It allowed women the opportunity to earn a

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[1] Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 8.

[2] Helen Waite Papashvily, All the Happy Endings (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 40.

living without formal training.

Elaine Showalter points out that women in the literary profession differed from male writers in that they were deprived of education due to sexual discrimination, they turned to writing as the only means of support for themselves and their families, and, frightened of rejection and the world of business, they did not begin their careers until middle age.[3] But by the middle of the nineteenth century women writers had found a mass market for their work in story-paper weeklies, which published their novels in serial form. Some of the most successful of these were the New York Ledger, the New York Weekly and Saturday Night.

Scholars do not agree about the influence of domestic novels on their mostly female readership. Janice A. Radway, who analyzes the effects of romance novels on female readers in the 1980s in her book Reading the Romance, offers a model to explain the conflicting viewpoints on this issue. After interviewing a salesclerk in the midwest and many of her clients--from fifty to seventy-five female romance readers--Radway argues that these novels can be construed either as "conservative" or "oppositional."[4] In other words, they either promote the status quo, encouraging women to accept

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[3] Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Bronte to Lessing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 40-53.

[4] Janice A. Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 209-22.

their situation, or they stimulate change or opposition on the part of their readers.

The same polarization has been pointed out by scholars vis-à-vis domestic novels in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, corresponding to the Beecher-Gilman argument discussed in Chapter Four, which regarded the home as a either a place where women felt equal to men or a prison to which women were condemned. In a similar way, the domestic novel could either fulfill the fantasies of its readers so that they didn't have to leave the home in search of contact with the outside world, or they could foment rebellion from within. Helen Papashvily, in All the Happy Endings, argues for the latter--the oppositional approach. It is her contention that domestic novels, which recounted the suffering of women at the hands of men, served as a "Declaration of Rights." She believes that on a subconscious level,

> these pretty tales reflected and encouraged a pattern of feminine behavior so quietly ruthless, so subtly vicious that by comparison the ladies at Seneca appear angels of innocence. . . . [the novels were] a witches' broth, a lethal draught brewed by women and used by women to destroy their common enemy, man.[5]

In the view of Papashvily, while only ten per cent of the women of the United States actively supported the suffrage movement, which began with the Woman's Rights Convention in July, 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York, many others quietly

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[5] Papashvily, xvi-xvii.

waged their own wars, carrying their "manual of arms . . . the sentimental domestic novel."[6]

In The Madwoman in the Attic, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss the "angel-monster" dichotomy faced by nineteenth-century women writers. Because their decision to write made them suspect, female authors hid their rage and rebellion against a patriarchal society by creating a character who served as a "mad double," the perfect heroine's opposite, who could escape from the home, the "woman's place" to which women were consigned.[7] Whatever this character did was justified by her madness.

In her book, The Feminization of American Culture, Ann Douglas supports the status quo or conservative point of view. She offers the thesis that the "sentimentalized" novels written by American women between the 1840s and 1880s, no less than the writings of ministers, served as "an icon of idealized if arrested femininity which forestalled the disappointments of maturation in a world uninterested at best in their intellectual and emotional adulthood." Women characters were perfect; they "never had to shop" (metaphorically) because they were possessed of all the qualities they needed. Douglas finds that these writers exerted a harmful influence on their female readers by

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[6] Ibid., 24.

[7] Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 3-92.

rationalizing "the middle-class woman's role," rather than exhorting women to do something about it.[8]

Jane P. Tompkins, in her essay "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History," is diametrically opposed to the view that women writers were "apologists for an oppressive social order." For Tompkins, the domestic novel

> represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the women's point of view; that this body of work is remarkable for its intellectual complexity, ambition, and resourcefulness; and that, in certain cases it offers a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville.[9]

She suggests that it is the duty of scholars to pay more attention to the popular novels of the period, citing Uncle Tom's Cabin as a case in point.

An examination of the themes of some of the writers of the time allows for both positions. The oppositional stance can be seen in the works of the nineteenth-century novelist and journalist Fanny Fern, who, like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, believed that the key to women's rights was financial independence. The title character of her novel, Ruth Hall (1855), left impoverished by the death of her husband and rejected by the men in her family who were in a

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[8] Douglas, 62-63, 68.

[9] Jane P. Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History," The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory, edited by Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 82-83.

position to help her, became a successful writer despite them. Although wrongly dismissed as "the grandmother of all sob sisters," Fern encouraged women to look to themselves for support, rather than enter into a dehumanizing marriage.[10]

On the other hand, domestic novels written towards the close of the century, blending sentimentality with sensationalism, were more interested in thrills than calls to arms. The newly-literate immigrants provided a surge in readership for the domestic novel. Selling for either a dime or a nickel, "dime novels" proliferated in the large urban, low-income areas. Writers like Laura Jean Libbey wrote for this audience. Papashvily, critical of Libbey's writing, referred to her as a "hack" who set up a strict formula described below:

> The heroine, a young girl between sixteen and nineteen, with fair curls, fair skin, blue eyes often tear-swolled, little white hands and a dainty, spritelike form, hurried through page one on her way to find or perform work that would enable her to support a beloved dependent.
>
> On page two a bold, dark-eyed villain feasted his gaze on this innocent beauty and with a twirl of his mustache accosted her with an improper proposal. At the top of page three he was overheard by a tall, handsome, fair-faced young man who reprimanded such insolence with a well-directed blow from a strong muscular arm. By pages five and six two other stock characters had made their appearance, a poor girl who loves the villain and an heiress intent on marrying the hero. For the next two hundred pages the heroine. . .

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[10] Fanny Fern, Ruth Hall and Other Writings, edited by Joyce W. Warren (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), Introduction.

> was shunted between the other four characters with all the speed, precision and passion of an empty freight car. She was chloroformed, gassed and smothered, sprayed with acid and poison, blown up by gunpowder, borne down by the churning wheels of a ferry. She was tied to a railroad track, thrown from a cliff, imprisoned in a madhouse and kidnaped. She was stabbed, choked, buried, dug up and . . . . emerged unscathed and able to murmur, "The course of true love never did run smooth."[11]

The structure of Libbey's novels is quite similar to that of the ten-twenty-thirty melodramas. In spite of the obvious restrictions on time and stage settings, the two genres were very much alike.

In his memoirs, Owen Davis revealed the formula for his melodramas:

> Act I Start the trouble.
> Act II Here things look bad. The lady having left home, is quite at the mercy of the Villain.
> Act III The lady is saved by the help of the Stage Carpenter. (The big scenic and mechanical effects are always in Act III.)
> Act IV The lovers are united and the villains are punished. . . .
>
> [At] the end of each [scene is] . . . a moment of perilous suspense or terrifying danger. This gave the playwright rather less than seven minutes to instruct his audience, to prepare his climaxes, to plant the seed for the next scene, and to reach his climaxes, which of course was absurdly impossible and resulted, I feel sure, in a form of entertainment which was only too ready to yield to the encroachment of the cheap vaudeville and moving pictures.[12]

Because they were so similar in tone, there was much cross-pollination between plays shown in popular-priced theatres

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[11] Papashvily, 203-204.

[12] Owen Davis, "Why I Quit Writing Melodrama," American Magazine, September 1914, 29-30.

and dime novels, inspiring one another, even stealing from one another. Libbey wrote some plays, including an adaptation of her well-known novel, Miss Middleton's Lovers, which was further modified and then produced by Charles E. Blaney as the successful melodrama, Parted on Her Bridal Tour. Another well-known melodrama began in 1871 as a serial novel by Francis S. Smith, co-owner with Francis S. Street of the New York Weekly, about the helpless and exploited working girl, Bertha, The Sewing Machine Girl, or, Death at the Wheel. It was adapted into play form and produced in the same year by Charles Foster at the Bowery Theatre, and in the early twentieth century it became a staple of the ten-twenty-thirty repertoire in a version written by Theodore Kremer.

Playwrights of the ten-twenty-thirty theatre sometimes novelized their own plays. In earlier chapters the point was made that only a handful of ten-twenty-thirty melodramas were published. Royalties were not a source of income for these playwrights, though many plays were produced illegally by means of play piracy, despite copyright laws. People who saw the plays could not buy the scripts, but they could buy the dime novels, often sold in the theatres. Therefore, novelizing plays provided additional income to the playwrights.

One did not have to be the author of the play to novelize it. Grace Miller White, a successful writer,

novelized dozens of the ten-twenty-thirty plays in the early part of the twentieth century. In The Vanished Villains, Frank J. Beckman describes one of his many jobs as a youngster selling dime novels in the Metropolis Theatre in the Bronx, managed by Henry Rosenberg:

> Mr. Rosenberg offered me fifty cents as an inducement to hawk up and down the aisles of the theatre a cheap, paper-backed novelette of the current attraction, which happened to be Arthur J. Lamb's The Queen of the White Slaves, a blood-curdling thriller. . . . These paper-backed pulps sold for ten cents a copy and they were authored by one Grace Miller White, who, during the lifetime of melodrama adapted more than a hundred of them. In addition to Miss White's sizzling text, the book's cover revealed one of the play's sensational scenes in all its lurid and compatible color. Miss White's contribution to Literature was on sale not only in the auditoria of the popular-priced theatres, but it was obtainable in every neighborhood candy and stationary store.[13]

White, working within the tradition of sentimental novels and sensational melodramas, transposed "male" plays into "female" novels. While continuing to tell stories of the suffering of women at the hands of men, she transformed the plays into vehicles for these women, who drive the plots, whose actions are clearly motivated, and who develop more backbone than they have been given in the plays written by men. Therefore, although the framework is formulaic, and may be regarded as conservative, the female writer allows the women she creates to oppose the status quo. To avoid redundancy, three examples will suffice to demonstrate the changes White made in the depiction of females when

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[13] Beckman, "The Vanished Villains," 42.

novelizing plays written by men.

On the cover of each of White's novelizations she acknowledges the play on which it is based. White's novelization of Owen Davis's Secrets of the Police (both 1906) takes the time and space to set the scene with a long introduction during which the reader has the opportunity to know and understand the characters. The novel opens in Nodski, Russia, where two women are gossiping about a third, Olga, who has gone out the night before. They talk of the repressive society in which they live, about the beatings they receive at the hands of their husbands, who would never allow them to go out at night, and the fear of Siberia, where "men became beasts before they gave up their lives upon the pitiful altar of their principle."[14]

Olga, who has been seeing an American, is returning "fer my things that my mother gave me, for I'm goin' away." She shows them the marks of a whip on her brow, adding, "I won't be beat, I won't be jawd, and I won't stay in Russia to go to Siberia with him." The narration adds:

> every Russian woman knew about America, and over the land of promise lay a golden hue, which to every dark-browed woman of the land of snow and ice, was like some happy dream that flitted away when they lived their lives of sorrow. . . . [America] where husbands loved their wives without expressing it through blows, and where little children never cried for bread (12-13).

Olga's American assured her that in his country "every man

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[14] Grace Miller White, Secrets of the Police (New York: J. S. Ogilvie, 1906), 4-5. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically.

arrested himself if he did a wrong deed, and soldiers were unknown"(16).

While Olga journeys to meet her lover, Jack Dunstan, he is captured and condemned by the Order of the Red Ring, having been denounced by her husband, Mitchka, a member of the order. Dunstan, accused of stealing Mitchka's wife and of "being in the favor of the Czar and his court," is given the choice of death by slow torture or swearing to three conditions: staying out of Russia unless summoned by the Red Ring, renouncing all claim to Olga, and always remaining ready to further the cause "of the Russian Nihilist in America." He takes the solemn oath, promptly ignores it, meets Olga on the steamer for America, and moves to a different domicile every time he is summoned by the Ring.

This is the background of the story to follow, of Olga and her miserable treatment at the hands of Dunstan, "a crook" who will stoop to anything for money. She takes part in his scheme to kill a friend of theirs, so that Jack can marry (or kill) his wealthy English bride-to-be, Mary Bland. But knowing what Olga suffered in Russia, and her love and sacrifices for Jack, it is hard to hate her as one is supposed to hate the stage villainess. When Dunstan confides his evil plan to her, "Olga was weeping bitterly, and her eyes were always wet with tears for the man at her side was teaching her a bitter lesson" (50).

Davis's play provides none of the Russian background,

but opens with the plan to poison the friend in a cafe in the Bowery. An alternate title is Bloodhounds of the Law, referring to the adventures of Nick Chambers, the detective, who is determined to save Mary and set everything right. The play depicts Olga as the usual evil adventuress who is determined to destroy the heroine as the play proceeds.

