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INVENTING TIMES SQUARE

COMMERCE AND CULTURE
AT THE CROSSROADS
OF THE WORLD

EDITED BY

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DEVELOPING FOR COMMERCIAL CULTURE

David C. Hammack

TIMES SQUARE became America's great central marketplace for commercial culture between 1900 and 1929. With its garish lights, large and numerous theaters, close proximity to movie and radio headquarters, and stacked office warrens, it flourished as the great national showcase for popular music, vaudeville turns, plays, mass-market fashions, and consumer goods through the 1920s and, even as it was challenged by Hollywood, for many years thereafter. Times Square did not create its market. Indeed, the products of commercial culture were important to the nation's economy long before Times Square emerged on the scene. But by the early 1920s Times Square provided the largest, brightest stage for the presentation and sale of commercial culture in the United States. And to the extent that Americans increasingly defined themselves through the items they bought on the market rather than through inherited or workplace identities, the commercial fashions and icons marketed through Times Square took on added importance.

Why did Times Square come to take on this shape and play this role? The answer has four parts. National decisions gave the United States a market economy; geographic circumstances and local actions made New York City its great central place. Within New York City, local geography and disjointed decisions combined to make mid-Manhattan the great transit crossroads. Private and public land-use policies determined that within mid-Manhattan commercial entertainment would be concentrated in Times Square. And the entertainment industry's response to market opportunities (constrained by such national developments as Prohibition and the Depression) gave Times Square its classic shape—large office buildings fronted and interspersed with great theater marquees.

Two infrastructures developed Times Square for commercial culture.

The market economy and fragmented polity that characterized both the nation at large and New York City in particular provided the institutional infrastructure that allowed Times Square to take on its classic role. This in turn produced decisions that shaped the transportation system and the built environment of the nation and the city, providing the physical infrastructure that located and defined Times Square. These bases combined to put the national market for commercial culture in Times Square by the early 1920s and to keep it there for several decades.

That there would be a single central marketplace for commercial culture in the United States was determined long before the rise of Times Square. It was determined first by the nation's Revolutionary hostility to strong, active government, then by the commitment to national unity after the Civil War. That the commercial culture marketplace of the United States would be located in New York City was also determined by the time of the Civil War. By the mid-1860s New York was already well established as the central market for the entire nation. Since about 1780, as historical geographer Allan Pred has shown, the metropolis had been *the* central place in the circulation of information.¹ It was also the great center for commerce with Europe: in 1870 some 57 percent of all imported and exported goods passed through the port of New York. Although New York's share of the goods trade declined to just under 50 percent in 1900, its volume grew rapidly. And the metropolis moved much further ahead of its rivals, Boston and Philadelphia, in the import and export of fashions, ideas, credit, and other intangibles.²

In the last third of the nineteenth century, manufacturing also changed in ways that reinforced the market for commercial culture in New York. Heavy manufacturing moved toward the sources of raw materials around the Great Lakes, but the manufacturing industries most closely tied to the shifting fashions of commercial culture—women's clothing, publishing, and luxury goods of all descriptions—flourished in New York. As one manufacturer explained in 1910, "Those industries which produce products of a standard pattern can locate anywhere . . . but industries whose products differ with each particular order must be located in or very near their market, in order to be under the constant supervision of their customers." New York was located in the midst of the largest regional population in the United States, in the center of the East Coast and at the terminus of one of the best sets of rail and canal routes to the interior. It was also at the central point for imports and exports from Europe. New York provided the market.

New York's intensely urban qualities also provided special support for the women's wear, fashion, luxury, and publishing trades. Its uniquely large and varied population offered a great variety of specialties and skill:

and every conceivable sort of service or supply, at a moment's notice and in any quantity. And New York's many publications—its many local newspapers, trade journals ranging from *Variety* to *Women's Wear Daily* to *Advertising Age* to the *Wall Street Journal* to the *Real Estate Record and Investor's Guide*, and its national magazines and press services—all reinforced its position as the national market for every sort of fashion.

Together, the information and goods markets and the myriad specialties of New York provided an unmatched environment for all the industries that were increasingly ruled by fashion. This infrastructure of market, market information, support services, and the press also supported aspiring writers, performers, and theatrical producers as well as producers of commodities in the equally fickle and fashion-dominated field of commercial culture.³ From the 1870s, and perhaps earlier, the popular music of Tin Pan Alley, the "serious" music of opera and operetta, vaudeville and variety acts of all descriptions, theater—classic and contemporary, tragic and comic—and, when they appeared, film and radio all found their central American markets in New York.

The economic infrastructure of both the nation and the metropolis created the conditions that brought the market for commercial culture to mid-Manhattan. The market for commercial culture had to be accessible to the largest and most diverse audience possible to test and validate vaudeville acts, plays, films, songs, singers, and performers of all kinds. By 1918 local and national transportation networks brought such an audience together in just one place: mid-Manhattan. Here, more than anywhere else in the United States, city residents of modest as well as ample means, affluent suburbanites, and visitors from other regions and from Europe could easily assemble to view the latest offerings on the stages of American popular culture. A long, complex, and fragmented process of economic and political decision-making had centered the transportation networks that served these three groups in mid-Manhattan. The location of the market for commercial culture in that district was simply a by-product of these decisions.

Grand Central Station, at Forty-second Street and Fourth (now Park) Avenue, was the first of mid-Manhattan's transport facilities, with a railyard in the 1840s, a terminus in 1871, enlargements in 1884–86 and 1900, and construction of the present vast structure between 1903, when plans were announced, and 1913. Elevated railroads followed: by 1876 their lines ran up Second and Third avenues on the East Side, up Sixth Avenue in the middle of Manhattan Island, and up Ninth Avenue on the West Side. All of these lines had stations at the major cross streets, including Thirty-fourth and Forty-second streets.⁴ But because these lines were slow and dirty, they did not provide "real rapid transit," and they failed to spur midtown development.

The transportation infrastructure for mid-Manhattan, and for Times Square in particular, was built between 1900 and 1920. "Real" rapid transit arrived in 1904, with the opening of the first IRT line up what is now Lafayette Street and Park Avenue South to Grand Central Station at Forty-second Street, across Forty-second Street to Seventh Avenue, and north up Seventh Avenue and Broadway to the Upper West Side and, through a branch at 103rd Street, to Harlem and the Bronx.⁵ Rail connections to the New Jersey and Long Island suburbs followed, with the construction between 1908 and 1909 of the Hudson Tubes from Newark, Jersey City, and Hoboken to the Battery, Wall Street, and under Sixth Avenue as far north as Thirty-third Street.⁶ Pennsylvania Station, the Manhattan terminal for the Pennsylvania and the Long Island railroads, opened its vast structure in 1910 on the double block between Thirty-first and Thirty-third streets and Seventh and Eighth avenues.⁷ By 1920 the IRT had completed its projected H-plan, with the Seventh Avenue line south from Times Square and the Lexington Avenue line north from Grand Central Station; and the BMT had completed its line up Broadway from Brooklyn and Wall Street to Times Square, then up Seventh Avenue to Fifty-seventh Street and across to Queens.⁸

Economic and political factors were intricately mixed in the many decisions that produced this tightly woven though often poorly coordinated transport net. And sometimes it was difficult to distinguish between the economic and the political factors. Economic elites—bankers, great merchants, leading real estate investors—often dominated the political decision-making process. But they had to work with the funds provided by the masses of ordinary consumers—the fares of straphangers, the tolls of bridge-crossers.

Economic elites dominated the political decision-making process in late-nineteenth century New York. The 1857 ban on steam-powered locomotives below Forty-second Street, for example, reflected an effort by the owners and insurers of large commercial buildings to control smoke and fire pollution in the city's chief business and residential districts. This decision forced the New York Central to build its Grand Central Station at that point; and by concentrating transfers from the northern suburbs and from long-distance travel here, it had the effect, 40 or 50 years later, of making Forty-second Street the most important of mid-Manhattan's wide cross streets. Times Square—a triangle above the intersection of Forty-second Street with Broadway and Seventh Avenue—developed rapidly only after the first rapid transit subway opened in 1904 with a key stop at Forty-second Street and Broadway. Times Square thus owes its significance as a transit intersection and assembly point to the location of the subway as well as of the railroad.

The IRT subway was the product of a protracted decision-making process in which—as often in New York City—"private" and "public" interests and powers were thoroughly intertwined. A public commission

planned the subway, but every member of that commission was also a leader of the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York. A private corporation, put together by some of the nation's leading bankers and railroad men, built and operated the subway, but a municipal franchise defined its powers, and a municipal guarantee subsidized the bonds that financed it. The commission and the corporation recognized political reality by awarding construction contracts to a company that enjoyed warm relations with Tammany Hall and by accepting the preferences of a variety of private business interests in defining the first subway's route.

The Chamber of Commerce itself insisted that one of the most important tasks of the first subway was to connect Grand Central Station with the long-established downtown business centers at Wall Street, City Hall/Brooklyn Bridge, Canal Street, and Fourteenth Street. Such a connection was essential, Chamber leaders insisted, because congestion in the streets impeded access to warehouses and delayed shipments, increasing the cost of doing business in New York.⁹

But if merchants needed rapid transit to speed the movement of their goods and messages, owners of already-developed properties put severe constraints on the possible locations of rapid transit lines. The East Side was relatively well supplied with elevated railroads (on Second, Third, and Sixth avenues). These were slow and, until their small steam engines were replaced with electric motors after 1902, dirty, but their franchises preempted alternative improvements on their thoroughfares. The New York Central already controlled Fourth Avenue, but in 1887 and thereafter it was cool to a proposal to use its lines as part of a rapid transit scheme that would extend both downtown and uptown from Forty-second Street. Property owners along the lower portions of Broadway had put a clause forbidding the construction of a railroad over, under, or on the street in the Rapid Transit Act of 1879, and even into the early twentieth century feared the disruption that would accompany the construction of rapid transit on their streets. Fifth Avenue property owners secured a clause in the Rapid Transit Act of 1891 that forbade any railroad construction on their thoroughfare.

Owners of less well developed property had different interests. In the 1880s and 1890s, owners of property on the Upper West Side insisted that the absence of adequate rapid transit facilities was unfairly holding their district back. They lobbied hard for the location of the first subway on Broadway above Fifty-ninth Street. When the N. Y. State Public Service Commission chose that route, Upper West Side property owners worked hard to help it gain the necessary legislative support. Ultimately, the IRT subway line connected the Wall Street/Broadway/Canal Street business district with Grand Central Station, then ran under Forty-second Street to the West Side at Broadway, and up Broadway to the Upper West Side. To provide "real" rapid transit, the IRT would provide express as well as local

service, on four tracks. The projected volume of traffic dictated the location of express stops at Forty-second Street and the other major crosstown streets. Altogether, the IRT's route met the needs of several key economic interest groups, and accommodated others by avoiding the avenues and boulevards they wished to protect. That the IRT gave a great locational advantage to Times Square, at a time when theatrical entrepreneurs were on the move, was incidental.

After the turn of the century, mass-market economic factors and popular politics played more direct roles in the location of transport facilities in mid-Manhattan. Pennsylvania Station and the Hudson Tubes were planned, financed, built, and operated by private corporations (though with the permission of public authorities); they brought travelers from New Jersey as far north as Thirty-third Street and as near the center of Manhattan as Sixth and Seventh avenues, largely because they had concluded that was where the largest numbers of passengers wished to go. The new IRT and BMT subway lines built under the Dual Contracts¹⁰ were also designed to serve the largest possible number of passengers, including passengers from Brooklyn and Queens, for two overriding reasons: to generate the largest possible flow of fares and to gain the greatest possible number of votes for the city officials who negotiated them. Broadway property owners now relented, and the BMT followed that street from Wall Street to Forty-second Street, then up Seventh Avenue (with another stop at Forty-ninth) to Sixtieth Street as it connected Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens. This route strongly reinforced Times Square's place at the center of the city's rapid transit network.

After World War I, political considerations delayed additional subway construction for many years. Federal policy had allowed wage inflation but forced transit companies to retain the five cent fare during the war; afterwards, it was politically impossible to raise the fare. As a result, private interests were unwilling to invest in rapid transit franchises or in bonds guaranteed only by transit fare revenues. New subways would require large subsidies that could be provided only by tax revenues, and the taxpayers balked. Construction of the projected IND subway under Eighth Avenue was delayed throughout the 1920s. The locational advantages that mid-Manhattan and particularly Times Square had accumulated remained unchallenged.

New York's rail and subway lines served suburban as well as city neighborhoods. Before 1920 transportation planners paid little attention to the automobile; indeed, until the late 1940s New York's suburbs depended far more on rail than on road connections with Manhattan. And since the rail terminals were at Grand Central and Pennsylvania stations, mid-Manhattan remained a logical place for the location of entertainment for suburbanites. The development of facilities for automobiles and buses came later. Unlike the rail facilities, all roads, bridges, and tunnels were

designed, financed, built, and operated by government agencies, usually agencies of the state and federal governments, rather than by the city government or private corporations. Since many of these were special-purpose agencies (state highway departments, the Port of New York Authority (1921), and the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (1933, powers greatly expanded, 1937), however, they operated with some of the independence and secrecy—and with some of the ability to choose those with whom they would deal—that characterize private businesses.

Such agencies produced the Holland Tunnel (a special interstate commission, 1927), the George Washington Bridge (the Port of New York, 1931), and the Triborough Bridge (1936), which brought traffic into the far ends of Manhattan; and the West Side Highway (as far north as mid-Manhattan, 1903), the Lincoln Tunnel (New York Port Authority, 1937, 1945), and the Queens-Midtown Tunnel (a special commission, then the Triborough Authority, 1940), which brought traffic closer to midtown. Despite their distinct institutional forms, these agencies were influenced by political and economic considerations similar to those that shaped rapid transit. Investor skepticism, property-owner protests, Regional Plan Association advocacy of comprehensive transportation and recreational planning, and Port Authority plans for the rival Lincoln Tunnel, for example, combined to kill a proposal for a road and rail bridge over the Hudson to New Jersey that was seriously advanced by bridge-builder Gustav Lindenthal and several mid-Manhattan real estate groups in 1929.¹¹ During the 1930s and 1940s, their actions did more to reinforce than to displace the centrality of Times Square.

So, from the moment that Adolph Ochs celebrated the completion of Times Tower and the renaming of Longacre Square with a New Year's Eve Spectacular in 1905, Times Square has been New York City's great crowd-center. But the square plays this role only because it sits at the center of the city's transport facilities—the second crucial infrastructure for New York's commercial culture marketplace.

National political and economic forces brought the American market for commercial culture to New York City; local transportation decisions brought it to mid-Manhattan. The local economic and government decisions that defined the city's land-use districts finally centered the market for commercial culture in Times Square. Retail, manufacturing, corporate office, and mass communication activities also sought to take advantage of mid-Manhattan's central location. Economic calculation based on the reputations of certain streets as well as on accessibility governed location decisions for most of these activities; "sound business," as a spokesman for the Forty-second Street Property Owners and Merchant's Association asserted in 1929, "is both Czar and Dictator here."¹² Political decisions also played a significant role, however: the nation's first comprehensive zoning

ordinance, enacted in 1916, was designed to control land-use patterns in mid-Manhattan. In its first period of intensive development after 1900 the area was also controlled, far more than lower Manhattan during its intensive development in the nineteenth century, by government regulation of factories, tenement houses, theater safety, electric signs, and building heights. The economic and political forces that defined land-use districts in Manhattan provide a third infrastructure of power for Times Square.

Specialized land-use districts are as old as cities; in ancient Athens, the port district at Piraeus, the market and civic facilities of the Agora, and the temples of the Acropolis were widely separated. In nineteenth and twentieth century cities in Western Europe and the United States the commercial and industrial districts expanded out of all proportion to the rest of the city and developed finer and more complex internal differentiations. As early as the eighteenth century, Dorothy George tells us, "The London watchmaking trade was minutely subdivided," and "the working part of the trade located itself in Clerkenwell and the neighbouring parish of St. Luke's," while "the watchmakers and clockmakers of repute . . . were to be found in the chief streets for shops, such as Cornhill, Cheapside, or the Strand."¹³

A similar process occurred in New York City. Retailing increasingly separated from manufacturing, and activities that once required only a few lots grew to occupy many large buildings over several entire city blocks. Mid-Manhattan became a sort of permanent World's Fair, with particular streets reserved for the display and sale of clothing, housewares, jewelry, appliances, automobiles, books—as well as for the music, arts, fashions, and theatrics of commercial culture.

Mid-Manhattan also became a major center for garment manufacture, business services, and the offices of business firms and professionals. The location of each of these activities affected the location of others. The commercial culture district might have located in any of several areas that afforded good access to Grand Central and Pennsylvania stations. Transport considerations attracted commercial culture to Times Square; competing land-use districts pushed it away from Fifth Avenue and up from the West Side between Thirtieth and Fortieth streets.

The changing land-use patterns of Manhattan were stimulated by the expansion of the market for ready-made women's wear, an expansion that was well under way in the 1880s and which exploded after 1900. New York's retail stores grew, with some becoming more specialized and others emerging as vast department stores. The garment manufacturing industry grew as well, producing for the national as well as the regional market. By the early twentieth century these two parts of the industry were in conflict.

For decades, dry goods and department stores had sought lower rents

and better access to their affluent customers by moving up Broadway, away from the expanding financial and government office district below Canal Street. As the retailers moved, garment manufacturers, seeking to minimize their own transport costs and to maximize their access to buyers and market information, moved with them. In New York, as in London, retailers sought streets with fashionable reputations. Broadway provided that asset in the nineteenth century. Macy's, which successfully appealed to a broad middle-class market, moved up on Broadway to Thirty-fourth Street in 1902, displacing Koster & Bial's Music Hall and a large part of the notorious red-light district known as the Tenderloin. But stores that sought a narrower, more wealthy clientele, including Lord & Taylor, B. Altman, Stern Brothers, and Arnold, Constable & Co., moved to Fifth Avenue, seeking to associate themselves with the prestige left by an earlier generation of fashionable homes, churches, and clubs.

The extraordinary growth of New York's garment manufacturing business created problems as the fashionable stores themselves grew and moved toward mid-Manhattan. The loft buildings used by the garment industry did not fit Fifth Avenue's fashionable pretensions, and by 1907 the retailers had created a Fifth Avenue Association to find ways to keep the lofts off Fifth Avenue. Many of the lofts were "cheap in construction and appearance," the Association's representative complained in 1913, and they were "crowded with their hundreds and thousands of garment workers who swarm down upon the avenue for the lunch hour . . . and as work ends at the close of the day." Uncomfortable in what seemed like an industrial district, "women shoppers tended to avoid the section."¹⁴ The terrible 1911 fire in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company's loft on Washington Place at Broadway made shoppers painfully aware of the "cheap" and "crowded" conditions in the lofts, intensifying their sense of discomfort.

Stanislaw J. Makielski, Jr., has described how the Fifth Avenue Association succeeded in protecting the Avenue above Thirty-fourth Street from the invasion of garment industry loft buildings. Its first instrument was economic power: a threat by dry-goods stores to boycott any manufacturer who located in a loft above Thirty-fourth Street, and by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (and perhaps other lenders) to refuse loans for such a purpose. Government action was still more effective: New York City's Zoning Resolution of 1916, which received key support from the Fifth Avenue Association and several other business groups, excluded industrial activities from districts designated as commercial, and specified Fifth Avenue (and Broadway) as commercial districts.

Makielski does not note another source of support for the Zoning Resolution: the alliance of Charity Organization Society leaders, social workers, and politicians which successfully supported legislation to improve housing and working conditions between 1911 and 1914.¹⁵ The Zoning Resolution pushed garment manufacturing away from Fifth Avenue. Government (and private) incentives pulled the industry into a

new area on the West Side, between Broadway and Eighth Avenue and Thirty-fifth and Fortieth streets. By 1929 this area constituted the "foremost manufacturing center of the metropolis." Entirely created in the years after the enactment of zoning, the new Garment District provided space for over 25,000 workers in buildings that contained "every modern convenience to meet the needs of the trade," including adequate fireproof stairways and toilet facilities.¹⁶ It is likely that some of the key planners and investors in the Garment District were the same people who pushed for the exclusion of manufacturing on Fifth Avenue, and who supported efforts to strengthen the regulation of tenement houses and factories. Some of them may well have been leaders of the German Jewish community which was struggling to retain a leading position after the massive influx of Jews from Russia and Poland.

The rapid development of the Garment District after 1920 had in turn the effect of pushing away the many theaters that were then located on and just off Broadway in the thirties—which might have remained in a cluster near the grand, new Pennsylvania Station. It would have been impossible to have matinee performances on weekdays or Saturdays in a district where the sidewalks, narrowed to allow the construction of larger buildings, were "wholly inadequate to accommodate the crowds of workers" who overflowed from those buildings onto the sidewalks and into the streets, clogging vehicular traffic, interfering with the movement of garment racks, and delaying the movement of the "buyers for whose benefit the district has been so closely concentrated."¹⁷ The Pennsylvania Railroad and the proprietors of adjoining hotels no doubt welcomed the buyers but regretted the decision to locate the manufacturing activities of the Garment District on their doorsteps.

At the end of the nineteenth century, New York's theaters had been scattered in clusters on Second Avenue, the Bowery, East Fourteenth Street, on 125th Street in Harlem, and along Broadway "from Union Square to Forty-second Street," with concentrations at Madison Square and Herald Square. In the next 25 years many of these theaters closed, and almost 80 new theaters were built in and around Times Square.¹⁸ The theaters followed their audiences to mid-Manhattan's transportation nexus. Within mid-Manhattan, informal and formal zoning pressures then pushed the theaters away from Fifth Avenue and up to Times Square.

Early in its career as a theatrical center, Times Square became known for the spectacular quality of its productions and for the great size of its theaters. Because New York lacked the subsidized state theaters of the great cities of Europe, these buildings were designed to the specifications of entrepreneurs driven by the market. Commercial forces, organized in a succession of business arrangements, were in control.

The entertainment industry was in constant flux between 1880 and

1930 as entrepreneurs sought more efficient ways to create salable products for customers throughout the United States. Their changing strategies established a continuous history from the lyceum, chautauqua, vaudeville, and opera-house circuits to the theatrical road shows to movies and radio—and eventually to television. After 1900 each set of demands brought new building forms to Times Square.

Entrepreneurial strategies and building forms evolved more or less continuously in response to market opportunities between 1900 and 1930. Twice, however, national policy dramatically intervened. Prohibition made roof gardens and many restaurants unprofitable just at the time when improved transportation facilities were driving up rents in Times Square; thus it strongly reinforced the rise of the great movie palaces. The Federal Reserve's high-interest policy discouraged construction after the Crash of 1929, helping to bring on the Depression and incidentally freezing Times Square into the shape created during the 1920s. In the 40 years that followed 1920, only five major new theaters were opened in mid-Manhattan—all of them between Forty-ninth and Sixty-third streets.¹⁹ Working within the constraints imposed by Manhattan's transit system, by land-use controls, and by federal efforts to regulate alcohol and interest rates, entrepreneurial strategies constituted the fourth infrastructure of power that shaped Times Square.

Through most of the nineteenth century the theatrical business was in the hands of freewheeling entrepreneurs. Before the 1860s, New York theaters provided showcases for plays, star performers, and vaudeville and other acts. Box office receipts, shaped by the reviews and reported in the news and gossip columns of metropolitan and trade papers, determined success. Successful plays and performers became available through booking agents located in New York for tours to other American cities. Some plays and large productions often did not travel. Instead, theater managers in other cities used their own stock companies, sometimes augmented by stars, to produce seasons that included scripts recently successful in New York as well as classics and unprotected English material which did not require royalties.²⁰

The completion of the national railroad system and the growth of cities across the nation made it possible, after the Civil War, for touring shows to challenge and largely displace resident stock companies outside New York. The touring shows provided complete productions, including not only entire casts but also scenery and props, freeing provincial theater managers from the onerous tasks of maintaining companies of actors and producing their own shows. In the 1880s more than 100 separate companies were touring the nation; by 1904 there were 420. All these companies worked out of New York, using its theaters to establish their productions and to demonstrate their merits to booking agents in New York and to visiting theater managers from other cities.²¹

So long as the show-touring business remained fragmented, it was well served by the small and medium-sized theaters around Union Square and up Broadway, especially at Madison Square and Herald Square along Broadway. At the end of the nineteenth century, Brooks Atkinson once asserted, "the section of Broadway between Thirty-seventh Street and Forty-second Street was known as the Rialto," because, like the Venetian promenade of the same name, it provided a great marketplace. "Theatre people gathered there or promenaded there," Atkinson wrote. "Producers could sometimes cast a play by looking over the actors loitering on the Rialto; and out-of-town managers, gazing out of office windows, could book tours by seeing who was available."²²

After the mid-1890s, however, much larger organizations sought to create order and to increase profit by gaining control of national chains of theaters as well as the shows that toured through them. The first of these organizations, the Theatrical Syndicate, was organized in 1896; by 1904, according to a competitor's estimate, it was managing 500 theaters across the country. The Syndicate relied heavily on independent producers, but it also produced its own shows. By 1900 it was developing shows and acts on its own, testing and improving them on Broadway, and sending them on national tours. Some theater historians suggest that the Syndicate's control of so many theaters on the road enabled it to establish something close to a monopoly by 1900, but this seems exaggerated. Oscar Hammerstein and other major "independent" producers continued to produce road shows in competition with the Syndicate. And as early as 1901, the Shubert Brothers were mastering the theater business; within a few years they would have their own national chain of theaters. Other entrepreneurs, meanwhile, were applying similar methods to the declining genres of vaudeville and burlesque.²³

The Syndicate, independents like Hammerstein, and the Shuberts all sought national publicity for their New York productions; to get it, they built showcase theaters in Times Square. To attract the attention of audiences and the theatrical press, they made these theaters large and ornate. When the Syndicate's flagship New Amsterdam Theatre opened on Forty-second Street in 1903, it was one of the most impressive examples of art nouveau interior decoration in the United States; for more than twenty years it provided the perfect stage for Central European operettas like *The Merry Widow* and for the Ziegfeld Follies. The great theatrical entrepreneurs also used dozens of less impressive theaters to launch shows for the road. As Lee Shubert put it in 1912, "The rivalry of the theatrical factions" led them to build or lease an "excessive number of playhouses . . . in other cities." So long as these playhouses had to be supplied with shows "direct from New York," producers would demand large numbers of theaters whether New York audiences showed up or not. The Syndicate fell apart in 1916, but the Shuberts—who enjoyed stronger

financial backing—took over a large part of its theater chain and carried on into the Depression years.²⁴

Even as the Shuberts were mastering the national market for theatrical entertainment, movies were changing that market and, with it, the shape of New York's theater district. By 1909 leading vaudeville houses, including Hammerstein's Victoria, were incorporating movies into their programs; by 1912, moviemakers were expanding their offices in Times Square.²⁵ D. W. Griffith opened *Birth of a Nation* on Forty-second Street in 1915; with two performances a day at prices ranging from twenty-five cents to two dollars, he grossed \$14,000 a week, comparable to the income of a successful stage production. In 1916, at the very moment when the Shuberts were picking up some of the pieces left by the Syndicate's collapse, S. L. Rothafel, "Roxy," was tearing down Hammerstein's Victoria Theatre, the greatest of all vaudeville houses, to erect the Rialto, designed exclusively for movie programs.²⁶

Henceforth, the movie business would shape much of what happened on Times Square. Theatrical producers would continue to look for theaters. Their aim, however, was less and less to put together a show they could take on the road: more often, they hoped to gain national exposure—and wealth—by developing scripts that could be sold to a movie producer. Between 1910 and 1925, according to one estimate, the number of legitimate theaters in the United States declined from 1,549 to 674, and the number of road companies collapsed from 236 to 39.²⁷ In New York the prospect of selling material to the movies, the vast available audience, and speculative greed all encouraged the continued increase in the number of legitimate theaters to about 80 in 1925.

