

Capital Entertainment: Stage Work and the Origins of the Creative Economy, 1843 – 1912

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Jeanne Cluster Miller.

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Abstract

We are told on a daily basis that the future of work is creative. The 4.7 million employees in the arts generate more than \$698 billion annually for the U.S. economy, while creativity is celebrated far beyond the artist's studio.¹ At the same time, we hear that what once counted as creative labor—music, theater, journalism—no longer operate in a sustainable fashion. We are thus faced with an apparent contradiction: creativity as a psychological process or social status is valued, while the work itself is not. This condition has intensified in our alleged “post-industrial” moment, but culture workers have long labored in a world of large profits, fluctuating social value, and marginal working conditions. This dissertation makes sense of this incongruity by excavating a labor history of the creative economy out of the origins of the U.S. entertainment industry. In historicizing and politicizing this early creative class, I demonstrate how labor struggles in the first era of continuous entertainment shaped enduring conceptions of artistry and work, while also establishing the foundational infrastructure that undergirds contemporary media and entertainment industries.

While most histories of the culture industries begin in 1900, it was in the prior century that commercial performance was transformed from an artisanal or folk practice into a staple product of global, export-oriented capitalism. Despite the glossy sheen of stardom that shapes our understanding of stage work, most performers were contingent staffers whose efforts generated exponential profits. I employ a range of archival materials and methods to identify the diverse sites—the Italian opera, theater orchestra, agent's office, African American tent company, and vaudeville circuit—that generated extensive debate over the value and categorization of stage labor. As performance was drawn more closely into the mechanisms of capital circulation and growth, the new reality of artists as modern laborers was increasingly deployed by managers and commentators as a conceptual impossibility, and to the non-star performer's detriment. It is no coincidence that this era produced the first culture industry labor organizations, the first systematized African American-owned touring operations, and the first promising path to success (through the world of cheap amusements) for performers outside of the Anglo-European theatrical establishment. Each of these were attempts by performers to exert greater control over the fruits of their effort, and to reform an industry that epitomized the modernizing workplace in its strict rules, managerial techniques, and pursuit of capital accumulation. Unlike more familiar test cases for modern capitalism, stage work's unusual qualities—particularly its visibility and its relationship to alienation—make it an ideal test case for labor history. Moving across the disciplinary

¹ This number constituted 4.32% of GDP, a larger share than expected sectors such as construction or transportation. Department of Commerce and the NEA, 2012. (<https://www.arts.gov/artistic-fields/research-analysis/arts-data-profiles/arts-data-profile-6>).

boundaries that divide the evaluation of aesthetics from the analysis of production, I not only make art visible as labor, but explain why this remains a challenge and why this challenge should be met.

Introduction. The Disappearance of Theatrical Labor

It was at the end of a predictably hot August when a regular patron of Trimble's Varieties noticed a new pattern of behavior among his fellow amusement seekers. Trimble's began as a Pittsburgh concert saloon with upmarket pretensions, but by 1860 three years of rough and frequent use had carpeted the floor with spilled beer and peanuts. When the crowd tipped over a hundred, a frequent occurrence that summer, the male audience was packed too tight to applaud and instead hollered their appreciation or disapproval. On this particular evening, the crowd was cheering for the month's most popular acts: jig-dancer Lida White and singer Sallie Duval, two teenagers from Philadelphia. Their performance of the "Bold Privateer" elicited cheers and whoops from the audience, prompting a twenty-minute encore from Duval while White accompanied her on the tambourine. The performance so excited the Trimble's crowd that when the women attempted to leave the stage, the crowd became an "insatiate monster" and roared for another jig. When the next act came on as planned, the audience left in protest, and they repeated this same pattern for the rest of the week. They wanted only Lida and Sallie.²

² *Clipper*, August 25, 1860. L. White, "'programmed' as principal dancer from Mc Donough's Gaities" in Philadelphia, opened at Trimble's on July 28. White was "considered 'some pumpkins' by the frequenters of the establishment, and to her it has been indebted for much of its patronage." At White and Duval's first appearances at Trimble's, Adelphi praised Sallie Duval's "very strong voice" and noted that her singing was very good. "She is, however, evidently unused to such audiences as assemble there, and does not appear at home with them." Regarding White, he noted that "her jig dancing is tolerable, but her fancy dances are not by any means the genuine article. Her pretty, youthful face, and symmetrical and well

Standing in the hissing crowd was Adelphi, a new contributor to the entertainment trade paper the *New York Clipper*. Printed in New York but read around the world, the paper's rise from a scrappy sporting sheet to the keystone of the entertainment industry both depended on and facilitated the growth of local amusement scenes like the one in Pittsburgh. Adelphi praised the performers but had a problem with the crowd, whom he thought should be "more considerate in their demands upon the performers" as they "are not endowed with a very extraordinary power of endurance [and] they naturally require a short time for repose now and then." Women's presence in such venues was spectacular and suspect, so it is not surprising that the men of the crowd—who knew Trimble's as a place of leisure—could both applaud Lida and fail to see her as a fellow member of the working classes. "Some unreasonable persons," Adelphi explained, "seem to regard the execution of the 'Essence,' 'Break-neck act,' or other equally tiresome performances, as a mere pastime to the actors, and requiring no exertion of any consequence." Dances like White's "Essence of Old Virginia" were the spawn of vernacular traditions carried through European and African diasporas and tapped out on tavern floors, marketplaces, and minstrel stages.³ They were not new. What was new, however, was the entertainment

developed understandings 'bring down the house' when her dancing don't." *Clipper*, August 11, August 18, September 15, November 17, 1860. Only place of amusement open is from *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, August 23, 1860. The "Bold Privateer" is narrated by a British sailor leaving his sweetheart to fight in the war, popular on American stages in the 1850s and 1860s based on its appearance in multiple songbooks published in that period. Albert Tolman and Mary Eddy, "Traditional Texts and Tunes," *Journal of American Folklore* 35 (Fall, 1922), 358-9.

³ Lida White was a "jig danseuse," and often billed as a champion dancer. Antebellum challenge dancing—which drew on both Irish and African dance traditions—flourished in taverns and saloons among multiracial and mixed-gender audiences. April Masten argues that between 1840 and 1860, challenge dancing was transformed from "pastime to profession" within a wage labor system that separated work and leisure activities. The prize money at stake in local boxing or challenge dancing matches had once functioned as a kind of mutual aid, moving money from one community member to another instead of transferring winnings to the house. Like many studies of the process of commercialization—or commodification—Masten's tone laments the growth of commercialized leisure and the substitution of a profit motive for a prior "give-and-take ethic." April Masten, "Challenge Dancing in Antebellum America: Sporting Men, Vulgar Women, and Blacked-Up Boys," *Journal of Social History* 48 (Spring, 2015), 612.

infrastructure in which they were now embedded, a grouping of places and people that converted sound and gesture into capital while retaining the feel of a “mere pastime.” Adelphi had observed the articulation of a nascent demand by audiences—a structure of feeling among commercial amusement seekers—that willfully ignored the labor of performance.⁴ It is no coincidence that this willful ignorance was noted by a new critical voice, the self-conscious voice of the cheap amusement fan, at tipping point when stage work was pulled into an industrial form that mirrored similar transformations in the audience’s own working lives.⁵ White and Duval at Trimble’s poses fundamental questions about the value of creative labor at the critical juncture when “mere pastime” became mass culture.

And Adelphi did not only ask the other Trimble’s patrons “to be more considerate in their demands upon the performers.” He made this argument to an unknown but fast-growing public through “the columns of your [the *Clipper*] widely circulating sheet.” This was not a local problem but one that extended far beyond any single venue or city, taking the distinct shape of what we now know as the culture industries. It takes only a slight stretch of the imagination, then, to consider ourselves among the admonished.

⁴ You might even call this a social experience “in solution,” one of Raymond Williams’ refinements of his slippery “structure of feeling.” Rather than detail its many interpretations and contradictions, I suggest approaching the term by asking what kind of work Williams’ intended his theory to do. Much of Williams’ larger project was an attempt to do full justice to the complex and multi-dimensional relationship between lived experience and the cultural forms we built and inhabit. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-135. See also Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 6-7.

⁵ The *Clipper* and Adelphi’s address to an anonymous readership built on several decades of a representational feedback loop that allowed working people to see themselves reflected in cheap amusements. As Peter Buckley argued in his case for “paratheatricals”—the educated dogs and performing fleas lamented by actress Olive Logan—“America gained its cultural identity on the terrain of the popular and the vernacular.” Peter G. Buckley, “Paratheatricals and Popular Stage Entertainment,” in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre 1*, ed. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 426.

What demands and expectations do we bring to the stage performers and culture workers that we applaud? If there really is no business like show business, what kind of labor makes this possible?

Art as Work in the Age of Industrial Cultural Production

This dissertation project began with a nagging sensation that had accompanied me to graduate school. I could not stop thinking about the city I had left behind, a charming coastal destination two hours north of Boston revitalized by the “creative economy,” where my artist friends were priced out of their rental apartments as the city handed over the keys (and tax breaks) to new investors. I wanted a robust theoretical and historical framework for understanding the value of cultural work, particularly when it is done by people who do not get famous, and one that could think beyond gentrification. As a nineteenth-century historian, the way to do this was with what scholars refer to as the industrialization of the theater business.⁶ Early on, my pitch was often derailed by the commonplace meaning of “creative class,” a term primarily used to encourage and justify the uneven return of capital investment to cities through individual households. This boosterism adopts the terminology but none of the analytic rigor of scholars seeking the link between the working conditions and politics of twentieth-century culture workers, from the revolutionary potential of C. Wright Mills’ “cultural workmen” to the limited emancipatory function of the “artistic critique” in Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski’s *The*

⁶ In 1968, drawing on Alfred Bernheim’s 1932 study commissioned by Actors’ Equity Association, Jack Poggi identified the four key qualities that marked the “industrial revolution in the theatre”: 1) centralized production replaced local; 2) division of labor, separating theater management from play producing; 3) standardization of product (combination company touring with one play); 4) control by big business. Jack Poggi, *Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 3-27.

New Spirit of Capitalism.⁷ This latter text and related discussions are extremely useful in explaining why Google stocks its office with Legos. Yet it assumes the following premises that are less useful in a longer historical frame and a narrower occupational one: culture workers are linked to the decline of industrialization; they are defined primarily in relationship to managerial theory; and they are interchangeable with white collar or knowledge workers, or the “new class.”⁸ This work cannot fully explain the cognitive dissonance people experience when learning that orchestra musicians in the 1860s understood themselves as exploited workers and organized into a union, claiming that they were evidence of “a striking illustration of a truth which is familiar to the working class by bitter experience [...] capital is almost invariably combined against labor.”⁹

⁷ Unlike Richard Florida’s vapid celebration of the “creative class” of the 2000s, earlier theorists of culture workers were primarily interested in the political potential of workers who did not fit neatly into proletariat or the bourgeoisie. In Michael Denning’s gloss, C. Wright Mills was interested in the “ambiguous position of the cultural workman in America”—both the “commercial hacks” and the “commercial stars”—because he might reclaim the means of production, theorized as the “cultural apparatus.” Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 110-114. This 1960s enthusiasm for the culture worker’s revolutionary potential has been tempered in recent years by capital’s capacity to absorb and recuperate the New Left critique of alienation. This is clearly articulated by Boltanski and Chiapello’s as the limitation of the artistic critique, in which capitalism is understood primarily as a source of disenchantment or inauthenticity, and a source of oppression subjecting us to the domination of market and subordination of wage labor. The artistic critique “stresses the objective impulse of capitalism and bourgeois society to regiment and dominate human beings, and subject them to work that it prescribes for the purpose of profit [...] To this it counterposes the freedom of artists, their rejection of any contamination of aesthetics by ethics, their refusal of any form of subjection in time and space and, in its extreme forms, of any kind of work.” Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2006), 38. More recently, Shannan Clark has used the term “creative mental labor” to extend Denning’s Popular Front artists to include the mid-century emergence and organization of white-collar workers in design, advertising and publishing. The questions Clark asks—if the workers in expanding creative industries would identify with an “old middle class” of “proprietors and professionals,” if they would constitute a “new class [...] between capital and labor,” or if they would “begin to see themselves as members of a recomposed and enlarged proletariat”—can be asked of culture workers of the previous century, when the very categories he invokes were first recognizable. Shannan Clark, “White Collar Workers Organize: Class-Consciousness and the Transformation of the Culture Industries in the United States, 1925–1955” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2006), 1-2.