Another female character presented differently in the play is Maggie Green, the soubrette. She works in the Bowery cafe and falls in love with Alias, the tramp, who is always out of a job. Alias comments:

> Some fellows were born unlucky. I was one of 'em. I have never been able to find a job yet where I could get good wages and have nothing to do. Where's all the good hearted millionaires? Why don't some of 'em adopt me--that's what I want to know (act 1. 2). [15]

Maggie spends the entire play pursuing Alias in order to persuade him to marry her, but this is done in a comic vein, as opposed to the ruined heroines whose men forsake them. The day after they first meet, the struggle begins:

> Maggie: You said you'd dream of me all night.
> Alias: That's when you said you made the mince pie.
> Mag: You asked me if I would think of you when you were gone.
> Alias: That's because I owed you for the pie.
> Mag: You said you loved me!
> Alias: That's because the pie made me foolish! (1.2).

When Alias arrives in London to help Nick Chambers, he thinks he's safe from Maggie until she shows up to torment him, asking: "Do you know what they do in England to men

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[15] Owen Davis, Secrets of the Police, unpublished manuscript, 1906, Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically.

who deceive girls?" He asks "Hang em'?" Her reply: "No, sir. Marry them" (2. 1). She follows him to Paris, where Alias finally succumbs and they marry, as do the hero, Nick Chambers, and the heroine, Mary. Much of the play's humor comes from this chase.

Maggie and Alias, though present in the novelization, are there to help Nick save Mary. Although they do fight from time to time, Maggie does not beg Alias to marry her: she is feisty and gives as much as she gets. Is this because the writer is female and doesn't find it funny to have Alias constantly reject Maggie? Perhaps it is too reminiscent of the beginning in Russia where men struck women as a matter of course. In the novelization, Alias tells Nick, the hero: "a woman and a dog likes [sic] the man that licks them most," whereas the Nick believes "No manly man ever struck a woman in all his life. . . . it is only a bully who would strike a woman" (White, 124-25).

Unlike the novelist, the playwright will do anything for a laugh, insisting on a balance between comedy and tears. Perhaps the playwright opts for scenes of clowning and entertainment value, which may be more necessary when there is a live audience, while the novelist, in the tradition of the nineteenth-century domestic novel and the current twentieth century "romance novel," is more concerned with female emotions.

The play also has more action than the novelization.

There is more fighting and suspense, timed to reach its peak at the end of exciting scenes. Characters don't describe battles or narrow escapes--they take part in them. Grace Miller White did not seem to feel the need to provide non-stop thrills in her novels. Perhaps she was not as afraid of losing her audience as Davis, who had to contend with verbal complaints if he did not satisfy a public hungry for action.

Today, we can identify more with the novelizations than the plays because they provide character motivations and believability. Without the visual clues supplied by the performers and sets, we look to the novelizations to give credence to the situations and to comprehend where the characters have been and are going and why they act the way they do. The scripts don't attempt to do that. Except for some quick exposition at the beginning, we are thrown in medias res and must take everything and everyone at face value. Probably the excitement and theatricality of the production with its musical interludes and underscoring made that possible. Further, the alternation of sensationalism and comedy kept the audience enthralled. But because we cannot know what the performance was really like, we look to the novelization to provide us with the underpinnings we have come to expect in order to enter into a suspension of disbelief.

Arthur J. Lamb's Queen of the White Slaves (1903), the

novelization Beckman claims to have distributed, has been completely revamped by Grace Miller White.[16] In her 1904 novelization, White turns the play into a more coherent whole, eliminating characters, and providing a strong female focus. Just as she has designated a woman, albeit the heavy, to be the lens through whom the story of Secrets of the Police unfolds, White chooses Sybil Grimestone to be the anchor of this novel. She combines two characters from the play to create Sybil: Tottie Dizzle, a comic mistress of Ralph Grimestone, the main villain, and Leonora Grimestone, his wife. Sybil, who has been supporting her faithless and ungrateful husband by fleecing customers in the beer hall where she works nights, learns from Fang, a Chinese man to whom she turns for companionship, of Ralph Grimestone's illegal activities. He is involved with the Terrible Nine, a subsidiary of the Highbinders, a powerful Chinese criminal organization whose members, both white and Asian, abduct white women and sell them to wealthy Chinese men. Although horrified, Sybil does not lose her love for Ralph until she overhears her husband say that he was hoping to marry the heroine he is abducting, Laura Rivers. As to his wife, he tells his travelling companion, "a woman is the easiest thing to get rid of in the world."[17] From then on, Sybil

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[16] Arthur J. Lamb may have been a pseudonym for Owen Davis.

[17] Grace Miller White, Queen of the White Slaves (New York: J. S. Ogilvie Publishing Company, 1904), 68.

joins the group that eventually saves Laura from her terrible fate in order to take vengeance on her husband.

This group is headed by James Wendel, the brave and handsome detective, who, like Nick Chambers, uses a series of disguises to penetrate the lairs of his enemies. He has already saved another young woman, Alice Branston, from the Hong Kong harem of Wong Fung (Fong) Low, and is determined to stop the villains from abducting Laura Rivers. Laura is aware that her guardian, Dr. Toxert, to whom she was entrusted by her dying father, has misused her large inheritance and is not to be trusted, but does not realize that he is Ralph Grimstone's accomplice. Wendel the detective is the hero and the lover: he and Laura plan to marry. He goes through every kind of torture and near-death escape to save his love. The Wendel-Laura relationship is parallel to that of Nick Chambers and Mary in the Secrets of the Police.

In the play, Laura's fiancé is Charles Maitland, a man who was formerly in love with Alice Branston. Because of his fickleness, he is not a strong hero. It is not he who takes all of the risks to save his fiancée, but Wendel, who only does so out of a sense of duty. This is not as satisfying as the novelization, in which Wendel's emotional commitment to Laura justifies the terrible risks he takes. Alice Branston, who marries Charles Maitland in the novel, ends up in the play with the poet-tramp, Fleecy Ruggs, a

comic character with flowery language and a good heart, similar to Alias in Secrets of the Police. The playwrights do have to be given credit for their unique choice of names.

Because Alice does not have a fiancé in the play until she meets Fleecy, she disguises herself as a newsboy in New York City after her escape from the harem in Hong Kong. This must have appealed to the newsboys in the audience, sitting upstairs in the cheapest gallery seats. Upon meeting Fleecy, Alice explains why she is wearing this disguise:

> a girl in rags never commands respect in these wicked days, and in this wicked world; a girl has only her beauty and her honor, soon finds that there are wolves prowling around in the guise of man who would rob her of both. Any such wolf who seeks to rob me of my good name will have to walk over my dead body to do so.[18]

Whereas the play accentuates Fleecy as a comic character, the novel focuses on Fleecy and Alice in terms of their important role in helping to save the heroine.

Human Hearts (1904) is based on a play of the same name by Hal Reid. It tells of the suffering caused by Jeanette Graves, a New York City girl who marries into the Logan family during a summer sojourn in the country (Arkansas), and ruins their lives. White's novelization begins by chronicling the life of the Logan family before the arrival of Jeanette, the love of the good woman Ruth Larkins for Tom

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[18] Arthur J. Lamb, Queen of the White Slaves, unpublished manuscript, 1903, University of Missouri, Columbia.

Logan, who falls instead for the faithless Jeanette, their marriage, the birth of their daughter, the boredom and misery of Jeanette in the country and her desire to return to the city.

Ruth Larkins is elevated in the novelization to the position of schoolteacher. While Tom was living with Jeanette, Ruth, having been rejected, went back to school to become a teacher. Early on Ruth reveals to Tom that she wants to teach: "there ain't no use of a girl always staying 'bout home when there's work to do." This turns out to be a real obstacle for Tom, who thinks of her as a "future schoolmarm." "He would have asked her to be his wife first, but now that she had ambitions for the future his part was at an end."[19] Tom was falsely accused by his wife and her lover, Frederick Armsdale, of murdering his father, a crime committed by Armsdale, and spends several years in prison, during which time Ruth comes to the farm to help Tom's blind mother every day after school.

The novelization offers romantic interludes expressed in dialogue as well as narration. There are scenes that show how Jeanette charms Tom, who is dazzled by her beauty and her savoir-faire. White also lets the reader see the disappointment of Ruth as she realizes that the man she loves is falling for someone else. When Tom and Ruth

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[19] Grace Miller White, Human Hearts: A Romantic Story Based on the Play of the Same Name (New York: J.S. Ogilvie Publishing Company, 1904), 12.

finally do marry, after Jeanette is killed by her lover, the novel includes a final scene of the happy couple with their two children--Grace, who was Jeanette's daughter, and their new baby.

Some of the differences between the two genres can be attributed to the greater length of novels as opposed to plays, which must establish the plot and relationships quickly. David Belasco warned that "only one novel in five hundred can be successfully dramatized," because a play needs great economy. He believed that "from the moment the curtain rises the flight of the dramatist should be straight as an arrow toward the dénouement of the play."[20]

Reid's play begins on page sixty of the novel, after the marriage between Jeanette and Tom, in a scene showing Tom's mother, before her blindness, ironing her daughter-in-law's fancy clothes, while complaining to her younger son, a simpleton named Jimmy, that she should not have to do all of the housework herself. The events leading up to the marriage are given through exposition. There is no mention in the play of Ruth's career as a teacher, and there are very few scenes showing Tom's relationship with each of the two young women, who are more like pawns than individuals.[21]

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[20] David Belasco, "The Great Opportunity of the Woman Dramatist," Good Housekeeping, November 1911, 927-28.

[21] Hal Reid, Human Hearts, unpublished manuscript, Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant,

What conclusions can be drawn about the comparison between these three plays and their novelizations? In each case, White fleshes out the women characters, refocusing the story to be told from their point of view. We understand and can sympathize with their feelings and their actions. Secrets of the Police and Queen of the White Slaves tell the story of women who are treated miserably by men. In the case of Olga in Secrets, she moves from one cruel man, who actually did love her but kills her in the end, to another, who uses her for his own ends, implicating her in kidnapping and murder. She never reforms, but continues to fight against the hero and her husband. In Queen, Sybil accepts her husband's ill treatment until she realizes he wants to rid himself of her, and then does whatever she can to thwart him. In Human Hearts, two contrasting women fight for Tom Logan: his villainous wife, Jeanette, who marries him, discards him, and then wants him back, and Ruth, a constant presence throughout the play, who wins Tom's love in the end. Every one of these novelizations is driven by women. Every hero who succeeds has done so with the help of a woman. It is her romantic attachment for him that gives her the strength to support and save him. These women are not passive victims--they fight for the men they love and against the men they hate.

Iowa, n.d. This manuscript was given to the Museum by Neil E. Schaffner, whose donations of memorabilia from his tent repertoire company formed the basis of their collection.

The plays are driven instead by the villain. Suspenseful cliff-hangers are sprinkled throughout the plays, with the hero and heroine alternately at the mercy of or getting the better of the villain, who continues to reappear although he seems to have been disposed of earlier. These nail-biting scenes alternate with comedy, mostly provided by eccentric males.

As I have said, these differences may in part be attributed to the fact that the novelization is read while the play is seen by a live audience. The device of a central female character in the novelizations conforms to the novels written by women in the nineteenth century.

But an important question for this study is whether or not a powerful leading woman could hold the attention of a live audience in a play intended for the popular-priced theatre. After looking at differing views concerning women playwrights, I will discuss the actress/playwright/manager Lillian Mortimer, who wrote and starred in plays for this theatre in which tough but sympathetic females were the main characters.

Women had a more difficult time gaining acceptance as playwrights than they did in other literary genres. In a 1939 speech accompanying a "national achievement" award to Rachel Crothers, whose first play was produced professionally in 1902, John Golden noted that

> there were few, if any great women dramatists--the reason is obvious: They were congenitally good, sweet,

> tender, loving, shy . . . so protected that they could never have seen the side of life . . . that one should know, see--perhaps, even live, to be a great dramatist.[22]

On the other hand, David Belasco encouraged women dramatists, as one can see by the advice he offered in 1911 to the many young women who wrote to him about playwriting careers. Belasco stated:

> Why shouldn't women make successful dramatists? The average woman certainly has a greater power of intuition than the average man. Her dramatic sense is keener, and while it may be true that the man from one point of view may have a wider outlook on life, the woman, within her scope, goes more into the details and has a greater knowledge of life in general. Emotionally she is man's superior, and as a student of human nature she is certainly his equal. Her powers of concentration may not be so great, yet on the other hand I, from my own experience, have always maintained that it is false that men have a greater sense of humor than women. . .
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> Watching that great "Votes for Women" procession which last spring in New York wound its triumphant way down Fifth Avenue, with its splendid contingents of doctors, lawyers, actresses, teachers, editresses, nurses and all other professions in which woman is holding her own so gallantly, I was amazed to notice that there was not even a single file of women dramatists and I have cause to know that the woods are full of them.
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> There is no profession in the world which offers such splendid emolument to a woman, when she has made a success of it. Not even the successful actress who has become a money making star can equal the income of the woman who has succeeded in landing two or three big successes. . . . With such a great financial goal in sight it has always been a marvel to me that more women have not gone in for this line of endeavor.[23]

Yet, according to Helen Krich Chinoy, there were women

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[22] Women in American Theatre, 129.