The national triumph of the movies affected Times Square in several ways. Movie producers tried to get each show off to a good start by presenting it first in Times Square, with its unparalleled access to mass audiences and to the metropolitan and theater press. Roxy's Rialto and such later picture palaces as the Strand, the Paramount, the Roxy, and the Capitol were built for this purpose.²⁸ Since the movie palaces housed larger audiences than did the legitimate theaters, and their programs were repeated several times a day, they produced much larger revenues.

The rise of the movies brought new groups of managers and producers, as well as new, larger theaters, to New York's theater district. They came in large part to see the talent of all kinds—writing, directing, designing, and performing—that was constantly on display before the live audiences of Times Square and of "Broadway" in general. After 1912 the movie industry established offices on Forty-second Street and in Times Square itself and some production facilities in the industrial district west of Eighth Avenue. Famous Players-Lasky and other film production companies produced live shows in their own theaters, then made them into films. Although most film production soon moved to Hollywood, many movie

offices, including the headquarters of several producing companies, remained in or near Times Square because New York continued to provide much of the talent—as well as most of the capital—for the new industry.

The growth of radio during the 1920s brought still another communications industry to Times Square. According to Walter Zvonchenko,

As late as 1926, every important aspect of the radio industry was located on Broadway just above or below City Hall, with the exception of facilities which the Radio Group (a term used often to identify General Electric, Westinghouse, and the Radio Corporation of America) had installed in Aeolian Hall at 33 West 42nd Street and in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel at Fifth Avenue and 34th Street. But within two years time, as network radio became big business, virtually every operation of primary importance in the radio industry was in midtown Manhattan.²⁹

Most of these operations were located on Sixth and Fifth avenues near Times Square. Radio executives, like movie producers, were eager to evaluate theatrical talent—and to make it easy to bring performers and newsmakers to their studios. By the early 1920s radio programs were also originating from the stages of several theaters or from their studios. The explosive expansion of the radio industry in turn persuaded hard-nosed investors to build the Radio City complex in Rockefeller Center, on the edge of the Times Square district.

Land-use regulations imposed by local government could not hold Times Square steady. Indeed, there were no such regulations. The New York Zoning Resolution of 1916 did not create a district for the exclusive use of the entertainment industry. It created only three kinds of land-use districts: residential, business, and unrestricted. The resolution excluded industrial activities, such as garment-making, from business districts, but it did not segregate the various kinds of commercial businesses from one another. As the theater district developed around Times Square, property owners continued to be free to use their land and buildings for the commercial uses that offered the highest income.³⁰

Nor did New York City's zoning regulations protect the theater district by limiting the heights of buildings in the Times Square area, a limitation that would have retarded the intrusion of large office buildings. The core supporters of zoning in New York City were very much concerned with reducing what they saw as the excessive "congestion of population" in the city. They firmly believed, as the *Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs* put it, that the Times Square district was congested, "due primarily to the concentration of theaters," which was in turn "both

a cause and an effect of the concentration of transit facilities.”³¹ But they could not use zoning to reduce congestion, because mid-Manhattan already contained “buildings of excessive height on the street line,” some occupying “their entire lot areas.” The *New York Times* tower itself exceeded the zoning guidelines, and because such structures already existed in 1916, the author of the zoning resolution later wrote, “There was danger that the courts would declare more drastic regulations discriminatory and therefore unreasonable and void.”³²

So as the transportation network that served Times Square improved and as real estate developers bid up the price of land, nothing prevented property owners from raising their rents. Small, two-story legitimate theaters with no rentable office or shop space, limited to eight or nine performances a week, began to find it difficult to stay open. As early as 1920, continuous-play movie houses and a flea circus had moved onto Forty-second Street, and most new theaters on Times Square itself were designed to show movies to large audiences several times a day. By 1925 many proposed theaters like the Paramount were combined with office buildings. Or they were to be joined, like the Roxy proposed for a site on Broadway at Fiftieth Street, with hotels.³³ When the final plans for Radio City (with its Music Hall) were announced in 1928, that vast project was simply the culmination of tendencies that had already been at work for several years. It was only the Depression, the restrictions on construction during World War II, and then the vastly changed postwar markets for transportation, Manhattan office space, and popular entertainment that delayed the reshaping of Times Square along the lines of Rockefeller Center. Already projected in the *Regional Plan of New York* during the 1920s, that reshaping was delayed for more than 60 years—and when it finally arrived at the end of the 1980s, Times Square no longer served as popular culture’s great American market.

UPTOWN REAL ESTATE AND THE CREATION OF TIMES SQUARE

Betsy Blackmar

REAL ESTATE investment is an enterprise that builds on omens and prophecy. In 1900, the editor of the *Real Estate Record and Building News* greeted the new century by divining the signs of the “Present and Future of Forty-second Street.” Three “complex” and “vigorous” developments were already at work to shape the street’s future “character.” Theaters near Broadway were forming the core of the city’s “amusement center” and the “very heart of [its] night life.” A second “influence,” plans for the New York Public Library (along with exclusive clubs, expensive restaurants, and large retail stores) promised to establish “a rather more selective character” for Forty-second Street near Fifth Avenue as “a center of metropolitan life.” And a “third great influence,” Grand Central Station, had begun to attract hotels and shops to the midtown district. With these institutions already in place, the *Record*’s editor announced, the future development of rapid transit could only make “the neighborhood of Forty-second Street much more valuable for purposes of retail trade and amusement.”¹

The *Record*’s editor was not a bad prophet, although the process of Forty-second Street’s “destined” development encountered many snags along the way. In 1903, for example, investors worried that hotels and theaters had been “overbuilt” because an economic downswing kept “industrial adventurers and promoters . . . sitting at home . . . wondering where and how they can best economize.”² When speculation drove up the price of midtown land, the *Record*’s seers added office buildings to the catalog of “improvements that [would] pay sufficiently” to offset the costs

light, wishing, desiring, dreaming, spending and speculation, theatricality, luxury, and unmitigated pursuit of personal pleasure and gain. These qualities were “consumerist” and are today thought of by many Americans (and by people wanting to come to this country) as the most seductive features of American life and as somehow intrinsic to what it means to be an American.

Between 1890 and 1929 this dimension of American culture was formed and reinforced by a new set of institutions that worked together in an interlocking circuit of relationships. Every culture, if it is to endure, must rest on such a strong institutional circuitry. Before 1895 the institutional circuits that we think of today as crucial to the stability and perpetuation of corporate capitalism were just beginning to emerge. It is therefore a mistake for historians to claim that, somehow, the modern consumer order was already on the scene in 1880. After 1895, however, a full range of institutions—the ones described here and others as well—functioned together in mutually binding patterns to give birth to this new culture and economy.

At the heart of this institutional circuitry was a new group of brokers who facilitated the movement and distribution of images, information, and money central to both economic and cultural formation. Brokers, of course, had always existed—as nonjudgmental go-betweens, bringing people together, arranging deals, negotiating contracts, and, most important, lending money. In the early phases of capitalist development, however, brokers—especially moneylenders—were on the fringes of economic and cultural life. People regarded them with contempt and fear, given their “parasitic” dependence on and willingness to exploit the productive powers of other people. Over time, as the market grew and new kinds of brokers appeared (jobbers, real estate agents, commodity and stock traders, and so forth), such prejudices against brokering began to weaken, although its marginal character persisted.⁴

After 1900 the brokering class took on unprecedented size. It began to fill a place in American life that today seems hardened in stone and which has turned the twentieth century into a century of intermediaries and cities like New York into cities of brokers. The brokering personality—that individual who represses his/her convictions and withholds judgment in the interest of forging profitable relationships between other people—is among the most modern of personalities, occupying a preeminence in today’s political and moral economy. Brokers now work in nearly every sphere of activity and have helped to inject a new nonjudgmental “counter-culture” into American culture, essentially indifferent to virtue and hospitable to the ongoing expansion of desire.

These new brokers worked largely by selling services or commodities in volume and by trying to maximize the profits of American corporate



The unfinished *New York Times* Building in 1904, seen from Forty-third Street and Broadway. Excavation for the subway can be seen in lower right. Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, N.Y.C.



Charles Frohman's Empire Theatre at Broadway and Fortieth Street, was still at the northern fringe of the entertainment district in 1898. *The Dramatic Mirror*, next door, was an important theatrical paper. Photograph by Byron, The Theater Collection, Museum of the City of New York.



Entrance to the Times Square subway station, located in front of the Times Building on Forty-second Street, decorated for opening day. Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, N.Y.C.



A 1909 view of two famous theaters facing on the Square, the Astor and the Gaiety, both associated with George M. Cohan. By the mid-1920s both had been converted to movie houses. Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, N.Y.C.

B.F. KEITH'S PALACE THEATRE

BROADWAY & 47TH ST.

FIRE NOTICE

Look around NOW and choose the nearest Exit to your seat. In case of fire walk (not run) to THAT Exit. Do not try to beat your neighbor to the street.

ROBERT ADAMSON, Fire Commissioner.

WEEK BEGINNING MONDAY MATINEE, MARCH 16, 1914.
Matinee Daily at 2.15. Evenings at 8.15.

NOTICE—SMOKING WILL NOT BE PERMITTED IN ANY PART OF THE THEATRE DURING THE PROGRESS OF "THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT" OR "THE KID KABARET," AS CHILDREN APPEAR IN EACH ACT.

A **Palace Orchestra**
Overture—"Our Director" Remick
MR. FREDERICK F. DAAB, Conductor.

B **Eight English Roses**
Dancers.

C **Ed. Morton**
The Comedian Who Sings.

D **Cathrine Countess**
AND HER COMPANY
In The Dramatic Playlet,
"THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT."
Cast.

Gwendolyn	.....	Cathrine Countess
Natalie, a maid	.....	Anita Allen
Billy, a messenger	.....	James Hyde
Gerald Sturtevant	.....	John W. Lott
Gerald, his son	.....	Mac Macomber

E **Swor and Mack**
Realistic Impressions of Southern Negroes.

F **"The Original Brinkley Girl,"**
Mae Murray
Assisted by CLIFTON WEBB
(Late of "Purple Road" Company)
With Europe's Society Orchestra.

PROGRAM CONTINUED ON SECOND PAGE FOLLOWING.

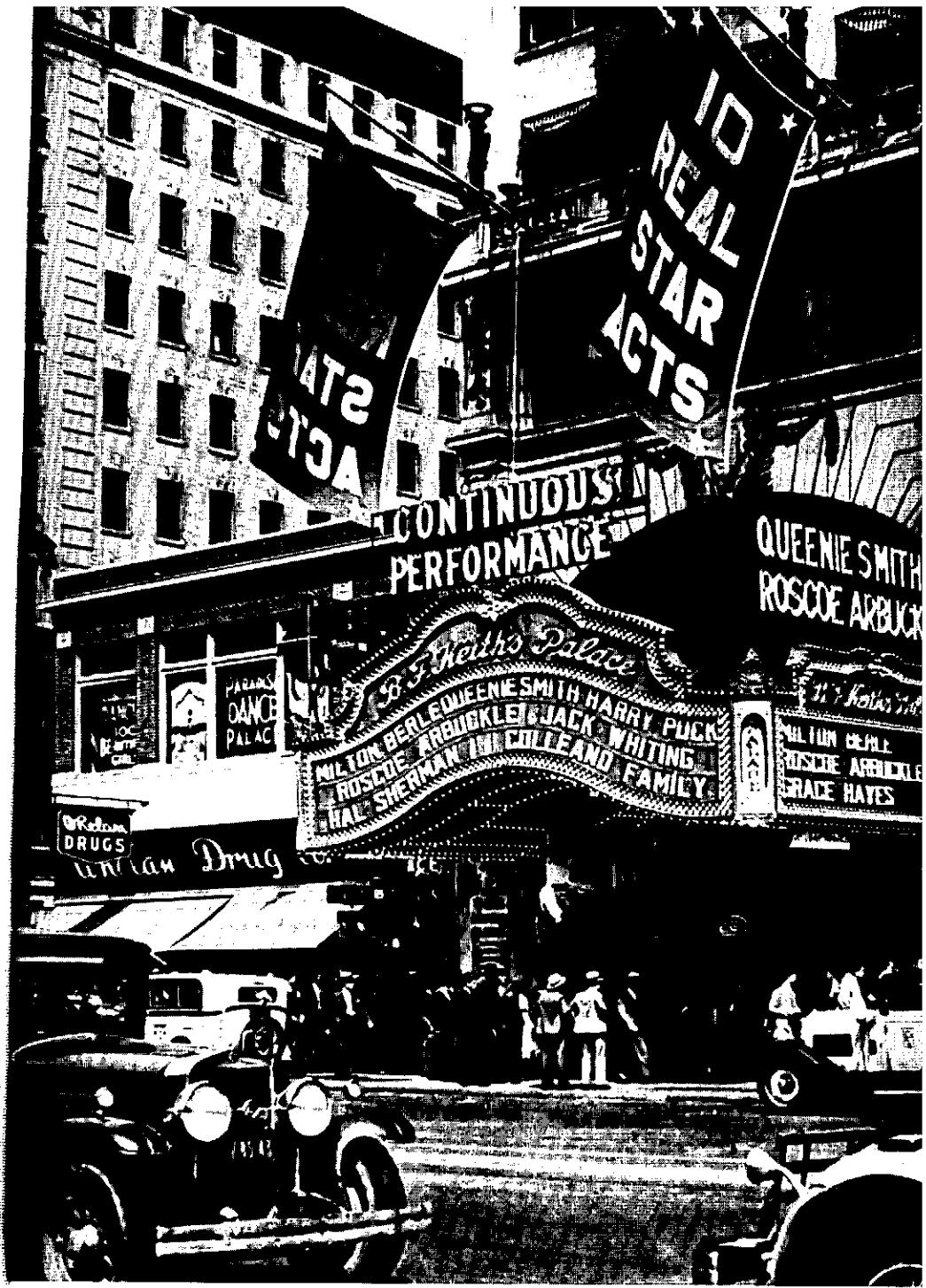
Egyptian Deities

"The Utmost in Cigarettes"

The sum and substance of the "utmost" cigarette satisfaction.

Plain or Cork Tip

The booking formula at work, 1914. A corps of dancers is the opening "dumb" act, followed by a comedian, a dramatic sketch, and a blackface minstrel act. The Theater Collection, Museum of the City of New York.

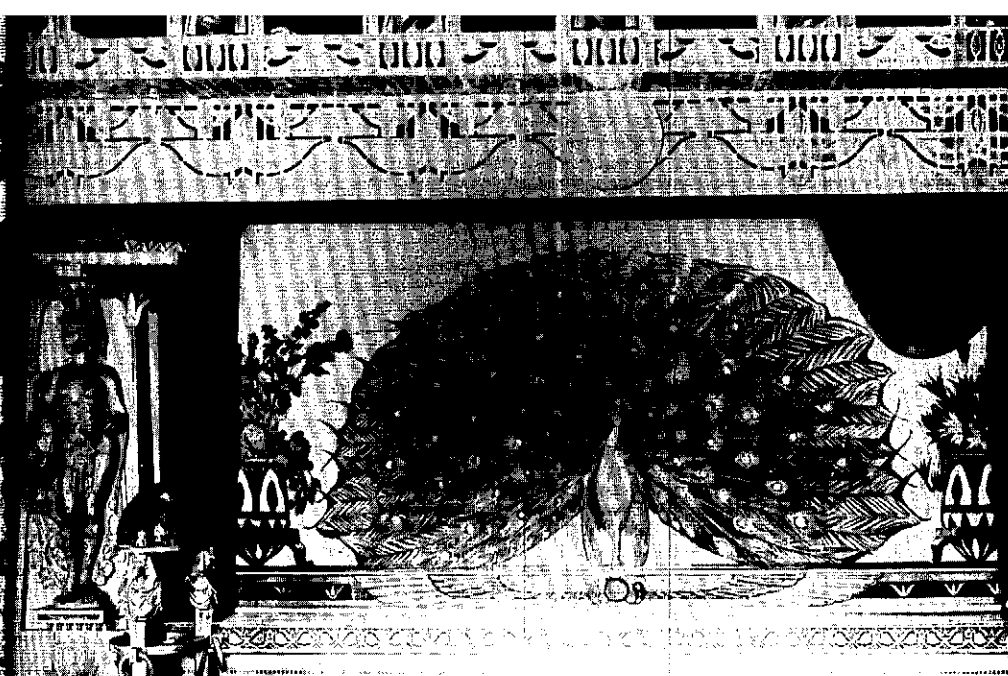


The entrance and marquee of B.F. Keith's Palace Theatre, the Valhalla of vaudeville, at the heart of the Square on Broadway between Forty-sixth and Forty-seventh streets. Photograph by Samuel Grierson, The Theater Collection, Museum of the City of New York.



Ziegfeld's *Midnight Frolic*

Ziegfeld's *Midnight Frolic* took place nightly between 1913 and 1927 on the roof of the Amsterdam Theatre on Forty-second Street. Its "see-through" runway allowed patrons an unusual view of the famous chorus line. The Theater Collection, Museum of the City of New York.



The interior of Murray's "lobster palace." Elaborate classical detail distinguished this massive "cabaret for the people." The exterior was French renaissance. The Byron Collection, Museum of the City of New York.



An unlikely pair: David Belasco, producer/director, colorful bon vivant, whose reversed collar earned him the title, "Bishop of Broadway"; and Will A. Hays, former Postmaster General, lobbyist for the film industry (1922-34) and administrator ("censor") after 1934 of the Film Production Code. Photograph by Capital Photo Services, The Theater Collection, 37.399.1750, Museum of the City of New York.

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Margaret Knapp

FOR MOST of its history, Times Square has played host to a kaleidoscopic mixture of residential and commercial tenants, but in this century it has been most closely identified with the entertainment business. From the Olympia Theatre, which opened on Broadway in 1895 in what was then considered a dangerous "thieves' lair," to the lavishly renovated Forty-second Street theaters scheduled to reopen in the 1990s as a cure for the street crime that has plagued the area in recent years, mass entertainment in all its forms has been the decisive influence on the image of Times Square for New Yorkers, for the nation, and for the world.

The preceding chapters in this volume have explored a number of factors that led to the development of Times Square: the extent and location of new forms of mass transit; the lure of huge real estate profits; the focal role of the new brokering figures in American commercial life; the protection of certain districts by restrictive zoning ordinances; and the growth of tourism. All of these factors contributed importantly to the desirability of the Times Square area as a commercial precinct. And, as Richard Fox has argued, the growth of theater was abetted by a new tolerance for mass entertainment on the part of some liberal Protestant denominations. But the combination of transportation, finance, politics, and religious acceptance could only create a series of favorable conditions; it was the entertainment industry itself, and most especially the efforts of a number of shrewd (and sometimes visionary) entrepreneurs, that were decisive in the creation and subsequent re-creation of the so-called theater district. As individuals, partnerships, syndicates, or corporations, these entrepreneurs demonstrated an extraordinary ability to anticipate, indeed to create, public demand for new forms of entertainment. From Oscar Hammerstein I and his son Willie scouring the news for new vaudeville "freak acts," to Arthur Mayer converting the Rialto Theatre into a mecca for "men's films," to Billy Rose attracting a whole new class of nightclub patrons to his Diamond Horseshoe, and to Irving Berlin's and Damon Runyon's mining of the area for the local slang in song and story—the successful businessmen of Times Square have always combined financial shrewdness with a remarkable sensitivity to new markets and changing public tastes.

Oscar Hammerstein I, who built the Olympia Theatre on Broadway

between Forty-fourth and Forty-fifth streets in 1895, is generally given the title "The Father of Times Square," but his move northward into Longacre Square (as it was known until 1904) was not as great a gamble as it might seem. Other theater builders had been flirting with the Longacre Square vicinity for several years. Rudolph Aronson had opened the Casino Theatre on Broadway and Thirty-ninth Street in 1882; the following year the Metropolitan Opera House was erected on Broadway between Thirty-ninth and Fortieth streets; in 1888 the Broadway Theatre was opened on the southwest corner of Broadway and Forty-first Street; and in 1893 the American Theatre opened on Eighth Avenue between Forty-first and Forty-second streets. With electrification rapidly transforming dark and dangerous streets into safer, more attractive locations for legitimate amusement, the northward movement of theaters into Longacre Square was seemingly inevitable.

The transformation of Times Square into the city's main amusement district coincided with, and was driven by, the fundamental changes in the nature of public entertainment that occurred at the turn of the century. Because of these changes, theater became a potentially lucrative investment, at least for those who could anticipate the public's tastes. In the days before film, radio, and television, live performance (that is, legitimate drama and vaudeville) was the dominant form of public entertainment. And live performance was a profit-making activity. When the first British theater companies arrived in the colonies in the 1750s they brought with them a system of theatrical organization that depended on box office receipts for its existence (unlike opera, the ballet, and the symphony, which followed the Continental practice of at least partial government or private subsidy). With rare exceptions, the legitimate theater continued operating as a capitalist enterprise throughout the nineteenth century. In his chapter in this section Peter Davis explains how the evolution in patterns of theater financing reflected changes in the capitalization of other turn-of-the-century businesses.

By the time Longacre Square was developing into an amusement area at the turn of the century, New York had become the starting point for a vast, nationwide entertainment network known as "the road." This complex theater operation had its beginnings in the 1860s when the traditional method of running a theater, the stock system, was challenged by the growing popularity of touring "combination" shows. In contrast to the stock system, in which a theater manager engaged a company of actors for a season and presented them in a variety of plays, the combination system consisted of a company of actors appearing in a single show which toured from city to city, providing its own scenery, costumes, and sometimes musical accompaniment. Helped by the expansion of the nation's railroads after the Civil War, the combination system eventually killed off the majority of stock companies. By 1904 some 400 combination

companies were touring through thousands of theaters in cities and towns across the country.

Of crucial importance to the operation of the combination system was a single location where shows could be cast, rehearsed, tried out on audiences, and then booked for cross-country tours. Since New York was already regarded as the most important theater city in America, it is not surprising that it became the headquarters for the combination system. In addition to the many theaters needed for an initial Broadway production for the shows before they went on tour, New York's theater district encompassed rehearsal halls; the headquarters of scenery, costume, lighting, and makeup companies; offices of theatrical agents and producers; theatrical printers and newspapers; and other auxiliary enterprises. Close to the theater district were boardinghouses catering to the hundreds of performers who came to New York in the hope of being hired for a touring show or a Broadway production.

As Robert Snyder explains in his chapter, vaudeville, which had also grown enormously in popularity at the end of the nineteenth century, had a similar organizational structure. Theaters across the country belonged to different circuits which were labeled as "big time," "small time," or "family time." A group of acts would be booked in New York and then sent out, sometimes for years, to tour a circuit. Many of the auxiliary theatrical enterprises that clustered in New York, such as costumiers and publicists, served both the legitimate stage and vaudeville.

A successful theatrical entrepreneur needed to have a sense of what would "go over" in New York and still be a hit in other parts of the country. That sense was usually developed over a period of apprenticeship, either in out-of-town theaters, or as an assistant to a veteran theatrical manager/producer. Fortunately for the budding entrepreneur, the theater, which has always been a labor-intensive industry, benefited from the relatively low wages paid in the days before the rise of theatrical unions. This meant that theaters could be constructed at a relatively low cost: Oscar Hammerstein built the Victoria in 1899 for \$50,000, and even the elaborate 1,500-seat art nouveau New Amsterdam Theatre, complete with office building, roof theater, and generous helpings of European statuary, was reported to have cost \$1,500,000 when it was built in 1903.