⁸ Lawrence P. King and Iván Szelényi, *Theories of the New Class: Intellectuals and Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Mills is, in some places, clear on the distinction between intellectuals and cultural workmen. Michael Denning’s work is an exception to this general rule, extending across genres (social theory and cartooning, for example) and eras (the 1870s of *Mechanic Accents* through the *Cultural Front*).

⁹ “Card to the Public,” *New York Times* [NYT], November 13, 1865.

This dissonance indicates a fundamental challenge in thinking of art as work, which I explore here in two parts. The first deals with academic disciplining, and specifically the distinct historiographies of labor and capitalism and cultural production and the periodization of these fields. At both the peak of labor history's influence and in our current moment of histories of capitalism, scholars trained in these fields are rarely interested in the production of symbolic commodities. When labor historians turn their attention to culture, they use the anthropological definition to capture the systems of meaning and expression excluded from aristocratic or bourgeois definitions of art. The stakes of this recalibration entail more than an expansion of the category of art. Culture becomes a "whole way of life," the symbolic terrain on which working people make sense of their lives and take action.¹⁰

At the same time, it is also the case that scholarship on cultural production is more interested in the "culture" than the "production." This is due to the influence of disciplines that pay primary attention to representation and the rippling effects of cultural turns, which swing for the level of symbolic meaning. Works in this mode make causal arguments for discourse or seek the working-out of social and economic disruption in the symbolic register.¹¹ This is particularly true for scholarly projects interested in subaltern

¹⁰ Roy Rosenzweig's *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and Herbert Gutman's *Work, Culture & Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Vintage, 1977) are canonical examples of labor historians' turn to culture. This was in reaction to an earlier focus on strikes, leadership, and unions, and an attempt to think working-class history beyond institutions. The shift, however, did not mean exploring the labor history of cultural workers. The "new" labor historians of an earlier period came of age when collective bargaining and large industrial unions seemed here to stay; it is hard for me to imagine what this was like. David Brody, in 1993, wrote in favor of "placing institutions and power relations at the center of labor history," a task he argued was at odds with both the scholarly projects and self-narrative of the "new" labor history. David Brody, "Reconciling the Old Labor History and the New," *Pacific Historical Review* 72 (February, 1993), 111-126.

¹¹ For example, Karen Halttunen's *Confidence Men and Painted Women* took dislocation, mobility and flux of an emergent urban/capitalist order as the starting point for a "new system of cultural forms" that

expressive cultures, which attach high political stakes to representation. But whether attached to the elite, the masses, or the subaltern, cultural production is not solely a site of symbolic conflict for its consumers. It is also a workplace. Cultural production is more than hierarchical ranking, and the navigation of aesthetic categories and the engagement with “taste” as an exercise of power requires workers.¹²

Over the past few decades, due to the coinciding of multiple scholarly inquiries, “culture industry/ies” has emerged as both a theoretical tool and an historiographic field. Most obviously indebted to British Cultural Studies, the Frankfurt School, the “myth and symbol” school of early American Studies, social history, and the perennial pursuit of “Americanness” in literature, the critical study of cultural production was of a piece with the wider adoption of cultural history methods. Cultural history cross-pollinated social and intellectual history with poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, performance studies, literary theory, folklore, racial formation theory, symbolic anthropology, and feminist projects at the interstices of these disciplines.¹³ The cumulative result is a subfield defined not by region or topic, but by a method in which language and discourse assume causal power. Scholars of U.S. History in this tradition stress the multiple meanings and

emphasized sincerity. Halttunen argued that these cultural forms were rooted in social worlds but have a logic that can't be reduced to material conditions. But because her undifferentiated subjects move through a cloud of discourse, those initial economic factors take on a more determinative stance than she likely intended. It is not clear who wrote and profited from the manuals and Pamela bonnets, what readers and consumers did for a living, or how the middle class interacted with the prescriptions of the advice manuals. Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 193.

¹² Works like Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) and Sven Beckert's *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) have been instrumental in my thinking about the cultural politics of taste, but they are less helpful in understanding where actors or musicians fall in the culture wars. Commercial entertainment spaces were both the places where labor disputes were worked out—the Astor Place Riots are the most famous example—but, as transforming workplaces, they could also be the source of tension.

¹³ *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. James Cook, Lawrence Glickman, and Michael O'Malley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

negotiated power relations embedded in the cultural forms they discuss.¹⁴ While subfield boundaries often isolate these works from culture industries scholarship, opera scholars and theater historians rooted in the British Empire have also long been attuned to culture and capitalism's linked metamorphoses.¹⁵

In spite of this occasional long view, most scholarship on performance-based culture industries and commodification begins with the advent of transcription technologies and the capacity to record the sound and movement of human bodies.¹⁶ This

¹⁴ Key works in this include: the growth of the blackface minstrel show and the eventual eclipse of “minstrel” paradigm of authenticity in popular music; “awarish” women on stage; the social world of urban oddities and the industrial spectacle of the traveling circus; the international development of publishing and the rise of magazines; the social formation of theatrical melodrama; the permeable boundary between early film's diverse representational and material world; the fluctuating but ever-present color line in wireless media; and the affective and geopolitical registers of diasporic Filipino karaoke. T.H. Lhamon *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), Karl Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), James Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), Janet Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), Bruce McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), Steven Ross, *Working Class Hollywood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and The American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), and Christine Balance, *Tropical Renditions: Making Musical Scenes in Filipino America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). Given the centrality that the press plays in the culture industries, it is also worth noting the integral role scholars of print culture have played since the first stirrings of cultural history. Beginning in the 1970s, Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton, and Natalie Davis did groundbreaking work on print culture's twinned elements of meaning-making and structural transformations (for example, Darnton's *The Business of Enlightenment*, which used publishers' records to rethink the transformations in French Revolutionary politics and letters). Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775-1800* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1979).

¹⁵ These works include tracing the corporate form's move from a compact to a dominant mode of production, the gendered roots of celebrity culture, and the articulation of the imperial relation's violence and coercion in national fictions. Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), Tracy Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage, 1800-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649-1849* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

¹⁶ This is the case for the best recent work as well as the canonical texts that explicitly deal with culture as an industry, a sampling of which include David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), Alex Cummings, *Democracy of Sound: Music Piracy and the Remaking of American Copyright in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular*

varies according to medium, but it is the artistic processes that find tangible and lasting form in time-based media that capture the majority of scholarly attention.¹⁷ If technology is only one factor in the process of industrialization, which is primarily about the reorganization of social relations, then the advent of transcription technologies cannot be the dividing line of industrial cultural production. This twentieth-century focus is reinforced by the visibility and recognizability of artists' politics in this era. As Michael Denning's formidable *The Cultural Front* suggests, the sheer numbers of cultural producers identifying with leftist labor politics in the 1930s makes it much easier to register their efforts as worker activism.¹⁸ Long before Hollywood and RCA, though, performers in the mid-century show trade confronted the hallmarks of industrialization—alienation, deskilling, routinization, and capital consolidation—and responded accordingly. Furthermore, although culture workers who predate industrial unionism did not organize as their later counterparts did, the entertainment industry had arguably undergone a more profound change in the previous century.

Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), and Miller, *Segregating Sound*.

¹⁷ My two years at the Pop Conference in Seattle has made this focus very clear. I gave a paper this year on the 1850s and was placed on a panel titled “Back in the Day” with two other (excellent) scholars speaking on the 1920s and 1950s. “Time-based media” is a term borrowed from the fine arts world where duration, instead of height and length, is the key dimension.

¹⁸ In the two best works on the labor organizing of actors and musicians, the period before the twentieth century receives only a passing glance. These are Sean Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!: Actors' Unionism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), which focuses on the organization of stage actors into the Actors Equity Association, and Michael James Roberts, *Tell Tchaikovsky the News: Rock 'n' Roll, the Labor Question, and the Musicians' Union, 1942-1968* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

A Conceptual Reason

Yet even these explanations remain on the surface. On a more fundamental level, naming the stage as a workplace runs roughshod over our most ingrained assumptions about creativity. The problem is not identifying artists as workers in the abstract but performers as laborers within capitalism. From its beginning, political economy excluded artists from the category of productive worker. “The piano maker is a *productive worker*, but not the *piano player*,” wrote Karl Marx, as “the piano maker reproduces *capital*; the pianist only exchanges his labor for revenue.”¹⁹ For Marx, the dividing line between productive—in the economic sense—and unproductive labor was its relation to capital accumulation, or whether the capitalist was extracting a surplus that could be reinvested and circulated. This argument drew from Adam Smith’s definition of productive labor as that which “realizes itself in some particular subject or vendible commodity, which lasts for some time at least after that labor is past.”²⁰ Before Smith listed the frivolous professions of players and musicians, he had already used the term “performance” to indicate the ephemeral quality that united both “men of letters,” officers of the state, servants and opera-dancers. By the close of the eighteenth-century, then, stage work had become shorthand for unproductive labor.²¹ A clear illustration of this phenomena is the

¹⁹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin Classics, 1993), 305-306. Marx adds that piano player does produce something, possibly even “the musical ear” itself, but that “only such labour is productive as produces capital.”

²⁰ Smith acknowledged that there were both “respectable orders” and “menial servants” whose labor was technically unproductive, because their “services generally perish in the very instant of their performance, and seldom leave any trace or value behind them, for which an equal quantity of service could afterwards be procured.” *Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 352.

²¹ Performance theorists once celebrated this resistance to commodification. Peggy Phelan names the same ephemerality of performance as Smith—“performance as that which disappears”—as usefully resistant to the logic of commensurable exchange. Writing of anti-capitalist performance art in the 1970s, Phelan notes her interest in “the *immaterial* allure of performance as one possible way to imagine new economies of value.” The same element that made performance unproductive for Smith makes it valuable for Phelan. Phelan, “Performance, Live Culture and Things of the Heart,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 2 (2003), 294.

common trope in early actor biographies in which great performers leave their clerk or counting-house positions on account of having “no head for business” and instead “an immediate inclination for the stage.”²² This training facilitated their rise as actor-managers and star players, but the ideological distinction between commerce and art made the continuity appear as a rupture.

Marxist thought offers a second key term for the stage worker: alienation. In an early workshop, I was asked by a colleague where all the fun was in a dissertation purportedly about amusement.²³ This question reveals a deep discomfort with recognizing the alienated worker on stage rather than in the audience. We understand the factory operative to be alienated from production, from her fellow workers, from the social relations of production, and from her essential humanity. In contrast, artistic work is not only exempt from alienation, but is often framed as its antithesis. Beyond the factory, scholars of nineteenth-century capitalism have identified the process of alienation and commodification in the creation of agricultural futures, the AP newswire, credit reporting, and life insurance.²⁴ We do not expect art—where we pursue pleasure, communal meaning, or beauty—to undergo this process.

Now, because performance can now be recorded and distributed—because it no longer necessarily “perishes”—and because it is embedded in a system of capital investment and return, it is clear that performance is no longer “unproductive” in the terms of classical political economy.

²² “Immediate inclination” is from the biography of Robert William Elliston, *Mirror of Taste and Dramatic Censor* [Philadelphia] III.IV (April, 1811), 222; “head for business” is biography of George Frederick Cooke, *Mirror of Taste and Dramatic Censor* [Philadelphia] III.I (January, 1811), 19.

²³ This is because graduate students in history are brought to the stage from the audience’s perspective, with the canonical scholarship focused on the consumer. Two examples are John Kasson, *Amusing the Million* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978) and Catherine Ramirez, *Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

²⁴ Alfred Chandler and James Cortada, *A Nation Transformed by Information: How Information Has Shaped the United States from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) and Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

This vision has two linked genealogies. The first inherits the tradition of the European Romantic artist, who, as Raymond Williams argued, emerged as the figure of “art” in counterpoint with “industry” in a constellation of terms delineating of a new set of relations between humans and their world at the close of the eighteenth century.²⁵ The Romantic artist, Williams explained, was indifferent to worldliness and existed solely in zones of beauty and natural feeling. The development of the convention of artistic genius as a “special kind of person” with access to a higher truth was a compensatory response to a changing system of literary production that threatened to render an ode to a nightingale as just another commodity. This process transformed the meaning of art work, which became the incubator of “certain human values, capacities, [and] energies” within the maelstrom of industrial civilization.²⁶

If the Romantic vision emphasizes the purity of art against the soul-crushing grip of industrial progress, the separation of art from work was even more powerful for those denied access to the house of labor built for white men. As scholars Robin Kelley and Tera Hunter have argued, the expressive forms of the African diaspora provided their creators with autonomy and self-definition in workplaces rife with violence and dispossession. While one approach to vernacular music classifies the blues by occupational group, Karl Hagstrom Miller has argued that for many early commercial blues players, “music was a way to stop working.” The harmonica player Deford Bailey

²⁵ Williams argued that while both “art” and “industry” had once described a particular human quality among many others, but with a broad application, they were transformed to describe separate and specialized realms. Art signified the “imaginative” or “creative” activity that “came to stand for a special kind of truth,” with the “artist” as its bearer; industry became “a thing in itself—an institution, a body of activities” used to describe manufacturing and production. Williams, *Culture & Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), xii, xv, xviii.