[23] David Belasco, "The Great Opportunity of the Woman Dramatist," 927-28.

playwrights working at the turn of the twentieth century.

Chinoy observes that at this time there was a major breakthrough for women playwrights who "almost seemed to take over the processing of popular commercial productions for an increasingly female audience." They wrote "melodramas, farces, mysteries and comedies," competing with men in the "business" of professional playwriting.[24] There are two points worth noting in connection with these turn-of-the-century women: firstly, most of them worked in the legitimate theatre so that their plays are outside the scope of this study, and secondly, Chinoy complains because they generally "did not challenge--except by their presence --the conventional views of women."[25] I will argue that there are many ways to challenge these views, some less obvious than others, but the popular-priced playwrights Lillian Mortimer and Cecil Spooner did attempt to do so.

Women playwrights in the ten-twenty-thirty theatre have gone unrecognized. Their names do not appear in reference books, unless their plays began in the legitimate theatre and ended as staples used in popular-priced stock or touring companies, such as Lottie Blair Parker's 'Way Down East (1898), or revivals of an earlier play, Mrs. Henry Wood's East Lynne (1865).

Lillian (also known as "Lottie") Mortimer has been

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[24] Women in American Theatre, 130.

[25] Ibid., 130.

largely ignored by theatre historians. Born into a theatrical family in Salt Lake City, Mortimer moved to Cleveland, Ohio at the age of three.[26] She had a great deal of experience in stock work, beginning as a child actress in Katherine Rober's Company in Boston, touring the south with James R. Curran who tutored and starred her in his company, and working in New York with the well-known manager Jacob Litt. In the early years of the twentieth century, Mortimer formed her own stock company with her husband, M.J.L. Veronee, who served as her manager and producer, in which she starred in the melodramas she wrote, playing in theatres on the Stair and Havlin Circuit until about 1909, when audiences dwindled. The next part of her career was a twenty-year stint in vaudeville, writing and starring in her own "mini-melodrama" sketches for the prestigious Keith Circuit. Except for her most famous play, No Mother to Guide Her, Mortimer's melodramas and sketches remain unpublished, but in the 1920s and 1930s she wrote a steady stream of plays that were published by T. S. Denison and Company in Chicago. She died in Petersburg, Michigan, survived by two sisters, Mabel and Ellen, who were both in the theatre.

Mortimer was highly praised for her ability as an

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[26] Cambridge Guide to American Theatre, edited by Don B. Wilmeth and Tice L. Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 325, lists her birth year as c. 1880.

actress. Jacob Litt, speaking of Mortimer's performance in In Old Kentucky, admired her work:

> She has brought to her impersonation of the role a fitness gained by several years of preparatory work in stock companies, the best training an actor can have in these days or any other days. There is no training to be compared to it in these days of combinations when a player often essays a role during the better part of his life and then finds himself in his maturity with limited experience and no time to gain it. Miss Mortimer comes of a family of actors and has a bright future before her. She is a pretty girl, she has ability, and she has industry, three qualities which compel success.[27]

In a 1909 interview with Mortimer in Green Book Album, Margaret Dodd, who referred to her as the "Queen of Melodrama," compared her versatility as an actress to that of George M. Cohan, who could perform every role in the plays he wrote. She explained:

> Miss Mortimer, of course, having "created" every character, knows just the way each one should be presented, and she is not only able to describe that manner to the player who is to assume the role, but she is able to act it as well. . . .
>
> This lightning character-change artist can evolute from the role of the panting, pursued waif-heiress-to-a-fortune, to that of the villain who pursued her, and then to the role of the fat comedian, following it immediately with the character of the village gawk, and an instant later resolve herself into the dignified matron with the altitudinous nose and the almost-gold lorgnette.[28]

Journalist Amy Leslie described Lillian Mortimer as

> a small, sparkling, nervous creature of contagious magnetism which lights up any sort of plot. Most of

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[27] Dramatic Magazine, n.d., 29-30, Locke Envelope #1553: Lillian Mortimer.

[28] Dodd, "Mistress of All She Surveys," 655.

> her plays, which are full of the meat the gallery god doth feed upon, are strong, speedy, well built and lasting. She herself, for so young a woman, has had extensive education in stage matters, and her acting is forceful, intelligent, attractive and upon a scale of such varied indication of talent that she is quite a wonderful little lady.[29]

Mortimer found that acting in her own plays helped her to understand how to rewrite them. "Sometimes I put in a whole new scene, for you never can tell how a play is going to come out until you act it."[30] Robinson Locke of the Toledo Blade referred to her as "the best known and undoubtedly the best liked star on the popular-priced stage."[31]

Mortimer was also an astute businesswoman, controlling all of the artistic aspects of production, including writing, directing, costumes, and sets. She designed the models for the sets and made sketches of all costumes and properties. That Mortimer had a thorough knowledge of costumes and sets can be seen in the detailed descriptions of them in some of her manuscripts and in all of her published plays. In addition, there were character descriptions and instructions on how to produce special effects.[32] Margaret Dodd joked: "compared to Miss

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[29] Amy Leslie, Daily News, 26 September 1905, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

[30] Dodd, 657.

[31] Toledo Blade, 31 December 1908, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

[32] For the "rain effect" in Mother in the Shadow Mortimer instructs the producers to thread "cheap silver five-and-ten-cent store beads on long strings and hang them

Mortimer, a one-man-band has no more to do than the man who plays the triangle."[33]

Mortimer explained how she was able to perform as well as direct the plays:

> I don't hamper myself in the producing, by which I mean that I give myself plenty of scope. For instance, this next season I have two plays going out [1909], one of which I am rehearsing in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Well, I always have a good understudy for my part in the play I am acting in, so that I can look after the other play, if so needs be [sic].[34]

For each play, Mortimer's company carried along all of the properties used in the production, merely asking the theatres in which they performed for a clear stage. Here is an advertisement for Mortimer's tour of her play Bunco in Arizona:

> This will be the largest and most magnificent production to be seen on any stage during the coming season. [1907-8] The management carries two large sixty foot baggage cars to transport the necessary scenery and electrical and mechanical equipment.[35]

In the files of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, there is an announcement for a

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about two feet back of the window, so that they will glisten like rain against the darkness behind them whenever the light from the room strikes them." Lillian Mortimer, Mother in the Shadow (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Company, 1936), 8-9.

[33] Dodd, 655.

[34] Toledo Blade, 31 December 1908, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

[35] Advertisement in Lillian Mortimer, No Mother to Guide Her: A Novel Founded Upon the Drama of the Same Name, (Baltimore: I. and M. Ottenheimer, 1906).

Christmas tour of Mortimer's company in Illinois:

> Thursday Dec. 25, 1902, Standard Theatre, Pekin, Illinois. Decker [representative] and Veronee [manager] Supporting Lillian Mortimer in a Repertoire of the Finest Plays. Dec. 25 Xmas Nite In the Shadow of the Gallows, Friday Wormwood or the Curse of Paris, Sat. Princess of Patches, Sunday A Greater Love. Only Stock Co. to Charge 25-35-50. Show had 80 foot Baggage Car. Own'd Baggage Car, Scenery and Prop. Each Show a Production.[36]

It was not so much the size or number of baggage cars that was unique about Mortimer's company, but the fact that a single woman was not only the star but the author, designer, and director, although fortunately she was helped on the producing end by her husband.

As a playwright, Mortimer wrote characters for herself that were unlike other women's roles in the popular melodramas. In most of the ten-twenty-thirty plays, the heroine was passive, while the comic soubrette was strong and active. Mortimer combined the soubrette with the heroine to form a leading lady who was independent, often funny, and always ready for a fight. She excelled at both writing and playing these roles.[37]

Mortimer wrote the kind of plays she felt the audience wanted to see, priding herself on her "clean" melodramas.

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[36] Paul Zallee File, Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

[37] Another instance of this type of character occurred, as discussed earlier, when a commercially successful soubrette influenced a male writer, such as Blaney, to design his play around her abilities. I maintain that in those cases it was the actress who was responsible for the female point of view.

She asked:

> Do you know what is the most noticeable feature of the audiences . . . ? Their stern and inflexible morality. The people who go to the popular-priced houses. . . are invariably of the grimmest and most unswerving ideas in regard to morals. Plays bearing upon the seventh commandment do not appeal to them, and have been the flattest of failures when brought before their notice. Problem plays, risqué or suggestive skits--these won't do.
>
> An off-color sentence or improper theme dooms a play at once. . . along the melodrama circuit. Things that will get a ripple of laughter [in the legitimate theatre] will be received by the outlying brigades with stony silence or with openly expressed anger. Their heroines must invariably be of unquestioned morality. An adventuress may be introduced, but always as an accomplice of the villain, and always as the recipient of hoots and hisses. Language and scenes must alike be . . . clean cut. . . or the play does not make good.[38]

Mortimer was angry when she felt she was losing her family audience because of the preponderance of improper plays in this field. In a 1909 article in Variety marking the decline of the popular-priced melodrama theatre, Mortimer blamed the Stair and Havlin Circuit for giving the producer Al H. Woods a "liberal franchise" to produce fourteen to sixteen plays of the "lurid, sensational sort," which drove away her female clientele:

> the women and children don't go to the theatres where they see these titles [Lured From Home, Dealers in White Women, etc.] and vicious lithographs. The fathers and mothers keep them away. Some of the plays are more harmful than the uncensored burlesque, and the managers wonder why business is falling off. . . . In my plays I have always tried to teach a moral. I appealed particularly to women and children, and built up an excellent clientele. I don't know what has

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[38] New York Morning Telegraph, 22 November 1908, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

> become of it. This season I have discovered that it is not that they have lost interest in my style of plays, but they are afraid they will be subjected to annoyance as they were in a preceding play. When you drive away the middle classes you drive away the show business, especially the melodramatic end, and that's what these managers have done.[39]

Woods responded in a later article that Mortimer omitted to mention her husband's request to Woods that he put her in a "dramatic show" the following season.[40]

Although many critics felt that she should use her talents in a higher class of theatrical endeavor, Mortimer stayed with the melodrama and was well-compensated for her pains. She remarked:

> Besides writing my own plays I act in them myself, and further, I produce them. You see in the latter case there is no trouble about royalty: I do the whole thing myself. You may think it is very strenuous work for a woman, but I fancy it is the best way after all, especially in melodrama.[41]

In another interview, Mortimer justified her decision to continue in her chosen line of work:

> This is a cheap sort of amusement that a certain set of public always like, and always will like. It attracts them, especially if you can infuse just so much human nature into the various parts and situations. . . .
>
> Take it from me that this melodrama business, whether it is authorship, acting or producing, is all right from a monetary standpoint. You may dispute the fact that art is extant very much in its surroundings, but

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[39] Variety, 28 January 1909, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

[40] Variety, 13 February 1909, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

[41] "Writing a Melodrama," Columbus Journal 27 December 1908, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

> there is an art in writing a ragtime song. Melodrama is a notch above ragtime. . . . I am not ashamed to be in it as an author, a player or a producer and manager. I would, maybe rather be in higher branches of the profession, but there is nothing derogatory in such work. Your wise ones may laugh, and sneer, but what I say it true, for I have been through it.[42]

Mortimer continued to write until she retired from the theatre. From melodramas to vaudeville sketches to her published "comedy-dramas," certain themes dominated her work.

The most pervasive of these was the theme of mother love. This probably explains Mortimer's appeal to the mothers and children in her audiences. In mid-nineteenth century, according to Ann Douglas, "the cult of motherhood was nearly as sacred . . . as the belief in some version of democracy."[43]

Mortimer's most successful play, No Mother to Guide Her, is a testament to this theme. Written in 1905, the play was first published in 1940 by editor Garrett H. Leverton in America's Lost Plays. Originally produced at the Star Theatre in New York City, it continued to tour the country as late as 1913.[44]

The hero of No Mother is Ralph Carlton, who is secretly married to Rose Day. Unfortunately, the villain, bank

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[42] Toledo Blade, 31 December 1908, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

[43] Douglas, 74.