In the early years of the decade, land was still relatively cheap and easily leased in the Longacre Square area, so potential theater owners invested comparatively little money in the initial construction of a playhouse. Producing a play was also a fairly inexpensive undertaking. In the days before Actors' Equity became a power to be reckoned with, actors were not paid during the weeks when a show was being rehearsed, and the materials and labor required for constructing scenery and costumes were not costly. Once the show opened, weekly operating expenses were minimal, since low wages enabled producers to hire large casts and stage

crews of up to 200 people without straining their budgets. Although ticket prices were low, most theaters had large capacities, which enabled producers to keep even mediocre shows afloat. And even if a show failed in New York there was always the possibility of making money on the road, where audiences might be gullible enough to believe the billboards and posters that read "Smash Hit in New York."

If a theater owner or manager experienced financial reversals, bankruptcy was an acceptable way to emerge from his difficulties. T. Henry French, the manager of the American Theatre, suffered financial losses in the Panic of 1893, which forced him to give up control of his theater (even his father, Samuel French, the founder of the play publishing house that still bears his name, took him to court). More typical was the case of Oscar Hammerstein I, who suffered a financial fiasco with his Olympia Theatre, but was able to rid himself of his debts and open a new theater, the Victoria, in 1899.

So lucrative was the theater at the turn of the century that it was perhaps inevitable that some individual or group would consider coordinating the national theater booking business, thereby cornering the theatrical market, just as the "robber barons" had done with oil, steel, and railroads. And so, in 1896, six theater owners and producers got together to form the "Theatrical Syndicate," whose ostensible purpose was to bring order to the chaotic booking system. Between them, the members of the Syndicate controlled a number of theaters in key towns and cities across America. Since a profitable tour required that combination companies be able to perform at frequent intervals without long and expensive railroad trips between engagements, theaters in small towns along the railroad routes were just as important as playhouses in the major cities. By controlling those theaters the Syndicate could force managers of touring productions to book exclusively in Syndicate houses, both in the small, one-theater towns and in the larger cities where there was a choice of playhouses. Once the theatrical producers were forced (at higher fees) to book exclusively through Syndicate houses, it was possible to force theater managers across the country to accept (at higher fees) only Syndicate-produced shows. The result was a monopoly as effective as any in the Age of Trusts. Opposition was immediate and vocal, but for several years, relatively ineffective. At one time or another producers such as David Belasco and Oscar Hammerstein I, as well as actor-managers such as Richard Mansfield and Minnie Maddern Fiske, declared their enmity to the Syndicate. But with the exception of Mrs. Fiske, whose husband published the anti-Syndicate newspaper, the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, all of the opposition either surrendered or gave up producing legitimate drama. A similar trust was created in vaudeville, under the aegis of the partners B. F. Keith and E. F. Albee.

One result of the war between the Syndicate and the independents was

a spate of theater construction, both in New York and in towns and cities across the country. Forced out of Syndicate-owned theaters, independent producers either built playhouses of their own or played in less desirable venues, including roller-skating rinks and circus tents. Theater building proliferated after the Shubert brothers, Sam S., J. J., and Lee, arrived in New York from Syracuse with the aim of challenging the Syndicate. At first the Shuberts managed theaters owned by others, but they were soon building playhouses of their own. In the 1899–1900 season, Manhattan had 22 theaters, only one of which was in Longacre Square. Ten years later there were 34 theaters in Manhattan, most of them new, and most of them in Times Square. By the time the Syndicate and the Shuberts had declared a truce in 1907, New York had more theaters than it really needed, but the pattern had been set, and for the next two decades, new theaters would be constructed at a dizzying rate: by the 1919–20 season 50 playhouses were operating in New York, and by the 1929–30 season there were 71 in use. The expansion in New York was mirrored in theater districts throughout the United States.

At first, the few theaters that were built in Longacre Square blended into a district that harbored a number of different businesses, as well as single-family homes and small apartment houses. The existence of schools, libraries, and churches in the district at the turn of the century attests to the fundamentally residential character of the area. As Timothy Gilfoyle has documented, taverns and houses of prostitution existed in the Longacre Square area even before the theaters arrived, but they avoided the kind of blatant self-advertisement that would lead to a permanent crackdown. The first theaters to be built in Times Square soon attracted both theater-related businesses and other enterprises that catered to both native and visiting pleasure-seekers. Vaudeville quickly followed the legitimate stage into the Times Square area; the first major vaudeville house, Hammerstein's Victoria, opened as a legitimate theater in 1899, but switched to vaudeville in 1904 after Hammerstein found it impossible to compete with the Syndicate in booking legitimate theatrical productions. And, as Lewis Erenberg demonstrates in his chapter, the restaurants and nightclubs that appeared in Times Square during the early years of the century were frequently as theatrical, in both decor and clientele, as the theaters that surrounded them.

The legitimate theater that moved into Times Square can best be described as the television of its day. Dozens of plays and musicals were produced each year to keep up with the demand of a growing theatergoing public in New York as well as on the road. To appeal to the widest possible audience, shows followed tried-and-true formulas, avoiding themes and ideas that were difficult or controversial. Most plays were adapted from British or Continental successes, and even new musicals tended to hew to the well-worn formulas of European operetta, comic opera, and opéra

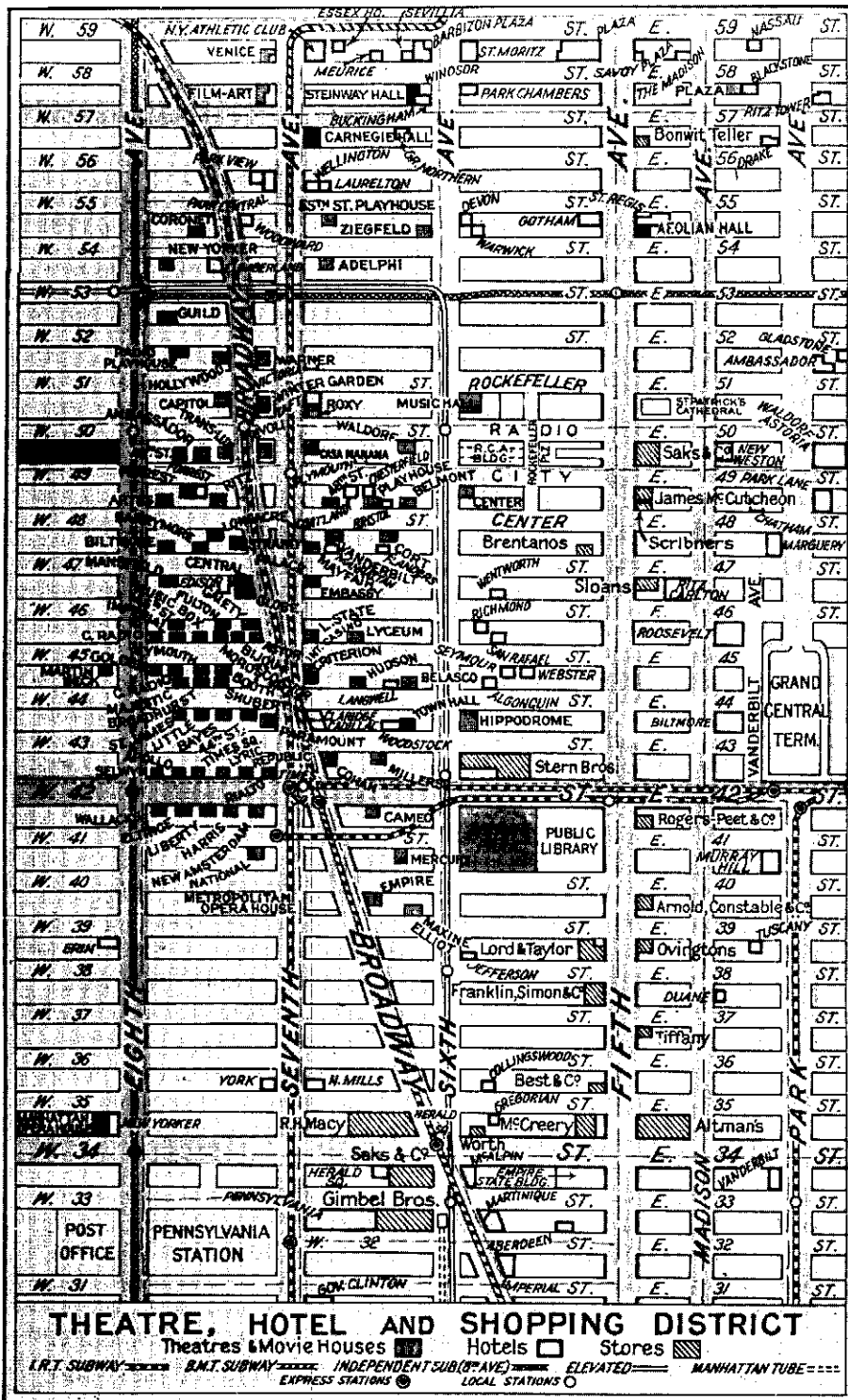
bouffe. Although a group of young American dramatists emerged in the first decade of the century, they were hemmed in by the demands of Broadway and the road for conventionally moralistic treatments of titillating subjects, such as the hard fate of fallen women or the downfall of greedy tycoons. Many plays were adapted from popular novels and stories, such as *Sherlock Holmes*, *Becky Sharp* (from Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair*), and *Quo Vadis*. In addition to new productions, Broadway still hosted great stars, both American and European, in limited engagements. For the most part, the stars played for a few weeks in New York before leaving on, or after returning from, national tours.

It is fruitless to argue that any given year marked the high point in the development of Times Square, but there are certain periods that seem to have been transitional for the area. In a chapter in this section, Brooks McNamara focuses on the theatrical season of 1938–39 to give us a vivid sense of the many kinds of entertainment provided by Times Square impresarios in the late Depression era. As a contrast, it is perhaps worthwhile to recall the spring of 1915, when Times Square most closely resembled in reality what it has subsequently become in legend and fantasy: a glamorous, exciting, quintessentially New York amusement district. Although the 1914–15 season was generally considered a disastrous one for the Broadway stage, a total of 133 productions were mounted in 42 theaters. Europe was at war, but America was feeling few of the effects, save for an increased economic prosperity founded on the manufacture and sale of arms and materiel to the allied armies. Denizens of the theater district had the war brought home to them when Charles Frohman, one of the most distinguished theatrical producers and a founder of the Theatrical Syndicate, perished on the *Lusitania*.

At the same time, younger entrepreneurs were appearing on the scene. Florenz Ziegfeld, who had begun his series of *Follies* in 1907 and had moved it to more lavish quarters at the New Amsterdam in 1913, now added a new show, called the *Midnight Frolics*, in the New Amsterdam's roof theater. There he was able to try out new performers, such as Will Rogers, before using them in the *Follies*. And so, in the spring of 1915 a well-heeled theatergoer could see a gorgeously mounted production of the *Ziegfeld Follies*, starring W. C. Fields, Ed Wynn, Ina Claire, and Bert Williams, and then take the elevator upstairs to the roof to view a smaller, but no less elaborate, revue in a cabaret setting.

The ballroom dance craze showed no signs of abating, and Vernon and Irene Castle, the high priest and priestess of the fox trot, hurried each night from vaudeville or legitimate stage appearances to dance at their own cabaret, "Castles in the Air," before winding up at the Club Castle in the basement of the Forty-fourth Street Theatre.

Film, which had endured a great deal of scorn during its primitive beginnings, moved from a novelty to an art form with the New York



premiere of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* at Forty-second Street's Liberty Theatre in the spring of 1915. The success of Griffith's film led to more full-length "photoplays," which in the years to come would provide strong competition for live theater. In the 1920s many Broadway theaters followed the Liberty's lead in showing silent films when no live theatrical offerings were available. Eventually, the Depression forced many theater owners to permanently convert their legitimate theaters to movie houses.

In 1915 the future of American drama could be discerned by the thoughtful, not in the theaters in Times Square, but in tiny playhouses in Greenwich Village or on the East Side, for in that year the Neighborhood Playhouse opened as an adjunct of the Henry Street Settlement, and the Washington Square Players gave their first season of performances at the Bandbox Theatre. Both companies presented theatrical fare that was innovative by Broadway standards. The Washington Square Players specialized in the new drama of Europe (Ibsen, Chekhov, Maeterlinck, and the like) while the Neighborhood Playhouse brought modern dance, Asian theater forms, and lesser-known British and European plays to their audiences. And in Provincetown, Massachusetts, during the summer of 1915, a group called the Provincetown Players was formed. The following year they began producing plays in New York, most notably the early work of Eugene O'Neill. Eventually, the Times Square theaters would be forced to take notice of these developments, but in 1915 it remained business as usual on Broadway, as producers still turned to a stable of veteran writers of farce and melodrama for their plays.

Vaudeville was thriving in the spring of 1915, but one event proved to be prophetic of its demise. Oscar Hammerstein I, who had built the Victoria Theatre and, with the help of his son Willie, had turned it into the most important vaudeville house in America, was forced to sell it after Willie's untimely death; the spring of 1915 marked its last season. The loss of the Victoria meant that the Palace, built farther north on Broadway in 1913, would now become the city's premiere vaudeville house, the symbol of success for a generation of vaudevillians. Over the summer of 1915 the Victoria was demolished to make room for the Rialto Theatre, an early movie palace and the first built without a stage. Under the leadership of a new entrepreneur who would be an important name in Times Square, S. F. Rothafel (later known as "Roxy"), the Rialto was committed to film and film alone, shown in a luxurious setting with proper orchestral accompaniment. The movie theater, originally a store-front nickelodeon, was to become the new symbol of Times Square glamor in the 1920s and 1930s, as a succession of great "palaces" was constructed on or near Broadway: the Rivoli, the Capitol, Loew's State, the Embassy, the Paramount, and finally the 5,920-seat Roxy Theatre, the "Cathedral of the Motion Picture," which opened on Seventh Avenue slightly north of Times Square in 1927. The size and popularity of the great movie palaces

made them the dominant institutions on Broadway; by the 1920s most new legitimate theaters were constructed on the side streets between Broadway and Eighth Avenue, their marquees barely visible from the Times Square crossroads.

By 1915, as Philip Furia has pointed out, Irving Berlin, working from an office at 1571 Broadway in the heart of Tin Pan Alley, had already developed the generic Broadway song which was to characterize all forms of musical entertainment for the next half century. Damon Runyon, as William Taylor indicates in his study of Broadway slang, was beginning his explorations of local argots in order to evolve the genre of colorful sports reporting that was to characterize the work of a generation of writers from Runyon and Hecht to Ring Lardner.

The Times Square of 1915 thus experienced a season of endings and beginnings. Despite a number of expensive flops, the legitimate stage was thriving, as were cabaret, vaudeville, and film. From that point until the end of the 1920s, entertainment activity intensified in Times Square, with additional theaters opening at a giddy pace. The first playhouses to be built in Times Square at the turn of the century had followed the traditional configurations of nineteenth century European theaters: large rectangles with the stage at one of the narrow ends faced by orchestra seating, boxes, and two or more balconies. As Times Square real estate became scarce and prohibitively expensive, the typical theater design featured a wider, fan-shaped orchestra seating area, fewer boxes, and one or two low-ceilinged balconies extending farther out over the orchestra. Spectators were thus brought closer to the stage, and more seats could be fitted into a smaller area, but the spaciousness of the earlier theaters was now gone. The large lobbies, smoking rooms, retiring rooms, and other amenities of the earlier playhouses were minimized or eliminated as theaters were constructed on ever smaller plots of million-dollar real estate.

The upward spiral of the stock market during the 1920s brought newly minted Wall Street tycoons into the theater business. Constructing theaters or owning long-term leases on them involved little financial risk, since owners and managers had the legal right to evict any production that was not bringing in a substantial profit. Only the theatrical producer who leased a playhouse for one show or for a season might lose money if the show was forced to close before turning a profit. But a producer with some record of success usually had little trouble raising money, since an ever-increasing choir of Broadway "angels" was eager to invest its Wall Street or bootlegging profits in the theater. The staggering number of shows produced in the 1920s, averaging over 200 a season, was thus a sign that the Broadway theater was vastly overextended rather than an indication of its artistic vitality. But as long as the Bull Market continued, little notice was taken of this dangerous overinflation.

While the legitimate theater was burgeoning, a new entertainment

business moved into Times Square. "Tin Pan Alley," as the popular music industry was known, relocated from the area around Twenty-eighth Street into the northern part of Times Square in the early 1920s, a time when, as Philip Furia notes in his chapter on Irving Berlin, radio and sound film were about to expand the business far beyond its traditional markets of sheet music and recordings.

Further changes came to Times Square as Prohibition, which went into effect in 1921, forced the well-known restaurants and cabarets to close their doors, while smaller and more discreet speakeasies tucked themselves away in the side streets. New conditions called for new types of entrepreneurs, as Lewis Erenberg explains in his chapter on New York nightlife.

Thus, by the late 1920s, the theater district offered far more than legitimate theatrical productions to those seeking entertainment. The great Times Square movie palaces symbolized the importance of New York to the California-based film industry; glamorous and well-publicized New York premieres were deemed as necessary to a film's success as an elaborate Hollywood first night. The Palace Theatre was still the top vaudeville house in the country. And the composers and lyricists of Tin Pan Alley turned out the songs that were heard in Broadway musicals, in Hollywood films, in the Palace's musical acts, and in the raucous floor shows at the speakeasies.

The stock market Crash of 1929 and the resulting Depression would severely curtail Times Square's dominance of mass entertainment. At first the legitimate theater seemed immune to the worst effects of the Crash, but as theater owners and producers saw their fortunes wiped out, playhouses began to close and production was severely curtailed. In the late twenties there had been several plans to pull down older theaters, especially those on Forty-second Street, and replace them with office buildings and hotels. The Depression put an end to those schemes, and most of the theaters in Times Square remained standing, though many were wired for sound films, the only growth industry in the entertainment field. Vaudeville was even harder hit under the twin onslaughts of radio and sound film, and several vaudeville theaters bowed to the inevitable by featuring vaudeville acts in between film showings. Some just gave up and went completely to films.

Times Square had always attracted a spectrum of pleasure-seekers from all economic classes. The legitimate theaters offered gallery seats for as little as 25 cents at the turn of the century, and the stately restaurants were complemented by lunch counters, family restaurants, and "chop suey parlors." Patrons could see "small time" or "family time" vaudeville in Times Square in addition to the "big time" offerings of the Victoria and the Palace. There were even some modest movie houses, such as the Bryant on Forty-second Street, which presented films and family-time vaudeville for a small admission fee. But the real democratization of Times Square

occurred in the Depression years, when a new group of entrepreneurs created and satisfied new tastes in amusement. Among them were the Minsky brothers, who took over the Republic Theatre on Forty-second Street and offered ever more daring burlesque shows, until they were put out of business by the license commissioner; Arthur B. Mayer, the "Merchant of Menace," who served up second-run movie double bills of murder, mayhem, and adventure at the Rialto Theatre; and Billy Rose, who, as Erenberg demonstrates, retooled the swank nightclub into a high-volume, low-price evening out. With the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, small bars began to proliferate in the theater district as well.

Ironically, despite the new kinds of amusement to be found in Times Square, the old image remained practically intact. In a series of backstage films directed by Busby Berkeley, Hollywood defined for the rest of America what Broadway was all about: production numbers of dazzling, almost surreal beauty created by plucky, upbeat youngsters who refused to buckle under to the miseries of the Depression. In an era of sharply reduced production activity on Broadway itself, the Hollywood musical kept alive the aura of the Times Square theater district as an enchanted place where talent and hard work could lead to undreamed-of success.

Those entrepreneurs, both new and old, who survived the worst years of the Depression were rewarded with renewed prosperity during the period of World War II. Much of the activity described by Brooks McNamara as occurring in 1938-39 continued into the 1940s, but it intensified to meet the increasing number of military personnel who were looking for entertainment as they passed through New York on their way overseas. The theater participated by sponsoring the Stage Door Canteen, where soldiers and sailors could mix with theatrical luminaries, and eat or dance before going overseas. And the recruitment booth in a Times Square traffic mall took advantage of the area's reputation for enormous volumes of pedestrian traffic by being the most conspicuous place to "sign up."

Despite optimistic predictions, wartime prosperity did not outlast the war. Developers concentrated on the East Side, where the demolition of elevated subway lines transformed undesirable neighborhoods into attractive investments. The owners and managers of the Broadway playhouses maintained their aging theaters and hoped for better days. Once more, new kinds of entrepreneurs moved into Times Square, this time offering forms of entertainment that existed on the edge of community standards of acceptability. Purveyors of "adult entertainment" and drugs joined prostitutes in challenging the boundaries of what was legal and "respectable" in Times Square, as Laurence Senelick has shown (see Chapter 16). These entrepreneurs preferred to keep their names out of the news, allowing their cadres of lawyers to defend them in their constant legal battles. Increased street crime in the area concerned merchants, theater owners, and investors; throughout the 1960s and 1970s plans were announced for the

renewal of the area, particularly Forty-second Street between Seventh and Eighth avenues, widely considered to be the most dangerous block in New York. The city's fiscal crisis in the mid-1970s put a temporary halt to government plans for improvement, but once the city revived, the calls for government intervention began anew. For the first time, state and municipal agencies began to decide what kind of entrepreneurial activity should be permitted in Times Square. Massage parlors and other sex-related businesses were closed down, primarily through zealous enforcement of the building and health codes.

Many of the plans to improve the area revolved around the need to change the public's perception of Times Square, to overcome fears about a neighborhood that had once again become a "thieves' lair" in the minds of both New Yorkers and potential out-of-town visitors. The entertainment industry was central to these efforts. The glamorous days of the past were dusted off and exhibited to the public, as the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, the Municipal Art Society, and several other organizations sponsored hearings, exhibitions, symposia, walking tours, and other activities designed to raise awareness of Times Square's glorious theatrical past. The demolition of two Broadway playhouses, the Helen Hayes and the Morosco, lent greater urgency to these calls for theatrical preservation.

In the 1980s the future of Times Square seemed to lie in the combined effects of several market forces: the pornography business took a severe downturn with the proliferation of VCRs, which made it possible for customers to rent or buy videos for viewing at home rather than at a Times Square movie house or porno bookstore. Developers shifted their attention to the West Side, and a number of new hotels began to rise in Times Square, returning it to its former status as one of the city's important hotel districts. But several of the new West Side development projects were large office towers, leading many observers to fear that a massive concentration of office space would alter forever the unique character of the theater district, as Ada Louise Huxtable argues in the Afterword.

The most ambitious project slated for the Times Square neighborhood is the 42nd Street Development Project. Under the aegis of the state's Urban Development Corporation and the city's Public Development Corporation, the 42nd Street Development Project calls for the construction of four office towers and a merchandise mart on Forty-second Street. In return for certain concessions from the city, the developers will contribute to the restoration of seven legitimate theaters on the block.

The original plans for the redevelopment of Forty-second Street merely provided for the renovation of the theaters; the assumption was that existing theatrical concerns would gladly buy or lease them once they had reopened. Over the past few years, the UDC's thinking on theater usage has altered substantially. Realizing that the long-term success of the

renovated theaters requires the involvement of imaginative and committed entrepreneurs, the UDC has requested bids from both nonprofit and commercial organizations encompassing a broad spectrum of live entertainment, from theater to dance to rock concerts to circus. A separate entity, called the Forty-second Street Entertainment Corporation, has been established to choose the initial tenants of the theaters and to oversee subsequent operations. At the same time, more theater-related usage is being encouraged for other spaces on the block, including rehearsal halls, office space for performing arts organizations, and restaurants and stores with theatrical themes. One plan involves a glassed-in restaurant that will attempt to duplicate the atmosphere of an old-fashioned Times Square roof garden.

Those opposed to the 42nd Street Development Project argue that it is unnecessary, since the large number of private development projects that have been announced and/or completed in Times Square recently will automatically reduce street crime, as "good" uses (offices, restaurants, hotels, theaters) will drive out "bad" (drug trafficking, prostitution, and other assorted crimes and misdemeanors). But the future of Times Square as an *entertainment* district requires more than the elimination of "undesirable" individuals and businesses. If the past is any indication, Times Square will remain the city's, and the nation's, theater district only if its combination of glamorous past and promising future can inspire a new generation of astute and creative "entrepreneurs of entertainment."

6

VAUDEVILLE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF POPULAR CULTURE

Robert W. Snyder

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL dig in Times Square would unearth some of the treasures of American popular culture. Starting from 1991, investigators would find remnants of the videotapes that have transformed public spectacles to private living-room entertainment. A little further down, they would find popcorn boxes, relics of the days when movies were presented in vast, palatial theaters. Deeper, they would find ticket stubs—admissions to an early form of musical theater, the Ziegfeld Follies. At the bottom of the dig, they would reach programs to a vaudeville theater called The Palace, and at that point they would be at the very beginnings of modern American popular culture.

Vaudeville touched virtually every expression of twentieth century American popular culture—films, the music industry, radio, and television. Its influence reached from its personnel, who often graduated to radio or film, to its format, which was adopted by early television variety shows. But vaudeville's most important contribution to the development of American popular culture was to erode the local orientation of nineteenth century audiences, and knit them, despite their diversity, into a modern audience of national proportions. Vaudeville accomplished this feat with appeals to audiences that were direct and intimate, by means of a centralized and bureaucratic industrial organization whose offices and foremost theater were located on Times Square.

Popular culture is defined by broad audiences. But by the middle of the nineteenth century, the conditions under which popular culture was produced and enjoyed were changing. Until then, American popular

culture was deeply influenced by custom, tradition, and public festivity. It was usually rooted in a place, like the Bowery of New York City, with its saloons and cheap theaters. Local likes and dislikes exercised a profound influence over shows; artists and audiences responded to each other so directly that audiences sometimes seemed like coproducers of the show.

In the twentieth century, popular culture came to be defined by film, radio, recordings, and television—the products of a centralized entertainment business, which disseminates standardized products from coast to coast and feeds international audiences. And they have undermined the local bases of culture.