²⁶ Williams, *Culture & Society*, 30, 36.

explained that once he discovered he could make money playing music instead of working in domestic service, “I never did no more good work.”²⁷ Across difference, both traditions identify creative effort as a specific kind of human activity that is valuable not in spite of but because of its categorization as “non-productive.”

These are the determining discourses—the well-traveled routes and immediate answers—that inform how we value performers and the work they do. They structure the funding of arts education, the regulation of global entertainment conglomerates Live Nation and AEG, and the range of responses to the unionization of web-based journalists and strip club employees. Most often, we understand the problem of the culture worker either as a forked path or a weighted balance scale, where the closer a performer gets to “worker” the farther she is from “artist.”²⁸ In this view, the rise of the culture industries turns artists into workers, with the former category reserved for the avant-garde and the latter populated with hacks. Yet many of the historical subjects in this dissertation were conscious of their position as both artists and workers. In response to these claims, it was the logic of culture worker management that framed artist and worker as opposing categories that could not be occupied simultaneously. Rather than choosing or being automatically sorted into these two camps, commercial performers are under constant obligation to negotiate multiple registers of value, even as these systems are increasingly presented as incompatible.

²⁷ Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 56.

²⁸ A related and equally unsatisfying transition that performers are said to undergo in this period is from amateur to professional, as argued in Benjamin McArthur's *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979). McArthur's relies almost entirely on the published memoirs of star performers.

The Case for Theatrical Exceptionalism

The central premise of this dissertation is that this dilemma of the modern culture worker is a product of the nineteenth-century theater industry. Careful historical analysis of the working lives of nineteenth-century performers—which we encounter now as the obscure gestures and inscrutable jokes of a bygone era—opens up new ways of understanding the era’s major transformations and its vast implications. Astute readers have noticed that I am moving freely between the terms “creative worker,” “culture worker,” “artist,” “performer” and “player,” but the majority of this dissertation uses the last two terms, with the understanding that they identify the specific kind of work at hand yet are also broad enough to encompass the first three. I understand performers as a subset of “culture workers,” meaning those engaged in the production of symbolic commodities for some portion of their livelihood.²⁹

I also want to clarify my use of the term “theater industry.” Some of the players who appear in these pages were actors and actresses playing roles in full-length productions, but there are just as many orchestra musicians, female impersonators, lady whistlers, and chorus singers. The significant differences in their working lives existed in relation to each other and to the development of an industry as a whole. This dissertation would not be possible without the ground-breaking scholarship that has analyzed the form and meaning of the genres that emerged across the nineteenth-century, such as Janet Davis, Gillian Rodger, Eric Lott, Katherine Preston, Jayna Brown, Robert Allen, and

²⁹ Sociologist Mark Banks defines the culture workers as “those involved in the production of ‘aesthetic’ or ‘symbolic’ goods and services; that is, commodities whose core value is derived from their function as carriers of meaning in the form of images, symbols, signs and sounds.” This is distinct from a looser version that prizes “creativity” as an intellectual act required for a wide variety of jobs, and it recognizes the key role of commodity production. Mark Banks, *The Politics of Cultural Work* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 2.

Bruce McConachie.³⁰ But I seek to knit these genres back together through the features they shared—theater orchestras, agents, the trade press—and the common problems they confronted.³¹ Genre categories often do not apply to the careers of individual players. The German musician Anton Straub, well-versed in cultivated music, was a founding member of the union in Chapter Two and the bandleader for a venue in Chapter Three promoted as “The Cheapest Place of Amusement in the World.” In spite of their differences, most performers eventually had to define themselves in relation to the new model of culture worker, defined not by a particular skill but by her position in a labor market that demanded mobility, fungibility, and self-promotion.

This project also argues for the particular significance of the theater, or for theatrical exceptionalism. Unlike plastic, visual, or literary arts, theater is built on a confrontation of the artist and the audience, or the worker and the consumer. There are close coincidences between these various forms, particularly in the history of copyright and printing, and I take inspiration from work in the history of the book that traces the

³⁰ Davis, *The Circus Age*; Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*; Bruce McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*; Katherine Preston, *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825-1860* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993) Jayna Brown, *Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Gillian M. Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³¹ The exclusive focus on either the “legitimate” or the cheap amusement obscures both the important differences and similarities between the two. For example, while credit for the first touring combination company is often given to Dion Boucicault for a London tour of *The Colleen Bawn*, the term was in fact already in circulation in cheap amusements on both sides of the Atlantic.³¹ In the spring of 1859, a “combination company” of Sam Sharpley, J.H. Robinson, and Morris Edmonds was formed to play at two variety houses in Philadelphia, owned by William Long: the Northern and Southern Varieties. According to the *Clipper*, “the performers are enabled to appear at either or both houses,” and “this consolidation of capital and management will doubtless make the talent engaged more available.” The point here is not simply to establish an earlier origin point. The mythos of Boucicault (which he created) was that it was he alone who understood that a play could be vested with star power, generating the cult of the playwright. Sharpley, Robinson, and Edmonds, in contrast, were minstrel players and managers. *Clipper*, May 28, 1859.

commodification of writing.³² But for inquiry that centers the valuation of labor, theater is the clear choice. First, the effort required to move players, sets, and props across growing distances in shorter periods of time built an infrastructure of theaters and middlemen that was both visible and controversial. Second, while readers may interact with a text at far remove from the author, the creative worker on the stage is always immediately present.³³ Stage work is fundamentally embodied. “To act you must be present in the body, available to be seen,” writes Faye Dudden, in her argument for theater’s constitutive role in sexuality.³⁴ This vital fact of embodiment and its relationship to identity, representation, and memory is the generative tension that has pushed theater history out into performance studies.³⁵ The great insight of this work is to push us toward deeper analysis about the representational quality of the stage—in which the purpose of playing is to hold “the mirror up to nature”—and to ask why and how this occurs.

Performance has long meant that entertainment is considered marginal to the operations of political economy, but theatrical exceptionalism allows us to bring it to the

³² Contemporary scholarship from Meredith McGill and Leon Jackson offers models for historians of a variety of media as they rethink familiar tropes of authorship, publication and circulation, and the artist’s position within and against market logics. Leon Jackson, *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007); Meredith McGill, “Copyright and Intellectual Property: The State of the Discipline,” *Book History* 16 (2013): 387-427; and McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-53* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

³³ Transcription technologies from wireless radio to Vine have changed this calculus, altering both the temporal and spatial coordinates of performance, so that we are no longer breathe the same air as the performers. Yet most of us understand what we see as on screen as a representation of an actually existing body. At the same time, scholarship on the most obvious exceptions to this rule—video games, virtual reality, CGI—explicitly situates itself in performance studies and grapples with questions about embodiment and, increasingly, labor.

³⁴ “Acting is linked to sexuality because it is an *embodied* art—in contrast to the relatively disembodied business of writing, or the decorative arts so long associated with women,” explains Dudden. Faye E. Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 2.

³⁵ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

center.³⁶ Performance and the industry built around its exchange are in fact particularly well-suited to the questions that are currently occupying historians interested in the structures and processes of capitalism. As Jean-Christophe Agnew argued thirty years ago, the theater and the market are bound together by “the same peculiar experiential properties that set them apart from other kinds of exchange.”³⁷ These “peculiar” properties are excellent ground for the study of what Michael Zakim and Gary Kornblith have call “the multidisciplinary intercourse by which capital became an ‘ism’ and business became a political philosophy.”³⁸ In his study of the Actors Equity’ Association, Sean Holmes argues that stage performance is an “unusual commodity” because “it is a labor process exhibited before and consumed by an audience.”³⁹ These unusual and peculiar qualities should make stage work not an exception but a primary case.

³⁶ This shapes the legal history of the entertainment industry, from the attempt to trademark “Christy’s Minstrels” in the 1850s to a 1907 New York County Court decision that named stage entertainments as not “useful commodities of common use” and therefore exempt from anti-trust law. The 1854 decision regarding E.P. Christy’s capacity to trademark the name “Christy’s Minstrels” was reprinted in the *Christy’s Plantation Melodies* (Philadelphia: Fisher & Brothers, 1856) songster, Minstrel Songsters, Harvard Theatre Collection; “Syndicate No Trust,” *Billboard*, June 29, 1907.

³⁷ Agnew’s argument was that the stage and the market both possess the ability to destabilize and reorganize identities and social structure, and that in his period of study—1550 to 1750—the stage thus became a testing ground for the emerging social relations of a new mode of production. I borrow from Agnew the conviction that theater 1) bears a particular relation to its perceived opposite, market exchange and 2) is not a register or a reflection of market relations emerging elsewhere but has both “constitutive and exploratory powers.” Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

³⁸ Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith, eds., *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 5.

³⁹ Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams*, 58-9. In his work on recorded music, David Suisman has argued that that the uneven and erratic processes of commodification of sound need to be explained and not merely identified. In popular music, he argues, these transformations have a much to do with advertisers, sales agents, managers, and lawmakers as they do with wax cylinders. Commodification, he argues, “is a social and political process, populated by human actors, and one that includes various dimensions and phases.” Claiming that a cultural form has become a commodity, Suisman argues, “tells us nothing about how music resembles or differs from other commodities, or what aspect of music lies at the core of its commercial circulation.” Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 9.

The argument that stage labor is “unusual” or “peculiar” builds from its mysterious relationship commodification and alienation. In Marx’s formulation, wage labor is the best example of simple commodity exchange and the worker selling his labor power is the first step in the process of commodification, before any material objects are produced. The commodification of labor is thus the clearest example of surplus value extraction that appears equitable but is exploitative, or what Slavoj Žižek calls the “negation of equivalent exchange.”⁴⁰ And if labor is the commodity that best expresses the process by which value is inequitably extracted, then nowhere is it more visible than in performance, where the work of producing (and exchanging) the good happens before the consumer’s eyes. Viewed in this way, the nineteenth-century interest in the buying and selling of stage labor shows itself as contiguous with the era’s most fundamental debates about value, property, and selfhood.⁴¹ Commercial performance stages, embodies, and makes visible this first fundamental step of capitalism. In his work on the legal struggles of recording artists, Matt Stahl has made a similar point that twentieth-century pop stars are a particularly useful demonstration of the limits of liberal employment.⁴² Recording artists appear particularly “free” in their capacity to sell their labor-power, yet they are positioned exactly at the “point of alienation,” or the place

⁴⁰ Writes Žižek, “the catch is that the labour force is a peculiar commodity, the use of which—labour itself—produces a certain surplus-value, and it is this surplus over the value of the labour force itself which is appropriated by the capitalist.” Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 22. Performance is the commodity par excellence because it is the primary example of the negation of equivalent exchange. Not wage theft or obvious exploitation—because the purchasing of labor is meant to look wholly equivalent and equitable—but rather the nature of the “peculiar commodity” that best portrays the commodity logic, or the necessary inequity of capitalist “equivalent exchange.”

⁴¹ Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Catherine Fisk, *Working Knowledge: Employee Innovation and the Rise of Corporate Intellectual Property, 1800-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

⁴² Matthew Stahl, *Unfree Masters: Recording Artists and the Politics of Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

where an employee is separated both from the product of her work and from control over the process. The same distance from alienation that made stage work seem “non-productive” in fact makes it an ideal test case for thinking through the position of workers in modern capitalism.