[44] Leverton, The Great Diamond Robbery and Other Recent Melodramas, xiii-xiv.

robber John Livingston, persuades the pregnant Rose to marry him after convincing her that her husband, accused by him of robbing and killing her father, is dead. That crime and countless others were committed by Livingston himself, whose assistant, the hellish gypsy hag, Mother Targer, imprisons and tortures Bess Sinclair, a poor sick woman ruined and deserted by Livingston, and kills her child.

The protector of Bess is Bunco, a brave and cunning young Bowery girl from New York, an orphan who rescues all of the good people and sees that the evil ones are punished. This is the role chosen by Mortimer for herself. She calls the character a "comedy soubrette," although there is an older comic pair: Lindy Jane Smithers, a landlady who takes in summer boarders, and Silas Waterbury, the town constable, who has courted her for twenty years.

Since Mortimer designed the role of Bunco for herself, it is to be expected that the character will be the major force in the play. Indeed, she becomes heroine and soubrette combined. The New York Dramatic News says that although Mortimer didn't play the title role, she made Bunco a "gem" and "a star part."[45] Another reviewer talked of the soubrette as the star who "butted in at opportune moments, and brought acts to effective climaxes." Mortimer "nearly

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[45] New York Dramatic News, 16 December 1905, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

ate up the play."[46] The Milwaukee Sentinel called her a "heroine who is a cross between a Bowery tough and a western cowboy girl."[47] Bunco has a revolver and never hesitates to use it, risking her life at every turn to save those she loves.

In Mortimer's novelization of her play, which follows the script closely, the narrator has an opportunity to introduce Bunco as she guides Bess to safety:

> It is difficult to describe Bunco, such an odd, whimsical, quaint little woman. Only a girl in years, scarcely past fifteen, but so self-reliant and independent she seemed as she tenderly guided her frail comrade over the rough road, almost lifting her at times and constantly murmuring words of encouragement. Perhaps Bunco had another name, but if so, no one had ever heard it, and the odd cognomen seemed to fit her perfectly. Great brown eyes, roguish one moment, and pleading the next, gleamed in her tanned, oval face. A thick mass of tumbled, yellow hair hung in damp tendrils on her forehead. Her ready smile compelled sympathy and her voice had a note of peculiar music.[48]

When Bunco tries to convince Lindy Jane, the landlady, to take in Bess after they have walked all the way from New York City to the country, she pleads:

> I don't care for myself, but poor Bess is so hungry, and sick and tired. If you could take her in tonight and give her something to eat, I'd work for it. . . . We worked in de factory togedder--then a smooth-tongued feller comes along, and won poor Miss Bess--den--den left her wid her little baby. . . . Don't be too hard on poor Bess. You see she's an orphan and ain't got no

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[46] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

[47] Milwaukee Sentinel, 6 May 1907, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

[48] Mortimer, No Mother to Guide Her: A Novel , 23-24.

> mother to guide her. She was just planning dying, so I thought if I could get her to the country, de beautiful trees, de green grass and flowers would do her good.

When Lindy agrees to shelter them, Bunco tells her

> Say, you'se de real article--you'se are. I'll work fer you as dough you was my husband.[49]

A 1910 reviewer suggests that the play should be titled "No Mother to [Guide] Her or Any of the Rest of Them," because they are all more or less in need of maternal advice at times."[50] None of the female characters has a mother, but each of them expresses her yearning for one. Ironically, the one character called "Mother Targer" is a drunk, murdering monster.

Mortimer recycled No Mother to Guide Her in her one-act vaudeville sketch: The Arrival of Betty. It is the story of a minister's daughter who runs away from home to hide her pregnancy. Betty, a "rough diamond," who works in a factory is responsible for reuniting the minister and his daughter. A 1912 review of Mortimer as Betty praised her "good characterization of the pugnacious waif who loyally defends her friend in time of distress."[51]

In 1907, Mortimer wrote a sequel to No Mother To Guide Her, called Bunco in Arizona, in which the playwright

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[49] Lillian Mortimer, No Mother to Guide Her in The Great Diamond Robbery & Other Recent Melodramas, act 1. 164.

[50] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Clipping File: No Mother to Guide Her, 25 November 1910, BRTC.

[51] Milwaukee News, 9 January 1912, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

reprised the role of Bunco, who, unaware of her parentage, has been adopted by a miner. This time it is Bunco who falls in love with the hero, a cowboy named Dick Gold, to whom she returns after five years of education and culture in England. Continuing the pattern of bravery and skill with a gun from the earlier play, Bunco saves the hero from Black Hawk the Indian and from Heathercott, the villainous Englishman, who has found out that Bunco is an heiress and has been pursuing her for her fortune.

Mortimer understood that to hold the popular audience she had to provide sensation scenes. "It is no easy matter to conceive a lot of sensations and then to dress them up in such a way that they really seem like probabilities."[52] No Mother features a raging storm at the end of the second act during a life and death struggle with the villain who is shot by Bunco, and in the second act of Bunco in Arizona, Bunco crawls across an abyss on a conveyor-belt to stop a bomb from killing the unconscious hero. What is different about this character from the heroines of other popular-priced melodramas is her ability to save the day. She is not a passive victim. Given her spunk, usually an attribute of the comic soubrette, can Bunco be considered the heroine?

Mignon B. Parker, an actress who has spent her life on the stage, played the role of Bunco in a revival of No

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[52] Pittsburg Post, 4 April 1907, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

Mother to Guide Her in the 1970s in Arizona, her present home. Having begun her professional career as a teenager in a ballet company of the civic opera in Texas, Parker toured with a theatre company of The Drunkard, performing in the "olios," later developed a magic act with her husband, worked in television, and between performances with a local theatre company she currently writes historical romances. Parker notes the distinction between her character and that of the heroine.

> When I did Bunco I decided she was a brash, worldly-wise woman and I put her in the lower East Side of New York, or perhaps in the Bowery. I gave her that sort of accent and put in a few ad-lib lines to indicate that. When I said I "knowed Bessie from de shoitwaist factory" no one in the cast (including the director) knew what a shirtwaist was.
>
> Physically Bunco was limited to my personal stature, but I tried to show that she was strong both physically and mentally. Toughened by life and knowing that society shows no sympathy for the lower classes, she became resourceful and conniving, yet she maintained her personal standards of fair play. She cared enough for Bessie to come searching for her, yet she thought nothing of cheating the villain for her own gain. In other words, her version of the Golden Rule was "do unto others before they do you."
>
> In contrast to the heroine, Bunco could defend herself and make her own way in the face of adversity; she could beat the "bad guy" at his own game. To me she was always a stronger character than the heroine, who tends to be a stereotype. While the audiences of those days always cared about the heroine I believe that they could identify more with Bunco and took delight in seeing her come out on top. The heroine did not dare to be too strong; she always needed the help of the hero. Of course, she had to be strong in her virtues and moral standards, but she could not be devious in her dealings with others. This helplessness was, of course, the thing which gave rise to the conflict and made the final dénouement exciting and satisfying.

> The heroine needed to be petite and soft-spoken. Her challenge was to arouse the mother instinct in the older women in the audience and the protective, macho side of the men. Since good always triumphed over evil, these plays were always acceptable to the family audience. Mothers did not hesitate to take their daughters to the theatre when such a play was presented. Many of the plays were done as part of a larger "Variety" bill and these shows were the outcome of an attempt to make the early beer hall type of variety acceptable to women as well as to men. I suppose the impresarios realized that there was a large, untapped source of money in these people who would never attend the performance given in an atmosphere which was strictly male and females of "a certain class". . .
>
> Since there was such class distinction in the nineteenth century it was easy for the audience to feel rapport with the women being portrayed, especially the poor but honest heroine and her family. When I did Bunco I wore a red, white and blue print dress and a hat with a ridiculous white feather. Her idea of "style."[53]

Parker reports that the production was directed in a straightforward manner with no intention to burlesque the script, and was well received.

In No Mother to Guide Her there is another kind of mother figure: the young woman "ruined" by a faithless man who impregnates and deserts her. She is determined to preserve her child at any cost, and to marry the father, no matter what a rogue he is, in order to give their child "a name." She is aware that no one else would marry a fallen woman, so that he becomes her only hope of legitimacy and financial security. Bess, not knowing that her child is

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[53] Mignon B. Parker, letter to the author, 25 May 1998, and telephone interview, 1 July 1998. Parker is the mother of a doctoral student in the History Department at CUNY.

dead, continues to pursue Livingston, hoping to marry him. After suffering the tortures of drugs, starvation and beatings by Mother Targer on Livingston's orders, Bess interrupts the wedding between her lover and Rose, objecting: "I should be in her place. He has promised" (act 2. 184). But alas, her pleading is to no avail.

The feisty soubrette/heroine and the mother love theme are also found in an earlier melodrama by Mortimer, A Girl's Best Friend, produced on September 14, 1900 at the Fourteenth Street Theatre. Mortimer created another unconventional character for herself: Jinny, a sixteen-year-old unschooled orphan who is actually an heiress, having been abducted by the villain at the age of five. She is beaten and forced to work by Mrs. Sterling, who knows nothing of her background. In spite of the evil Mrs. Sterling, there are good-hearted mother figures--Chloë, the "colored Mammy," and her counterpart "Uncle Rastus." Many of Mortimer's plays contain a "mammy" character, a foil who not only provides humor because of her dialect, but also feels a deep love for the heroine and offers common sense solutions to the problems at hand. In A Girl's Best Friend there is a murder committed by the villain at the end of the play that Uncle Rastus literally covers up so as not to ruin the happiness of the hero and heroine. There will be time for punishment after they leave.

In the course of the melodrama, Jinny meets and marries

Mrs. Sterling son's Steve, who has returned home after several years in the city. She was hoping he would take her away, but he persuades her to go on living with him at home with his mother, until out of desperation Jinny sets him straight two years later. At the end of fourth and final act, the couple leave for Washington to find her real mother and the fortune that awaits them.

Jinny is a wild young woman who, according to Chloë, has turned "dis old village up side down sence she's ben hyar." Chloë describes Jinny as

> a wild bird in a cage. They jess bound to spread their wings an' sing. . . . But they got hearts that kin break. Even if ther song is loud an' don't keer like (act 1). [54]

When Jinny first meets Steve, she wonders aloud if she ever had a mother:

> I'll bet the doctor took her away when he brung me, must have been a mean old guy--cause a girl needs a mother. . . thought maybe he forgot to bring her back. Some of them doctors is awful careless (act 1).

In act 3, after Jinny runs upstairs, refusing to scrub the front steps for her mother-in-law because she is married and will no longer be "drove" by a cruel tyrant, Rastus tells Mrs. Sterling:

> Dat pore honey chile am <u>breakin'</u> her heart--she needs a mammy to go to, and she ain't got--none. Far as I kin I'm gwine to try to be a mammy to her and <u>yessah!</u> An' as fore you mam, Ah Sho am ashamed of you Sah. I sho am (act 3).

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[54] Lillian Mortimer, <u>A Girl's Best Friend</u>, unpublished manuscript, 1900, Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically.

Rastus, Jinny's champion, her surrogate "mother," fights for her rights. He understands that "der ain't no house in dies hyar univarse dat's big enough for a man's wife an his Mother" (act 3). Finally Jinny finds the strength to fight her own battle, taking pity on a young woman who was seduced by the villain, and inviting her into the house against her mother-in-law's command:

> she's goin to set, an' set . . . jess as long as she wants to set. An Ahm goin' to be the Boss hyar jess once. . . . I reckon you an' me's lived in the same house long enough--when Steve comes home he kin decide which one of us is goin' to stay hyar for keeps (act 3).

At the end of the act, the curtain falls as Jinny shoots the sheriff who has stabbed her husband. Sheriff Jackson, knowing Jinny to be an heiress, has been trying to steal her from Steve, promising that she will be happier with him.

The New York Dramatic Mirror praised the playwright and her performance:

> While its object is to teach a moral, A Girl's Best Friend is different from most plays of this kind in being able to entertain as well as to instruct. It is well written and its climaxes are thrilling and logical.
>
> Lillian Mortimer in the role of Jinny has a wide range in which to display her unusual histrionic powers. She never fails to grasp her opportunities and always drives home with telling effect every line of her well written part. She possesses also a personality that is refreshing and pleasing.[55]

Jinny is the heroine in the play, but as in the case of Bunco, her humorous, uneducated speech and wild manners are

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[55] New York Dramatic Mirror, 26 September 1900.

more like the traits of a soubrette. But it is Babe Jackson, the overweight sister of the sheriff, who plays the soubrette role, teamed with Tommy Waddles, the "village cut up," whom she eventually marries, despite the disapproval of her brother.