Vaudeville arose in the middle of this transition and accelerated it: it marked a watershed in the history of popular culture, especially with regard to the conditions under which it was produced and enjoyed.

Vaudevillians reached audiences with acts that were lively, immediate, and inviting—audiences felt that each show was being invented just for them. But the nationwide organization of the vaudeville industry, with its booking offices and circuits, propelled the industry toward cultural centralization. Even though individual vaudevillians recognized diversity, the thrust of the vaudeville industry was toward a mass audience where much of this diversity would be submerged.

Vaudeville first appeared in the 1880s. Composed of separate acts strung together to make a complete bill, it was the direct descendant of mid-nineteenth century variety theater, which had often catered to carousing middle- and working-class men in saloons and music halls. To attract these men's wives and families, creating a wider and more lucrative audience, entrepreneurs banned liquor from their houses. They censored some of their bawdy acts—or at least promised to. They jettisoned the older name of variety, with its stigma of vice and alcohol, and adopted the classier sounding name of vaudeville.

The most famous and influential of the showmen who engineered this transformation were B. F. Keith and E. F. Albee, two New England showmen best known for their shows' wholesome reputations. But they also applied their energies to industrial reorganization. Backstage, they took the chaotic, informal booking procedures that characterized much of nineteenth century variety theater and put them on a bureaucratic basis, centralized in New York City. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, vaudeville entrepreneurs had organized their theaters into nationwide chains, called circuits, which radiated out from New York City in the East and Chicago in the West. Performers toured along the circuits, bringing their acts to the entire country. Critics likened the system to an octopus, with a brain in Times Square and tentacles reaching far into the country.

Times Square was not the first neighborhood of New York City to harbor vaudeville theaters. In the 1880s and early 1890s, the early

vaudeville theaters clustered around Union Square, then the theatrical center of New York City. But the one constant of the theatrical district in nineteenth century New York was that it kept moving uptown, staying just ahead of the northward movement of Manhattan's central business district. By the middle of the 1890s, it became apparent that the city's next major theatrical neighborhood would be located many blocks to the north, at the intersection of Broadway and Forty-second Street, then known as Longacre Square.

In November 1895, theatre entrepreneur Oscar Hammerstein opened the mammoth Olympia Theatre on Broadway between Forty-fourth and Forty-fifth streets. At the Olympia, a fifty cent ticket bought admission to a lavishly decorated pleasure palace incorporating a music hall, a theater, a concert hall, bowling alleys, a billiard hall, a two-story rathskeller, lounges, smoking rooms, and a Turkish bath, all capped by a roof garden.¹

But behind this bold facade was Hammerstein's flawed business management. The Olympia failed to turn a profit, and in 1898 the building was mortgaged away. But Hammerstein's decision to build, and other entrepreneurs' willingness to follow him, showed that Longacre Square was becoming a vaudeville center.²

The biggest boost for the area's theatrical fortunes came in 1904, when New York City opened its first subway line. The new Interborough subway line proceeded north from the Brooklyn Bridge along Manhattan's East Side, then headed west on Forty-second Street before turning north at Broadway to continue uptown. When the *New York Times* opened a new office building at the spot where the subway turned north, the intersection acquired a new name: Times Square. Mass transit brought millions to the Square, and in less than 10 years it was Manhattan's new center of theater and entertainment.³

By 1913, the bright lights of Times Square illuminated vaudeville houses—Hammerstein's Victoria at Forty-second Street and Seventh Avenue, Loew's American at Eighth Avenue and Forty-second Street, and the Palace at Broadway and Forty-seventh Street (technically Seventh Avenue, but because the theater was at the cross of Seventh Avenue and Broadway, Broadway was used to establish the address).⁴

Times Square, like the districts that preceded it, encompassed different levels of vaudeville; it served both middle class and working class, native and immigrant, male and female audiences—sometimes under one roof, sometimes in different theaters. "In New York, . . ." Andre Charlot wrote in *Variety* in 1914, "Hammerstein's and the Palace are only a stone's throw from one another and the atmosphere of both is absolutely different."⁵ The Palace was the embodiment of Keith and Albee's refined vaudeville, Hammerstein's Victoria recalled the Barnum Museum of the mid-nineteenth century.

Proprietor Willie Hammerstein's methods of attracting crowds in hot

weather were vintage humbug. In the lobby he placed a thermometer which purported to indicate the temperature inside. The thermometer actually rested on an exposed cake of ice. A blackboard behind it recorded seventy degrees on the hottest days, and a message urged skeptics to look at the thermometer if they didn't believe the blackboard. Hammerstein also heated the elevator that carried customers to his theater's roof garden. When sweltering sufferers reached the roof, they could only conclude that it really was cooler there.⁶

Newsmakers appeared regularly at the Victoria: participants in sexual scandals, prizefighters, wrestlers, bicycle racers, runners, sharpshooters, and suffragists. Hammerstein presented Jack Johnson, the black heavy-weight champion whose affairs with white women were as famous as his pugilism. When chorus girls Lillian Graham and Ethel Conrad were released on bail after shooting Graham's wealthy lover W. E. D. Stokes, the Victoria put them onstage as "The Shooting Stars." They packed the house.⁷

The Victoria's shows also encouraged the rowdy audience participation of the old variety theater. The Cherry Sisters, billed as "America's Worst Act," performed behind a net: it protected them when the audience threw vegetables and eggs. A sketch called "Hanged" climaxed with the warden refusing to spring the trap because he opposed capital punishment. A volunteer was then called from the audience to do the job. "Hanged" evolved into "Electrocution," in which an audience member pulled a switch that sent sparks flying from a simulated electric chair.⁸

The Palace, in contrast, was a different kind of vaudeville theater. It opened in 1913 under the ownership of Martin Beck, head of the Orpheum Circuit, which dominated vaudeville west of Chicago. But it was quickly taken over by Keith and Albee, who disliked seeing a rival so established in the heart of New York City. The Palace, Keith and Albee's flagship theater, was their house for what one observer called "the silk stocking trade." Palace decor was lavish; richly decorated box seats rested beneath sculpted wall ornaments, and its proscenium arch was outlined in bas-relief designs. Palace patrons were said to mirror the theater's design—smart, elegant, and sophisticated.

The Palace was the one theater that all performers wanted to play, the house where a successful appearance meant that they had reached the top of the "big time." It became the center of the vaudevillians' section of New York City. They hung out at coffee shops around the corner, or they milled about on the sidewalks in front of the theater, looking for work.

The Palace was the focal point of Times Square vaudeville (the Victoria closed in 1915, partly the victim of competition from the Palace).⁹ But the vaudeville audience was too diverse to be satisfied with just the Palace, however prestigious it might be. So Times Square succeeded

because it offered vaudeville and related entertainments in a variety of settings: the rowdy Victoria, the low-priced Loew's American, the massive Hippodrome, and houses where star graduates of vaudeville appeared in revues like the Ziegfeld Follies, or the legitimate theaters. The "vast, floating population"¹⁰ that filled Times Square found something for everyone.

On the circuits that radiated out from Times Square, the vaudeville moguls faced two tasks: to distribute vaudeville nationwide, and to entertain widely different audiences profitably. The key to the distribution of vaudeville was the vaudeville circuit system, headquartered at Times Square in the Keith-Albee booking offices.

The Keith vaudeville empire was based on booking. Although it owned its own circuit of theaters, it controlled many more by becoming the middlemen who charged a fee for bringing together performers and theater managers. Keith's operation had been incorporated in Maine in 1906 as the United Booking Office of America. In subsequent years, despite name changes and structural reorganizations, its basic operations changed little. Other booking systems challenged it, some with a degree of success, but none ever supplanted it. Through such organizations, as theater analyst M. B. Leavitt noted, vaudeville moguls "had things systematized in a manner not surpassed by a national bank."¹¹

The U.B.O. was a switching house that linked managers and performers and directed acts around the circuits. Its operations generally followed a basic pattern. Although managers sometimes bid for well-known acts without advance viewing, the steps in booking a big-time act typically began with a tryout, usually for small pay, in an obscure theater where a failure would not attract attention. (Acts sometimes used false names to dodge bad reviews.)¹²

An act might play four or five weeks in tryout houses before attempting a big-time booking.¹³ Then, the agent went to the Keith booking system on the sixth floor of the Palace Theatre building.

Within wooden walls topped by a metal grille, the agent found an open trading floor holding some 20 desks of booking managers, or bookers. Each represented specific theaters: a cluster of houses in New York City, for example, or New England. The bookers drew up the bills for each show at their respective theaters.¹⁴

To an outsider, the sequence of acts looked as random as the scenes glimpsed from a trolley car on a busy city street. Their selections were actually based on established principles of vaudeville. Bookers weighed each act's appeal, cost, and staging requirements, and then judged how it would fit into a complete bill that would satisfy the audience. In 1916, George Gottlieb, who booked shows for the Palace, described his techniques in the book *Writing for Vaudeville*.¹⁵

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

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

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

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

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

Sixth: the first act after intermission and a difficult slot to fill, because it had to sustain audience interest without overshadowing the remaining acts. A famous mime comedian to get the audience seated with few interruptions of stage action might work well. But most of all, Gottlieb noted, the sixth act had to begin a build-up that was "infinitely" faster than that of the first half, one that would quickly put the audience in a "delighted-expectant attitude."

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

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

Ninth: the closing act, preferably a visual number—trick animals or trapeze artists—that sent the audience home pleased.¹⁶

This basic format conformed to the likes and dislikes of each theater's audience. An act might be too refined for a house whose patrons had rough-edged tastes, too dependent on topical political jokes for a placid municipality. Bookers and theater managers tried to pick acts that would be popular with their own particular audience, mindful that what was successful in one theater might not work in another. In a 1907 report on singer Bessie Wynne, theatre manager H. A. Daniels noted that she was a hit in New York but a comparative flop in Cleveland. "Personally, I like her work immensely," he wrote. "She is dainty, clever, and artistic. But as I do not pay to see the show, its not good policy to force my likes and dislikes on the Clevelandites."¹⁷

As attentive to local preferences as these principles might be, they were applied in a setting that had much in common with a brokerage office. With money and jobs at stake, and bookers and agents in full swing, the booking office vibrated with arguments, excited gestures, and haggling—

"You will find yourself wondering what the panic is about," one writer noted.¹⁸ The agents tried to get their acts "top dollar" and a good touring route, one that touched many theaters without traveling long distances between them. The bookers tried to bargain the salaries down and, at the same time, construct solid shows.

If the agent and booker agreed on salary, the booker arranged for a contract to be signed by all parties. Contracts were signed for one theater at a time, and each house paid the salaries for the performances it presented. In at least some cases—exactly how often it is impossible to determine—the bargaining over salaries was a charade because the bookers met to fix them.¹⁹

Sometimes, acts that rejected a salary offer were blacklisted from the Keith circuit, and thus banned from virtually all of big-time vaudeville. They might also be banned from Keith theaters and booking facilities if they appeared for Keith competitors, failed to book through the Keith offices, or refused to play without fee at benefits for Keith's company union. Such measures were used to thwart vaudevillians' union efforts in 1910–11 and again in 1916–17, but even when the sanctions were not invoked, they remained a sword over performers' heads.²⁰

Once an act was booked, the Keith exchange made deductions which paid the cost of the booking system—and more. Given Keith's dominance of the market, performers were actually paying for the right to work. And, multiplied by the number of acts the Keith exchange booked—7,917 in 1917–18, for example—the sum reveals the lucrative nature of Keith's middleman position.²¹

Assume, for example, that an act was being paid \$250 a week, exactly what Fred and Adele Astaire received in 1917–18.²² Before they received their check from a theater, 5 percent, or \$12.50, would be deducted to pay for the services of the United Booking Office. An additional 5 percent would be deducted to compensate the Astaires' agent for his services—a total of \$25 in deductions. This deduction was processed by the Vaudeville Collection Agency, a Keith firm, which collected half of the agent's fee for this service (2½ percent of the act's salary). Keith's justification for the Vaudeville Collection Agency was twofold: it prevented agents from charging the performers more than the 5 percent commission allowed by law, and it guaranteed that the agents would receive their fee from the actors, minus the Vaudeville Collection Agency's own deductions. To offset this loss, the agents sometimes charged actors for additional services—real or imagined. The performer's paycheck suffered an even deeper cut.²³

The contracts used by the Keith system were as calculated as the commission system. A typical agreement, signed in 1909, limited the theater's obligations to the performer and made the most of the performer's obligations to the theater. It also compelled the performer to book through

Keith's United Booking Office and allowed management to censor or cancel the act at will.²⁴

Such arrangements had their attractions for theater owners. In a letter written around 1907, Keith representative Jule Delmar attempted to sell the Keith system to the operator of an upstate New York amusement park vaudeville house. He listed the following benefits: through the commission system, the acts paid for the bookings, not the theaters; theaters gained the drawing power of the Keith name; publicity and advertising were handled in advance by the Keith office; acts were booked on a route and were virtually guaranteed to appear (no small consideration, given managers' concern that acts would break contracts to pursue more lucrative offers), because cancelling one engagement meant cancelling all of them; and finally, acts were forbidden to reduce their novelty by appearing near Keith-booked theaters because "we virtually control the booking field and the various acts would not play other places than ours if we so directed."²⁵

Yet the system was not foolproof. From the manager's perspective, both the booking office and the performers posed problems. The bookers might sign acts whose salary or style of performing were inappropriate for a theater, as the manager of Keith's Union Square complained in 1907.

I think a few people ought to come down from the office and look at some of these acts and they would be convinced that a good genuine variety show with plenty of comedy and good acts is a 100% better than four or five of these tremendous big acts that do not seem to please the audience, and makes the show cost about \$2500 when I can do just as well with a \$1800 or \$2000 show.²⁶

And a manager's problems went beyond financial worries. Performers, with their complicated schedules, professional jealousies, and contract demands, confronted managers with many difficulties. This 1909 report from a Boston theater manager on the Keith circuit describes the potential for chaos in the organization of just one vaudeville show. For starters, there was the need to coordinate acts' arrival.

This proved to be our fifth successive "tempestuous" Monday. This time it is the Pissiutis who are in trouble. Through the stupidity or negligence of the people in the Pennsylvania baggage room in Philadelphia, combined with ignorance and a seeming desire to save a few dollars on the part of Pissiuti, his baggage was too late to make the steamer from New York last night. However, the Pennsylvania people on this end, made arrangements to have the stuff put on the 1 o'clock limited from New York so that it will be here in ample time for the evening show. Under this stress of circumstances we pressed

into service the Sutcliffe Troupe, who played here last week and are to sail for Europe in the morning.

Then there were unreliable performers.

To add to our troubles one of the young ladies of the Pianophiends went strolling around the streets looking in the shop windows and finally showed up at the stage door at the time the act was scheduled to go on. Fortunately Miss Bergere was ready and we were able to go along without any wait.

And rivalries and contract disputes.

Outside of these few mishaps everything was lovely until after the Hawaiian Trio had been on, when "Toots" sent for me and said that her guitar player and she had had trouble and they couldn't get along. While she was making her explanation, he came on the scene with his guitar and grip, saying she had fired him. I finally straightened this matter out by fixing it so they are both going to work the week out as a favor to me,—so they said, although I think they have done the same stunt in other houses. Hence, I do not feel all swelled up on my prowess as a diplomat. I trust Pat Casey will be able to use the salve so that they will lay out the rest of their contracts. The guitar player is a hit and knows it, while "Toots" is jealous of his success, thinking her Hula dance should be the big feature. Here endeth the story of my troubles.²⁷

From the manager's point of view, the Keith system provided an element of stability in a volatile industry. It also facilitated both the control of act content and the evaluation of acts' popularity. Part of the motivation, following Keith and Albee's reputation for wholesomeness, was the censorship of ribald or socially controversial performances.²⁸ But records of popularity were an incentive for performers to be consistently successful. An anonymous vaudevillian's letter printed in *The Morning Telegraph* in 1915 complained of this rating system.

This vaudeville has gotten to be too hard a game. Every Monday you go on trial. Every week a report goes in and you wonder what it says. You have stood the test of every kind of audience and yet you must constantly show your wares all over again.²⁹

And the U.B.O. didn't squeeze just performers—it also squeezed managers. As "An Old Timer" wrote anonymously in a 1918 letter to

F.T.C. investigators examining whether the U.B.O. violated the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, the U.B.O. had "a double-edged sword. Against the theatre owner it cuts by refusing him the best and the vitally necessary acts if he does not give it the exclusive booking privilege, and against the act it cuts by refusing them work in the best and vitally necessary theatres."³⁰

The Keith-Albee interests used access to their booking exchange and grants of regional booking monopolies to encourage or dissuade theater development. Around 1905, Bernard A. Myers was building a theater in Bayonne, a town on the New Jersey side of New York Harbor, when he sought a franchise to book acts through the U.B.O. The theater was to be a low-priced house, with ticket prices ranging from 15–50 cents. The U.B.O. refused him a franchise because it feared competition with its existing Jersey City theater eight miles from Bayonne. Unable to present U.B.O. acts, Myers instead offered dramatic shows. In 1918, he again applied for a U.B.O. franchise. Albee replied that since he had survived so far without U.B.O. vaudeville, he ought to be able to continue on his own.³¹

Vaudevillians were understandably suspicious of moguls who could make such deals. The performers, united in a union called the White Rats, struck in 1901 when Keith-Albee and associated vaudeville managers sought to establish a monopoly over vaudeville bookings that would enable them to collect a commission each time an act signed up to perform. The artists won a hollow victory, one they were unable to enforce, and the commission system remained in force.³²

A revived and improved version of the White Rats staged another strike from December 1916–January 1917, primarily fighting to establish a union shop. The managers, who coordinated their actions using a blacklist and a company union, beat down this second challenge and destroyed the union for good.³³ Without the White Rats, the vaudeville moguls, especially Albee, dominated vaudevillians' working conditions in a style that was paternalistic at best and coercive at worst.

The Keith system became the dominant business force in big-time American vaudeville. By the early 1920s, Keith and Orpheum theaters covered the entire United States. Keith-Albee interests owned, leased, or operated 5 small-time theaters in New York City, and their subsidiaries controlled 12 theaters in New York and its suburbs. Their system booked as many as 300 theaters east of Chicago. Orpheum covered Chicago and points west. Albee exercised his power through the Keith-Albee organization, which combined with the Orpheum circuit to rule eastern and western vaudeville respectively before the two consolidated in 1928.

Rival circuits of varying size and profitability—Pantages, Fox, Fally Markus, Shubert, and especially Loew at the small-time level—provided a degree of opposition to Keith and Orpheum. The Federal Trade Commission investigated charges that the U.B.O., V.M.P.A., and N.V.A. were

guilty of blacklisting and other offenses, but concluded that they had not violated federal regulations. The efforts of rival businessmen and the federal government were not strong enough to destroy the house that Keith and Albee built.³⁴

But however powerful the managers were backstage, their efforts at control were complicated by an inescapable reality; although the Keith-Albee regime could deal severely with performers and managers, their organization thrived only by enticing people into vaudeville houses. They had to make sure that their shows, however centrally organized, never lacked for a human and intimate touch. Part of that responsibility fell to the booker, who always gauged the taste levels of his audiences before he signed on an act. But the greatest part of the burden fell to the performer.

In 1922, in the *New Republic*, Mary Cass Canfield wrote about the "unforced and happy communion" between artists and audiences in the vaudeville houses. The vaudevillian, she wrote, was

an apparent, if not always an actual improviser. He jokes with the orchestra leader, he tells his hearers fabricated confidential tales about the management, the other actors, the whole entrancing world behind the scenes; he addresses planted confederates in the third row, or the gallery and proceeds to make fools of them to the joy of all present. He beseeches his genial, gum-chewing listeners to join in the chorus of his song; they obey with a zestful roar. The audience becomes a part of the show and enjoys it. And there is community art for you. A vaudeville comedian in America is as close to the audience as Harlequin and Punchinello were to the Italian publics of the eighteenth century.³⁵

More than its other theatrical contemporaries, vaudeville consistently reached out to make the people in the seats feel like part of the show. Drama and opera could be enthralling, but essentially they created their own reality which people witnessed from their seats; burlesque and early musical comedy reached out to audiences, but their appeal was narrower than that of vaudeville.³⁶ The performers' goal, in their own words, was to put the act over. As George Jessel recalled of his vaudeville years, "You lived by the reaction of the audience."³⁷

Above all, it was a heterogeneous audience. As vaudevillians worked the circuits, they toured across New York City and ultimately the entire country. They encountered crowds of middle- and working-class, immigrant and native-born.

As journalist Marian Spitzer noted in 1924, legitimate theater audiences were generally alike. Jokes usually went over equally well in one house after another. "But vaudeville audiences are different all the time," she wrote. "It's almost impossible to set a performance and then play it that

way forever. Each town seems to be different; every neighborhood in the city needs different handling. So a vaudevillian has to be forever on the alert, to feel out his audience and work accordingly."³⁸

Vaudevillians learned to establish a fine-tuned rapport by presenting a standard act that was customized for the audience at hand. Even though they performed the same routine for weeks and even years on end, they had to sound fresh and original. The demands were apparent even to a legitimate theater star who toured in vaudeville, Ethel Barrymore. "The vaudeville public is an exacting one," she wrote, "and nothing must ever be slurred for them—perfect in the afternoon and perfect at night, over and over again for weeks and weeks."³⁹

There was nothing rote or routine in their craft. In a book published in 1914, Caroline Caffin recognized "that genial familiarity, that confiding smile which seems to break out so spontaneously, the casual entrance and glance round the audience—all have been nicely calculated and their effect registered, but with the artist's sympathy which informs each with the spirit of the occasion and robs it of the mechanical artifice."⁴⁰

Performers learned to tailor their presentations to the crowd before them. A young Eddie Cantor flopped when he presented an English language act in a theater where most of the patrons spoke Yiddish. He translated the act into their language and scored a hit.

We had simply talked to them in the wrong language, . . . and this in a way is every actor's problem in adapting himself to his audience. Drifting as I did into every conceivable type of crowd, I trained myself to the fact that "the audience is never wrong," and if a performance failed to go across it was either the fault of the material or the manner of presentation. By carefully correcting the one or the other or both with an eye to the peculiarities of the audience I could never fail a second time. I proved this to myself on many occasions later on, when in the same night I'd perform at the Vanderbilt home and then rush down to Loew's Avenue B and be a hit in both places.⁴¹

Sometimes vaudevillians used references to local geography. "I went from bad to worse, from Jersey City to Hoboken," said a character in a 1912 sketch. The script explicitly noted that two different localities could be inserted outside the New York area. As vaudevillian Frank Rowan observed, "If you're playing Bushwick, you make fun of Flatbush, if you're playing Flatbush, you make fun of Bushwick. That's an old, old game."⁴²

Local appeal sometimes involved appreciation of language. Jewish comedian Billy Glason explained that if he played Loew's Avenue B Theatre on the Lower East Side, he would give his act a "hamish," or homey, Jewish quality, perhaps by using Yiddish expressions, to make the

audiences feel like "family." If he played a top Times Square theater like The Palace, he would not emphasize Jewish themes, but would use more complicated, sophisticated material.⁴³

Yet the vaudevillian's ultimate goal was always to make it to the Palace, and to become a nationwide star. Audiences may have been sitting in Bushwick, but their eyes were on Times Square. The big time was the standard by which all vaudeville was judged. A Palace booking was used as proof of an act's quality, and it opened doors to bookings around the country.

Acts always worked to balance intimacy and a national appeal. Jokes and sketches became trademarks of popular acts, and were performed from one end of the country to the other. Part of vaudeville's appeal was built on the acts' broad familiarity. For many performers, the old lines evoked laughter and recognition. "I luff you Meyer" meant Weber and Fields; "Is everything copacetic?" meant dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. Smith and Dale first performed "Dr. Kronkhite" around 1906 and presented it successfully for decades.

Such performers became the stars of vaudeville. And for audience members, it was the stars and the big-time theaters they played in that became the most compelling face of vaudeville. In interviews I conducted in the middle of the 1980s, elderly fans who remembered New York vaudeville from 1915 on focused on the big acts they saw, like big-game hunters recounting their trophies. The human experience of the shows and their vitality were important also, but they expressed this through their appreciation for well-known routines.⁴⁴ As vaudeville fan Murray Schwartz said of the stars, "They were out of this world, they were out of our world."⁴⁵

Theaters routinely promised the stars, but there weren't nearly enough stars to go around for even all the vaudeville theaters in New York City. The solution lay partly in small-timers imitating name performers, and partly in theater managers trading on the U.B.O. reputation for high-class vaudeville. The Keith-Albee seal of approval became a passport to success, and the booking office became a metropolitan arbiter of taste.

In 1911, the Sewell brothers of Staten Island, real estate brokers, announced plans for a vaudeville house in Port Richmond on the north shore of the island. Their theater was unlikely to become a top house like the Palace, but nevertheless they proclaimed their connection to big-time vaudeville. "All of the vaudeville artists who are to appear will be booked through the United Booking Offices," they asserted, "which, as every theatre-goer knows, furnishes the highest class talent to all the exclusive vaudeville theatres in the United States and Canada."⁴⁶

Vaudeville took people out of their neighborhoods and moved them into a world of stars and fans. It foreshadowed the day when people would relate to television and movie stars as if they were intimate friends. As

ludicrous as it might be for people to treat television characters as real persons, in vaudeville they at least had the satisfaction of a live person performing before them.

Being vaudeville fans did not make otherwise different people the same. It did, however, give them vaudeville in common, despite all their other differences. And vaudeville did that with a generous, human touch.

In a letter written many decades after she attended vaudeville shows, Florence Sinow captured the attractions.