Not only does stage work center this first-order commodification of labor, but it makes this exchange visible. Workers in other industries also experienced deskilling and interchangeability as workplaces in the United States transitioned from a craft or artisan to an industrial model, but most underwent these changes in private. The rise of sweated outwork, which was almost half of craft labor in New York City by 1850, moved piecework out of small manufactories and into cellars and cutters’ bureaus, where it was “invisible to most customers and chroniclers, hidden from view.”⁴³ Stage work was loaded with cultural and social meaning *and* it was highly visible, and its transformation thus generated extensive commentary from those on stage and in the audience. This is a familiar argument for theater scholars, who have long argued that modes of theatrical organization, in Douglass McDermott’s words, “[coincide] with parallel shifts” in religious, civic, and governmental institutions.⁴⁴ The transformation of U.S. entertainment into a major profit-generating economic sector was not simply *parallel* to similar conversion in other sectors but was a key site for debating the transformation itself.

⁴³ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 28.

⁴⁴ Douglass McDermott, “The Theatre and Its Audience: Changing Modes of Social Organization in the American Theatre,” in *The American Stage: Changing Modes of Social Organization in the American Theatre*, ed. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 6.

On stage, these same changes were disguised but never hidden. Audiences were fascinated with buying and selling of creative work as an activity with multiple meanings that existed alongside the most contemporary systems of exchange.⁴⁵ Stage work was thus a useful symbol to work through the multiple meanings of paid labor that could either align with or contradict what were now widely understood as profit or industry motives. As the musicians' union was preparing for its 1865 strike, audiences at Wood's Minstrel Hall were treated to "A Manager's Triumph," a "pungent and effective" burlesque that played to a sold-out house that "seized with readiness every local allusion and personal application."⁴⁶ Two years later, Tony Pastor's audience enjoyed "A Manager's Trials; Or, a Strike at the Opera House"; decades later, the long-running vaudeville sketch "Change Your Act, or Back to the Woods!" satirized a passé comic duo from the western circuits.⁴⁷ The comic Billy Kersands, perhaps the best-known African American stage performer of the 1890s, often concluded his shows with his take on the standard "The Essence of Old Virginia," in which he would stop dancing and lie on the floor. "He would look at his feet to see how they were keeping time," his colleague Sam Lucas recalled, "and then looking out at the audience he would say, 'Ain't this nice? I get seventy-five dollars a week for doing this!'"⁴⁸ The seasoned comedian's joke went

⁴⁵ Matt Stahl makes a similar point regarding nonfiction accounts of popular recording artists. "The narration of music makers "shows how varieties of domination and appropriation—which are close to the surface in creative work but largely obscured in other forms of work—are re-naturalized through these processes and their representations." Stahl, *Unfree Masters*, 38.

⁴⁶ The burlesque staged—in blackface—the current ongoing conflict between P.T. Barnum and the "Chieftain of the Satanic Press," a thinly veiled Bennett, and the wider conflict between current theatrical managers and the *Herald*. *New-York Tribune*, October 23, 1864. *The Clipper* noted that, on opening night, several actors flubbed their lines and the curtain was accidentally dropped before the final scene. *Clipper*, November 4, 1865.

⁴⁷ *Clipper*, November 9, 1867. "Change Your Act" played its 10,000th performance in February, 1924. *Variety*, February 7, 1924.

⁴⁸ Sam Lucas in *The New York Age*, quoted in Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theater* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 125. Kersands was also playing with

straight to the heart of commercial performance's antinomies. The historian's task is to take this comment seriously, to track both the conditions of production of Kersands' performance, and to take approach this moment of reflexivity as both entertainment and critical commentary.

A Note on Method

Drawing on cultural and labor history methods, as well as previous scholarly work on cultural production and theater history, this dissertation is an interdisciplinary inquiry into the industrialization of commercial performance and its consequences for creative workers. In a departure from other approaches to theater history, I use class to analyze a system of relations and as a key index of maneuverability. I do not mean in the sense of the aforementioned "new class" debates of the twentieth-century; the star system, which developed across the course of the century, produced a highly stratified hierarchy with a handful of highly paid stars at the top, a mass of barely solvent bit players at the bottom, and a full range of ingénues and comic old men between. Instead, I follow Seth Rockman and Erik Olin Wright's recommendation that we use the term as a "heuristic" to make sense of social relations within a capitalist system. My use of class analysis builds from the following five propositions: 1) class is a relation that indexes access to capital; 2) class is thus the central measure of power within capitalism; 3) the "ism" of "capitalism" is a set of rules—a *political* economy—that protects the accumulation and reinvestment of capital on behalf of its possessors; 4) class is not separate from nor prior to other modes of oppression but works with and through them;

white minstrel show performer Dan Bryant's most famous crowd-pleasing dance, "The Essence of Old Virginny."

and 5) class consciousness should not be limited to the success or failure of organized movements.⁴⁹

Interpreting a musicians' union, for example, through a class analysis framework entails beginning with the articulation of the shared position of musicians as exploited laborers. It also means weighing the common German nationality of many of its members, the gendered limitations of what music and which musicians were recruited and protected, the unstable position of bandleaders, the legal recourse managers and performers took to enforce contracts, and the role of the press in shaping public perception of musicians' labor. This approach to class analysis is invigorated by other approaches to axes of difference, making it fully compatible with "interlocking systems of oppression," to borrow Patricia Hill Collins' formulation.⁵⁰ Again, the peculiar or strange qualities of commercial performance make visible the labor relations that do not easily fit a factory floor but are in fact central to the recirculation of capital. While the best analogue for orchestra musicians may be other deskilled craft workers, the position of the female performers who opened this introduction was shaped by their "emotional labor." As defined by Arlie Hochschild, emotional labor "requires one to induce or

⁴⁹ Without attempting a totalizing definition of capitalism, I see in the growth of commercial performance across the nineteenth-century several of the key factors identified by Marxist thought: the commodification of labor, the separation of workers from the means of production, and the constant pursuit of the circulation and investment of capital. Across a series of articles, historian Seth Rockman has argued that we use class as an "heuristic" or "a label" for the social and economic relations *specific* to capitalism, with capitalism defined as "a system of labor commodification whose very structure predicated the wealth of some on the impoverishment of others." Seth Rockman, "The Contours of Class in the Early Republic City," *Labor* 1, no. 4 (Winter, 2004), 530-1. This analysis falls squarely in a tradition primarily associated with the Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright, who has long argued that "the concept of class should be systematically rooted in the problem of forms of exploitation." Erik Olin Wright, *The Debate on Classes* (London: Verso, 1990), 41. Inequality within a capitalist mode of production has a causal relation, in which success for the few comes at the direct and literal expense of others.

⁵⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 221-238.

suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind,” which “calls for a coordination of mind and feeling” and may draw from “a source of self,” but which is “sold for a wage and therefore has an exchange value.”⁵¹ White and Duval’s contemporary equivalents work as waiters and shot girls, a coincidence often explained by the service industry’s flexible hours and high turnover. But the service industry requires extensive emotional labor from its workers, as do other growing sectors of education and healthcare, linking these jobs not through convenience but through their demand on workers.

The questions of the “creative class” thus become not about occupational identity or taste but of working relations, property ownership, and access to capital. This might take the shape of cultural capital, following Pierre Bourdieu, but the question is always how non-financial forms of capital are leveraged in pursuit of greater returns. This does not reduce the imaginative or representational possibilities of cultural forms. In contrast, it lets us make stronger and more convincing arguments for the interconnections between culture and other registers of human life. This project attends to moments of class consciousness among performers, while recognizing that this often takes shape as occupational, professional, or fraternal organization, in benevolent societies, and in racialized, male-dominated organizations. Performers excluded from these institutions were still embedded in class relations. Furthermore, the real strength of the cultural

⁵¹ Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* [1985] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 7-8. Hochschild’s description of the flight attendant, and particularly her fatigue, could also be applied to Lida White. “For the flight attendant, the smiles are *part of her work*, a part that requires her to coordinate self and feeling so that the work seems to be effortless. To show that the enjoyment takes effort is to do the job poorly. Similarly, part of the job is to disguise fatigue and irritation, for otherwise the labor would show in an unseemly way, and the product—passenger contentment—would be damaged. Because it is easier to disguise fatigue and irritation if they can be banished altogether, at least for brief periods, this feat calls for emotional labor.”

history tradition has always been its ability to interpret consciousness, culture and class as inextricable but not reducible to each other. It is this method that will give us greatest insight into Billy Kersands' twinned "performance of labor" and "labor of performance."

Most of cultural history's interest in class has rested in the audience.⁵² Instead, I analyze the working conditions for performers and the manner in which these conditions were interpreted and mediated, both by players and audiences. I am drawing from C. Wright Mills' formulation of the cultural apparatus as "meanings and designs and communications" that stand between "consciousness and existence," and I offer concrete instantiations of the apparatus in action.⁵³ This includes the contested process of defining and categorizing in Chapter Three of Dora Dawron's double-voiced variety act—was it a "curiosity," as one of her employers claimed, or an artistic work, as she argued—carried out in the pages of the *Detroit Free Press*. But it also extends to the new style of theatrical program introduced in the 1870s, which framed the list of performers with a

⁵² We know the emergence of a universalizing US middle-class ethos defined primarily through the manner the class adorns, entertains, and disciplines itself. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*; Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). These approaches rely on conceptions of cultural capital and social status developed by Pierre Bourdieu and Max Weber and seek to explain how genteel taste and lifestyle function as currency in a stratified society. Weber used the term "status group" to indicate a position of power not directly related to property, or group of people whose collective "life chances" are not determined by the market. Max Weber, "Class, Status, Party," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 180-195. Pierre Bourdieu posited a more direct but mystified relation between capital and status, in which the latter was composed not of free-floating preferences or natural associations and affinities but of social and cultural capital, defined as the invisible and unregulated iterations of invested wealth rooted in but not reducible to financial capital. Because cultural capital *appears* simply as good taste and not as inherited wealth or institutionalized privilege, its transmission is harder to trace and to critique; in Bourdieu's model, this makes cultural capital one of the most powerful mechanisms of sustained inequality. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. G. Richardson (Westport, C.T.: Greenwood Press), 241-258.

⁵³ I also borrow from Mills the argument that, since the cultural apparatus and its production are central to consciousness and action even when the individual cultural worker is not concerned with politics. "Their work is increasingly of central relevance to the great issues of history," and that "we cannot examine merely the individual workman and his choices" but "the cultural apparatus as a whole." C. Wright Mills, "The Cultural Apparatus," in *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*, ed. John Summers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 203-212.

standardized border of advertisements, allowing theatrical managers to shift paper production costs from ticket-buyers to sponsors. In invoking the cultural apparatus, I am not proposing a unidirectional flow in which actors perform, critics interpret, and audiences receive and react. Instead, I follow the approach outlined by Stuart Hall, which understands the terrain of “the popular” as an uneven but permeable staging ground for struggle.⁵⁴

A final methodological touchstone for this project is the scholarship on the culture industries. In its initial formulation, the use of “culture industry” allowed Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to differentiate between Hollywood schlock and “a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves.”⁵⁵ Coming to Adorno now means doing so after decades of scholarship that treats mass culture as for appropriated re-use.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ “Popular” was a complicated but important word for Hall, offering a way around the strict equation where class determines political affiliation and the ruling order is established through coercion and false consciousness. Hall was building from Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who theorized hegemony as the winning of the “spontaneous consent” of those whose interests might not seem aligned with the dominant elite, thus forming a historical bloc of cross-class alliances. Gramsci’s language of “terrain” has allowed scholars to emphasize process and to reconceptualize the relationship between base and superstructure. Organic—that is, deep-rooted and “psychologically valid”—ideologies must be reckoned with because they can “‘organize’ human masses,” and “they form the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.” Writing for the conditions of his own time (and his subsequent interlocutors) when the force of the institutions of civil society were equal to or greater than the state, Gramsci argued that revolutionaries needed to adopt a “war of position” appropriate to the complex cultural and social ground where hegemony is sustained and ideology is produced and lived. Antonio Gramsci, *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 199. Hall identified popular culture as this terrain, where there are no “once-for-all victories” but only “strategic positions to be won and lost.” Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Samuel Raphael (London: Routledge, 1981), 223.

⁵⁵ Theodor Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 85. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Adorno criticized the unabashed pursuit of profit of modern cultural production at the expense of even a pretense to art or social utility. “Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art,” they wrote. “What is new is not that [art] is a commodity, but that today it deliberately admits it is one.” Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Continuum, 1994), 121, 157.