Another of Mortimer's vaudeville sketches, Po' White Trash Jinny, is a twenty-two minute playlet that tells the story of Jinny, played by Mortimer, who is a young heiress stolen from her family as a child and brought up with a poor family in the Tennessee mountains. Although there are differences in plot between this play and A Girl's Best Friend, this sketch provides another example of Mortimer's talent at adapting her melodramas to a different medium.

In A Man's Broken Promise (1906) a play written by Mortimer but one in which she does not take a role, the soubrette reverts to her usual function: the female half of the comedy couple, both of whom support the hero and heroine through difficult times. In this play, Turnips is clearly the "character soubrette," an orphan almost sixteen years old, beaten and forced to work for fear of being sent to the poor-house by Mrs. Burt and her son Simon, the villain. She has a good heart and rescues the crippled Ned, stepson of Mrs. Burt, from beatings and certain death. Engaged to Buttons, the "rube boy," Turnips must keep "busting it up" because there is always someone to save. Her motto is: "Dooty comes afore pleasure and dere's a dooty to be done

and its got to be did." [56] Turnips is free to fulfill the functions of a soubrette both because Mortimer is not playing the role, and because there are two other women who represent versions of the heroine: Jane Oakland, the "emotional lead," ruined and nearly drowned by Simon Burt, and Ruth Rivers, the "ingenue," upon whom Simon currently has designs of marriage. Jane, who will not return to her "patient old mother" and "innocent baby" until Simon marries her, is finally satisfied when Simon is fooled into thinking Ruth is his bride, although it is really Jane in disguise. The women begin as enemies but end by joining forces to defeat the villain.

The theme of mother love is as strong as ever. When Jane is in the depths of despair, her mother comes to see her with Jane's baby. Mrs. Oakland says to her daughter: "I couldn't sleep nights, athinkin' of ye. So I took the savins from the bank and come to ye, Janie." Jane tells her:

> A girl's best friend is her mother, but we learn it too late, too late. Dear mother forgive me.
>
> Mrs. Oakland: "I didn't come to reproach ye, my gal, but to comfort ye."

After she exits, Jane adds: "God pity the girl who has no mother" (act 2). Soon afterwards, when Mrs. Oakland sees Simon choking her daughter, old as she is she threatens the

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[56] Lillian Mortimer, A Man's Broken Promise, unpublished manuscript, 1906, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, act 1. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically.

villain:

> I am an old woman, she is my child. I've been taught by my Bible to forgive, but if ever you raise your hand to strike my gal again, may a just God call you to a fearful reckoning (act 2).

Jane then turns to Simon, demanding: "I ask you again,--will you give my child a name?" When he refuses, she answers:

> Then my child and I will do without your name. Perhaps in some other way I may be able to make up to baby for what she loses in a father's name (act 2).

Jane shows some spunk here, but Simon prevents her from leaving. In the end, it is Simon's mother who accedes to his final request to shoot him, rather than allow him to be incarcerated.

The aim of Mortimer's melodramas, though they clearly do not represent a high point in literary achievement, is, as she herself said, to teach a simple, straightforward lesson. Rollin Lynde Hartt, quoting Mr. Chesterton, observed:

> "Melodrama is popular because it is profound truth; because it goes on repeating the things which humanity has found to be central facts. . . . The melodrama is perpetually telling us that mothers are devoted to their children, because mothers are devoted to their children. Humanity may in time grow tired of hearing this truth; but humanity will never grow tired of fulfilling it."[57]

The way in which Mortimer was able to expand and strengthen the role of the typical female heroine, despite the need to fulfill the requisite lessons, comic scenes, and thrills, is

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[57] Hartt, The People at Play, 188-89.

impressive. She appealed to the women in the audience by creating characters who rose from extreme poverty to claim their rights in an unfair world, and found the courage and determination to struggle against the forces of evil. Not only did the writer break the barriers against females in positions of power, but her characters also succeeded in doing so.

The themes of mother love and female competence continue to appear in Mortimer's published works, as a brief examination of three characteristic dramas will demonstrate. Because these plays were written in later decades, they were less formulaic in their structure, but still kept the pathos of melodrama. In Mother in the Shadow (1936), a mother who was forced by her husband and sister-in-law to leave her child in their care finds her way back after many difficult years to save her daughter from an unwanted marriage to a wealthy, older man. Never revealing to her child her real identity, the mother confronts her sister-in-law Sara, who has continued to care for the girl after the father's death and looks forward to reaping the financial rewards from this marriage in order to pay for surgery that will save her sight. At the beginning of the second act, the mother, Emmy, tells her sister-in-law:

> Emmy: You have always cheated to get what you have wanted. . . . You have played on Sandra's sympathy long enough. I won't see her sacrificed. You have wrecked two lives--your brother's and mine. You shan't wreck hers. . . . There is a hopeless pain called remorse, Sara. It is the cruelest word in the language--an

> agony with a cure, a pain that makes the world grow dark. Open your eyes in time, Sara; look through the mist. . . . I am convinced there is a blindness worse than that of the eyes: a blindness of the soul--the selfish vision that forever looks in, not out. That Sara, is darkness, indeed.[58]

Emmy's daughter Sandra eventually marries her true love, while Emmy stays to provide the funds necessary for her sister-in-law's eye operation. The heightened language and sentimentality of these lines brings the reader back to Mortimer's earlier work.

Nancy Anna Brown's Folks (1926), set at the Grand Theater in Brooklyn, tells the story of the leading lady in a theatre company who refuses to acknowledge her poor but kind-hearted parents from Kansas when they arrive for a visit. Wanting to impress her wealthy fiancé who is unaware of her background, Nancy Anna Brown asks her maid Willa to pose as their daughter. Willa is delighted because she is an orphan whose mother died in childbirth. Ma Brown remarks tearfully:

> Ain't it strange? Children seem to fergit their folks when they're growed up an' succeedin'. Well, that's life. Those that ain't got mothers wants them, an' those that has, don't.

And Pa Brown turns on his daughter, furious and hurt:

> An' you are willin' to deny your parents fer money. Well, that ain't necessary, either, because--I'm goin' to deny you! I'm ashamed of you! . . . I'm a-goin' to disown you!. . . No matter what comes--joy or sorrow, birth or death, I don't want you ever even to think of me. You've passed out of my life ferever! . . . An'

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[58] Lillian Mortimer, Mother in the Shadow (Chicago: T. S. Denison and Company, 1936), act 2. 46-48.

> remember this. You can't never come back. Life is unsartin. Money has a way of comin' an' goin'. "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." But you have chosen. Come, mother.[59]

Ironically, it turns out that Ma and Pa Brown have come to tell their daughter about the large inheritance they received, but it is too late. Willa goes abroad with them for a year, and on their return they learn that Nancy and her child, having been abandoned by her husband, are starving. It is Willa who takes control of the situation and reconciles Pa Brown to his grandson and his daughter.

Finally, in The Gate to Happiness, dedicated by Mortimer "To My Mother," it is the motherless "show girl," Eden Gay, who earns the money to be a "mother" to her whole family: her alcoholic father, whom she rehabilitates; her younger sister, for whom she finances an operation to cure her limp; and her brother, who is able to study the violin because of his sister's generosity. During the year Eden is Carlotta, star of the Follies, but in the summer at home in Connecticut, she must pretend to be a schoolteacher on vacation, because her father is too proud to acknowledge her connection to the theatre. All of them conspire to prevent her from marrying Stephen Blair, a student of theology, because if she left her career they would have to do without the money they crave, although they are ashamed of the

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[59] Lillian Mortimer, Nancy Anna Brown's Folks (Chicago: T. S. Denison and Company, 1926), act 1. 33-34.

manner in which she earns it. Blair's parents, a minister and his wife, who have found out about Eden's theatrical career from her slick suitor from the city, beg her to leave their son alone. Eden responds to Stephen's father:

> I am used to making sacrifices. That seems to be my part in a very selfish world. One more will not matter. You shall have your son. I promise.[60]

During this conversation she defends her profession, explaining why she had to lie about it:

> I have never been ashamed of my profession, Mr. Blair. I love and respect the many fine people I have met there. The others I am not responsible for, as you are not responsible for the errors of your brother clergymen. It is only ignorance that is prejudiced. Ignorance condemns what it does not understand. My father and aunt are ignorant. It was for their sakes I kept silent. They had to live in this little village, and I did not. After all, Mr. Blair, we are all brothers (act 2. 63-64).

Perhaps Mortimer had to live with this sort of prejudice and ignorance as well and that is why she has put such an eloquent defense of the theatre into her play.

In an ending reminiscent of O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi," Eden, who misses a rural life, has decided to give up her stage career, while Stephen has abandoned the ministry to marry her. Eventually his parents apologize to Eden, Stephen becomes a minister, and Eden agrees to marry him and live "beside the still waters."

Another female playwright who has written roles in

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[60] Lillian Mortimer, The Gate to Happiness (Chicago: T. S. Denison and Company, 1930), act 2. 65. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically.

which women control their own destiny is Cecil Spooner. It is no coincidence that Spooner performed the leading roles in many of her plays. A glance at a few representative examples reveals the ideal of the female protagonist that she advanced throughout her professional career. (One caveat: it is not always easy to discern which plays were written by Cecil Spooner, which by her husband Charles Blaney, and which by writers they hired and then claimed as their own.[61])

Having achieved enormous success as star and producer of the dramatization of Elinor Sutherland Glyn's popular novel Three Weeks, Cecil Spooner decided to dramatize the author's sequel, One Day (1909) as a vehicle for herself. Advertised as a "modern Romeo and Juliet," the play is about the forbidden love between Paul Zelenska, Prince of Sardalia, and the American Opal Ledeux from New Orleans. The prince is betrothed to a woman older than he whom he has never seen, the Princess Elodie of Austria, a marriage which will benefit both countries. Opal Ledeux is betrothed to the Count de Ronnes, an older, lecherous aristocrat who demands to marry Opal in return for loans to her father that he cannot repay. Paul is unaware that his closest friend, the man who has been posing as his uncle, is really his father. The prince was conceived during a three weeks' affair in Lucerne between his father and the Queen, which

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[61] Holly Brooke Blaney, interviews with author.

resulted in her death and the death of the King. When Paul and Opal, who realize that their love is doomed, meet accidentally in Lucerne, in the very room where the Queen and her lover had stayed, they choose to die rather than go on living without one another.

Spooner's dramatization offers an important change in the ending of the story--whereas in the novel Paul kills Opal and then himself, in the play, Paul, who enters Opal's room promising to renounce the throne, finds her dead, having left a note saying she could not go back to the Count, and then he kills himself. In addition, the allusions to a mysterious past leading to a curse upon the life of Opal are ignored by Spooner in the play. Her heroine leaves nothing to fate--it is she who will determine her future.[62]

The New York Morning Telegraph noted in 1912 that the opening performance of One Day at Spooner's Metropolis Theatre during the season following her production of Three Weeks signaled a "run on the box office." Although Cecil Spooner scored a triumph, the Telegraph called the play the most "pretentious" of her offerings.[63] In 1915, Spooner was loath to admit her authorship: "I wrote One Day,

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[62] Elinor Sutherland Glyn, One Day (New York: Macaulay Company, 1909); Cecil Spooner, One Day, from the novel by Elinor Glyn, unpublished manuscript, n.d., Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

[63] New York Morning Telegraph, 12 March 1912, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

unfortunately. NO, I will no say unfortunately, because it has made heaps of money. I can't see why people go to see it, but they do."[64]

Cecil Spooner's play, The Fortunes of Betty, is about a young woman, Betty Bell Meredith, who ran away from home four years previously to escape an evil stepmother married to the father she adored--an old soldier who ran the local post office. Betty became the "star prima donna" of a ten-twenty-thirty company, in which she sang and danced and was known as "Queen of Soubrettes." Having fled from the sheriff after the theatre company went bankrupt, she returns home to save her father, now a widower, from false accusations of embezzlement. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Betty, who falls in love with the detective hired to investigate her father, is plagued unjustly by a reputation of immorality because of her show business experience. After her father is hurt in a car accident, Betty proves that despite her poverty, she can lead a moral life; take care of a home and a father; run a post office; solve the crime; and win the love of a gentleman.[65]

In a 1910 review, the Brooklyn Daily Eagle said of Spooner:

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[64] Cleveland Leader, 5 March 1915, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

[65] Cecil Spooner, The Fortunes of Betty, Novelized from the successful play of the same name (New York: J.S. Ogilvie, 1910).