I loved it—I miss it—neither film nor tv has the warmth, the excitement, or the life of vaudeville—it moved you with an emotion quite missing in other entertainment—it reached and touched *you*, individually. And also caught you up in a communal happening—a sharing together of a common wonderful experience. Nothing has taken its place. It moved fast, had a wide range that kept you always absorbed—no one act was on long enough so that you lost interest—the evening shifted from excitement to excitement, but on different levels—high comedy, sophistication, slapstick, dancing, singing—sentimental—jazz—acrobats—animals—a panorama that was gorgeous, funny, tearful, each in turn—a kind of entertainment audiences could lose themselves in, individually and collectively.⁴⁷

Vaudeville, and the bright lights of Times Square, represented the best and worst of American popular culture in the twentieth century. The grasping entrepreneurs who created the circuits set too many nasty precedents; the entertainment corporations they founded came to exercise too tight a hold on our culture. But the vigor and energy of vaudeville, and its Times Square setting, were undeniably attractive. Vaudeville, with its human, intimate touch respected human diversity. And it was far more open and generous than most cultural institutions that people encountered at the turn of the century. That was why they loved it, gave their allegiance to it, and became members of a national audience of unprecedented proportions.



THE SYNDICATE/SHUBERT WAR

Peter A. Davis

THE DECLINE of Times Square as the principal center of the American entertainment industry in the twentieth century is a well-documented and much discussed issue in theatre history.¹ Jack Poggi, A. Nicholas Vardac, and others have published accounts both statistical and humanistic for the area's slide from the theatrical pinnacle in the 1920s to its current state as a poor third behind television and film.² Even within the context of so-called legitimate theater, Times Square and its economic extension commonly known as Broadway must now compete with a burgeoning regional industry that is equally influential. Most of the blame (and consequently most of the attention) has fallen on the art itself. With the arrival of film, the stage could no longer compete. The best writers, directors, performers, and designers were swept away by the more lucrative and alluring business of film and with them went the audience. At least that is the standard argument—offered convincingly by countless doomsayers and theatrical critics since the mid-1950s.³ And the New York-based theater industry has done its best to bolster this perception of an art drained by the financial allure of a culturally inferior Hollywood.⁴

Although empirical evidence abounds to document Broadway's steady decline relative to the other entertainment media, most scholarly work has focused on narrative history. Theater scholars and their readers appear more interested in the personal or performance side of the art rather than the economic issues which have driven the theater to the brink of cultural extinction. Exceptions to this rule are rare. Bernheim's classic study, funded by the WPA in 1932, comes the closest to effectively blending economics and history.⁵ But the work is now over fifty years old and hardly relevant to the current state of the art. Even Poggi's book (1968), which is rife with facts and numbers, lacks any significant explanation of the reasons why change occurred in Broadway's status, presenting instead a largely chronological summary of events to augment the Hollywood-as-cultural-vampire perception.⁶



THE ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT AT THE END OF THE 1930S

Brooks McNamara

IN OUR FANTASIES, Broadway is a kind of nostalgic generalization. Old movies, casual journalism, and popular fiction assure us that George M. Cohan and Florenz Ziegfeld dine endlessly at Sardi's on some sort of perpetual opening night. Outside, Runyonesque characters loiter in Shubert Alley, beneath a forest of neon signs advertising the *Follies* of nineteen-something-or-other. But the unromantic truth is that the theater district is a specialized commercial neighborhood. The neighborhood has always had a distinctive character, but that character has changed radically over the years.

In Chapter 1 of this book, David Hammack remarks that "specialized land-use districts are as old as cities." He points out that in "nineteenth and twentieth century cities in Western Europe and the United States, of course, the commercial and industrial districts expanded out of all proportion to the rest of the city, and developed finer and more complex internal differentiations."¹ The Times Square entertainment district is one among the many examples of specialized commercial districts in New York City—the nearby Garment District, the Flower District on Sixth Avenue in the Twenties, the Diamond District around Forty-seventh Street near Sixth Avenue. What I propose to do in this chapter is examine some of the "complex internal differentiations" that marked the Times Square entertainment district ("Broadway") at the end of the thirties. After offering some background on the changes that took place in the neighborhood during that decade, I will concentrate on its identity fifty years ago, during the winter of 1938–39. This examination, I hope, will suggest some comparisons and contrasts with present-day Broadway.

The boundaries of the Times Square area have been defined somewhat differently by different writers. Mary Henderson's history of New York's

theater districts, for example, speaks of an area bounded by Thirty-eighth Street, Fifty-ninth Street, Sixth Avenue, and Eighth Avenue.² The 1939 Works Progress Administration guide to New York defines the entertainment district as running from Thirty-ninth to Fifty-seventh Street, between Fifth and Eighth Avenue.³ A 1948 guidebook to the city defines the boundaries as Forty-second Street, Fifty-ninth Street, Fifth Avenue, and Eighth Avenue.⁴ Whatever the differences, it is clear that in the late 1930s the heart of the district lay in Times Square itself and in the blocks directly around the square, northward from Forty-second to Fifty-second Street. Here was to be found the greatest concentration of legitimate and motion picture theaters and nightclubs as well as the bulk of related businesses.

In the early years of this century, as Brooks Atkinson points out, Forty-second Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenue, then New York's theater center, "was one of the finest [blocks] in the city and a splendid part of the theater district. People treated the block with considerable respect."⁵ But it was not to continue. The Depression—among other developments—would change the old theater street in many important ways.

By 1933, as Margaret Knapp has said, "half of the ten remaining legitimate theaters on the block had given up live production." Two of them had become burlesque houses, and since the motion picture theaters found it impossible to get important new movies, they had to show second-run films. By the fall of the following year, only the New Amsterdam was still attempting to present legitimate shows, and the house was dark much of the time. "Property owners and merchants had begun to complain about the tawdry burlesque houses with their suggestive sidewalk displays, their barkers, and 'steerers.'"⁶ The title song of the famous 1933 Warner Brothers film would characterize the block as "naughty, bawdy, gaudy, sporty, Forty-second Street."

But the changes involved more than just Forty-second Street. By the 1930s the whole Times Square area was no longer primarily a legitimate theater district; it had evolved into a much more broadly based entertainment center and, in the process, into a far less genteel area. The change was not so dramatically played out in the blocks above Forty-second Street, but the whole Times Square area was clearly in the process of transformation, due to changes in the theater and motion picture industries, the Depression, Prohibition, and real estate developments.

The peak of Broadway theatrical activity had come during the season of 1927–28 (traditionally, theater seasons run from mid-June to mid-June), when 264 shows opened in the district. From that point on, fewer and fewer shows were produced each season. In 1928–29, for example, the

number was already down to 225, and over the next decade it would plummet.⁷ Among the reasons for the decline given by Alfred Bernheim in 1929 were bad shows, the increasing costs of production, poor ticket distribution, the decline of the road, and competing forms of entertainment, especially motion pictures.⁸ In addition, of course, the long-term effects of the Depression were devastating to producers and theater owners.

As a result, theaters, which had been built to accommodate the Broadway boom of the teens and twenties, were now in oversupply, and an increasing number of them stood dark much or all of the time. As early as 1929, during the holiday season, *Variety* reported that one out of every five Broadway houses was not in use.⁹ The number would soon increase sharply. No new theater buildings were built during the thirties, and some of the existing houses were torn down. A number of those that remained became burlesque houses, motion picture theaters, or radio studios.¹⁰

It is important to note, however, that the beleaguered legitimate theaters did not leave the Times Square area as they had left the vicinity of Union Square some 40 years earlier. There was now nowhere for the Broadway theater district to move. In any case, there was no need for a new theater district and, after the Depression, no money to create one. The theaters remained, as did such traditional theater support businesses as costume houses, scenery shops, and manufacturers of properties. Theatergoing would continue as the "signature" activity of Broadway, but it was fading as the pivotal social and economic activity in the area. Other forms of entertainment had begun to assume more prominent roles in the district's mix of amusements. Chief among these was the movies. The motion pictures have often been blamed for the decline of the Times Square district. In fact, the burgeoning movie business, as we shall see, merely took over a number of the functions of the live theater in the area.

Meanwhile, the Depression, along with the cumulative effects of Prohibition, had robbed the area of many of its first-class cabarets. As Lewis Erenberg has pointed out in Chapter 8, many of the more expensive clubs were now to be found on the East Side, and Broadway nightclub promoters increasingly "aimed at a mass middle-class and middle-aged audience." The thrust—as Erenberg has suggested about one successful nightclub promoter—was now volume.¹¹ Times Square area restaurants and hotels were rethinking the market as well. The area had, for many years, been the chief hotel district in the city. In 1934, in fact, the Times Square area contained more hotels, many of them first class, and more hotel rooms than any other similar land area in Manhattan.¹² But throughout the thirties a number of these hotels went out of business or were forced to lower their rates to attract patrons. Much the same situation obtained with restaurants in the neighborhood. In 1934 the Broadway Association,

a merchants' organization, complained that important restaurants were leaving the area and were being replaced by cheap lunch counters.¹³

Part of the reason for the decline was because many people believed that the Times Square neighborhood had grown unsafe. The reputation of the area as a center for drug dealing and prostitution seems not to have developed until the forties, but, with the coming of the Depression, street crime was perceived to be on the increase. In 1934, Father McCaffrey, a local parish priest, complained of "a hoodlum element that was frightening people off the street," and noted that "weak laws and lenient judges" were hampering the effectiveness of the police. Shortly, the Broadway Association called for a police crackdown.¹⁴

Whether crime was seriously on the rise or not, everyone agreed that the area had become raffish and down-at-the-heels. The district had always been colorful and uninhibited. But observers were dismayed by the physical changes that had taken place during the thirties, and most of them described the "new" Times Square area in virtually the same unflattering terms. In *The Night Club Era*, for example, published in 1933, Stanley Walker pointed to a rather hard and tarnished Broadway. "Once a street of comparatively modest tastes, of some show of decorum, it has degenerated into something resembling the main drag of a frontier town. Once there were lobster palaces and cabarets; now it is cut rate." Walker noted seventeen cheap dance halls between Forty-second and Fifty-seventh streets, countless street pitchmen selling reducing belts, dubious Southern real estate, "Ten Recitations for Ten Cents," and "100 per cent pure whiskey candies—three for five cents." Broadway, he concluded "has become a bargain basement counter. It has places where one may go, with no cover charge, and gorge on cheap food while watching a ridiculous floor show. . . . There are chow-meineries, peep shows for men only, flea circuses, lectures on what killed Rudolph Valentino, jitney ballrooms and a farrago of other attractions which would have sickened the heart of the Broadwayite of even ten years ago."¹⁵

Ward Morehouse, a longtime Broadway critic, compared Forty-second Street in the thirties to Coney Island, noting that

Broadway itself, once the street of Rector's and Churchill's and Stanley's, was now cheapened and nightmarish. It was offering palm readings and photos while-U-wait, live turtles and tropical fruit drinks, sheet music, nut fudge, jumbo malteds, hot waffles, ham and eggs, hot dogs, and hamburgers. A screeching amusement park bedlam that was somehow without a ferris wheel and a roller coaster, but that presented shooting galleries, bowling alleys, guess-your-weight stands, gypsy tea rooms, rug auctions, electric shoeshines,

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dance halls—fifty beautiful girls—chop suey, beer on draught, wines and liquors, oyster bars, bus-barkers, and right there at the curb was the man with the giant telescope, ready to show you the craters of the moon for a dime.¹⁶

The amusement park imagery perhaps gives some insight into the Times Square of the thirties. The area was not simply in decline but in the process of redefinition. It is clear that the entertainment district was now increasingly aimed at a broad, popular audience, and that its appeal seemed to lie in many of the same elements that characterized Coney Island and other amusement parks of the period. In a sense, the Times Square described by Walker and Morehouse had *become* an amusement park—a chaotic, jarring, slightly sinister entertainment environment in its own right.¹⁷

In reconstructing the web of institutions and activities that made up the Times Square entertainment district at the end of the thirties, I have made two choices. First, I chose as my center of focus the period between Christmas and New Year's of 1938–39, because of that week's intense activity and the resulting news stories and advertising in newspapers and trade publications. Second, I have looked at the very complex activity in the district in terms of “overlays.” I have discussed the district's institutions in terms of four quite distinct but intimately related categories. Much of the emphasis has been placed on those institutions that *provided* entertainment. But I will also consider briefly those institutions that *supported* the entertainment business, those that *supplied* the entertainment business, and those district institutions that *administered* entertainment, either locally or nationally or both.

In the winter of 1938–39, some of the most important entertainment venues consisted of the square itself, legitimate theaters, and motion picture theaters, a number of which also presented vaudeville or revues or big bands. There were nightclubs, radio studios open to the public, taxi dance halls, dime museums, and burlesque theaters masquerading as something other than burlesque theaters. Within a few blocks of the district's center core visitors could also find sporting events at Madison Square Garden, opera at the Metropolitan, lectures and concerts at Town Hall, and concerts at Carnegie Hall and Steinway Hall.

Visitors to the Times Square area at the holiday season found that it had retained its carnivalesque quality. The *WPA Guide to New York City*, published in 1939, noted that an

outer shell of bars and restaurants, electric signs, movie palaces, taxi dance halls, cabarets, chop suey places, and side shows of every

description cover the central streets. . . . Adjoining elaborate hotel and theater entrances and wide-windowed clothing shops are scores of typical midway enterprises: fruit juice stands garlanded with artificial palm leaves, theater ticket offices, cheap lunch counters, cut-rate haberdasheries, burlesque houses, and novelty concessions.¹⁸

The beginning of the season was marked in the square by the lighting of two Christmas trees in the shape of the trylon and perisphere, the symbols of the World's Fair, which was to open in April in Flushing. Grover Whalen officiated at the ceremony, which was attended by 2,000 spectators, a number of Broadway stars, and theater producer John Golden, the chairman of the fair's entertainment committee.¹⁹ It was predicted that the fair would be a boon to the Broadway theater business, which was starting to emerge from the worst throes of the Depression. In fact, it was not, and theater publications would later come to see the fair as the enemy. As anthologist Burns Mantle wrote in an essay about the 1938–39 theatre season, producers “belatedly, and a little sadly, discovered that history's greatest show, in its early stages at least, offered competition that could not possibly be met.”²⁰

But that bad news lay in the future. In the meantime, the fortunes of the Broadway theater business had declined precipitously since the late twenties. Everyone connected with the theater business had been badly hurt, including the supposedly indestructible Shuberts, the wealthiest and most important producers and theater owners in the district. By the winter of 1938–39, however, they, along with other producers and owners, had begun to recover somewhat from the worst effects of the Crash. Of great importance in restoring the Shuberts' fortunes was a runaway hit show which had come to Broadway at the beginning of the 1938–39 theater season. That show, an eccentric revue called *Hellzapoppin*, featured two obscure vaudevillians, Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson, and opened to devastatingly bad reviews. Walter Winchell, however, took up the show's cause and turned it into one of the great Broadway hits of all time. Just before Christmas, *Variety* would note with wonder that “*Hellzapoppin*, the strongest musical bell-ringer Broadway has had in years, has piled up an advance sale of \$115,000 at the Winter Garden.” The writer concluded that the advance represented a new record, and added that the show was the only one “not affected to some degree by the pre-holiday slump.”²¹

In 1927–28 there had been 76 theaters operating in the district, many of them belonging to the Shuberts. No new theaters, however, had been built in the area since the Depression.²² In the winter of 1938–39, most of the theaters still existed, but a large number of them had been turned over to motion pictures or had become radio studios. Many were simply dark. There were now no theaters being used for legitimate shows (straight

plays, musicals, or revues) on Forty-second Street and very few on Broadway itself; the majority were to be found on the side streets around the square. Of these, Forty-fourth and Forty-fifth streets between Times Square and Eighth Avenue (the so-called Shubert streets) were then, as now, the heart of theater activity in the district. Theaters near these two streets or on Broadway were generally felt to be the most desirable by producers. During Christmas week 33 houses in the district were showing live attractions.²³

A number of the shows were fairly memorable, although the total number of productions was far below that of earlier seasons. Among the straight plays were Robert Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, Clifford Odets' *Rocket to the Moon*, S. N. Behrman's *No Time for Comedy*, and Philip Barry's *The Philadelphia Story*. Important musicals and revues included, in addition to Olsen and Johnson's *Hellzapoppin*, Harold Rome and Charles Friedman's *Sing Out the News*, Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill's *Knickerbocker Holiday*, George Abbott, Lorenz Hart, and Richard Rodgers's *The Boys from Syracuse*, and two swing versions of *The Mikado*.²⁴

Political and social issues seemed especially important on the Broadway stage during the post-Depression 1938–39 season. Burns Mantle pointed to both *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* and *Knickerbocker Holiday* as examples of the trend, along with Elmer Rice's *American Landscape* and Kaufman and Hart's *The American Way*. "All these plays," Mantle wrote, "or the inspiration from which they stem, can be traced, I think, to the political discussions and national problems that have arisen within the last few years to plague and confound the voting citizens."²⁵

Thirty-three shows were playing in the week between Christmas and New Year's. Ten had premiered, with high hopes, during this traditionally prestigious week. Virtually none of them, however, is remembered today, except for Thornton Wilder's *The Merchant of Yonkers*. No shows sold preview tickets during Christmas week, since tryouts in this period took place out of town. Straight plays outnumbered musical productions by three to one. Off-Broadway, which was to have a great influence on the course of the commercial theatre, was still a thing of the future. But a number of noncommercial companies, including the Group Theatre, the Mercury Theatre, the Federal Theatre Project (an arm of the WPA), and the Labor Stage (an ILGWU project), were all using Broadway houses during the season.

The Federal Theatre was shortly out of business, on Broadway and everywhere else in America, because of political pressures. On December 21, *Variety* noted that Actors' Equity had protested the F. T. P.'s "lagging production this season" in New York City.²⁶ A week later, *Variety* forecast the end in a news item which announced that the New York project was

required to lay off a thousand people by January 16. "In some quarters," the article pointed out, "it's said that the heavy slicing of the theatre project is attributed to alleged radicals in the various departments. Lists of those dropped will be watched carefully for any possible 'discrimination' against 'radicals.'"²⁷

Federal Theatre Director Hallie Flanagan later wrote that the 1938–39 F. T. P. Christmas show, a children's theatre production of *Pinocchio*, had been a particularly important one "because it is a visualization of what we have been able to do in rehabilitating professional theatre people and retraining them in new techniques." The production used "fifty vaudeville people who were at one time headliners and who, through no fault of their own, suddenly found themselves without a market. Now they are artists in a new field."²⁸

In fact, vaudeville was now virtually gone from the neighborhood—and from the nation. It was generally believed by show people that the chief villain was the movies, in particular the talking pictures, which had arrived at the end of the twenties. Whatever the cause, there were only a few minor holdouts on Broadway in the winter of 1938–39. At the Shuberts' Majestic a kind of vaudeville-revue, with Molly Picon and "Fats" Waller, called *Vaudeville Marches On*, opened during Christmas week. But there were no houses still playing traditional "straight" vaudeville on Broadway; the famed Palace, for example, was showing motion pictures.²⁹ Such vaudeville acts as had survived were to be seen in area nightclubs and in the neighborhood's so-called presentation houses—the large movie theaters that featured live stage shows between their films. In April 1939, *Billboard*, the entertainment trade magazine, surveyed a number of theater critics about the form's potential for survival. The consensus was summed up by Brooks Atkinson. "On the whole," he said, "there is nothing wrong with vaudeville except that it is dead."³⁰

Burlesque's symptoms were equally serious at the end of the thirties. Throughout the decade, burlesque operators had taken over a number of theaters on Forty-second Street and elsewhere in the Times Square district. In the mid-thirties, in fact, when other forms of live entertainment were suffering, the burlesque business had been excellent. But in May 1937, Paul Moss, the License Commissioner of New York, bowing to pressure from clergymen and moralists, had banned burlesque in the city. The shows' operators fought back in the courts and gained a series of partial reprieves. But basically it was all over.³¹

By 1938 there were only five burlesque shows—then known as "Follies"—in the entire city. By 1939 there were just three shows left, and many strippers fled to the World's Fair, where they could find employment in the Amusement Area. As H. M. Alexander noted in 1938 in his *Strip Tease: The Vanished Art of Burlesque*,

For the present the strip tease and burlesque are through in New York. It's true that the reformers have temporized a little, allowing some of the theatres to reopen. But the operators can't use the tease; the off-color blackouts are forbidden; the word "burlesque" is taboo. The Minskys aren't even allowed to put their own names on the marquee. The jerks pass the theatres by. The one or two houses that remain open are in the red.³²

In 1942, Commissioner Moss refused to grant any license renewals to burlesque theaters, officially eliminating traditional burlesque in New York. Throughout the late thirties, however, as Irving Zeidman points out in *The American Burlesque Show*, there was a kind of underground burlesque operating on Broadway. These were the

strip clip-joint nightclubs on 52nd Street which succeeded the burlesque houses. They survived for several years only because they were, in the main, unadvertised, unpublicized, and generally unknown—in exact antithesis of the exploitation that brought about the downfall of the burlesque houses. After a while, they became noticed and noticeable. They had moved from storefronts near Sixth Avenue to gaudy bagnios near Broadway. So they were closed down also. And all that remained were the belly dancers.³³

The belly dancers were to be seen in cheap sideshow-style presentations connected with the penny arcades and dime museums in the area. The classic dime museum was Hubert's on Forty-second Street, which had been in the area for some years and would continue to operate into the sixties. In the thirties, Hubert's offered visitors freaks and Professor Heckler's popular flea circus.³⁴ The belly dancers were presumably there, too; a later visitor to Hubert's noted "a tiny stand-up theater in which two United Nations Dancing Girls periodically gyrate modestly to the strains of a horrendous Greek rock-and-roll phonograph record." An interesting symbolism is suggested by the December 1938 news story that a more up-to-date dime museum, Robert Ripley's Believe-It-Or-Not "Odditorium," would soon replace the old George M. Cohan Theatre.³⁵

The garish "grinders" surfaced in much the same way. As the 1939 WPA guide noted, on "Forty-second Street west of Broadway, once the show place of the district, famous theaters have been converted to movie 'grind' houses devoted to continuous double feature programs."³⁶ As huge, elaborate movie palaces like the Paramount and the Roxy arose on Broadway and Seventh Avenue, the old Forty-second Street houses could no longer compete and were forced to lengthen their hours and lower both their prices and their artistic sights. The frankly pornographic films of later years had not yet arrived on Forty-second Street, but by 1939

male-oriented second-run films and ancient comedies were now the staple of the old theater block.

A few blocks to the north, the motion picture business was being played out on a very different scale. The Roxy, Strand, Paramount, Radio City Music Hall, and the other large and important houses were generally doing a considerable volume business during the 1938–39 season. Grosses had been down just before Christmas week, but that was not uncommon, and the major Broadway movie houses were featuring an appealing list of first-run films. Big bands had become an important attraction and were featured in several of their stage shows. During Christmas week, the Astor was offering *Pygmalion* and the Capitol, *Sweethearts*. The Criterion was presenting *Blondie*, the Globe, *The Lady Vanishes*, and the Music Hall, *A Christmas Carol*. The Paramount was showing *Artists and Models Abroad*, and the Rialto; *Heart of the North*. The Roxy featured *Kentucky*, and the Strand, *Dawn Patrol*.³⁷

Some of the old vaudevillians not employed by the Federal Theatre Project were seen in stage shows in the neighborhood's big movie theaters, most of which were "presentation houses" offering patrons live entertainment between films. But there were problems. The American Federation of Actors (the variety artists' union) met with the owners of film theaters which ran stage shows to protest the working conditions of the performers in the shows. The union met first with the management of the Roxy, since, according to *Variety*, "conditions there are worse than in any of the Main Stem houses." The big issue was the fact that chorus members from the shows—the so-called line girls—were underpaid.³⁸

Line girls did have a few other options during the winter of 1938–39. Among them were the big new nightclubs that had come into being since Repeal, clubs that specialized in "big revues with elaborate settings" and which catered "to big audiences."³⁹ Most nightclub operators in the neighborhood were emphatically committed to a cut-rate formula and volume business; and at the end of 1938, they were concerned about their holiday crowds. Just before Christmas, *Billboard* noted that nightclub business was down and that club owners were intentionally keeping their minimums and cover charges low during the holidays. Owners were especially worried that a 3:00 A.M. curfew would seriously hurt their New Year's Eve business.⁴⁰ There were labor problems in the clubs as well as in the presentation houses; nightclub waiters were insisting on a \$3 per week raise, although they had worked out a compromise with two of the biggest clubs in the district, the International Casino, and Billy Rose's Casa Manana.⁴¹

Rose, who refined the "volume" concept to an art form during the middle and late thirties, did not have much to worry about, however. In 1938, as Lewis Erenberg has said, Rose's two clubs, "Casa Manana, in the old Earl Carroll Theatre, and the Diamond Horseshoe, installed in the

basement of the Paramount Hotel, were the two most successful theater-restaurants on Broadway.⁴² The new Diamond Horseshoe, which opened with considerable fanfare on Christmas night, 1938, illustrated Rose's especially creative cut-rate formula, which, as Stephen Nelson says, included "low prices, and exciting pace, familiar old-time material, and an overall feeling of continuous festivity."⁴³

Rose's show that night, *The Turn of the Century*, featured an evening in the life of Diamond Jim Brady and Lillian Russell, and portions of it were set in Rector's and Delmonico's. The stars were Fritzi Scheff and a number of other Broadway old-timers who exploited the kind of canned nostalgia for so-called Gay Nineties Broadway (a barber-shop quartet sang during intermissions) also seen in movies and musicals of the period. As Rose himself characterized the essence of the show: "You have to keep in mind that 700 people are wrestling with a five course dinner. The goal is a down to earth show with obvious audience appeal . . . no subtlety allowed."⁴⁴

The result of Rose's efforts, as *Variety* noted, was a palpable Christmas week hit.⁴⁵ The press was lavish in its praise and patrons turned up in droves. *The Turn of the Century*, which cost \$33,000 to stage, ran for seventeen months and grossed \$982,000 in its first year. Not surprisingly, a decade later, Rose—who perhaps understood popular entertainment better than anyone else in his time—was still using the same formula. When the club closed in 1951, it was said that four million people had come to Rose's lucky Diamond Horseshoe and that the club had grossed \$20 million.