⁵⁶ While “Cultural Studies” is often invoked as a singular entity that recovered people’s creative and politicized interactions with the products of mass culture, Stuart Hall and Adorno were not in total disagreement. Both identified the industrialization of culture production—what Hall called the “popular imperialism” of nineteenth-century recreation—as a moment that made impossible a “separate, autonomous, ‘authentic’ layer of working-class culture.” As Hall argued in the same essay, the emergence

Without adopting Adorno's interpretation of the culture industry's effects, the term itself can still reorient us to historically contingent *processes* and analytic tools—class, for example—more readily associated with other sectors.⁵⁷ As James Cook has argued, “industry” helps us think locally and transnationally at the same time, making visible new kinds of self-awareness as well as competition between or within industries.⁵⁸ Finally, industry reintroduces the terms of political economy back into the study of culture. It asks how performers position themselves and their work as they move between venues and genres, and how they make claims for their work across multiple registers of value.

A Brief Jaunt Through Stage History

It is hard to overstate the radical transformation of commercial entertainment in the United States over the course of the nineteenth century. One way to measure this change is through the increased geographic reach, density, and endurance of regular stage performances. Theater historians have pieced together fleeting glimpses of the French *masques*, indigenous storytelling, Spanish *comedias*, African dance, and English plays that appeared in the Americas between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. By the

of corporate capitalism and the necessary infrastructure that made possible its production and dissemination forever altered the terrain of expressive culture. Both scholars agreed, then, that the existence of mass culture was the starting point for discussions of both its terms—“mass” and “culture.” Their key divergence was not the historical situation they described but their reading of its political possibilities. Hall, “Notes,” 229.

⁵⁷ In his work on men's ready-made clothing, Michael Zakim argues that “industrialization” be viewed not as technological change but as a re-organization of social relations. This is an echo of E.P. Thompson's argument in the 1960s that the working class was made as much by political and cultural forces as by economic or technological ones. It was not the product of the steam engine, but of the exploitative relationship between capitalists and workers, the latter having already been molded by religious, popular, and political traditions. So while Zakim's argument is not new, it is perhaps particularly appealing in a period of rapid financialization, when economic change seems to happen through invisible or inaccessible financial instruments instead of in steel and brick. Michael Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men's Dress in the American Republic, 1760-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁵⁸ James Cook, “The Return of the Culture Industry,” in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History*, 291-317.

eighteenth century, entertainers from Philadelphia to New Orleans established playhouses and cultivated an elite postcolonial audience for drama—tangling with local anti-theatrical forces—while conjurers, animal exhibitors, and equestrians traversed imperial edges.⁵⁹ Traveling companies inched along carriage roads and journeyed in boats along the Ohio, Mississippi, and Cumberland Rivers to Lexington, Louisville, and Frankfort—to Cincinnati, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Detroit—to Mobile, Nashville, Memphis, and Pensacola—where, over time, their presence encouraged commercial entertainment habits. The loose dichotomy of “legitimate” theater and itinerant spectacle of the eighteenth century fractured into circuses under canvas (1820), traveling minstrel companies (1840s), dime museums, variety halls and concert saloons (1850s), and mammoth tours claiming fifty starring performers that combined every style of performance under the sun. In 1873, more than 3,500 towns hosted regular theater performances in at least 5,000 theaters; in 1886, there were 282 combination companies on the road.⁶⁰

Theaters were transformed by the same sweeping technological, social, and cultural changes that gave shape to the nineteenth century. Each new performance style of the period involved the movement of people from rural areas around the globe into urban centers—drawn by wealth, political freedom, and social mobility; driven by exploitation, repression, and violence—where their embodied, melodic, and narrative

⁵⁹ British theaters are successful in Williamsburg and Charleston, but face Quaker and Puritan opposition in Boston and Philadelphia. As Heather Nathans has argued, the American Revolution converted anti-theatricalism “from religious doctrine to patriotic duty,” and rejecting the playhouse—bound up with class distinction and an English dramatic canon—was an effective form of cultural nationalism. Heather Nathans, “Forging a Powerful Engine: Building Theaters and Elites in Post-Revolutionary Boston and Philadelphia,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 66 (1999), 114.

⁶⁰ Christopher Bigsby and Don Wilmet, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre* I, 19.

ways of making meaning collided and transformed. Each new way to transport theatrical companies remade the temporality and geography of touring. The Little Miami Canal in Ohio and the Erie in New York moved showboats west and south along waterways. A few decades later, every mile of railroad track that crossed a plain, paused at a river, or knit a small town into the orbit of metropolises—place like Oil City, Pennsylvania and Sioux City, Iowa—established conditions in which variety halls and euphemistic “Opera Houses” could flourish and fail alike.⁶¹ Innovations in printing and communications opened up new possibilities both for promotional materials and their dissemination. Colored lithographic posters sold mammoth shows with a new visual vocabulary, while the proliferation of trade papers and the “entertainment beat” of even the most local papers connected audiences, proprietors, and performers in ways previously unimaginable.

As the show trade became the entertainment business, the standard institutions of modern capitalism—stockholders, speculators, trusts, employment bureaus—appeared in theatrical guise. In the early Republic, no one expected to make a fortune building a theater or establishing a circus, so most managers and proprietors were themselves performers. By the end of the Civil War, however, show business was pulled into the world of capital accumulation. Wall Street agents and hustling small-town saloonkeepers converted churches and cheap storefronts into a wide range of venues in search of the

⁶¹ In the decade following Sioux City’s incorporation as a town in 1857, its residents participated in amateur musicals, dances, lectures, and tableaux held in halls, churches, and the courthouse, and also came out to see traveling companies like the J.W. Carter Theatrical Troupe, in *Richard II* and *Lucretia Borgia*. The local newspaper editor applauded Carter’s offerings and chastised the audience for “laughing when the tragedy was presented and looking solemn as owls during the comic afterpiece.” This is an excellent example of how audiences had to learn how to properly respond to traveling companies bearing new artistic forms. Harold E. and Ernestine Bennett Briggs, “Early Theater on the Northern Plains,” *Journal of American History* 37 (September, 1950), 233.

growing pool of amusement seekers, and theatrical goods, labor, and know-how became commodities widely available through a growing network of agents and information brokers. No Gilded Age development was more reviled than “The Syndicate,” a theatrical partnership formed in 1896 that quickly gained monopolistic control over hundreds of independently owned theaters, and its counterparts in vaudeville. While theatrical proprietors with similar dreams had once been depicted as puppeteers controlling multiple theaters, the Syndicate appeared as an octopus—not a human-scale vision of management but an autonomous being.

Alongside new metaphors for the economy, historians will also recognize the rhythms of modern capitalism pulsing through the theater. More venues, audiences, and workers meant that managers could expand theatrical seasons, the number of performances in a week, and even the length of the performance, culminating in “continuous vaudeville.” Each period of abrupt economic expansion and contraction—the financial panics of 1837, 1857, 1873, 1893—had profound effects on how show business was structured. Beginning with the 1837 recession, panics signaled disaster for playhouses and a concurrent rise in the cheap amusements that best exemplified the new theatrical mode of production.⁶² Panics also brought increased scrutiny of culture workers. The people who made (and lost) a living within these changes could clearly articulate the sea change in their midst. “Persons who imagine the ‘show business’ to be insignificant would be much astonished when better informed on the subject,” explained the *Clipper* in 1859. The “capital and energy invested” in the country’s fourteen major circuses, measured by its number of employees (60 to 200), number of horses (90 to 220),

⁶² Peter Buckley, “Paratheatricals and Popular Stage Entertainment,” 457.

and daily expense (\$250 to \$700) allowed the public “to form some impression of how much money is devoted to their amusement.”⁶³

One way to name this transition is from a *craft* to an *industrial* mode of cultural production. The second term in “performing arts” refers both to symbolic and skilled manufacture. As a trade akin to shoe or textile manufacturing, early commercial entertainment—whether it was *The Merchant of Venice* in Williamsburg or jigging to the sailor’s hornpipe in a tavern lot—was produced in an artisan workshop. This workshop was characterized by three elements: the profit structure, the protection of lines of business within the stock company system, and the family unit. British companies in the Americas were organized along the “sharing system” until the end of the eighteenth-century, in which actors received a designated share of the receipts after costs.⁶⁴ The advent of the star system, in which freelance celebrity players commanded huge salaries either in advance or at their benefit performances, helped push companies towards a salaried system in which the manager assumed both risk and profit.

Like the sharing system, the clear designation of particular roles in a dramatic company—leading lady, first old man—were designed to provide consistent, life-long employment instead of stardom and wealth. Reliable players could move from utility player to leading man to old man parts over the course of their career. As a member of stock companies in New Orleans and St. Louis, Walter Leman had “passed through most of the phases of theatrical life, and by gradual steps mounted to the loft of the ladder (so

⁶³ *Clipper*, June 11, 1859.

⁶⁴ See *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues From the Colonial Period to the Present*, ed. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Alfred Bernheim, *The Business of the Theatre, Prepared on Behalf of the Actors’ Equity Association* (New York: Actors’ Equity, 1932), 9-11.

far as that phrase may be applied to a leading stock actor) and for the two past seasons have led the Business.”⁶⁵ Lines of business promised stability for the journeyman actor, if not a route into master status. Both the benefit system of payment, a contractual guarantee in which a player received the largest portion of a night’s proceeds, and the protection of lines of business were strategies developed by stock company actors to balance the power of the manager. The end of this practice and its replacement by the logic of the “specialty” is explored in greater depth in Chapter Four.

Finally, all British troupes in the early Americas traveled, and they were formed around the male actor-manager and his wife, children, and in-laws. Children learned to dance, sing, contort, and fiddle from their parents, and the fruit of their effort belonged to the patriarch. In Lewis Hallam’s troupe, which toured North American and Jamaica in the 1750s, the troupe of twelve adults divided its profits into fifteen shares. Hallam received two additional shares, one for his work as manager and the second for his children.⁶⁶ The family troupe lasted into the 1870s—particularly in musical or circus families—and the performing family remains but rarely as the basis of production. The advent of amusement entrepreneurs displaced the nuclear family as sole unit of labor while retaining its central feature: the manager patriarch and his performing (but now retired) wife.

These transformations had major implications for the people whose work made American entertainment possible. Most players involved in commercial performance before the 1830s were from performing families, and they found work through familial or

⁶⁵ Walter M. Leman to Moses Kimball, January 17, 1851, Moses Kimball Letters Received, 1840-1878, Library of Boston Athenaeum.

⁶⁶ Bernheim, *Business of the Theatre*, 9.

personal connections, or through direct application to theaters. Over the next few decades, the disruptive force of the blackface minstrel show and the variety theater upended this traditional path into the profession. Suddenly, concert saloon singers with little experience were commanding high salaries alongside acrobats and European ballerinas, and the labor market flooded with aspiring amateurs.

These opportunities afforded to British players in the United States extended beyond touring companies playing full-length dramatic productions. Compared to Europe, theaters in the United States were freewheeling and unregulated. Companies struggled and flourished in the absence of strict licensing laws governing which theaters could play what kind of production, the nonexistence of international copyright protections, and the challenge of regulating the “trademarking” of copycat troupes materializing wherever there was a willing audience aware of the phenomenon called “Christy’s Minstrels.” These factors shaped and facilitated the growth of the blackface minstrel show, considered the United States’ first cultural export and defining national genre because of its staging of racial difference. However, the structural conditions that enabled the minstrel show as a mode of theatrical production are as particular to the United States, *if not more so*, than the black-white racial imaginary that has captured the majority of historians’ attention. Because the minstrel show has been the subject of several field-defining monographs, I do not take it up in this project.⁶⁷ For the purposes of this project, it is sufficient to recognize the minstrel show as a significant American

⁶⁷ The genre’s fame and shame are both rooted in the minstrel show’s founding germ as a Jacksonian middle finger to authority assumed by white men through caricatures of stage blackness. Best known are Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Lott, *Love and Theft*, and Lhamon, *Raising Cain*.

mode of cultural production not only because of its content, but because it reworked the perception and enforcement of artistic norms, including creativity, intellectual property, and who had a right to the stage. These changes affected how all players entered show business—Spanish gymnasts, Irish comediennes, Japanese jugglers, African American female impersonators—and shaped the industry’s perpetual inequality of access and control. The long shadow of the blackface minstrel show is cast both by its racist and gendered representational grammars and its new rules about how performance was made and distributed.