> she is not only a clever actress, but also a dramatic author of no mean merit. . . . The plot has been cleverly fashioned, the action is smooth and the dialogue at times witty and well sustained. Of course, Miss Spooner had the leading role, and as Betty Bell Meredith she was bright, vivacious and girlish.[66]

The New York Dramatic Mirror observed:

> Miss Spooner could hardly have selected a better play for the initial performance of her stock season than this pleasing little comedy of rural life, which shows the original and entertaining little comedienne at her best.
>
> [The play is] especially bright in repartee and amusing and pretty situations.[67]

Because the playwright created a character who shared her own stage background, it was a perfect vehicle for her.

Spooner's play, My Irish Cinderella, must have been written about the time of the first World War. It is the story of Peggy McNeil, an Irish "poorhouse brat," whose English father was killed in the war, and whose Irish mother died alone in a New York poorhouse. She has a Bowery accent, as do many of Mortimer's leading women, tinged with an Irish brogue. Her parents had eloped and moved to America against the will of Lord Lonsdale, her grandfather, who repudiated the marriage. After returning to England to see his sick father, the younger Lonsdale came back to find that his wife and daughter had disappeared. Unable to locate them, he enlisted in the war and died heartbroken, leaving a note found on his body asking that his father

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[66] Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 20 September 1910.

[67] New York Dramatic Mirror, 1 March 1911.

search for his child and take care of her. If Peggy were discovered, Lonsdale's niece and nephew could not inherit their uncle's fortune. They therefore undertake to find a poor girl to masquerade as Lonsdale's granddaughter, who, if she refused to marry her cousin, Lonsdale's nephew, would be exposed as a fraud. Their plans are foiled by an American who falls in love with Peggy in England, where she is now a lady living with her loving grandfather. The American, Clifford Morgan, is able to prove that she is the real granddaughter after all.[68]

Played by Cecil Spooner, Peggy begins her life in poverty as did Cinderella, but her Irish spirit is never subdued from her early beatings at the hands of Mother McGee, who took her from the poor-house to make her work, to the disappointment of her first meeting with her distinguished grandfather, who is unable to stand this savage "Irish wildcat." Upon her arrival in England, Lord Lonsdale threatens to send Peggy to bed without any supper because of her uncouth manners.

Peggy replies:

> sure that's nothing new for me, sir. Many a night I went to bed widout anything to ate, and cold into the bargain, and the bed I went to was a bundle of rags in the corner, and breakfast time never come until supper, and thin we forgot to have that, so you see, sir, maybe

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[68] Cecil Spooner, My Irish Cinderella, n.d., unpublished manuscript from the collection of Neil Schaffner, Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically.

> if I had things and niber had to fight or go hungry, I might know more and you wouldn't have to be so ashamed of me (act 2. 37).

After Peggy completes the eight months of training to become a "lady," she must then defend herself against the underhanded dealings of her niece and nephew, who try to discredit her in the eyes of her grandfather. It is the fear of losing his affection, not his money, that nearly destroys her. Possessed of a wonderful sense of humor, the ability to quickly assess the people she meets and stand up to them no matter what their rank, and a strong capacity to love, Peggy remains a delight and an inspiration. This role is similar to that of Betty--both women are fighters who overcome numerous obstacles in order to prove themselves.

Grace Miller White, Lillian Mortimer and Cecil Spooner seized on the opportunity to increase their profits by tailoring their abilities to fit the market. With a willing publisher, and a female readership hungry for books about women, White took the opportunity to convert into novel form the plays that were attracting millions to the theatres. Mortimer and Spooner, controlling the companies that would produce their works, designed more active roles for themselves to perform, reaping substantial rewards. They not only produced and starred in the plays, but also guaranteed publication by novelizing some of them.

Notwithstanding their pecuniary motives, these women

made a contribution to society. They offered a broader view of the capacity of "woman" than many of the male writers in their field. Applying the conservative versus oppositional approaches mentioned earlier, I conclude that although the plays of the ten-twenty-thirty theatre and their novelizations were codified and patriarchal, there is still a development to be noted here. Each of the works in this chapter has a female protagonist who is pro-active; she takes charge of her own life. In this sense, the female writers were oppositional--they presented a woman's perspective. Although they cannot be called feminists, these writers helped to change the way women were regarded by the multitudes in the popular-priced theatres. In modifying the stereotypical view of woman-as-victim, they offered to their audiences new role models, both by their own example and through the characters they created.

Conclusion: Where did the women go? Decline of the ten, twent', thirt'

Towards the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, there was a significant decline in attendance at the popular-priced theatre. The ten-twenty-thirty movement, which evolved as large audiences clamored for entertainment, now found motion pictures and vaudeville claiming its patrons. As a result, the playwrights, managers, and actresses whose lives had been intertwined with this theatre foraged elsewhere for sustenance and glory.

The growing popularity of vaudeville and cinema was evident in news coverage. Beginning in 1909 and 1910, the two amusements monopolized a large portion of the New York Dramatic Mirror, at the expense of theatrical news. The "Motion Picture Field" featured reviews, articles, and editorials, while the "Vaudeville Mirror," printed in addition dozens of advertisements by performers, booking agents, and producers. With the refinement of vaudeville, producers like Lew Fields were able to lure actors away from the theatre by offering them high salaries.[1] And the cinema seduced former theatre patrons with low prices and varied programs.

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[1] See Armond Fields and L. Marc Fields, From the Bowery to Broadway.

In this final chapter, I will trace the growth of cinema, the decline of stage melodrama, and the way in which the content and audiences of the latter were appropriated by the film industry. Establishing a strong connection between vaudeville and cinema, I will give examples of the many ten-twenty-thirty actresses who turned to careers in these fields.

Beginning in 1905, film exhibitors began to take over converted storefronts, dance halls, and restaurants, where, for the price of a nickel or a dime, they showed an array of short films, many of which borrowed heavily from popular melodramas. These nickelodeons, whose heyday lasted only nine years, numbered more than ten thousand throughout the country by 1910. After the Mayor of New York, George McClellan, revoked the licenses of over 550 nickelodeons in 1908 because he felt they were unsafe and immoral, the film industry began to regulate itself. Following the pattern of popular theatres, they tried to lure respectable women and children through offers of free admission, moral screenplays showing female protagonists, and comfortable theatres. As popular theatres became defunct, their audiences having deserted them for the cheaper nickelodeons, the film industry took them over, renovated them, and lengthened movies from one to four reels.[2]

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[2] Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905-1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," American Film Industry, edited by Tina Balio (Madison: University of

In 1908 the New York Dramatic Mirror began a series of articles exploring the decline of stage melodrama. An article in April noted that theatres like the American and the New Star, which earned from five to seven thousand dollars per week, were down to two or three thousand, with some as low as twelve hundred. Various causes were suggested, such as a business depression and the "phenomenal growth of the five-cent moving picture houses." But the managers interviewed for this series all believed that it was the quality of the melodramas that caused the decline in attendance. One manager who refused to give his name argued that if hard times and the film industry were indeed the cause, then other popular entertainments such as burlesque and vaudeville should not be as profitable as ever, but they were. He suggested that the public have "have had their fill" of sensational melodrama, where every action was predictable, and, for the same price, fifty cents, went to see the star-studded, large-cast burlesque and vaudeville shows. He offered two solutions: a return to lower prices in the melodrama houses (ten, twenty, and thirty cents) and to a higher class of plays.[3]

In May, the Mirror interviewed manager Charles E. Blaney. Blaney claimed that what he had predicted two years

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Wisconsin Press, 1985), 83-102.

[3] "What is the Cause? A Great Falling Off in Patronage of the Popular-Price Theatres," New York Dramatic Mirror, 18 April 1908.

before had come to pass. The public was "getting tired of the rapid-fire variety of melodrama." Blaney improved his melodramas, finding that when one of his productions arrived at a theatre which had just shown a "bad melodrama," the public, after initially shunning the play, learned by word of mouth how good it was and rushed for seats. He explained: "The public that demanded a quick succession of pictures--that is, scenes--have now gone over to the moving-picture houses, and the melodrama of the future, to survive, must be built on a higher plane."[4]

Howard Hall, an actor, manager, and playwright who spent his life in melodrama, was interviewed in June of the same year. He spoke about the loss of middle-class patrons, who could not afford the two dollar price of admission to the legitimate theatre, but were "practically excluded" from the popular-priced houses because of the low quality of plays there. Hall disagreed vehemently with the attitude of some managers to "get down to the level" of the patrons of melodrama theatres. Audiences of every class wanted better entertainment. He noted that "clap-trap melodrama and the logical, consistent melodrama cannot exist together in the same theatre." Hall believed that the former caused the lower classes to turn to moving pictures and the middle classes to buy the cheapest seats in the higher-priced

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[4] "Good and Bad Melodrama: The Decline in Patronage of the Popular Price Theatre from a New Viewpoint," New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 May 1908.

houses, whose business was increasing.[5]

Producer Al. H. Woods, hardly a prophet, stated in 1910:

> melodrama is not dead. . . . We had the wrong dope in giving 'em too much. Now they've got indigestion . . . . It's the Never-Again Kid. "Never want to see another melodrama," he says. "Me for the moving-picture wagon." But how tired the public is going to get of that picture thing![6]

In a 1912 interview, Woods declared that melodrama had "simply moved up-town." Speaking of the relationship between his production of The Gambler of the West and Belasco's Girl of the Golden West, Woods remarked that the fifty-cent thriller had become the two-dollar melodrama. "Melodrama never declines. . . . it merely puts on airs, as the result of a temporary condition of obesity in the national spine's pocketbook."[7] But by 1916, he conceded:

> melodrama is dead and buried and we have erected a monument over its grave. . . . Popular melodrama depended upon mechanical and scenic sensations for its appeal. . . . For example, I want a girl to jump off a bridge into the river and have her saved by the hero. The film maker stages the scene just as it would happen in real life, and beats the best thing that we can do on the stage so much that popular-priced melodrama hasn't a chance to compete with the picture.[8]

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[5] "The Melodrama Theatre: The Discussion as to its Decline in Popularity and its Needs Continued," New York Dramatic Mirror, 6 June 1908.

[6] Green Book Magazine, April 1910, n.p., Locke Envelope #2643: Al H. Woods.

[7] "Producing Spine-Thrillers," Literary Digest, 10 August 1912, 222.

[8] New York Review, 18 March 1916, 160, Locke Envelope: Woods.

After the 1910-11 season, Woods turned his hand to the legitimate theatre, where he produced melodramas like Within the Law that did not depend on scenery or special effects. George Jean Nathan maintained that when melodrama moved "indoors," eliminating its sensational exterior scenes, it lost its soul.[9]

Charles Blaney, who thought he could revive melodrama by changing its style, finally gave up and moved into film production. In a 1914 interview, Blaney claimed: "I have turned to the production of photoplays, and my one hundred successful melodramas will make more effective photoplays than I ever could have made of them as stage productions."[10]

Historians point to the increased effectiveness of the genre on film, which, according to A. Nicholas Vardac, "merely translated into the idiom of the motion-picture camera the mid-century aims and methods of the melodrama."[11] In his book Stage and Screen Vardac demonstrates with numerous examples the conventions of the melodrama stage, which involved two "filmic devices," namely "cross-cutting between two or more lines of action," and "straightforward

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[9] George Jean Nathan, Mr. George Jean Nathan Presents, 23-24.

[10] New York Review, 31 October 1914, Clipping File: Charles E. Blaney, BRTC.

[11] This and subsequent quotation from A. Nicholas Vardac, Stage to Screen: Theatrical Origins of Early Film: David Garrick to D.W. Griffith (New York: Da Capo Press, 1949), 66-7.

storytelling" in episodic form, both presented visually. While the theatre had to mount and change complex scenery, which was time-consuming, the camera had no such problem--the techniques were innately cinematic. John L. Fell observes: "There appears to be ample evidence of striking similarities between theatrical and filmed melodrama in terms of structure, techniques, and the aesthetic implicit to both."[12]

Frank Rahill notes that one of the reasons for the downfall of the ten-twenty-thirty theatre was its doomed attempt to compete with film. Vardac is critical of the appearance of live animals and practical properties on stage as producers tried to combine melodrama with "pictorial realism." He believes that the two were incompatible and caused the destruction of theatrical illusion.[13] Rahill points out the enormous outlay of money on "superproductions," beginning with Davis's hit Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model. These presentations required larger companies, more scenes, and more elaborate spectacle. Eventually these big shows flopped, losing large sums of money for their producers.[14]

Film historians confirm that the audiences for early

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[12] John L. Fell, "Dissolves by Gaslight: Antecedents to the Motion Picture in Nineteenth-Century Melodrama," Film Quarterly 20 (Spring 1970): 32.