This brief survey of Times Square entertainment venues during Christmas week of 1938–39 suggests some of the quality of the area at the end of the thirties. But it tells only a small part of the story. In his book on the nineteenth century Union Square theatrical district, John Frick points out that Union Square cannot be explained solely by describing such venues. He believes that the neighborhood was defined quite as much by its concentration of related industries: "by the offices of theatrical agents; by hotels, bars, and restaurants that catered to actors and theatre-goers alike; by costume houses, scenery shops, manufacturers of stage properties, theatrical printers, stage photographers, trade newspapers, and shops that sold the latest foreign and domestic scripts."⁴⁶ So it was with Broadway at the end of the thirties. The area contained hundreds of institutions which were connected in some way to its theaters, its movie houses, its nightclubs, and all of its other entertainment venues. Many of these institutions *supported* the entertainment industry (and were supported by it). There were theatrical clubs, such as the Lambs and the Twelfth Night Club, and several churches for actors, like Saint Malachy's

and the Union Methodist Episcopal Church. The offices of the Broadway trade papers, *Variety* and *Billboard*, operated in the neighborhood, as did a number of boardinghouses, restaurants, and small hotels like the Schuyler, which catered specifically to performers.⁴⁷

The Astor and Sardi's were among the important hotels and restaurants aimed at visitors who had chosen the area because it was an entertainment center. Unfortunately, in 1939, the first-class hotel and restaurant businesses were in decline. The famous old Knickerbocker Hotel, for example, had recently become an office building. World's Fair tourists would come increasingly to choose East Side hotels in preference to those in the entertainment area because of the area's growing reputation for crime.⁴⁸ But quality support institutions were simply being replaced by those directed at a new, broader audience.

There were also those institutions that *supplied* the specialized entertainment industry in the neighborhood, and, to a considerable extent, nationwide. If the theaters remained in the neighborhood after the Depression, so did many of the businesses that provided them with costumes, scripts, makeup, lighting equipment, and the most necessary element, personnel—actors, musicians, dancers, directors, designers, technicians. Many of the same companies also supplied nightclubs, motion picture theaters, and related entertainment venues in the area.

A number of the old companies had gone out of business after the Crash, but trade papers and magazines from the late thirties were still crammed with advertisements for the crafts associated with entertainment. Marcus Loew's old booking agency on Forty-sixth Street was still advertising in *Variety*.⁴⁹ Dazian, a theatrical fabric supplier which had come to the neighborhood at the turn of the century, was still doing business there in 1939. An important costumer, Brooks Costume Company, had recently moved to larger quarters in the neighborhood because of World's Fair contracts and, as they said in their advertisements, their "ever increasing clientele."⁵⁰ Brooks, like many other entertainment-related industries in the area, was just then emerging from the worst of the Depression.

Related to these support institutions and suppliers was a third category of Times Square institution. I suggested earlier that the neighborhood in 1939 was also center for the *administration* of entertainment, both locally and nationally. It was the hub for performing arts unions and guilds, for the offices of the major theater owners and producers, for the Eastern offices of motion picture companies, the headquarters of carnival entrepreneurs, and popular music publishers. The offices of Actors' Equity and the American Federation of Actors, for example, were to be found in the area, along with the executive offices of Paramount, Loew's, and many other film-related companies. The Brill Building was the headquarters of

America's popular music industry, and the Shuberts still operated their somewhat battered empire out of offices that overlooked their private street, Shubert Alley, the center of the entertainment universe.

Many of these institutions continued to exist in the neighborhood well beyond the winter of 1938–39. As Stuart Little and Arthur Cantor suggested in 1971, "Over the years the directory listing in lobbies may change, but the parochial quality of the district remains. . . . In the theater district theater people work, eat, and transact business with their own kind in their own inbred enclave." Yet, by the late sixties, as Little and Cantor also suggest, the "tendency to congregate in the old rabbit warrens around Times Square" was clearly breaking down.⁵¹ Theaters were disappearing, traditional entertainment-related businesses were leaving the neighborhood, and new—and often undesirable—businesses were swiftly taking their places.

Times Square is clearly not the same specialized commercial district that it was 50 years ago. The entertainment business has changed radically. There are far fewer legitimate theaters in the area and far fewer Broadway shows being produced, although those that manage to survive are often extremely profitable. Motion picture houses are closing, and the various support businesses associated with the entertainment industry have virtually disappeared from the neighborhood. Nevertheless, real estate in the area is extremely valuable, and Broadway is becoming lined with office buildings.

Some people prophesy that the traditional Times Square entertainment district will be dead in another decade. Others claim that the area is already dead, soon to be replaced by an uptown Wall Street in the making. It has also been suggested that the neighborhood is merely undergoing another change, this time into a new kind of entertainment district suited for the twenty-first century. But that is another story, and one that remains to be told.

10

IRVING BERLIN: TROUBADOUR OF TIN PAN ALLEY

Philip Furia

Irving Berlin has no "place" in American music; Irving Berlin IS American music.

Jerome Kern

JEROME KERN'S equation of Irving Berlin with American music may seem like theatrical hyperbole, but during the first half of the twentieth century "American music" was largely the product of the industry known as Tin Pan Alley, and nobody epitomizes the Alley or its music better than Irving Berlin.

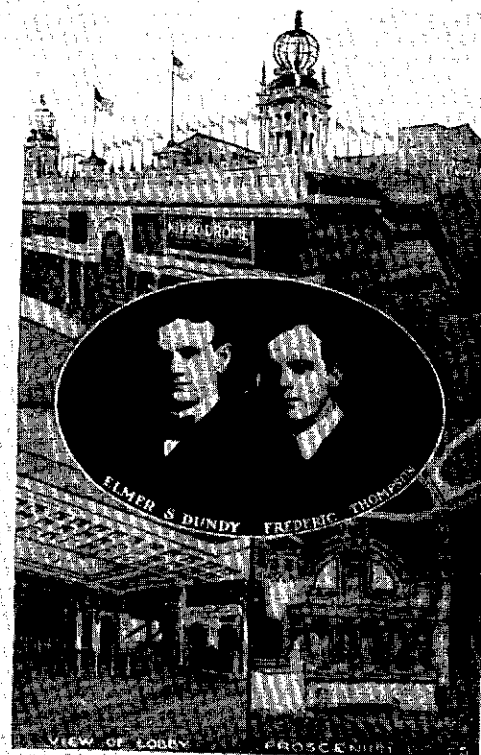
Tin Pan Alley started out in the 1880s as a cluster of sheet music publishing houses in the Bowery, moved up to Union Square in the 1890s to be closer to vaudeville, then followed the movement of theaters and nightlife northward. By 1910 most publishers had moved up to West Twenty-eighth Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue, where the din of pianos concocting, polishing, and demonstrating songs sounded to songwriter Monroe Rosenfeld like a cacophony of clashing tin pans and inspired his sobriquet, "Tin Pan Alley." By 1920 Tin Pan Alley had followed the crowds up to Times Square, with T. B. Harms anchored at Forty-second and Broadway and other publishers setting up shop along Broadway to Fifty-sixth Street. In 1931 the new Brill Building at 1619 Broadway became the center of an industry which, by then, reached into the Broadway theater, Hollywood sound stage, and radio and recording studios.

More successfully than any other songwriter, Irving Berlin, who



New York Hippodrome, Thompson & Dundy's "department store in theatricals," covered the entire block between Forty-third and Forty-fourth streets along Sixth Avenue. It opened its doors in 1905. The Wurts Collection, Museum of The City of New York.

SOUVENIR BOOK OF THE NEW YORK HIPPODROME

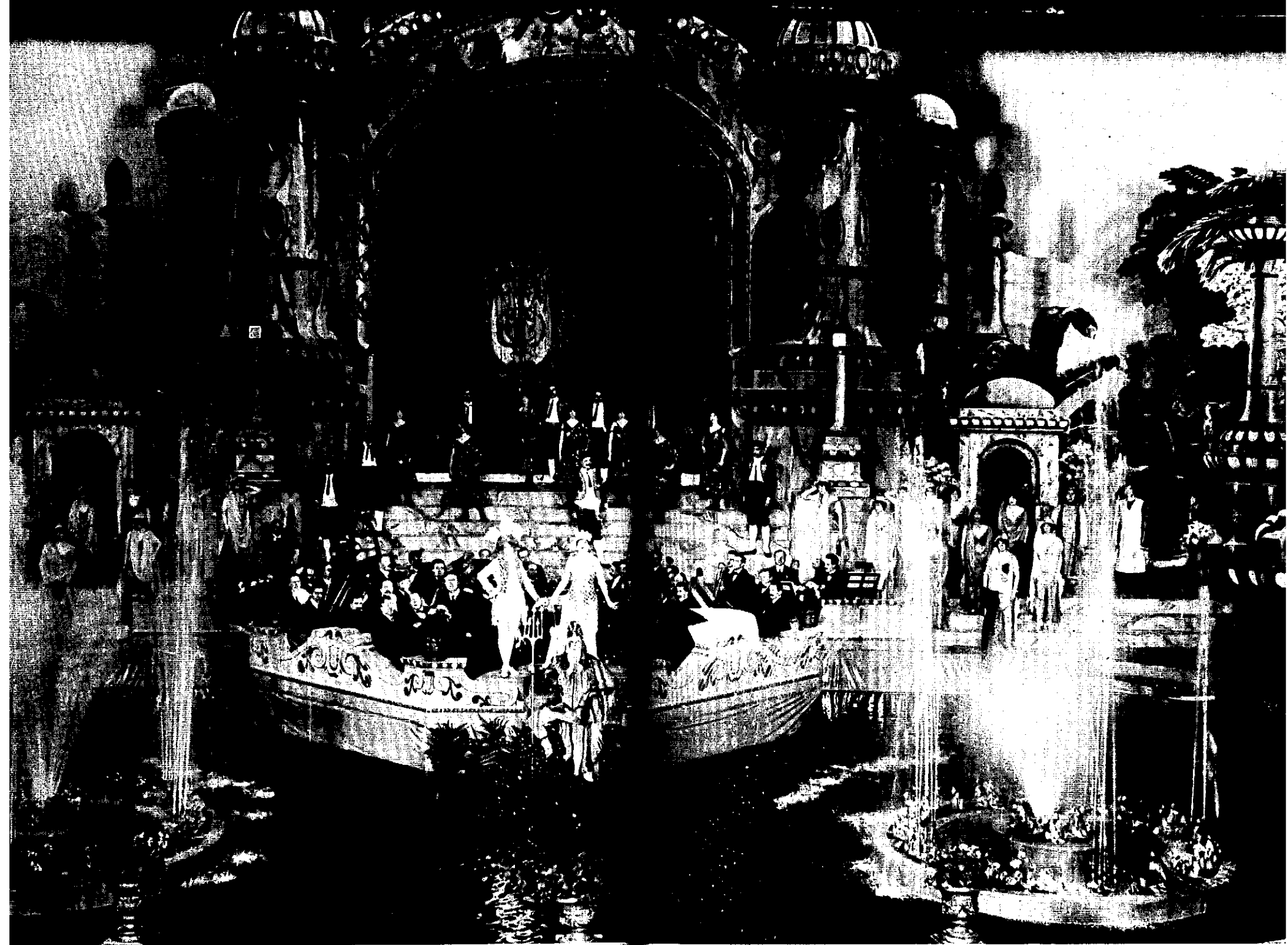


PRICE TEN CENTS

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Elmer S. "Skip" Dundy and Frederic Thompson (inset), creators of the Hippodrome and Coney Island's Luna Park, were partners until Dundy's death in 1907. The Thompson Collection, Museum of The City of New York.



"The Court of the Golden Fountain" was a characteristic Hippodrome spectacular, featuring stage illumination on an unprecedented scale—some 13,000 amperes. Photograph by [unreadable]



A Tenderloin "street dancer," pictured here in stylish dress typical of turn-of-the-century prostitutes. (Respectable women would not have appeared on the street alone.) Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, N.Y.C.



The Knights of Columbus "welcome hut" in the mid-1940s, a precursor of the USO clubs of World War II. Museum of the City of New York.

Presbyterian clergyman Charles H. Parkhurst established the Society for the Prevention of Vice in 1892 to rid the city of prostitution. Courtesy of Timothy J. Gilfoyle.

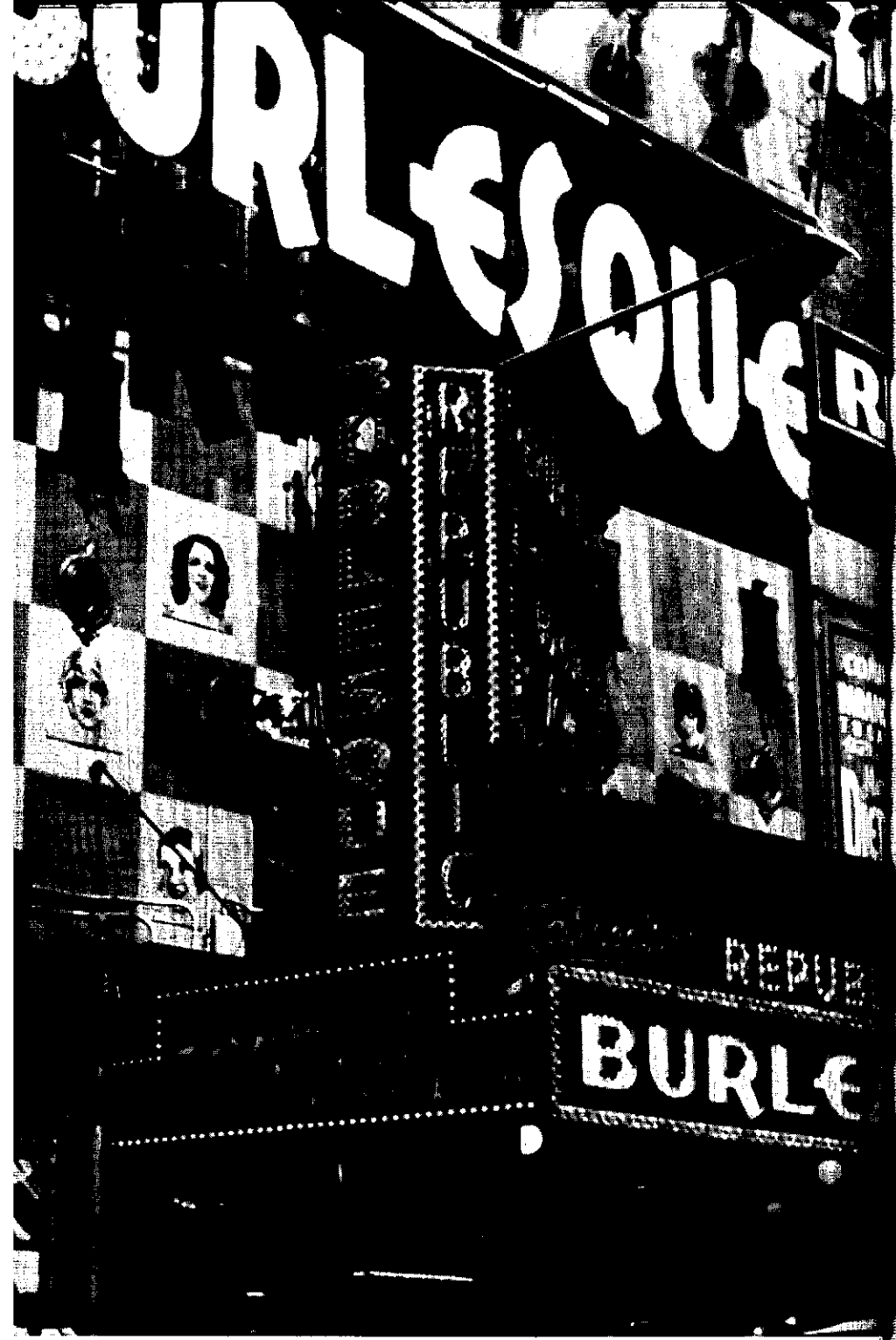


A Tenderloin "street dancer," pictured here in stylish dress typical of turn-of-the-century prostitutes. (Respectable women would not have appeared on the street alone.) Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, N.Y.C.

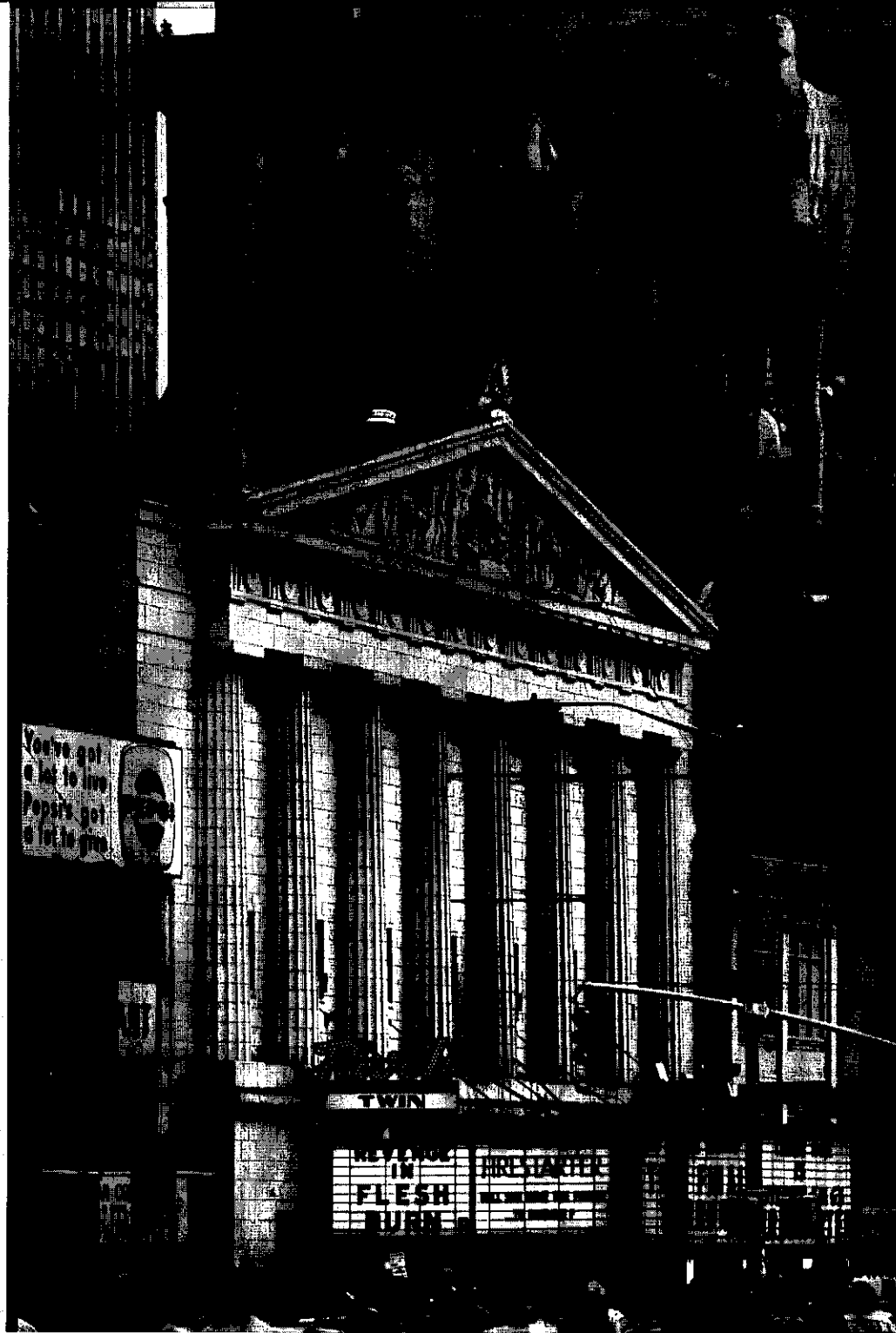


The Knights of Columbus "welcome hut" in the mid-19th century, precursor of the USO clubs of World War II. Museum of the City of New York.

Presbyterian clergyman Charles H. Parkhurst established the Society for the Prevention of Vice in 1892 to rid the city of prostitution. Courtesy of Timothy J. Gilfoyle.



The Republic at 207 W. 42nd Street was one of three legitimate theaters converted during the 1930s to burlesque houses by Billy Minsky. The Republic's shows, theater critic Brooks Atkinson observed, "were the bawdiest this neighborhood has seen in years." Courtesy of



Times Square today: The Rivoli, one of the great movie palaces of the 1920s, became a venue for "adult" films. © 1991 Cervin Robinson.

Bryant Park. Thus the Astor maintained its public reputation as an eminently respectable Times Square rendezvous, while its reputation as a gay rendezvous and pickup bar assumed legendary proportions in the gay world; and on certain nights the Metropolitan Opera became the "biggest bar in town."

Still, gay men's use of the Square was a hard-won and unstable victory, which required them to engage in constant territorial struggles with the agents of the dominant cultural order. Different groups of men adopted different strategies of everyday resistance to the dominant order, different strategies for staking out and defining their worlds, and those differences often brought them into conflict. Nonetheless, even those men who chose to remain most hidden from the dominant culture were not hidden from each other. Gay men became part of the spectacle of Times Square, but they also transformed it into a haven.

PRIVATE PARTS IN PUBLIC PLACES

Laurence Senelick

"If you get three Americans in one place, two will get together to reform the morals of the third."

H. L. Mencken¹

A LONDON MAGAZINE reported recently on the current proliferation of prostitutes in the Earls Court area and commented on a passage of arms between a black transvestite and a "civilian": "This incident occurred not, as you might have expected, on the sidewalk of Times Square but outside the Underground station in Earls Court Road."² Violent encounters and flaunted deviancy are taken by the world at large to be "expected" in Times Square: the Great White Way is now a byword for ostentatious flesh-peddling in an open-air meat-rack. How has it come about that Times Square should be perceived as, to use Steven Marcus's term, pornotopia?³ Is it the condition or the perception of the condition that is novel?

A current sociological study notes that, whereas in 1933 the musical film *Forty-Second Street* portrayed Times Square as a glittering world of show business, John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* in 1968 characterized it as a squalid subculture of sex-for-hire.⁴ This is a popular contrast but a superficial one, promoting the civic myth of a primordial Square that was once an Arcadian playground for all white New Yorkers. The differences between the two films are not so great. Made during the Depression, *Forty-Second Street* actually draws a cynical picture of hungry girls like "Anytime Annie" ("she only said No once, and then she didn't hear the question") who will "put out" for a part in the chorus; they may be loose in the hilts, but are shown as brave, self-reliant, and realistic in a tough time.

The sexual economics of *Midnight Cowboy* are more blatant and, because the prostitute is male in a patriarchal society, allegedly more depraved. Both films offer depictions of microcosms—the closed system of the theater, with untouchable allure projected across the footlights, and the closed system of hustling, with attainable allure flashed on the street corner. But because the former is kept behind its proscenium frame and remains expensively out of reach (especially for a Depression public), it retains glamor, whereas the latter, all too approachable, seems sordid in its potential for realization. Loud protests are raised nowadays about the flamboyant drag queens who “turn tricks” on Eighth Avenue, but no one objected in 1895 when Oscar Hammerstein’s Music Hall on Forty-fifth Street and Broadway opened with a female impersonator on its bill.⁵ The footlights neutralized and beautified what was unacceptable under the streetlights. Still, what Una Merkel in *Forty-Second Street* purveys to the chorus director behind the scenes and what Jon Voight purveys to closet cases in penny-arcades in *Midnight Cowboy* remain the same commodity. Times Square did not gradually change from the Great White Way to the City of Dreadful Night; rather, its veneer rubbed off to reveal the economic realities that had always been present.

Illicit sexual activity in New York has never been limited to any particular neighborhood; certain vicinities gained a reputation for vice simply because gamy goings-on were more conspicuous there than elsewhere. Before the Civil War, moralists and visitors characterized the Bowery and the Five Points as the sinkhole of the city, but by the 1870s and 1880s, as commercial and public life moved uptown and westward, so did what the reformers stigmatized as the Social Evil—prostitution. Satan’s Circus, the nickname for the area between Fifth and Seventh avenues and bounded by Twenty-fourth and Fortieth Streets, became the focus of attention for reporters seeking a lurid story or preachers a sensational sermon. It was also at this time that the stretch of westside streets from Fourteenth to Forty-second won the name Tenderloin, allegedly from a venal cop who contrasted the pickings to be had there with those from a rumpsteak area. Less affluent and opulent in its display of vice was Hell’s Kitchen, the area north and south of West Thirty-fourth Street and west of Eighth Avenue, which rose to notoriety in the 1890s. Some said it was so called because of the emanations from the many steam vents in the roadway; others, because a veteran police officer had opined that hell was a mild climate compared to it.⁶ Only ten blocks from Times Square, its reputation for gang warfare and abject poverty went unchallenged until most of it was demolished for the Lincoln Tunnel and the bus terminal.