Here is what I mean. In the English artisan model of the theatrical workshop, a performer assigned a minor role—a spear carrier or a member of Falstaff’s army—had three choices: remain content with his position, hope chance and talent would move him into leading roles or strike out on his own. In England, however, that third option was limited to summer tours in the provinces and was elsewhere denied by custom and law. When brothers William and Lewis Hallam—the manager of a second-rate theater and a third-order comedian, respectively—attempted to climb London’s theatrical ranks, their theater was limited to pantomime, farce, and rope-dancing. No such rules existed in the colonies, so Lewis, his immediate family, and a few stragglers sailed for Virginia in 1752.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ They played Charleston, Philadelphia, and NYC, avoiding local prohibitions on theater by playing for charity or advertising concerts with drama performed in between. While southern settler audiences were more receptive to theater, they were too scattered to form a consistent body; northerners were concentrated but skeptical. The Hallams are often referred to as fathers of the American drama, with a noble vision comparable to other founding patriarchs. However, as Alan S. Downer has argued, they are better understood as “theatrical outcasts, subversives, and dropouts.” Alan S. Downer, “Early American Professional Acting,” *Theatre Survey* 12 (November, 1971), 84.

When performers in cheap amusements a century later were unhappy with their working conditions, they had a different set of options. Minstrel stars built reputations on specialties—jig dancing, ballad singing, comic monologues—but many of them moved between roles and played different positions in the show’s tripartite structure. A promising newcomer at Long’s Varieties in Philadelphia was “spoken of as a very clever performer on the banjo, gives imitations of men and birds, and makes himself generally useful.”⁶⁹ Although no minstrel company composed solely of bone players could survive, there was more leeway in the roster than for dramatic companies. By the mid 1850s, minstrel hall managers in New York City learned that a constantly rotating list of new players could keep an audience returning, which provided an incentive to move performers into headlining positions. However, once a minstrel player had been “carded,” he could tour on his own with few restrictions. For example, in the spring of 1858, George Christy and handful of others left Henry Wood’s minstrel hall for California, where there was less competition. A century earlier, Lewis Hallam needed sets, costumes, and a company that could play at least a few familiar plays as a cohesive unit. All George Christy needed was a brand-name forged by his stepfather Edwin and his rowdy friends. Wood hired a new roster of players and gave them top billing, but within a few months these players had also left for California.⁷⁰ This revolving door pushed Wood to hire

⁶⁹ James F. Wambold, *Clipper*, January 29, 1859.

⁷⁰ *Clipper*, September 11, 1858. The “carding” of minstrel players echoed the packaging of other “acts” that would once have been relegated to a circus or sideshow but could now play the best theaters. When P.T. Barnum made the Swiss Bell Ringers Swiss in 1844, he named them as “the most extraordinary fellows in the world,” and told Moses Kimball that “if fashion will only stamp them, I don’t see why they can’t quite equal ‘Ole Bull’ in attraction.” Barnum to Kimball, July 29, 1844, Moses Kimball Letters Received, 1840-1878, Library of Boston Athenaeum.

female variety players, who could not recombine and leave as easily. He gave Ernestine De Faiber, of Chapter Three, her first New York City engagement.

Dissertation Structure

Performers across rank and genre responded to these changing circumstances in myriad ways. Each chapter focuses on a specific group of non-star players with shared working conditions—members of the Italian opera chorus, orchestra musicians, variety performers, specialty acts negotiating with agents, and players on the industrial minstrel tour—and the strategies they developed to pursue creative autonomy and professional success. These case studies follow the arc of the entertainment industry in the United States, beginning with a small handful of performers trained in German, Italian, and British folk and cultivated traditions and expanding, across the course of the nineteenth-century, to include players of African, Eastern European, and Irish origins, among others. While the players featured in the dissertation are not a comprehensive representation of the industry, I am confident that different examples would yield additional strategies while still supporting the project’s historical conclusions.

The tactics chosen by these groups were shaped by the performers’ relationship to stardom and ensemble work; the particular genre in which they worked. The key historical actors of Chapter One, the members of the Italian opera chorus in the 1850s and 1860s, understood that their presence had become centrally important on a stage that was often publicly contested, but did not offer a route into stardom. They went on strike. The European American women of Chapter Three who played in variety and who performed similar work on very different stages did not; their labor was culturally degraded, and

there was a real (if faint) possibility that they could be the next headliner. Their successors, the specialty players of Chapter Four, attempted to play a system increasingly designed to favor managers rather than performers. Theater orchestra musicians, the centerpiece of Chapter Two, who could stake claims on a masculine European art music prowess, not only went on strike but also formed a union that could protect the journeyman musician who commanded respect not as a soloist but as a member of an ensemble. Shut out from labor unions and from the dominant theatrical agencies, the thousands of African American performers staffing touring minstrel companies at the peak of Jim Crow—the key force of Chapter Five—used a major commercial mouthpiece to achieve the best possible working conditions.

As this summary suggests, the subject of this dissertation is the theater industry, even though there are few plays and fewer dramatic stars in its pages. In fact, the “legitimate” theater—a loaded term that refers in its simplest reading to full-length, plot-driven productions on proscenium stages—appears here mostly as a foil against which cheap amusements are measured. First, the “legitimate” has always been theater historians’ primary interest and its changing iterations are well-documented; it is the norm against which other genres are assessed.⁷¹ I have retained the terminology “theater industry” even though I focus on what were previously considered its marginal forms

⁷¹ From Pierre Bourdieu, we know that high and low are not pre-existing conditions but are instead relational pairs that establish the metrics for debates over and within cultural value. These categories are, in scholar Mark Hodin’s terms, “*structuring* rather than structural, forming a conceptual framework, a set of ‘rules of the game,’ which govern the positions taken by critical reviewers and inflect the dispositions and tastes of cultural consumers.” Mark Hodin, “The Disavowal of Ethnicity: Legitimate Theatre and the Social Construction of Literary Value in Turn-of-the-Century America,” *Theatre Journal* 52 (2000), 212. But structuring distinctions have structural effects. The differential positioning of performance genres, well-articulated by literary scholars, have material consequences not only for those who acquire cultural capital by *refusing* “commercialism,” but also for those whose livelihood depends on the taste of others. Hodin ties the term “legitimate” to literary value, but it is also derived from the British practice of theater licensing, in which only patent theaters were allowed to play spoken or serious drama.

(such as minstrelsy and variety) because I want us to see how the pieces fit together, and specifically how these marginal forms—and their modes of employment—moved toward the center and remade what it meant to be a professional performer. It would be a pleasure to tell the story of this transformation with clear heroes and villains, where the outcome of theater’s industrialization can be easily summarized as good or bad. But as is particularly clear in the final chapters, the massive upheaval in theatrical production following the Civil War had mixed results for performers. It was, however, a boon for theatrical managers. Each chapter is organized around this conflict, and is driven by the same question: what was it like to be a professional stage performer as entertainment became big business?

As may be clear by now, this is a nineteenth-century question with an answer that resonates loud and strong in our contemporary moment. If we are all now creative workers, it is not because we work with our brains now as not before; it is because we freelance, because we are expected to strive towards stardom and celebrity based on our versatility and personality, and because we are expected to accept low pay from employers generating massive profits because we love what we do. It is my hope that this dissertation, in offering a more accurate account of the origins of the “creative classes,” can move us toward their more just and equitable future.

Chapter 1. The “Strike Operatic”: The Italian Opera Chorus Takes the Spotlight, 1843 – 1857

Sesto Benedetti had a cold. When the curtain closed on the first act of *Lucrezia Borgia*, the Astor Place Opera House filled with whisper and speculation. Was the star tenor’s lackluster turn an indication of a more serious illness? The murmurs summoned manager Edward Fry to the stage, who explained that Benedetti’s stilted delivery was due not to sickness but to his refusal to sing in an upcoming performance.¹ When the tenor reappeared in the second act, the murmur rose to a roar of hisses and boos. He turned the next day to the press to defend himself. “It is with sincerest reluctance that I am induced to obtrude upon the public attention matters which do not appropriately come within its jurisdiction,” he wrote, but readers deserved to understand the extent of Fry’s poor management; his casting decisions were made with no regard for a singer’s range or preparation, and this particular role had already been promised to a different singer. Benedetti would indeed sing, he announced, not out of obligation to Fry but to his public.²

Two days later, news of the conflict brought a huge crowd to Astor Place for *Norma*, where they assumed their pivotal role in the evening’s entertainment with great enthusiasm. Benedetti was again met with applause and hisses, and opening his mouth as if to sing, he instead spoke directly to the audience. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” he said, “I

¹ Vera Brodsky Lawrence, *Strong on Music: The New York Music Scene in the Days of George Templeton Strong, Volume 1: Resonances, 1836-1849* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 517-520.

² *Weekly Herald* [New York], December 2, 1848.

have come here to sing for you. Shall I sing, or not?" Turmoil ensued, and the tenor collected his bouquets and walked off the stage. In a few minutes, Fry appeared. "Signor Benedetti is now before you," he said. "It is evident, therefore, that he has re-considered his determination, and intends to go on with his part." The *Herald* narrated the entire scene:

[Mr. Fry—] May I be allowed to suggest, that he may proceed. (Applause and hisses.) Circumstances between us, of a private nature, are to be disposed of elsewhere—(applause and cries of "No! no! no!" and "Yes!")—And Mr. Fry bowed.

"State the facts between you and Benedetti," said someone in a loud voice.

Mr. Fry.—They are not to be brought before the public by myself. ("Good! Good!" and some hissing.)

Mr. Fry.—Ladies and Gentlemen—These private difficulties are not to be brought before the public by myself [...] All differences of a private nature between us will be settled off the stage. I wish to know if Signor Benedetti will be allowed to proceed?

A unanimous "Yes," was the reply, and Mr. Fry bowed himself off the stage.

Twenty-five minutes passed, with "knots of persons discussing the circumstances," until the opera resumed. At the evening's end, the audience applauded with great fervor both for *Norma* and the evening's real show: the audience's participation in the making of opera. In spite of protestations that matters between the tenor and the manager were "private," this working relationship was of great interest to the public, and this interest was a key part of selling tickets in a moment when the politics of cultural production occupied a literal center stage. Two weeks later, in Verdi's *I Lombardi*, Benedetti again broke character to mark the tempo for the "overwhelming, thundering" orchestra. Some

observers sided with the superior musical talent of conductor Max Maretzek, while others endorsed “the invariable custom” in opera for the instrumentalists to “humor the singer.”³ Yet all agreed, considering recent events, that the most tickets were sold when the conflict was “before the curtain instead of behind it.”⁴

When New Yorkers discussed trouble at Astor Place at the end of 1848, they were referring to these staged negotiations between managers, conductors, and performers. Within six months, however, the now-infamous Astor Place riots displaced these commotions from historical memory. Triggered by the rivalry between British actor William Macready, playing *Macbeth* at the opera house, and Bowery favorite Edwin Forrest, the riot has become historical shorthand for the self-conscious clash of antebellum working-class masculinity and a nascent New York elite. The riot, in historian Lawrence Levine’s influential formulation, was “a struggle for power and cultural authority within theatrical space.”⁵ In the showdown between democracy and oligarchy—or between mob rule and propriety—securing the right to the opera was nothing short of claiming the cornerstone of social order.

In the wake of this influential interpretation, historians employ the vocabulary of class and capital to describe the symbolic dimensions of commercial entertainment, or to analyze genre and style as the expression of particular social formations. This wide-angle lens has been crucial in making the case for the importance of symbolic forms, but it

³ *Albion*, December 1848, 608. The opera was Verdi’s *I Lombardi*, which the *Albion* did not like, and judged noisy and brass-heavy. In the chorus, “the female voices are positively horrible; they all seem to sing through one huge nose, so nasal and inharmonious is the tone they produce.”

⁴ *New York Herald* [NYH], December 9, 16, 1848. “The only the time, in fact, when the Opera paid,” noted the *Herald*, “was during the row between the manager Benedetti.”

⁵ Jeff Ullom, “Critiquing the Huzzah: The Historiography of the Astor Place Riot,” *American Theater and Drama* (Fall, 1999): 16-29; Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*; Peter Buckley, “To The Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820-1860” (PhD diss., SUNY Stony Brook, 1984).

cannot explain everything. Audience investment and gossipy participation in Benedetti and Fry's squabbles, for example, does not map neatly onto opera as a key plank in the battle for cultural hegemony. In tracing the larger political stakes of opera and its co-optation by elite audiences, scholars have overlooked other dynamics of class and capital at play on the ground and in the details.