[13] Vardac, 66.

[14] Rahill, The World of Melodrama, 282-83.

film were the same ones that had supported the popular-priced theatres. Garth S. Jowett observes that "middle-and upper-working-class patrons of the live theater, especially the fans of the popular melodramas," comprised a large segment of the first motion picture audiences.[15] Roberta E. Pearson writes, "the general consensus was that the moving picture had driven the popular priced melodrama out of existence by successfully competing for patrons," who "deserted their 'blood and thunder' theatrical productions for the moving-picture equivalent."[16] And Lewis Jacobs, author of The Rise of the American Film, explains that

> immigration was at its peak . . . and the movies gave the newcomers, particularly, a respect for American law and order . . . pride in citizenship and in the American commonwealth. . . . More vividly than any other single agency they revealed the social topography of America to the immigrant, to the poor, and to the country folk.[17]

Owen Davis, referring to the audience for his plays, remarked that "a large percentage of them . . . only recently landed in America."[18] The immigrants and the poor

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[15] Garth S. Jowett, "The First Motion Picture Audiences," Film Before Griffith, edited by John L. Fell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 196-206.

[16] Roberta E. Pearson, Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 133.

[17] Lewis Jacobs, The Rise of the American Film (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), 12.

[18] This and subsequent quotation from Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, 36.

in the cities and the "country folk" throughout the land had previously been the stalwarts of the ten-twenty-thirty theatre.

Davis claims to have written "for the eye rather than the ear," since words were not always heard due to noisy theatre audiences, nor understood by immigrants who did not speak English. Yet, although he refers to his melodramas as "practically motion pictures," he could not compete in this regard with a completely visual medium devoid of spoken language.

These audiences were also attracted to vaudeville, which shared many common techniques with film. In his dissertation, "The Stage/Screen Exchange," John Carter Tibbetts maintains that some of the earliest films were "simply photographed variety turns." He remarks that vaudeville was so successful at its peak, between 1890 and 1913, that "it was regularly presented in thirty-seven houses in New York alone, with some two thousand smaller theaters outside the big cities." Its various types of acts, which could be seen in the theatres and in short films, typified "the gamut of the popular theater of the day," including musicians, dancers, singers, comics, magicians, pantomimists, and actors in theatrical sketches or excerpts from plays.[19] On the other hand, "motion

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[19] John Carter Tibbetts, "The Stage/Screen Exchange: Patterns of Imitation in Art: 1896-1930" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Kansas, 1982), 46-67. See also David Mayer,

pictures became a regular part of variety bills."[20] If the films were short enough to fit into the vaudeville format, they could be seen as part of live shows in theatres.

As audiences for the popular-priced theatres diminished, most of the actresses turned to vaudeville and/or film, and some to the legitimate theatre. Since the women who played soubrettes were required to sing and dance, it would not be too difficult for them to relocate into vaudeville, many of them having begun there, as noted earlier. Actresses often alternated between vaudeville and melodrama bookings.

Lottie Williams, who started out as a singing and dancing comedienne in mining camps in California before becoming a star in Blaney's melodramas, moved on to a highly successful career in vaudeville. In 1909 she toured for forty weeks on the well-known Orpheum Circuit with a sketch called On Stony Ground, a mini-melodrama by Edmund Day, in which she played a Bowery orphan. Asked at that time whether her "dip" into vaudeville was merely temporary, she answered with a resounding

> No, you see it isn't a dip, it's a swim, and the water is fine. I am through with popular price melodramas and their blood-curdling scenes, blood-curdling memories and even blood-curdling salaries. When I look

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"The Victorian Stage on Film: A Description and a Selective List of Holdings in the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection," Nineteenth Century Theatre 16 (Winter 1988): 111-122.

[20] Tibbetts, 57-58.

> back on those days it is like recalling a hard luck tale, since I have entered vaudeville and found success in this line.[21]

In a 1910 interview during her tour, Williams explained why her life was so much less hectic since she left the melodrama theatre:

> It's the easiest job I ever struck. Only twenty-two minutes twice a day, no change of costumes, no dancing or singing . . . I'm idiotically happy in vaudeville. It's such a change from the hard work I was doing. And I don't get tired knocking around the country as some people suppose.[22]

Williams refers to continuous vaudeville, which ran for twelve hours at a time, from morning to evening, during which the leading performers appeared twice, and the others three times. This same actress who had talked earlier of her love for the audiences in melodrama now maintained that vaudeville audiences were "more keen and appreciative in their treatment accorded an artist behind the footlights."[23]

Harry Clay Blaney and his wife Kitty Wolfe, who starred in the melodramas of Harry's brother, Charles E. Blaney, enjoyed an enormous following in their tours of such plays as: Across the Pacific, The Boy Detective and The Boy Behind the Gun. Marian Spitzer claimed that when Blaney and

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[21] New York Morning Telegraph, 31 October 1909, Locke Envelope # 2604: Lottie Williams.

[22] Des Moines Register, 14 September 1910, Locke Envelope: Lottie Williams.

[23] Unidentified newspaper clipping, October 1912, Locke Envelope: Lottie Williams.

Wolfe arrived in a town, they would be greeted at the station by local organizations and accompanied to their hotel by a brass band (the Blaneys always knew how to publicize themselves).[24] Yet, in 1908 they began to appear in vaudeville sketches. Their first, The Boy, the Girl, and the Count, was a farce with a medley of popular songs sung by the Blaneys. Harry Blaney explained why they made the change:

> I saw it coming. I didn't see how we could escape a poor theatrical season and I thought it was time to get out for a while. I sold out the largest part of my [theatrical] holdings and my wife and I put on a vaudeville act.[25]

At the time Kitty Wolfe was not in good health and welcomed the opportunity. When asked if he enjoyed vaudeville, Blaney replied:

> Yes and no. One has to keep his eyes open for extra turns and little chances to do funny stunts. It's good for the training of nerve and wit. But when the audiences are small it's hard to do the twenty minute act. A vaudeville artist needs applause more than any other actor. It's an inspiration to him to do his best in the short time at his disposal.

Harry Blaney, who missed the days of packed houses in the ten-twenty-thirty theatre, continued to write, produce and star with his wife in what he felt were "better shows, better companies of players and better productions," than in

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[24] Spitzer, "Ten-Twenty-Thirty," 42.

[25] This and subsequent quotation from unidentified newspaper clipping, 31 October 1908, Clipping File: Harry Clay Blaney. See also Variety, 17 October 1908 and New York Mirror, 5 September 1908, Clipping File: Harry Clay Blaney, BRTC.

the days of melodrama.[26]

In a touching letter to H. Clay Blaney, son of Charles Blaney, Harry acknowledged his nephew's letter of condolence regarding the death of Kitty Wolfe in 1944:

> Your Aunt Kitty and I celebrated our 40th anniversary just a few months ago and I doubt if anyone had a more happy life--we played together--we worked together, we traveled this whole world over together, and our happiness was complete . . . It will be some time until I am able to decide whether I will remain in California or return east, but I think I will remain here with her.[27]

Harry Blaney and Kitty Wolfe were a unique and talented duo.

Edith Browning, who starred in several Woods' melodramas after a successful career in vaudeville, preferred to be in full-length plays. She revealed to the Toledo Courier in 1907 that she thought a vaudeville performer "works harder in a twenty or thirty-minutes stunt than a character actor works in five acts of melodrama, barring the nuisance of quick and frequent changes of costume."[28]

A 1909 article in Variety pointed out the difficulties faced by Lillian Mortimer because of decreasing profits in the popular-priced theatre.

She said to herself, as I made a guess at it, that

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[26] Louisville Times, 15 November 1918 (?), Clipping File: Harry Clay Blaney, BRTC.

[27] Letter from Harry Clay Blaney to H. Clay Blaney, 27 June 1944, from the papers of H. Clay Blaney.

[28] Toledo Courier, 13 October 1907, Clipping File: Edith Browning, BRTC.

> being a cut rate star actress whose vogue was with the populace she was up against a problem hard to solve for the season of 1908-09. I take up her case to illustrate the difficulty encountered by those who hitherto have entertained people with more dimes to spend than dollars. A slump came to the gun and knife drama last season. The galleries joined with the parquets in taking gory melodramas as a joke.
>
> For awhile audiences got their money's worth of fun by treating heroics as burlesque, but that form of diversion lost its attractiveness and the multitude went like sheep over a wall to vaudeville, female minstrelsy, moving pictures, anything else than the "melodrama" that for years their coins had prospered.
>
> What was to be done? Four theatres in New York that were devoted last season to the Bowery brand of drama are turned over this season to vaudeville, two are lifted to a good grade of touring plays, three are occupied by stock companies, and a tenth, after a discouraging endeavor to resume with the rejected sort of melodrama, will drop back to moving pictures.[29]

Mortimer, undaunted, went on to a career in vaudeville, writing and starring in her own sketches.

Katie Emmett, known for her interpretation of Irish characters on the melodrama circuit, continued her Irish impersonations on the vaudeville stage, stating in a 1913 interview:

> It took me some time to make up my mind to go into the varieties, but now I am glad that I did. About ten years ago I would never even consider vaudeville, as I thought it was far beneath me and that no real actor would be seen on the variety stage. Since those days things have changed quite a bit, and now I am of the opinion that the vaudeville stage is to be preferred to the legitimate.[30]

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[29] Variety, 28 January 1909, Locke Envelope: Lillian Mortimer.

[30] Milkaukee News, 25 April 1913, Locke Scrapbook ser. 3, vol. 451: Emmett.

By "the legitimate," Emmett probably meant the popular-priced theatres, where she had spent much of her career.

Other actresses whose talents allowed them the opportunity to move from popular-priced theatre to vaudeville and back include Aileen May, star of Woods' thriller, Queen of the White Slaves; Florence Bindley; Cecil and Edna May Spooner; and Mildred Stoller, star of burlesque, vaudeville and musical comedy, who played a leading role in Owen Davis's Broadway After Dark.

When films first began, there was a question as to whether there was any acting in them at all (unless they were excerpted from plays with famous stars). Critics spoke about stage actors who "posed for the kinetoscope," to make extra money. One writer remarked

> the repertoire actor has discovered a new use for his talents. He is now a moving picture. . . . By lying down, rolling over and jumping in front of the camera he is able to earn in three days a sum equal to a week's salary at his former industry.[31]

This was not something to be proud of; many actors kept their film work secret. For years performers' names were not even written on the screen. In addition to vaudeville acts, early films (actualities) documented topical events and scenes of everyday life, showed chase sequences, or magical "tricks" of the camera.

But between 1907-8 there was a sweeping change in the

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[31] Richard de Cordova, Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 35.

content of films--they became based on a narrative, rather than a documentary form. Film historian Eileen Bowser reports that after 1907 melodrama became the "major film genre."[32] According to Bowser:

> Most of the actors and actresses, and their directors, were drawn to the film industry from the road shows, the barn-storming melodramas. Melodrama style was what they knew, and audiences across the country were familiar with it too. Given the distance of the actors from the camera in 1907 and 1908, stereotyped and familiar gestures made the simple stories clear.[33]

Richard deCordova claims that in 1908 the percentage of dramatic production increased from 17 to 66.[34] What deCordova refers to as the "discourse on acting," the recognition that film acting was an art, occurred about 1908. With the appearance of D. W. Griffith, performance style gradually changed between 1908 and 1913, from what Roberta Pearson terms "histrionic" to "verisimilar."[35] During this time resident stock companies of film actors began to be formed. As the contributions of the actor in motion pictures became recognized, the star system emerged.[36]

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[32] Eileen Bowser, "Silent Fiction: Reframing Early Cinema," Circulating Film Library Catalog (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 14.

[33] Eileen Bowser, The Transformation of Cinema: 1907-1915, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 87-88.

[34] Ibid., 27.

[35] Pearson, Eloquent Gestures, 14, 21-37.

[36] DeCordova, 50.

Vivian Prescott, who played leading roles in numerous melodramas by Owen Davis (Sal, the Circus Gal), Hal Reid (In Convict's Stripes), and Charles Blaney (The Child of the Regiment and Young Buffalo, King of the Wild West), became a celebrity in the film world. The "original Biograph Girl," Prescott worked for several film companies. She played comedy roles for the Biograph Company and more serious roles for the IMP (Independent Motion Pictures) Company and the Lubin Company. Two of her highly praised dramatic roles were "Cigarette" in the film of Under Two Flags and the title role in Leah, the Forsaken.[37]

In 1909, the Edison Company, in an attempt to present a high-class film, hired Cecil Spooner to play both boys in Twain's The Prince and the Pauper. A reviewer wrote:

> Graceful, effective and polished as an actress, her finished art has contributed much to the beauty and strength of this notable silent drama. We hope to employ others as well-known [as Spooner] in the near future.[38]

DeCordova distinguishes between actresses known for their work in the theatre, like Cecil Spooner, and movie stars, whose fame was based purely on film appearances, like Florence Lawrence. He regards the hiring of Spooner as a one-shot venture and noted that theatrical stars were generally older than movie stars.[39]

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[37] See Locke Envelope #1798: Vivian Prescott.