From its beginnings, then, the Times Square region was ringed round with red lights. The business districts near West Forty-second Street

between Sixth and Seventh avenues and the residential areas near West Fifty-fourth between Fifth and Eighth avenues were honeycombed with parlor houses. After a series of raids made them inoperative, their activities transferred to Raines Law hotels. The Raines Law had been passed to prevent sales of liquor in saloons on Sunday, but it was legal to sell drink in hostelrys with no fewer than ten bedrooms. Saloonkeepers opened up hotels in such numbers that over ten thousand new bedrooms were added to Manhattan in short space; most of them occupied by prostitutes. After the crusading citizens’ Committee of Fourteen forced cleanups in 1905 and again in 1912, these were converted to male-only residences, but after World War I they reverted to their original use. Most of the side streets leading off Broadway’s theater district were occupied exclusively by such hotels, where it was alleged that during an entr’acte you could get anything from a quick “knee-trembler” to an abortion.⁷

In the early days of Times Square, prostitution was carried on openly, but because it was upscale and discreetly conducted (the discretion prompted in part by the ongoing action of the Committee of Fourteen), the public attitude towards it was relaxed, not to say tolerant. Discriminating brothels in the upper Forties and lower Fifties between Broadway and Fifth refused to admit customers if they failed to arrive in cabs or taxis. Broadway was the avenue most favored by streetwalkers, but only of the most expensive kind, and it was *de rigueur* not to solicit. The woman would linger at a shop window and wait for a man to approach her with the formulaic “Anything doing tonight, dearie?” These high-priced hookers received commissions from the managers of the cafés and hotels they patronized, and they could afford to pay graft to the police and protection to their pimps. In turn, the pimps and the cops were in collusion to harass any streetwalker who tried to maintain her independence.⁸

Chorus girls and kept women were entertained at fashionable restaurants, some of which, like their European counterparts, provided *chambres séparées* complete with sofas, to accommodate digestive coition. (Rectitudinous Rector’s did not, but limited itself to supplying a gastronomic prelude, thus acting as kind of sexual off-license.) The interclass dalliance promoted by Times Square restaurants was such common knowledge that a line from a Weber and Fields revue became proverbial. A chorus girl is asked if she ever found a pearl in an oyster; she replies, “No, but I got a diamond from a lobster over in Rector’s last night.” The final curtain line of Eugene Walter’s 1909 play about a kept woman, *The Easiest Way*, also turned into a catchphrase; the heroine, abandoned by both her keeper and her lover, proclaims at the end with an insouciance worthy of Scarlett O’Hara, “I’m going to Rector’s to make a hit and to hell with the rest.”⁹ Any Broadway audience of the time would deduce that she meant to pick up a new protector there.

The proximity of restaurants to theaters, which, to pay the increasing

rentals, expanded into cabarets and roof gardens, encouraged this reciprocity between the actress's dressing room and the millionaire's boudoir. The murders of Louise Lawson and Dot King, both young actresses kept by well-to-do men and both strangled with their own stockings, and the case of Evelyn Nesbit Thaw, a former chorus girl whose rich husband shot her lover, the architect Stanford White, impressed this intercourse on the public mind.¹⁰

It was an age-old symbiosis. In 1753 a writer in the London journal *The World* had sarcastically suggested that "at the Play-house, young gentlemen and ladies were instructed by an Etheridge, a Wycherley, a Congreve and a Vanbrugh, in the rudiments of that science which they were to perfect at the Bagnio."¹¹ In the early nineteenth century, American theaters had stayed solvent because of receipts from their bars and admissions to the third tier, a haunt of prostitutes.¹² Moralists who attacked the theater had powerful ammunition in this economically dictated nexus between sex and stage, and would soon train their gun sights on Times Square.

The rapid sleazification of Times Square was due not to a moral breakdown but to a most moral experiment: the passage of the Volstead Act in 1919. Divested of their liquor sales, the restaurants and roof gardens folded. They were replaced by after-hours, nonalcoholic cabarets which, for a fifty dollar cover charge, provided chorus girls or walk-on actresses for each table: the customer could take it from there.¹³ A highly symbolic transfer occurred in 1924 when Murray's restaurant, famous for its revolving dance floor, closed, and its well-located premises, on Forty-second Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue, were leased to Hubert's Museum. A typical dime museum specializing in freaks, platform acts, and Professor Heckler's Flea Circus, along with a view of the "Hidden Secrets" of sex as displayed by the "French Academy of Medicine, Paris," Hubert's was often cited in the thirties as a sign of the area's decay. But it proved to have great survival potential, and persisted into the 1960s, by which time, despite turning into a pinball arcade, it had become, after the New York Public Library, "the ranking cultural institution" on Forty-second Street.¹⁴

The reason this shift from posh restaurant to cheap dime museum is symbolic has to do with more than the decline from carriage trade to *boi polloi*. It signals a transference from participation to, if I may coin a word, spectation. Wining and dining a chorus girl was a sport of the rich or at least the well-heeled; the sexual consummation was a private tête-à-tête (or *corps-à-corps*) behind closed doors. What took place was experienced solely by the parties involved, even though a host of constables, waiters, barmen, cabbies, and florists may have benefited financially from the transaction.

The dime museum, on the other hand, represents a spectacle offered to the eyes of the multitude, a spectacle that promises to unveil the hidden,

the forbidden, the secrets of the alcove. In downtown dime museums, the manager would bawl, "In de rear room, gemmen, dere's a exhibition of such a nature dat no ladies an' no boys uner sixteen is allowed. Ten cents admits each an' every sport!"¹⁵ The rear room may have contained nothing more titillating than Indian artefacts and a tame bear, for dime museums sought to avoid scandal, but the claim to enlightening the public was bolstered by displays of wax casts of venereal ailments, deformed genitalia, and graphic depictions of embryo development. Within the dimly lit sanctums of the dime museum, those aspects of human nature normally kept under wraps were solemnly exfoliated. The male viewer—the "sport"—could gaze, but not touch, on the mysteries of generation, ostensibly for his edification, but also for a surreptitious titillation, the sense that here one was admitted, in all safety, to a prohibited pleasure. One might savor the aroma of the fruits of the tree of knowledge without actually biting into them. The joys of the dime museum are passive: the imagination is stimulated without an outlet for physical gratification. But it had to remain a backroom pleasure. As late as 1911, Anthony Comstock, the egregious Dogberry of American morals, had had asexual wax figures removed from the window of a Broadway garment manufacturer because they exhibited their anodyne nudity.¹⁶

A similar voyeurism is an ingredient of the theatrical spectator's pleasure as well, and as Prohibition-era reformers managed to sweep prostitution off the streets, making it low key and discreet, they trained their attention on the theater. Oddly enough, it may be George Bernard Shaw who pioneered the notion of "adult entertainment" in Times Square. When, in 1904, Arnold Daly sought to stage *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Shaw's comedy about brothel-keeping as a capitalist enterprise, the playwright inserted a special clause into the contract stipulating that "the Manager shall endeavour as far as may be practicable to apprise the public of the fact that the Play is suitable for representation before serious adult audiences only."¹⁷ Despite Shaw's proviso that his play be X-rated, the 1905 production at the Garrick Theatre was attacked by the newspapers as gangrenous smut-peddling, and, incited by Comstock, the police closed it down. Shaw coined the term "Comstockery" to characterize such officious prudery. A generation later, the prudes were back on the prowl.

In 1923 a magistrate dismissed charges against a downtown burlesque dancer with the observation, "The standard of morals is no higher on the East Side than at Broadway and Forty-second Street."¹⁸ What he meant was that scantily clad but high-toned revues were flourishing on Broadway while cheaper burlesque was relegated primarily to the Lower East Side. Ziegfeld, the Shubert Brothers, George White, and Earl Carroll all featured female nudity as an attraction, the spectrum running from Ziegfeld's refined artiness to Carroll's blatant eroticism.¹⁹ Bernard Sobel

complained, without irony, that the morals of burlesque were being ruined by Broadway: strippers were no longer having affairs with company members, but

employ the gold-digging methods perfected by some Broadway show girls; that is, prostitution so thickly coated with stage glamor and publicity that it escapes this invidious term; systematized prostitution, nevertheless, with consistent holding out, conscious capitulation and definite subsidy.²⁰

To the reformers it seemed as if the sex they had swept from the streets had settled on the stage. Throughout the 1920s and well into the 1930s, the revues were raided and the legitimate theaters regularly attacked by John Sumner and the Society for the Suppression of Vice. In 1923 religious organizations declared a ban on a very mixed bag which contained Brieux's anti-syphilis play *Damaged Goods*, Sholem Asch's Yiddish melodrama *The God of Vengeance*, Avery Hopwood's romantic comedy *The Demi-Virgin*, and two musical revues, *Topics of 1923* and *Artists and Models*.²¹ A stage censorship bill introduced in Albany failed to win passage, but three years later the district attorney empaneled three hundred citizens to "pass on the moral content of theater productions."²² He drew up a list of shows he regarded as unacceptable, and when the managers failed to close them, he raided the three he considered most degrading: Edouard Bourdet's neurasthenic lesbian drama *The Captive*, Mae West's lighthearted period piece *Sex*, and William Francis Dugan's *The Virgin Man*. Fines and short jail terms were imposed on the authors and producers.

Although Governor Alfred E. Smith opposed official censorship and New York's bon vivant mayor Jimmy Walker was heard to remark, "Did you ever know a woman who was ruined by a book?"²³ as good Catholics they were pressured into complying with the religious community's onslaught on the drama. In 1927 Smith signed into law the Wales Act, which allowed theaters to be padlocked for a year, with a caution that licenses might not be renewed if the police decided, before its opening, that a play was obscene or if a jury decided, after the opening, that the show on display tended to corrupt minors.²⁴ This placed the onus on the theater-owner to oust the offending show or else suffer financial loss. The first play so prosecuted was the French drama *Maya*, about a Marseilles prostitute whose customers' fantasies deify her; neither the critics nor the producer Lee Shubert found anything offensive in it, but it was withdrawn after a week.²⁵ At the same time, the district attorney made no effort to close the melodrama *The Shanghai Gesture*, which the critics had excoriated as flashy sensationalism; a kind of *Mrs. Warren Goes East*, it is set in Mother Goddam's elegant Shanghai bordello, where girls wait in hanging cages to

be chosen. Apparently the district attorney believed that exoticism and an unhappy ending defanged vice, while the lowly setting of *Maya* and the equation of whore with earth goddess put public morals in jeopardy. The following year, when the cast of Mae West's *Pleasure Man* was arrested after two performances, the critic Hiram Motherwell pointed out the law's Catch-22:

The Wales law can only be invoked where the theatre manager or owner refuses to alter or eject a play which the police have adjudged obscene. In an undefendable case like that of *Pleasure Man* no producer or owner is going to defy a clear police order. But in a case like that of *The Captive* it may be the moral right and duty of the producer to protest the irresponsible decision of the police and insist on a fair trial in the courts—in other words, to take exactly the action which would make Wales procedure virtually mandatory.²⁶

Note his own offhand assumption that a comedy is unjustifiable, a sexual tragedy justifiable. There was clearly no consensus on what constituted stage obscenity. Who was being protected: sophisticated Broadwayite, visiting hicks, or Mr. Podsnap's "young person"? Despite the Wales Act's patent unconstitutionality, it remained on the statute books for four decades.

Constrained to mute their erotic appeal and sexual frankness when these elements were clearly to the audience's taste, the high-priced theaters succumbed during the Depression to the laws of the marketplace: those that did not convert to cinemas were taken over by entrepreneurs of the bump-and-grind. Three of these five conversions were engineered by the Minskys, who leased the International at Columbus Circle, the Central at Forty-seventh Street, and, most notoriously, the Republic at 207 W. Forty-second Street. Turning his back on earlier attempts to camouflage burlesque as "musical comedy," Billy Minsky trumpeted the vulgarity of his shows to such effect that Brooks Atkinson was compelled to admit that they "were the bawdiest this neighborhood has seen for years."²⁷ The Minskys' success emboldened other entrepreneurs: the Apollo Theatre, which had housed the sophisticated nudities of *George White's Scandals* for eight years, now sheltered Max Wilner's high-class burlesque; under Max Rudnick, the Eltinge also went the way of all flesh. It was noted that the good fortune of Times Square burlesque depended on low salaries and secondhand scenery, abetted by the curiosity of the man in the street. Outside New York, rising railway fares and the conversion of theaters to movie houses had all but vanquished the circuits or Wheels; burlesque's last stronghold was Forty-second Street and Seventh Avenue.²⁸ By 1937, chronicler Irving Zeidman reports, "burlesque... was threatening to

engulf the entire Broadway area,"²⁹ ever more daring in its advertisement and sumptuousness.

The ensuing protests and opprobrium had, as usual, an economic foundation, and, under the smokescreen of religious outrage, their instigators were theater owners and producers envious of burlesque's takings. Uptown burlesque shows differed in no essential quality from those downtown, which were temporarily left unscathed. It was the "frowiness" of the facades of those in Times Square and the slumlike environment they seemed to engender that were accused of devaluing neighboring businesses and fostering a clientele unpropitious to other commercial interests. With burlesque's street barkers and gaudy posters, the district had taken on the coloration of a carnival midway, and what had once been discreetly concealed behind elegant facades was now emblazoned in the open.

Even before the invasion of burlesque, Times Square had become the venue of "pickled punk," shows featuring fetuses in alcohol, living statuary which was always unrobed if immobile, and lecturers on restoring virile potency. It housed a Salon des Arts hung with thirty nude paintings, where, as patrons of the finer things looked on, an artist in smock and beret would churn out fresh masterpieces based on the nude model on display.³⁰

Some deplored the decline from lobster palaces to chop suey joints, but many, like the painter Reginald Marsh, found the change exhilarating: Minskyville, as *The New Yorker* renamed the district, seethed with life, an Hogarthian lustiness lit by neon and punctuated by the spiels of the pitchmen. As Brooks McNamara has noted (see Chapter 9), the Square was redefining itself as an entertainment district for a broader popular audience.³¹ It was a year-long version of the fairground, and, as in Ben Jonson's comedy about *Bartholomew Fair*, there were always plenty of Justice Overdos and puritanical Zeal-of-the-Land Busys eager to see it banned.

A recent sociological study has stated that "regardless of the level of crime, little tends to undermine the fabric of a city more than visible street deviance [which] creates an offensive atmosphere, especially for children."³² This is a relatively modern and remarkably culture-bound attitude: ignoring long traditions of bazaars and public squares, it derives from nineteenth century modes of social control, policing, and city planning, which sought to contain outdoor activity of all sorts within closed, licensed premises. It distrusts social plurality and the interaction of classes and attitudes, while it subjects urban life to stratification or compartmentalization. At present it contributes to the proliferation of suburban malls and the Disneyland style of sterilized amusement park. In its view, the efflorescence of sexuality in plain sight, illicit or not, was and would remain deplorable in Times Square.

The attempts to curtail burlesque in 1933 and 1934, while the Depression still raged, had scant success, since celebrities were willing to attest that it was no dirtier than many profane Broadway hits. Literary figures insisted that the padlocking of Republic burlesque was the thin edge of the wedge that would imperil legitimate theater.³³ Female employees in burlesque houses testified that they had never been attacked or pestered by customers. This suggests that the current ongoing debate as to whether erotic shows incite or defuse the spectator's lust had already been engaged. But in 1937, a number of external factors combined to eliminate burlesque entirely. First, a series of sex crimes had occurred in the city just before licenses were to be renewed, and it was claimed, with no hard evidence, that the moral chaos created by burlesque had bred a climate in which such crimes could flourish; one Brooklyn clergyman declared that a man who had seen such a show came home and assaulted his own daughter.

Nowadays, when burlesque is an object of nostalgia, it is hard to imagine the vehemence of the attack launched on the burley houses of Times Square in 1937. Although the rallying cry was still the preservation of morality, the spearhead of the attack was the 42nd Street Property Owners and Merchants Association, which enlisted the aid of the Society for the Suppression of Vice and the local clergy, but always remained the front man of the legal actions. When enjoying such affectionate recreations as *Sugar Babies*, we should bear in mind that burlesque theaters at that time were branded as "breeders of vice" and "loitering places for men who trade on the shady side of night life," and Forty-second Street as "a cesspool of filth and obscenity." One theater manager complained with some justice, "We've been accused of everything except kidnapping the Lindbergh baby."³⁴

Most important to the success of the attack, there was a reform administration in office which had to live up to its billing. After smashing fruit machines with a sledgehammer for the news cameramen in his war against gambling, Mayor La Guardia was eager to be seen as the David who slew the Goliath of what he called "incorporated filth."³⁵ Licenses were denied to all fourteen existing burlesque houses in New York, and no new ones were issued; by fiat the very word "burlesque" disappeared from the lexicon of show business advertising.³⁶ Complaints from the American Civil Liberties Union were met with the prudish mayor's insistence that burlesque was just so much sewage and he had the right to abolish it in the interests of public health. So for 20 years, New York and Times Square in particular did without burlesque—with no perceptible improvement in the moral climate of the area. As one historian remarks, burlesque was usually behind the times, sexually speaking, and any evils that might trail in its wake were "symptoms of more basic deficiencies."³⁷

An incidental effect of La Guardia's ban was that the few remaining Times Square playhouses devoted to live entertainment finally metamorphosed into cinemas or "grinders," cheap continuous showings which made their appeal to an exclusively stag trade.³⁸ By the late 1930s, Times Square was already notorious for its honky-tonk atmosphere, its once-elegant restaurants replaced by luncheonettes, its cigar stores and lobbies inhabited by a new element of petty hoodlums. Its hotels, avoided by out-of-towners for fear of crime, charged streetwalkers a dollar for the time it took to turn a trick. The Times Square working girls were now regarded as almost the cheapest white prostitutes in the city, hard put to make seventy-five dollars a week.³⁹ However, this pervasive ambience of lawlessness and squalor was not particularly licentious: off-track betting was a more common misdemeanor than sexual solicitation.

Sex on the hoof really returned to the area with the Second World War. The blowsy blonde runway queens and front-row baldheads in the paintings of Reginald Marsh were superseded by the riotous gobs and gals in the paintings of Paul Cadmus. Servicemen and their adolescent companions flooded into Times Square to kick up their heels on the eve of destruction. The urban tourist described by Neil Harris (see Chapter 3) as a by-product of the commercial city⁴⁰ had evolved into the sexual tourist, who could breathe a heady aroma of freedom from small-town mores in Times Square, and, submerged in its crowds, experience a reassuring assumption of anonymity. Anonymity is the privacy of the crowd. It is still an important factor in the sexual tourist's attraction to Times Square. In wartime, it was abetted by the electrical dimout which tempered the carnival atmosphere with one of mystery, when even the MPs were powerless to prevent the fracas that occurred in the subway arcades.

The invasion of servicemen made another feature—men picking up men—more conspicuous. Previously, and from the 1870s, the downtown area adjacent to Broadway and Houston was regarded as the happy hunting ground of male-to-male sexuality, and Greenwich Village took on a reputation it still merits. In the gay nineties, as his memoirs relate, the self-styled "androgynous" Earl Lind cruised for rough trade in Stuyvesant Square and on Mulberry Street between Grand and Broome; male prostitution had moved as far uptown as Fourteenth Street.⁴¹ The Times Square Building became a popular rendezvous in the late twenties, but wartime put the activity back on the streets. By the early 1940s, young Tennessee Williams was making "abrupt and candid overtures" to groups of sailors and GIs on Times Square street corners; when, as often as not, they accepted his solicitation, he would bring them back to his cruising partner's Village "pad" or to his own, closer room at the Y.⁴²

The first civic measure taken to curtail such activity appears to be the nightly closing of Bryant Park to the public in 1944, because, according to

Mayor La Guardia, "various types of undesirables are gathering there." "Undesirables" became the temporary euphemism; tabloid headlines screamed UNDESIRABLES ARRESTED.⁴³ Both cruising and its consummation moved into the "grinders" and went on undisturbed in restrooms and movie balconies.

The postwar calls for a cleanup were, as usual, economically founded, as corporations and their taxes moved out of midtown Manhattan and many theaters were left empty. Revisions of the zoning codes in 1947 and 1954 did little to halt what most chroniclers lament as the downward slide of Times Square. One study has wryly noted that the new zoning code unintentionally "encouraged the advent of the Forty-second Street porno bookstore by driving out competitors for space on the street."⁴⁴ The prevention of the opening of new penny arcades and similar sucker-bait led to the proliferation of souvenir shops which sold imitation bronze Empire State Buildings over the counter, and photographs of other sorts of erections in the backroom. The ostentation of the arcade, a public space, was replaced by the clandestine "dirty bookshop," a more private space protected by the social assumption that what was invisible did not exist.

The sensational press reported that both streetwalkers and what science had taught it to call homosexuals were more abundant and more conspicuous in their abundance than ever before. Yet there was clearly a division of opinion as to whether Times Square was the Sodom and Gomorrah it was made out to be. Throughout the course of his 25-year tenure at Holy Cross Church, an annual jeremiad from the parish priest Father McCaffrey inveighed against the degeneration of the neighborhood; by 1960 he was insisting that murder and rape were potential at any moment. At the same time, the Police Department stated that out of New York's eighty-one precincts, Times Square would not fall in the top quarter of the list for major crime. It housed no brothels, only one legitimate nightclub, and was responsible for only four drug arrests in 1959. Commentators on these phenomena put them down to the transient nature of the neighborhood and the low incomes of its denizens.⁴⁵ Poverty and vagrancy in a nonresidential area were now being cited as deterrents to serious crime.

According to the same commentators, the police considered the major nuisances in 1960 to be chestnut vendors, beggars, intemperate evangelists, and the "fags" on Forty-second Street. In the late forties, a new style of male hustler had emerged, often ex-servicemen or youths openly declaring that their sexual preferences were for rent. Most of the hustler bars were on the East Side, but Forty-second Street between Seventh and Eighth avenues became the weekend Mecca for out-of-town kids.⁴⁶ The loitering of young men in open shirts and dungarees became well established, yet most arrests of males in Times Square in the fifties were for

brawling. At this unenlightened period, both police and their reporters complained that the boys in what they deemed "Queens County" were "not easy to identify," devoid of tell-tale marks of effeminacy, and solicitation was not so simple to descry as with a female prostitute and her more obvious markings. Distinguishing the female whore from the modern woman was also tougher than in the days when, as one hotel manager remarked, "You used to be able to tell a prostitute by the fact that she let you see her smoking."⁴⁷

What John Rechy was later to melodramatize as the "boiling subterranean" world of the hustler's Times Square⁴⁸ remained invisible to the average passerby, who would go his way unperturbed, unaware that sexual synapses were being formed by—to use a Shakespearean word—"oeillades." Eye contact bears great significance in an area where those who are merely passing through keep their eyes modestly downcast or unfocused. In Alan Bowne's recent play *Forty-Deuce*, one underage hustler refers to these unwitting pedestrians as the "goyim" who "just look at you like you wasn't there or like the street was a movie and you was this extra?"⁴⁹ On the other hand, knowing linkage of eyes between potential consumer and potential consumable is the complicitous signal of entente. Taking pictures of Hispanic juvenile hustlers, the photographer Larry Clark was fascinated by "kids' eyes, the way a kid looks at a man. . . . It's a look, right? It's an entire attitude. It's a way of seeing things, but it's all polished up. It's a point of sale."⁵⁰

This unobtrusiveness and ocular complicity between hustler and client drove—and still drives—the authorities wild, by evading their measures for control. In 1961 the Wagner administration, urged on by the press, tried to validate its credentials for crime-fighting by sealing "the Hole," an IRT entrance through the Rialto Arcade known to be a pickup point for teenagers; it also prosecuted *louche* bookstores and cinemas. These were token gestures, though, since the police candidly admitted their inability to curb the sexual interest males take in one another.

Father McCaffrey's lament in 1959 that things could not get worse was remarkably shortsighted. The consensus perception is that the increase of Times Square's sexual activity throughout the 1960s had something to do with an enlarged drug trade, but it should be remembered that even in the late thirties, Times Square was, next to Harlem, the city's most open market for cheap reefer.⁵¹ More certain is the fact that the drug culture introduced an element of violence and petty crime hitherto uncommon to sexual solicitation.

The libertarianism of the sixties, informed by new Supreme Court decisions on obscenity, paved the way for the sex industry, as entrepreneurs began purveying allurements to the libido on a grand scale. What had formerly been considered liminal and illicit moved into the forefront of

the American consciousness, borne in by all the power of advertising and its media. Times Square had the advantage of being an old-established firm in the sex business; the under-the-counter and hole-in-corner triumphantly bobbed to the surface. Prostitution of all gender affiliations, ←
massage parlors, live sex shows, and bookstores now called "adult" (Shaw would have been amused) burgeoned into the most characteristic features of the area. Over the next two decades not only did erotica shed its plain brown wrappers, but newstands blossomed with such mass-appeal publications as *Screw* and *Hustler*. The traditionally eroticized female body was now joined in the open by its male counterpart: the most prominent billboard in Times Square was rented by Calvin Klein to display models naked from the waist up, their buttocks snugly fitted into his designer jeans. "The tighter they are, the better they sell." was his rationale.⁵²

In 1966 the first twenty-five-cent peepshows were introduced amid the comparatively tame wares of Times Square bookshops. Instant success caused overnight conversions of many small businesses back to arcades now featuring explicit magazines and film loops, which, to suit quickening public demand, intensified their content from nude dancers to copulation. Higher profits, which had sent the cost of leases skyward, attracted the attention of the mob which muscled in around 1968; even after paying for protection, peepshow vendors could become millionaires. Their machines proliferated to about a thousand throughout the city, mostly located at first in fetid backrooms and curtained cubicles of porno bookshops. One reporter recalls that "viewing time in the good old days was two minutes for a quarter; inflation would drop this to thirty seconds in just a dozen years."⁵³

A major factor in the popularity of peepshows was the introduction of curtains and doors, offering privacy to the customer.⁵⁴ This heightened the crucial factor of anomie, for while peepshow sex is a form of public enjoyment, sexual consumption, usually by masturbation, remains private. To quote one researcher, "in the pornographic arcade, the dominant theme of behavior is one of mutual inaccessibility of patrons"⁵⁵; another student of the Times Square sexual community believes that "anonymity" must be *socially created* by rules patrons observe. Hiding behavior functions as a sense of shame or show of apology for 'deviant' behavior."⁵⁶ This would suggest that customers for pornography are among the best-behaved, most self-effacing, least lawbreaking one might imagine. The tacit refusal to acknowledge the presence of other clientele keeps the atmosphere muted and innocuous.