As a major financial and infrastructural undertaking, opera in New York generated controversy at the point of production as well as consumption. And the repercussions of the transformations in commercial entertainment extended far beyond just the private squabbles of a star tenor and his manager. In debating the operative mode of production—demanding the “facts” of Benedetti and Fry's relationships, discussing the finer points of their obligations to each other and to the audience, weighing the relationship between the star singer and the instrumentalist—New Yorkers were also discussing the changing nature of labor—the struggles over autonomy and alienation—that characterized their daily lives. Rather than providing an escape from the changes of mode in production that upended antebellum America, opera unexpectedly revealed industrial capitalism's particular forms of stratification. In addition to the strife between star singer and manager, introduced here between Fry and Benedetti, these concerns crystallized in the use and abuse of the chorus, which was curiously both central and marginal in the Italian opera. Opera was thus not simply a proxy for social control but was itself a source of conflict about the manner in which an entirely new scale of entertainment would be produced and under what conditions. Who would reap the profits and bear failures? Whose efforts would be recognized and rewarded? What kind of work was singing, and who decided what it was worth?

It may come as a surprise that these questions were articulated in opera. Few Western musical genres command a more distinguished pedigree, even when we recognize its commercial roots and capacity to provoke political controversy. But New York's antebellum opera was more than a new graft of an old genre. It was spectacular and speculative, requiring an array of financial actors and tools, including landlords, stockholders, mortgages, contracts and loans; it depended on the physical labor of orchestra musicians, prima donnas, tailors, agents, impresarios, chorus members, and stage carpenters; it was fundamentally transnational, as New York papers reported Spanish audiences applauding Italian stars singing in German in Mexico City. Early republic audiences had been exposed to truncated and translated versions of Italian works, but by the 1840s, Italian opera had become a massive labor- and capital-intensive operation. Antebellum opera may even qualify as an early example of mass culture, not simply because it was not yet fully high-browed, but because of the labor required to pull it off.

Highlighting the business of operatic production does not detract from its other dimensions as art, as pleasure, or as moral battleground, but instead concretizes these registers so they can be understood in relation to each other. As is the case throughout this manuscript, the commercial has always existed alongside other measurements of value. It is both more thought-provoking and historically accurate to understand how opera was regarded once as a grand aesthetic achievement, as well as a potentially democratic entertainment, a tool for refinement, and a potential blockbuster.⁶ And while

⁶ Scholars are intermittently interested in nineteenth-century music as business but rarely as labor. Richard Crawford's *The American Musical Landscape* devotes an entire chapter to performance, but the only "struggles" of Italian opera are those of entrepreneurs and elite cultural caretakers to cultivate a reliable

historians have excelled at framing opera as a litmus test for taste, its many participants were as interested in the material conditions of its making as they were in reveling in opera's aesthetic pleasures or arguing for its cultural significance. It is not only the historian but also the operagoer who was intrigued by its production.

Audiences understood what opera meant by knowing how it was made. As early as 1835, New York papers printed box office receipts and itemized expenses, often at the manager's behest to prove that closure was not his fault.⁷ The promise of a new soprano's arrival in New York, multiplied by a rumor of romantic intrigue or conflict with a manager, were as likely to bring out the crowds as an opera premier. These skirmishes weren't simply the clash of personalities. They were a crucial step in the manufacture of commodified personhood known as "celebrity," a key part of the operatic mode of production.⁸ New York operagoers paid careful attention to opera finances because, in the absence of court patronage or state subventions, they considered themselves patrons—remember that Benedetti had returned to the stage to avoid breaking his contract with the public. Critics and audience members thus felt a license to assess both the workplace's function and the allocation of funds—both of which unfolded before their eyes—that did not apply in other industries.

audience and build permanent structures. Richard Crawford, *The American Musical Landscape: The Business of Musicianship from Billings to Gershwin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 72-3.

⁷ In 1835 the *Commercial Advertiser* reprinted a *Sun* article that detailed the process that left the lessee of the short-lived Italian Opera Association almost \$2,000 in debt. June 3, 1835, 2. In the 1833-34 season, Rivafinoli—the lessee of the Italian Opera Association building—reported \$52,000 in ticket sales, including both single-ticket sales (\$16,000), twenty benefits (\$10,000), and subscriptions for three seasons, two in New York and one in Philadelphia (\$11,000). But Rivafinoli was still \$29,000 short of meeting his expenses, which included \$36,000 of contracts for eight months with singers and musicians.

⁸ Joseph Roach, *It*; Nussbaum, *Rival Queens*; Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).

Like many of commercial entertainment's constitutive features, the struggles at Astor Place over salaries, contracts, engagement length, and choice of role began in the seventeenth-century.⁹ But in 1840s and 1850s, managers were confronted for the first time with unruly masses of choristers and instrumentalists, who publicly and visibly refused to play on terms they found unsatisfying.¹⁰ This "muss among the flunkies" grew into the unions and protective associations that established the discursive and organizational contours of mass cultural labor, permanently shaping the subsequent trajectory of non-star performers across diverse genres.¹¹ By the mid-1860s, the musicians in the Astor Place orchestra who had "overpowered" Benedetti's singing in *I Lombardi* formed the Musical Mutual Protective Union, the key predecessor of the American Federation of Musicians. This change brought both negotiating strength and exclusion, as instrumental musicians developed a consciousness and strategic approach suitable to the industrializing show trade. The shape of the musicians' organizations was in no way predestined but emerged in active mutual constitution with the transforming industry itself.

⁹ Scholars date many of opera's key features date to seventeenth-century Venice, which has an intriguing parallel in arguments about the origins capitalism more generally. See, for example, Beth and Jonathan Glixon, *Inventing the Business of Opera: The Impresario and His World in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (New York: Verso, 2016).

¹⁰ Disobedient choruses make brief appearances in John Rosselli's history of opera in Italy, which records choruses on strike in Lucca (1836), Piacenza (1844), and Parma (1829), but their action attracted little notice beyond theatrical management. John Rosselli, "Opera Production, 1780-1880," in *The History of Italian Opera II, Systems: Opera Production and its Resources*, ed. Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli and trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 133. See also Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and *The Opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi: The Role of the Impresario* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984). An academic and music critic for the *Guardian*, Rosselli was raised by his British mother after the 1937 assassination of his father, Carlo Rosselli, a major Italian anti-fascist leader and intellectual.

¹¹ *Clipper*, November 28, 1853.

Before this happened, however, orchestra musicians and chorus singers experimented with expressions of displeasure and critique that did not find an outlet in formal organizations. This chapter takes up this phenomenon and makes a series of related claims. First, I suggest a new approach to opera that grounds the genre's contentiousness in its structural form. To do this, I demonstrate the process by which opera became mass spectacle in United States. This includes the relationship between traveling companies and permanent houses, changes in repertoire and company size, as well as the shifting responsibilities and resources of the key players. I argue that the massification generated a new kind of laboring subject: the anonymous player in the chorus and the orchestra. Like all class positions, this one both indexed a relationship to capital and was fundamentally relational, emerging in tension with stardom and a variety of managerial roles. The chapter ends with the operatic strike in the midst of the Panic of 1857, when the new laboring subject came into direct contact with management and looks forward to its next iteration.

I pay particular attention to the role of the Italian opera chorus, because their very presence on stage, particularly when it was disruptive, served as a lightning rod for key questions about the value of cultural labor in an industrializing workplace. The opera chorus existed in a liminal space, serving as a connecting link between several pairs of opposing cultural categories: vernacular and commercial, high and low, folk and court, street and stage. On the one hand, Italian choruses were an essential component of the most expensive, artistically-vaunted form available to the American cultural elite; as vocalists, the chorus was proximate to the star singers who commanded massive salaries and sparked theatrical gossip. On the other hand, Italian choruses detached from the

opera stage were often grouped with other musical nuisances that both irritated and entertained city-dwellers. In October 1850, a New York journalist recorded the many rivals to the city's theaters recently seen on the streets, which included "hand-organs [...] Swiss pandeans [pipes]; Italian choruses; performers on the flute, and whole caravans of fantoccini [puppets]."¹² Eliciting arguments about skilled and unskilled labor, specialization, and racial fitness, the opera chorus was alternately characterized as the voice of the people or an unwashed mass. To understand the logics of these categorizations, and the context in which they were produced, let's go to the opera.

The Arrival of Italian Opera in New York

There are several reasons why the Italian opera house emerged as a primary site of conflict, and this requires a brief review of the genre's first decades in New York. New York's first Italian opera was performed by tenor and noted Rossini interpreter Manuel Garcia and his company at the Park Theater in 1825. The Park's proprietor, Stephen Price, was a ruthless competitor in the transatlantic theater marketplace who built a successful career by attracting British stars with lucrative contracts.¹³ Price introduced several new components to cover the high costs of the Garcia company and manage the low receipts if the Park's audiences did not turn out in significant numbers. Ticket prices were raised for the boxes and pit but kept at the standard price for the galleries, seats could be reserved in the pit in addition to the box, and "season tickets" were available,

¹² *The Prompter*, August 5, 1850. The cacophony of the street was translated into parlor music by Mrs. C.C. Hunn, in her 1854 composition "The Wandering Minstrels," "an effective imitation of the Pandean pipes, hurdy gurdy, bagpipes, swiss bell ringers, harp, music box, drums, fife & fully military band."

¹³ Barnard Hewitt, "'King Stephen' of the Park and Drury Lane," in *The Theatrical Manager in Britain and America: Players of a Perilous Game*, ed. Joseph Donoghue, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 87-142.

which provided a guarantee of income. Audiences saw an entirely new kind of performance: the first Italian opera sung through with recitative, the first evening's entertainment with a single performance on the bill, and the city's first female singing star, Maria Garcia Malibran, against whom all subsequent prima donnas would be measured.¹⁴

These origins are important for three reasons. The standard narrative of the Anglo-American theater's industrialization is the decline of the self-contained stock company in the wake of the star system and touring combination companies. But from its earliest appearance in the U.S., opera was star-studded and in constant reconfiguration, closer in some ways to the spectacular productions of later decades like the *Black Crook*. Also, although the Garcia troupe came with a full company of principal singers, they did not travel with instrumentalists. The Park was thus required to expand its orchestra to a "double-band" of twenty-six players, making it one of the largest ever in the United States at that time. The crucial drawing power of stars in combination with a comparatively large scale of instrumental labor was thus associated from the beginning with Italian opera.¹⁵ The Garcia troupe also initiated crucial questions regarding Italian opera in New York. Would it find audiences, and what kind would they be? Could such a complex musical form and financial operation survive? Karl Bernhard, a European visitor, saw the troupe's *Don Giovanni* at the Park but remained skeptical of their ability "to transplant this exotic fruit to American ground," which he felt did not fit "the taste of the public here." Or rather, as he qualified, "at least the speculation of the Italian theatre

¹⁴ Karen Ahlquist, *Democracy at the Opera: Music, Theater, and Culture in New York City, 1815-1860* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997) and Katherine Preston's *Opera on the Road* are two excellent texts on antebellum opera.

¹⁵ Ahlquist, *Democracy at the Opera*, 54-55; Preston, *Opera on the Road*, 106.

is not so profitable as was expected.”¹⁶ Bernhard’s comment identified Italian opera’s three metrics of success: taste, speculation, and profit.

For although the Garcia troupe remained in New York a year, they were one of multiple offerings at the Park, which continued to mount other plays interspersed with twice-weekly opera performances. The troupe’s success, as both contemporary observers and subsequent scholars have repeatedly pointed out, did not mean that a theater dedicated solely to opera could succeed. As a result, the history of New York’s Italian opera between 1825 and 1883 (when the Metropolitan Opera was founded) is usually narrated as a string of failed attempts to establish a permanent home. This did not mean Italian Opera was absent from New York, but that its form was highly mutable, appearing in translation, in any number of locations, in a traveling or barebones company, at an unpredictable time, and always with considerable fanfare.

Karl Bernhard’s comments were due in part to the fact that, like much of antebellum New York’s commercial entertainment, opera was open both to a wide range of social classes and to the conflicts that erupted when a range of people enjoyed themselves in close quarters. Providing a hospitable welcome to the stage’s most prestigious genre was a central component of the elite’s efforts to claim New York as a cultural capital befitting its financial and infrastructural might.¹⁷ However, opera historians Katherine Preston and Karen Ahlquist have convincingly cautioned against an overstatement of the sacralization processes. New York’s “upper-tendom” — the antebellum term for the 1% — made several attempts to fix antebellum Italian opera as a

¹⁶ Karl Bernhard, Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, *Travels through North America, in the Years 1825 and 1826 II* (New York: G.C. and Carville, 1828), 197.