[38] Quoted in deCordova, 42.

[39] Ibid., 50-52.

But Cecil Spooner did not need to pursue film work with various production companies because she and her husband turned their farm in New Canaan, Connecticut into a film studio during the summer months. After giving up her New York theatres, Cecil Spooner and her company continued to tour during the year in a better class of comedy-dramas, with Edna May Spooner often playing secondary roles.[40] Blaney still owned multiple theatres in different cities, and maintained stock companies until his retirement. In the summer the Blaneys filmed many of their successful melodramas, including Spooner's My Irish Cinderella. In 1915 Spooner commented that

> if a lot more actors and actresses would pose for motion pictures, it would be a good thing for the theater. They call us egotistical. Well, they wouldn't if they could see us when we see ourselves for the first time as others see us, now made possible by means of the camera.[41]

She claimed that if a film company didn't like her scenario, she would produce it herself in Connecticut, hiring an operator from New York, and the film was immediately accepted for distribution by the same firm that had rejected it. She boasted: "You'd be surprised if you could see the statement of profits from one of those films."[42]

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[40] Notable Women in American Theatre, 821.

[41] Cleveland Leader, 5 March 1915, Locke Envelope: Cecil Spooner.

[42] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Locke Env ope: Cecil Spooner.

On a more sour note, however, in a private taped interview, Blaney's son disclosed that film producer Jack Cohn once offered Charles Blaney one-third of Columbia Pictures for the rights to forty of his melodramas while they were gambling in "Peacock Alley," the back lobby of the Astor Hotel. In the biggest blunder of his career, Blaney refused, failing to see the future of films, losing what would have amounted to one hundred million dollars. Neither his wife nor his children ever forgave him.[43] Cecil Spooner retired in the late 1930s and moved with her sister to California after the deaths of their mother in 1940 and Blaney in 1944. Both women died in 1953.[44]

One theatrical star who went on to a successful career in the legitimate theatre after separating from her first husband (Charles A. Taylor) was Laurette Taylor. She starred in Peg o' My Heart, written by her second husband J. Hartley Manners, which broke long-run records both in New York and in England, and left an indelible impression on those who saw her as Amanda Wingfield in the Broadway production of The Glass Menagerie. Owen Davis, who knew Taylor from her days as a soubrette, thought she "was one of the best of these I ever saw." He remarked: "when Laurette

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[43] Blaney, interviews with author. An article by Victor Gluck in Back Stage, 19 December 1986, names Harry Cohn as the producer who offered Blaney one half of Columbia Pictures for thirty of his plays.

[44] Notable Women in American Theatre, 821.

Taylor knocked the town off its feet by her fine performance in The Glass Menagerie, she was . . . hailed as great, which, as I told her, was quite amusing to me--I had known it for a good many years."[45]

The women of the ten, twent', thirt', having overcome many obstacles in their day, would not be stopped by the closing of the popular-priced theatres. Their contributions to the cultural landscape of turn-of-the-century New York were formidable; whether they would have been able to make further changes had their theatres survived we cannot know. With the passing of their world, the majority of these women did not give up, but adapted themselves to new circumstances. Now they have vanished into undeserved obscurity. My aim has been to give them a chance to speak for themselves, so that the reader will become aware of their existence, their many gifts, their strength and their tenacity.

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[45] Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, 104; Davis, My First Fifty Years in the Theatre, 64.

Figure 1. Adra Ainslee.

Figure 2. Victory Bateman.

FLORENCE BINDLEY, the Girl with the Diamond Dress.

Figure 3. Florence Bindley.

Figure 4. Edith Browning.

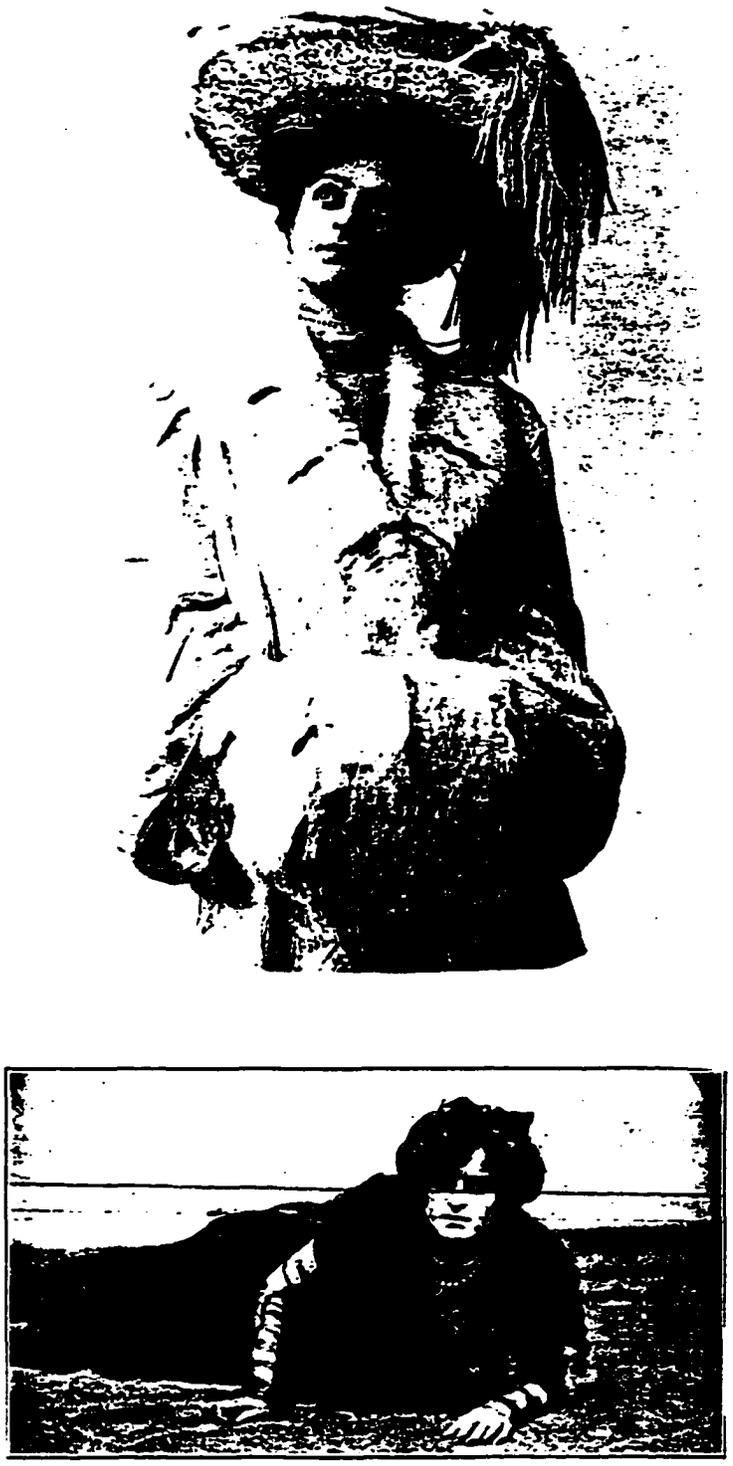

Figure 5. Selma Herman.

Figure 6. Lillian Mortimer.

Figure 7. Julia Ralph.

Figure 8. Etta Reed.

Figure 9. Blanche Shirley.

Figure 10. Cecil Spooner.

Figure 11. Edna May Spooner.

Figure 12. Mary Gibbs Spooner.

Figure 13. Lottie Williams.

Figure 14. Kitty Wolfe and Harry Clay Blaney.

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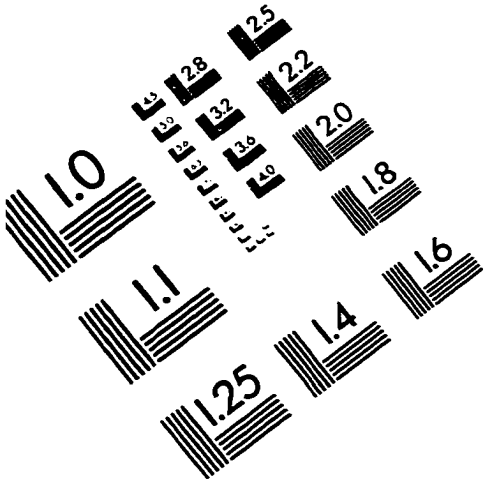

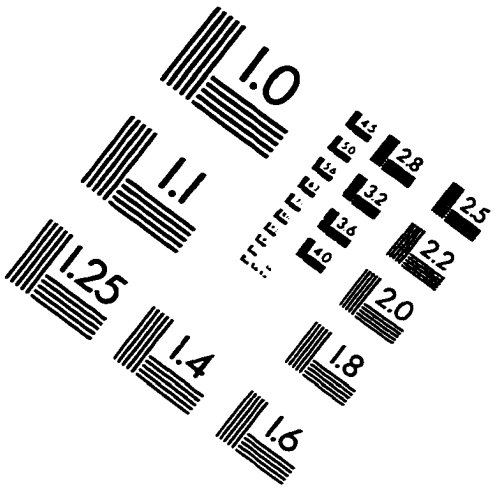

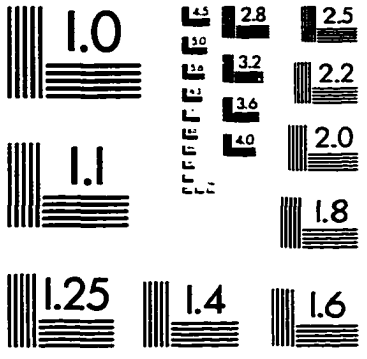

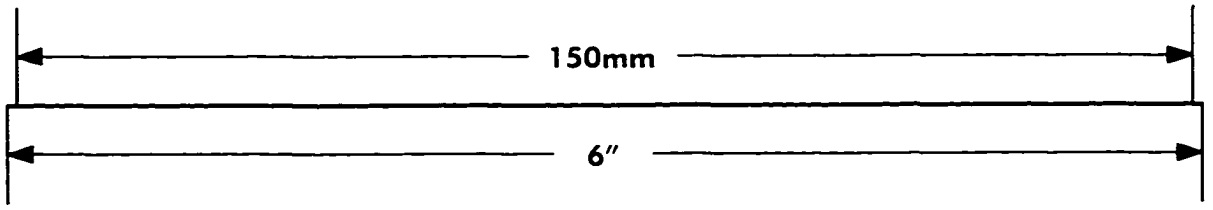

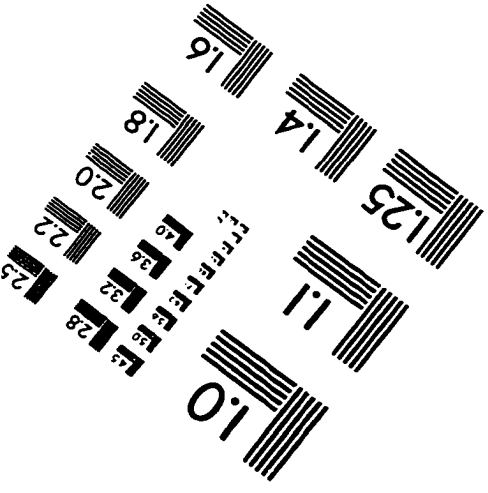

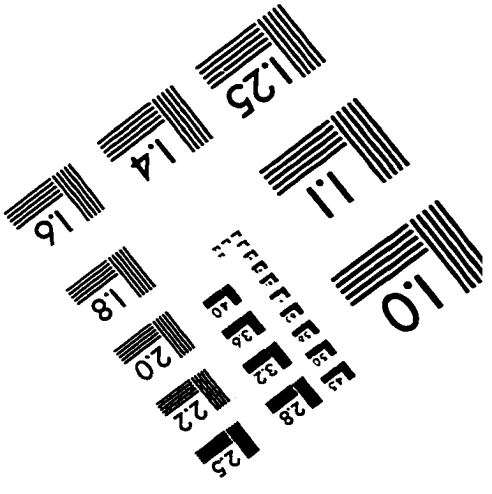

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