Ironically, and despite the complaints of reformers, the new sex industry eventually upgraded the neighborhood. Replacing the turn-the-crank peeps and fleapits, Show World Center, which opened in 1977, was antiseptic, well lit, up-to-date, offering a choice of printed, cinematic, or

live pornography; structurally sound, it has defeated assaults on it via the building code. Show World inspired imitators. Hubert's Museum may have discontinued its live freakshows in 1965, but in 1978 Peepland carried on the dime museum tradition of unveiling the arcane by opening a basement exhibition of sex loops featuring donkeys, eels, and German shepherds.⁵⁷ Emporia like Show World continue to promote anonymity while reducing guilt, since they are more reminiscent of supermarkets than of old "scumatoriums."

Live peepshows behind glass had begun to filter in in the early 1970s, and by 1978, the glass partitions were removed, so that the customer could touch, feel, taste the far-from-obscure object of his desire, the girls negotiating the price for particular favors. This kind of promiscuity ended in January 1980, when Show World reinstalled its windows, not on account of hygiene or morality, but for purely legal reasons. As the manager said, "Girls were makin' all kinds of deals with the customers—in fact, we were threatened that we'd be shut down for prostitution." They lost money as a result, but even the peeps that retained an open-window policy limited contact to breasts. (The sexual entertainment industry is, by its own standards, cautiously law-abiding, eager to keep its distance from prostitution and drug-pushing and to observe its proscription to minors.⁵⁸)

The honor of first showing a live deed of kind in Times Square falls to the Mini-Cine in the Wurlitzer Building, which, in 1970, presented it as part of a so-called "studio tour" of the filming of porno loops. From an ethnographic standpoint, public copulation, either real or simulated, is a time-honored and ancient rite connected with fertility and recalling the union of Heaven and Earth.⁵⁹ As a community becomes secularized, the act loses its sacral meaning, although sex is never wholly divested of its occult allure; and when the society is in upheaval or intense transition, such routines, normally confined to brothels, seek a public stage, as was the case in Paris after the fall of the Bastille and in Berlin after World War I. Much of what goes on on the third floor of Show World is simply the logical culmination of what burlesque and even earlier Aristophanic comedy had suggested, with dildos the more graphic embodiment of emblematic slapsticks and harlequin bats. Show World even uses an acting coach to help develop skits which have more than a tinge of Minsky about them: *Going Down* concerns a man and a woman stuck in an elevator; *Lois and Clark* shows Lois Lane and Superman in bed together for the first time; and *Love Potion No. 69* deals with a mad scientist and his newly discovered aphrodisiac.⁶⁰ Performers are taught timing, to give audiences a chance to anticipate, posing for maximal viewing effect, and similar skills. Any lust thereby incited can be slaked on the premises. It may be objected that the graphic nature of these displays, which leave little or nothing to the imagination, are inferior to the alleged wit or style of the defunct burlesque show; but these are aesthetic, not moral, arguments.

In 1982 a German woman of twenty with a sociology degree sought employment in the New York sex industry. Turning down a position in a live-sex show which paid only ten dollars for twenty minutes' work and eschewed condoms, she took a job in a peepshow on the guarantee of "no contact" and lots of money. In her tiny cubicle, she found a way to conceal a camera and adjust the lighting so that she could photograph her customers as they masturbated in her presence. Consequently, her book of reminiscences, interviews, and pictures cannot be published in this country, and her pseudonym Elisabeth B keeps her safe from lawsuits and extralegal retribution.

Encounters last only forty seconds before the screen comes down and the man must reinsert a quarter token (the normal stint runs to two dollars at most, but regulars can time their orgasms to two forty-second terms: Elisabeth B equates this with the "fast food" phenomenon, and wonders if her clients are equally efficient when actually engaged in coition). Since the woman receives half the money spent, it is to her advantage to prolong the session. Elisabeth B was struck by the absolute mediocrity of her clientele: most of them white and white-collar, between the ages of thirty and forty, with briefcases, shined shoes, and the *New York Times* under their arms, occasionally a grandfatherly type or some 20-year-old in jeans. No blacks, a great many exceedingly polite Asians. No rowdies, revolting monsters of ugliness, or cliché perverts. They generally arrived during their lunch hours or after their offices closed at 5. At least half were habitués who turned up three to five times a week; some seemed to spend all their leisure time there. One was a chauffeur who killed a couple of hours while his passengers were at the theater, an unexpected instance of the theater/sex nexus. As one regular, an investment counselor, put it: "I go with prostitutes too. But here it's cheaper and has exactly the same result."⁶¹

These men were uninterested in cunning stripteases or Playboy bunny poses: they wanted simply and staidly to study female anatomy in detail, and so Elisabeth B found herself most often taking the same position she would during a gynecological examination. This aspect was underlined by the manageress periodically calling over the loudspeaker, "We need some hot pussy-inspectors down here."⁶² Using the phone in their booth, younger customers asked Elisabeth B to show them where the clitoris is, how far a woman can open up, and similar details. She was touched by what she saw as an initiation rite in a society too puritanical to permit public nudity, topless sunbathing, and compulsory sex education. The peepshow had, *faute de mieux*, become a visual aid in instruction, just as the dime museum had been in the past.

In any prostitutional situation, as we have noted, the preliminary eyeballing is meant to culminate in a commercial transaction in which two or more parties participate. No matter how abstracted the prostitute's

participation may be, she or he is required as more than a mere simulacrum. But in the case of the peepshow, the client consumes not a body but the image of a body, under glass. The act of autostimulation uses the proffered image as three-dimensional pornography, a kind of jump start to the libido. No transaction, only reaction, takes place. Is this more or less degrading to the object of the client's lust? Is this more or less dehumanizing to both parties than the flesh-on-flesh commerce?

The received wisdom about such encounters is that they reify women and degrade men, but Elisabeth B's experiences offer some interesting qualifications. There were customers who preferred peepshows to prostitutes because actual physical contact prevented the exercise of the imagination, and as soon as the act was consummated, the woman left. "Whereas the girl behind this glass—she's all for you, whatever you desire in your fantasy. . . and *I'm* the one who leaves and can come back when *I* feel like it."⁶³ The masculine need for total control is certainly present here, a miserly hoarding of pleasure to one's self, along with the gnawing belief that in an ordinary prostitutional transaction, the customer is, in fact, at the mercy of the prostitute.

While admitting that she was required to become objectified, Elisabeth B also felt that she underwent a mythic metamorphosis into Woman with a capital W, the worshipped mystery of sex. She writes:

The feeling of being reduced to a sexual object is in everyday encounters with men an annoyance, but here it is precisely the basis of the relationship; . . . in the changing-room I put this role on with the professional undergarments. . . . That I am desirable as an individual I know, but to incite someone wholly as Woman, as twat, as bosom, as legs, without doing anything else, has something reassuring about it.⁶⁴

For her, the performance was a return to the original, sacred roots of prostitution as an act of devotion, an adoration of the fecund goddess, and the expenditure of semen a tribute laid at the source of fertility. The tacky was made transcendental.

With *Variety* tolling the knell for the Square as a theater district and Jerry Minskoff mourning the vacant third of his new office tower, Mayor Lindsay's Times Square Development Council, organized in 1971, debated ways to sanitize midtown, to no avail. A kind of climax came the following year when Gail Sheehy published two long articles in *New York* magazine, exposing the legal shenanigans of what she called "the landlords of Hell's bedroom." Her exposé revealed that the actual owners of the

properties most cited as blights on the district were among the most influential, most taxed, and most prominent in the city, including members of the Development Council itself—banks, reformers, up-market developers. (Nothing new about this: in Elizabethan London, whores were known as "Winchester geese" since the brothels in Southwark were under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Winchester.⁶⁵) Most property owners claimed ignorance of what went on in their buildings, but one, a prominent heart surgeon, used to phone to check receipts at the all-male Eros cinema. The greed of the landlords and the growing public demand for hard-core pornography were too great to be stemmed by police foot patrols and license revocations. Moreover, police crackdowns on prostitution increased crime, since prostitutes having to meet their pimps' daily quotas found it easier to mug their clients than to have sex with them.

Faced with an area high in crime and low in residential population, the mayoral response in 1972 was to create two police "super precincts": Midtown South, dealing with Forty-second Street down to Thirtieth, and Midtown North, responsible for Forty-third to Fifty-ninth streets, Lexington Avenue west to the Hudson River.⁶⁶ Its periodic raids of massage parlors, closings of bookstores, mass arrests of prostitutes, always made a big splash in the newspapers but had no enduring effect on the streets. Most of the businesses were in the hands of organized crime, which could easily afford bail, court fees, and elaborate litigation.

Moreover, it turned out that no more than 5 percent of actual crime related to prostitution, and by law the police could deal with prostitution only on a criminal, not a moral, basis. Midtown North objected to the proliferation of prostitutes and pornography primarily because they attracted unspecified "undesirables" to the area along the "Minnesota Strip," fifteen blocks of Eighth Avenue running parallel to Times Square and intersecting it at the Deuce, the argot abbreviation for Forty-second Street. It got its name from the usual answer prostitutes gave desk sergeants when asked where they came from; their statement of origin often proved to be true. The cops who piloted the arrest van, the so-called Pussy Posse, maintained a reasonably friendly contact with their detainees; as for the girls, they were on the job because they could make an annual income four times that of a school teacher or a staff nurse.⁶⁷

After 4 years of this labor-intensive but ineffectual policing, 1976 saw the foundation of the Office of Midtown Enforcement, which has been described as "a twenty-member legal SWAT team"⁶⁸; it can as easily be seen as a grey flannel vice squad, endowed by the mayor with extraordinary powers. Its goal was not to chastise vice but to return Times Square real estate to "good commercial uses." It may be no coincidence that the same year, 1976, the 42nd Street Development Corporation was born, with a starry-eyed hope of creating a "river-to-river Grand Boulevard that would

become a magnet for private investment." The Office of Enforcement enlisted heavy fines, zoning law amendments, and Health Department ordinances in its service, and its successes were many, including the virtual banning of massage parlors, pinball arcades, topless bars, and peepshows. Simultaneously, the Development Corporation took over and reconditioned the proscribed buildings, opening a police substation where a kiddie-porn peepshow had flourished and housing the Mounted Division in what had once been a prostitutes' hangout. Even so, when the time came for the construction of the Marriott Hotel, it was two eminent theaters and none of the buildings housing the sex industry that were razed to make room for it.

The first wave of organized feminism also turned its attention to Times Square, in the belief that sexually explicit words and images were causally linked to sexual violence against women. It demonstrated its anger when some six thousand Women against Pornography marched from Columbus Circle to Times Square on October 20, 1979. Brandishing banners reading TAKE THE HARD-CORE OUT OF THE BIG APPLE, PORN IS RAPE ON PAPER, and DEATH TO PATRIARCHY!, they garnered a great deal of publicity but little else. The vehemence of the rhetoric and the simplistic attribution of social abuses to single sources were reminiscent of the temperance parades at the turn of the century. Of course, the temperance parades made their point: Prohibition was eventually enacted, and we are still living with the results of that noble experiment. One old black man outside a peep show on Forty-second Street had shouted at the passing parade, "They got all those fine young girls inside. How else my gonna get my joint hard, you just tell me that!"⁶⁹ Twenty-five-cent peepshows put fantasy sex within the reach of even the poor, and antipornography movements, like most moral crusades, have the immediate effect of denying recreational releases to those of low income.

Women against Pornography then proceeded to organize twice-weekly bus tours of the Bright-light Zone, which, with sureties of safety, conducted gaggles of suburban housewives through the porno parlors: not unlike Mrs. Pardiggle in *Bleak House* descending on the undeserving poor with a handful of tracts, albeit without Mrs. Pardiggle's hands-on involvement. Ostensibly, the purpose was to alert these women to a terrible social evil. I have spoken to some of those taken on such a tour and the lesson worked: they had been shocked and were indignant that these fleshpots were permitted to thrive in the midst of Manhattan. But they were no more enlightened as to the sources of the so-called problem than were visitors to the old freakshows about hormonal imbalance. The denizens of Forty-second Street were displayed to them as Ubangis and pygmies were once shown to gaping yokels in dime museums, exhibited in such a way that the yokels felt most superior to the objects of their gawking.

However well-intentioned these coach tours through the Inferno, they exacerbate the simplistic Manichaeism of *them* and *us*, the street people versus the decent people, which demarcates society's attitudes. They are simply a different form of sexual tourism, a voyeurism one step removed from that of the peepshow customer, the enjoyment resulting from aroused indignation rather than aroused passion. It is worth noting that these tours have been temporarily discontinued, because the sponsoring group is more occupied in organizing a conference on International Trafficking in Women.⁷⁰ This implies a realization that the exploitation of actual women may be a more genuine issue than the transmission of women's images.

The feminist position on pornography rapidly diversified, and within the ranks dissent has argued that to attack pornography is a step away from attacking female sexuality.⁷¹ Opinions became even more contradictory over the question of prostitution, for feminist prostitutes' unions promote a liberal view of sex-for-pay as a private commercial transaction, not a public nuisance. Yet the move to decriminalize and license prostitution has been supported by the same feminist groups who argue for greater state interference in the private spheres of conjugal rape and battered wives, which they characterize as sexual exploitation. Logically, once you grant that a whore is an ordinary working woman, you have difficulty maintaining that she is sexually victimized. Those feminists who oppose censorship as a threat to sexual freedom have not favored a laissez-faire market in prostitution any more than the antipornography warriors have heretofore urged a crusade against prostitution.

In the absence of an ideological consensus as to whether prostitutes are empowered vendors of their own persons or exploited victims, their legal status continues to be dictated by concerns over property values and urban development. Campaigns against streetwalking do not therefore alleviate the situation, but simply move the walkers to other streets.⁷²

The latest statistics from the Office of Midtown Enforcement give a superficial impression that the angels of light are gaining the upper hand. In 1977 there had been ninety-six sex-related businesses in Times Square; by 1987 they had declined to and stabilized at thirty-five. But the Office itself had to admit that these reductions were due less to its clean-up efforts than to economic factors:

One is the technological advancements in the video industry which have led to the rise in home viewing of pornography tapes rented from neighborhood stores. This phenomenon has led to a decrease in the patronage of the x-rated movie houses and peepshows. Another principal reason is the physical redevelopment of Times Square: in 1986, a number of buildings and sites which had been locations of

sex-related businesses came under construction or were being cleared for assemblages.⁷³ . . . [Another factor is] the value of real estate escalating the dollar value of store rentals beyond what these businesses can support.⁷⁴

In addition, the AIDS epidemic impelled most entrepreneurs to eliminate live-sex displays from their shows.

Whatever its victories over the indoor sex industry, from its inception the Office of Midtown Enforcement was never very successful in uprooting street prostitution. Since streetwalking was only marginally connected with real estate and hence with mob-financed businesses, it was not susceptible to the Office's standard legal harassments. The individual pimp was left relatively unmolested, and the thousands of prostitute arrests were ultimately pointless, particularly since their clientele went unscathed. Obviously, as the local *maisons de passe* and fleabag hotels were converted to other uses, there would be fewer opportunities for casual carnal exchanges. In the meantime, prostitution continued unabated there and elsewhere, transvestites or "knobbers" crowing that they needed only hallways in which to satisfy their patrons efficiently and manually.

Unable to prevent an adult's choice to sell his or her body, the Office of Midtown Enforcement in October 1985 launched a major drive to eliminate juvenile prostitution from Times Square entirely. Uniformed officers patrolled the so-called chicken hawk hangouts in arcades and fast-food outlets; posing as hustlers, young undercover officers ensnared individuals the police reports loosely identify as "pedophiles"; social service workers and groups like Trudee Able-Peterson's "Street Work Project" tried to identify underage prostitutes and offer them alternative lives. The enticing undercover officers made a number of arrests; stiff sentences were handed out to the so-called pedophiles (technically, a pedophile is someone who fancies children between ages six and ten) as well as to the alleged Fagins of juvenile prostitution rings; and word went out that blatant solicitations had decreased in number.

Again, however, the reports make it clear that the standard approach to this improvised problem is not very effective. Intensified police harassment steps up street activity by dispersing and dislocating it.⁷⁵ Driven out of Times Square, the chicken and the hawk roost in less policed areas, and even the Port Authority bus station has never ceased its activity. In addition, the report notes "Hustling by a core group of older teenagers, aged 16-19 years old, remains a problem which the task force will continue to evaluate and attempt to resolve by 'outreach' programs."⁷⁶

It is easy to foment outrage about juvenile prostitution, and media coverage tends to distort and sensationalize it. An analogous situation occurred before World War I when New York was barraged with exposés

of the White Slave trade: newspapers and magazine articles, short stories, plays, and films made the public believe that any unaccompanied woman was in danger of being abducted and sent to a cathouse in Venezuela. In 1910 the Rockefeller Grand Jury investigation concluded that there was no evidence of organized white slavery in New York.⁷⁷ The paranoia had more to do with folk fears about the jeopardy of young women's innocence in the big city than to any actual abuse.

So it is with juvenile prostitution, which is generally discussed in tones of blind alarm, ignoring variations and complexities. The American notion of children's sexuality is fraught with confusion. In part it preserves the Puritan idea of the child as limb of Satan, who must be kept in order by strict monitoring, and in whom any whiff of sex is a sin to be chastised and uprooted. This has been complicated by the contradictory post-Rousseauian concept of the child as innocent whose every perception is to be protected to preserve it from taint by society's abuses. Both concepts are on the alert for signs of contamination. Consequently, we tend to label individuals as children long after they have passed puberty and grant them adult status much later than many societies do. Finally, there is the overlay of Freud that admits sexuality from infancy on, but assigns it developmental phases, so that behavior can be clinically graded as aberrant, precocious, or retarded if it fails to conform to pattern. This *mélange* of attitudes has either rendered juvenile sexuality inadmissible or hedged it round with taboos and safeguards.⁷⁸

Having sex with one's own children has been a feature of family life since Lot and his daughters, and the mass selling of juveniles for sexual purposes was common in the Eastern Hemisphere from ancient times until very recently. The rise of the modern metropolis revived the practice in the Western world. Pre-revolutionary Paris and Victorian London housed hordes of adolescents hawking their persons in the Palais Royal and the Haymarket. The crusading editor W. T. Stead was jailed for his exposé of the trade in 1885, because, as part of his research, he actually purchased a little girl from a brothelkeeper.⁷⁹ Officialdom in New York began to recognize the existence of child prostitution from the 1850s, citing girls between the ages of eight and sixteen. The practice of blackmail was evidently prevalent, which suggests that their clientele came from a respectable stratum of society.⁸⁰ One of the causal features may be the high price put on virginity in an age of endemic syphilis, but the corruption of innocence, even ostensible innocence, is, in itself, a powerful motive.

The influx of juvenile prostitution to Times Square seems to be a legacy of the 1960s counterculture: running away from home and joining a tribe was a standard rite of passage. To keep the commune in marijuana and lentils, selling one's body was useful and facile, especially at a time when sexual sharing was part of the creed. For the runaway, there was no

real distinction between peddling macramé, pushing grass, or prostitution. Throughout the following decades, the big city went on luring juveniles fleeing unhappy homes and seeking independence and selfhood long after the communal "let-it-be" philosophy had evaporated. The popular subculture of youth, domiciled in the streets, remained the alternative, and from the 1970s on, became more polymorphous, drug-ridden, and unscrupulous. What had been primarily situational became habitual; gang members whose older brothers would have beaten up the habitués of gay bars now sell themselves to those habitués with the same amorality.⁸¹ Teenagers who identified themselves as "gay" gravitated to gay areas, their relationships with older men a career move that provided a kind of upward mobility; whereas the adolescent hustlers in a mixed zone like Times Square were, in addition to being economically needy, more troubled and confused about their motives.⁸² Hence more prone to crime and violence, they became easy prey for police and social workers.

A reflection of the intricate muddle of motives and responses to juvenile prostitution is to be found in the writing of Father Bruce Ritter, who established Covenant House in Times Square in 1972 as an asylum for homeless boys and girls—the abused, the forlorn, the abandoned, the exploited. In his imploring book, *Sometimes God Has a Kid's Face*, he is urgent and persuasive in describing their degradation by all manner of causes. Still, Father Bruce is candid about his own ambivalence towards his charges: he dwells again and again on their physical beauty, their animal magnetism, the fact that when he walks the streets he is picked out as one in search of sex. He undergoes dark nights of the soul, anatomizing his ambivalent feelings towards pimps who give him money to support his efforts and unredeemed youths who enjoy their lives as objects of lust. Clearly, the ambiguity of these adolescents cannot be summed up on a police blotter. They are the same kind of amoral urchins Caravaggio turned into pagan deities in his paintings and Pasolini rhapsodized over as butch angels of death.

With whose eyes, then, are we to see? The strident upholders of consensus morality, who are more upset by the notion of adolescent sexuality—and especially male-to-male sexuality—than by the ugly family situations that drive these children to the streets; the politicians, who can gain a few points by attacking juvenile prostitution, knowing it has no constituency; the realistic but pressured police, for whom these kids' sexual delinquency is more dangerous as a seedbed for theft, drug-pushing, and viral transmission than in itself; the social workers, who are on the lookout to reclaim and heal those unable to survive in the jungle of cities but who regard experience as a set of problems craving solutions; the

developers, who want to extirpate anything that might lower property values and clutter their architects' pristine renderings; the photographer Larry Clark, who is struck by their innocence, or the playwright Alan Bowne, who unjudgmentally registers their toughness and their vulnerability in the face of an uncaring world?

In an appendix to his book, Father Bruce, who served on Attorney General Meese's Commission on Pornography, provides a series of "Observations and Suggestions," which spell out the attitude that often shapes the Samaritan stance. Along with such unexceptionable statements as "Kids should not be bought and sold" are more debatable ones: "Sex was never supposed to be a spectator sport," "Sex isn't love and love isn't sex. It's good and beautiful when it's between married people who love each other and it's private."⁸³ Dr. Ruth Westheimer is attacked as "the high priestess of hedonism" for blessing premarital sex, although there is a grudging admission that she provides the enlightenment our schools refuse to supply. At bottom, this is the age-old voice of Mother Church imposing ascetic straitjackets on human nature and mourning the loss of her authority as the sole arbiter of social conduct; it sounds exceedingly quixotic howling in the wilderness of the Minnesota Strip. Are St. Augustine's minority views on sexual desire, which have dominated Western thought since the fifth century, of any relevance to the construction of social codes in Times Square?⁸⁴ What sort of validity should they be granted when they are used to reinforce the territorial imperatives of real estate developers?

Yet when Father Bruce insists that "there is no ethical or moral or qualitative difference between spending \$25 to see *Ob! Calcutta!* for your sophisticated evening at the theater, and spending that 25 cents at the peep-show owned by members of organized crime, or watching the action at a West Side hangout on West Forty-fifth Street . . . or enjoying the entertainment at . . . a sexual supermarket,"⁸⁵ he has touched on a truth which applies, even when stripped of his censoriousness. When he points out that a continuum exists between the entertainment industry and the sex industry because they both supply a deeply rooted public demand, he has put his finger on an abiding—not abuse—but fact of life.

The spectation, delectation, and exploitation of private parts in public places exist not because organized crime has inveigled us into some new vice or because conspiracies of perverts are infiltrating an otherwise utopian society. The myriads of customers who frequented and continue to frequent Times Square for these services are not "undesirables" in any other context; they are cognate with the matinee audiences of the theaters. The clientele of the peepshows are largely respectable office workers and

businessmen, releasing their pent-up tensions in an anonymous, efficient manner, the manner taught them by the modus operandi of their business lives; or ordinary adolescents completing their sex educations in a virally safe puberty rite. A great many of the men who pick up youths are fathers of families who have had drummed into their heads from childhood that sex between men is vile; so they explore their sexual identities in the only way available to them, anonymously and with partners who make no emotional demands. The men who solicit female prostitutes and transvestites have been sold the idea that extramarital sexual pleasure is perforce exotic, out of the ordinary, dwelling in a sinful milieu. The women, girls, and boys who cater to these needs are making a living, sometimes the best living available in their circumstances, preferring victimless crime to the other sort. There is no historical example of any urban society that has so managed its economy or its biology as to eliminate this cottage industry. Social mobility and anonymity are the modern determinants of this cultural universal, and, as one scientist has contended, prostitution and pornography are "functional alternatives."

Both provide for the discharge of what society labels anti-social sex: prostitution provides this via real intercourse with a real sex object, and pornography provides it via masturbatory, imagined intercourse with a fantasy object.⁸⁶

By accepting the stigmata placed on them, the commercial purveyors of sexual services uphold the norms that define nonmarital sexual expression as illegitimate and thus serve as pillars of the very society that stigmatizes them.⁸⁷ When sex ceases to be a taboo experience and is freely engaged in by mutual consent, both prostitution and the family are equally threatened.

The spectrum of perception of Times Square's sexual aura, its uses and abuses as a pornographic marketplace, is thus a broad one ranging far beyond mere condemnation. One end of the spectrum: A vice president for planning and design of the New York State Urban Development Corporation declares: "We want to get rid of the pederasts, prostitutes and pimps and bring the bright lights back to the Great White Way."⁸⁸ As one of the city's power brokers, she readily subscribes to Durkheim's idea that immorality is identical with social disorder and seeks to remedy disorganization by imposing morality from without. The other end of the spectrum: A member of the dissenting subculture recognizes that morality is situational, created within the everyday experience; what is alleged to be deviant is, in its context, normal. "We bring a lot of tourists to this area," a male prostitute tells a researcher. "If not for us, this town would be dead. How many men would want to come to New York if they couldn't find

kids like me? What for—to go to see the Statue of Liberty?"⁸⁹ It remains to be seen whether Times Square can accommodate both the bright lights and the night frontier; history's lesson is that when social planning fails to come to terms with the sexual side of human nature, they both end up screwed.