¹⁷ Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 237-273.

privileged, segregated activity, but they lacked both the numbers and the sway over familiar theater-going habits.¹⁸ Italian opera in New York thus remained, in the 1870s, an uneasy mixture of languages, forms, social classes, repertoires, architectural styles, and geographic locations.

The uneven process of cultural stratification was due both to its contested cultural significance and to the structural requirements of producing Italian opera. The language of “seasons” suggests a permanent and stable schedule, but the seasons could last anywhere from one to six weeks, and often ended before anyone knew the singers were in town. Impresarios would frequently announce a closure due to insurmountable debt or uncooperative singers, and then “re-open” in a few days. Such irregularities made opera seem less an institution than, in the words of a contemporary observer, “a superior sort of travelling circus.”¹⁹ Most productions were performed by itinerant troupes crossing vast distances, which contributed to this highly volatile system. Through most of the antebellum period, Manhattan competed not only with Philadelphia and Boston but with Mexico City, New Orleans, and particularly Havana, the first destination of many European performers who came to the Americas. The companies emerging from each of these cities were combination companies from the beginning, with a mixture of famed European stars, debutantes, and familiar players in new arrangements and under new company titles each year. The growing pool of European singers in North America who were not attached to permanent houses meant that companies could be easily assembled. By 1846, three to six companies performing Italian operas cycled through New York

¹⁸ Bruce McConachie, “New York Operagoing, 1825-1860: Creating an Elite Social Ritual,” *American Music* 6 (Summer, 1988): 181-192.

¹⁹ “The Academy of Music to Let,” *Leslie’s*, December 29, 1860.

each year as part of a larger touring schedule.²⁰ The increase in volume was generally understood as an improvement in quality. “I doubt if there were ever brought together in any part of the world a larger number of talented vocalists than were gathered in New York between 1850 and the early sixties,” recalled violinist and conductor Theodore Thomas, at the time a young player in the city’s theater orchestras.²¹

The best illustration of the cause and effects of traveling troupes is the series of antebellum companies organized in Havana. Composed of Italian singers lured by the wealth of a Spanish colonial elite, these troupes played a Havana-New Orleans loop as early as 1837.²² Six years later, a fifty-seven member company with a chorus of thirty was organized by impresario Francisco Marti y Torrens and toured Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and finally New York, where they played at William Niblo’s pleasure garden. The completeness of the troupe was a recurring note of interest for critics, and when they returned in 1847, the company included eighty-three people and a particularly accomplished orchestra, travelling with “everything, save a theatre.”²³ Although it may seem counterintuitive for a troupe of this size to travel, their itinerancy was purposeful and necessary. First, most of the singers were already “abroad” when they began performing in Havana and were easily coaxed north to New York in the summer, when Cuba’s theaters closed for fear of yellow fever. At the same time, because the troupes were attached to Havana’s Gran Teatro de Tacon in 1838 and subsidized by

²⁰ Preston, *Opera on the Road*, 99-100.

²¹ Thomas, *Theodore Thomas: A Musical Autobiography* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1905), 24.

²² Preston, *Opera on the Road*, 116-122.

²³ *NYH*, April 15, 1847.

Marti's extensive fortune, they faced less pressure to turn a profit when on the road.²⁴

The Havana troupes toured until 1852 and were repeatedly praised for their high-quality musicianship and cutting-edge repertoire, including the New York premieres of *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Donizetti), *Norma* (Bellini), and *Ernani* (Verdi). It was not only the star singers who received great praise, but also the troupe's "superior" orchestra and "deliciously given" chorus, which was described as singing 1847's *Ernani* "in such a style as never greeted our ears by any efforts of any choristers we ever listened to."²⁵

As the Havana companies— itinerant troupes semi-attached to specific opera houses— indicate, there was variety of ways to pay opera's bills. European opera houses were often supported by subventions or courtly patronage. But impresarios mounting productions in the Americas had to navigate both stockholders' investments and ticket sales. In Germany or Italy, an opera manager might receive the house rent-free or be supported or "secured by privilege" by subscribers. In New York, he was responsible for the rent and had to find loans to engage European talent. As a result, the construction of the most ambitious opera and playhouses in New York, and in Philadelphia, Charleston, and Boston beginning in the eighteenth-century, was financed not by individual managers or troupes but through the sale of shares of the building to local elites. Opera managers mounting productions in New York thus had to bend to the whims of these stockholders, who kept the best seats in the house and sold or rented them as they desired, as well as to the demands of the public who purchased tickets.²⁶

²⁴ *NYH*, May 5, 1843; Ahlquist, *Democracy at the Opera*, 131. They followed a troupe from New Orleans presenting "French opera and Vaudevilles."

²⁵ The 1847 Havana was by the *Spirit* as "equal if not superior to any company that ever came to this city, and certainly better than that at Palmo's." *Spirit of the Times*, April 24, 1847.

²⁶ Maretzek thought this was as a particularly American phenomenon. "Every business or undertaking, whether an Opera or a slaughter-house, a soap-factory or a public library, a railway or a monument to

If the rein of building stockholders was too tight and the impresario was willing to gamble with less prestige, he mounted his opera at the city's mixed-use pleasure gardens. Both Castle Garden and Niblo's could be more flexible with booking because of the absence of resident stock companies—an issue because of the Garcia troupe's tenure at the Park—and the lack of oversight from stockholders, who wrangled for both financial and artistic control. Real estate and opera management were separate at both the Astor Place and Castle Garden, but the owners were less involved at the latter location, where traveling companies leased the space from the proprietors and took the profits. Risk was shouldered by the companies and not the venues, an appealing arrangement for a troupe based primarily elsewhere—the Havana company—or for a manager with multiple operations, like Max Maretzek.

Castle Garden and Niblo's also benefited from an economy of scale: they offered opera at cheaper ticket prices and with no subscriptions, and thus attracted a larger and more diverse audience than at Astor Place.²⁷ When the Havana troupe first arrived in 1843, they played six nights across three weeks at Niblo's with all tickets at fifty cents, the high-middle range for the city's commercial amusements.²⁸ “The influence which Niblo's Garden exercises upon the public taste is great,” wrote a critic at the *Musical Review* in 1838, “because it is extended to a great number of persons. Thousands go there who would not go to the theatre; and thousands of others go there because the admission is but fifty cents; and other thousands go there of strangers who are passing through the

Daniel Webster, is a private speculation,” he complained. Max Maretzek, *Crotchets and Quavers: Or, Revelations of an Opera Manager in America* (New York: Samuel French, 1855), 181.

²⁷ Ahlquist, *Democracy at the Opera*, 116-159.

²⁸ The Havana troupe alternated nights with the ever-popular Ravels. “The recent French company has created a taste for opera,” noted the *Herald*, “which the Italians have it in their power to cultivate to their own advantage.” *NYH*, September 15, 1843.

city, or are temporarily here on business.”²⁹ Maretzek later claimed that the only financial success he had enjoyed was at Castle Garden in the summer of 1850.³⁰ The secret of New York’s Italian opera was that it “failed” in highbrow locations and thrived as part of a more diversified offering. For cultural powerbrokers, this commercial success threatened to undermine their cultural prestige. As long as it was supported by ticket sales rather than subscription, patronage, or philanthropy, opera remained partially open to a wider population than its reputation suggested and its most ardent defenders desired.

The constant fluctuation of prices and venues invited scrutiny. As the extensive coverage in a wide range of newspapers and magazines suggests, the fortunes of Italian opera depended as much on constant critical commentary in the press as on the impresarios and performers. Journalists went after poor management in one breath and parsimony in another, as part of the assessing of commercial enterprise that characterized the antebellum period. “We know nothing that so marks the time in which we live,” wrote the *Spirit of the Times* in an 1848 article titled “Suggestion for the Opera,” “as the extension of a certain business prejudice—the prejudice against things that ‘don’t pay’—into the hitherto irrational regions of display and pleasure.”³¹ But the *Spirit* frequently brought such “rational” thinking to the realm of aesthetics. The same column then listed Maretzek’s new recruits for the year, including the tenor Forti, paid a monthly salary of \$1,000, and “the beautiful Parodi,” whom Maretzek had been authorized by stockholders to offer whatever she asked. Twenty years after the Garcia debut, the *Spirit* author could

²⁹ “Musical Concerts Conducive to Morality,” *The Musical Review* I (July 25, 1838), 134.

³⁰ “The Great Operatic Case,” *NYH*, December 10, 1853.

³¹ “Suggestion for the Opera,” *Spirit of the Times*, October 27, 1848.

conjure an imaginary past when opera existed in isolation from business principles, but this had in fact never been the case.

The Italian opera of antebellum New York, then, was not only a contested site between classes, but also the battleground of rival impresarios, performers, and stockholders, all of whom were constantly testing the balance of venue size, subscriptions, and single-ticket pricing. Vying with a rapidly growing number of theaters for both patrons and employees, opera's participants made tactical decisions about venue, repertoire, cast, and potential rivals. Men who wanted to mount an opera had several options: a spring season with too many prima donnas could be offset by a strong showing in Havana, while a flop in Mexico City could be countered by the revival of an old chestnut at one of New York's pleasure gardens. But exerting consistent control over the actual bodies on stage was another problem.

Considered in this light, Italian opera becomes one of the many enterprises born in antebellum cycles of boom and bust, which in their continual failures and revivals reshaped both processes and meanings of social and financial exchange.³² Opera's antebellum critics and practitioners understood this, particularly those invested financially and emotionally in its success. Impresario Max Maretzek frequently referred to his life's work as "speculation." Critics called performers "co-laborers" and their employers "capitalist managers."³³ Manager Bernard Ullman named the opera-ization of the piano concert—the "Overture" for *Il barbiere di Siviglia* arranged for sixteen pianists

³² Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*; Cook, *The Arts of Deception*; Levy, *Freaks of Fortune*; Jane Kamensky, *The Exchange Artist* (New York: Viking, 2008); Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Edward J. Balleisen, *Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

³³ *NYT*, February 16, 1858.

and eight pianos—as “financial music.”³⁴ Patrons purchased shares, incorporated associations, and built opera houses because they believed opera was yet another European import that could turn a profit. While it was popular to complain about star singers’ “impossible prices,” the general opinion was that they were simply testing what the market would bear. Audiences, too, engaged in shrewd economy when competition drove down ticket prices. “They are wisely availing themselves of this opportunity of hearing Italian Opera,” noted the *Spirit of the Times*, “as clever housewives sometimes buy dry goods, ‘below cost,’ and at an alarming sacrifice,’ in order to ‘close the concern.’”³⁵

Such observations present opera as a speculative endeavor with its own metrics of success and relief. “To sew up gold in a bag, and drop it off at the Battery,” wrote one skeptic, “would seem to be as promising an investment as opera-house stock.”³⁶ Or, in the words of the *Clipper*, “who ever heard of an *empresario* making any money at the close of a season? And yet who ever heard of one getting tired of the business?”³⁷ The constant lamentation of opera as a money pit was tempered by the fact that impresarios facing poor receipts and high salaries had choices that other entrepreneurs did not, due to the uniqueness of theater financing and opera’s symbolic investments. For example, the widely-acknowledged poor chances of success in such a noble enterprise made the manager’s benefit performance a worthy cause, in ways that would be difficult to imagine

³⁴ “Financial music” is from pianist Henri Herz’s memoir, cited in R. Allen Lott, *From Paris to Peoria: How European Piano Virtuosos Brought Classical Music to the American Heartland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 63.

³⁵ “Things Theatrical,” *Spirit of the Times*, February 7, 1852. Wardle Corbyn was the author.

³⁶ “Music,” *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* I (June, 1853), 698.

³⁷ *Clipper*, January 16, 1858. Maretzek called opera “an establishment whose ‘failure’ had flourished” since its first iteration. Maretzek, *Crotchets and Quavers*, 16.

in other lines of work. At the end of his calamitous first season, the manager Ferdinando Palmo announced that at his benefit concert—a standard part of every key player’s contract where the evening’s proceeds went to the person being honored—tickets would be sold at three times the usual price. A list of eighty prominent New York men attached their names to the statement declaring Palmo a man of “zeal and liberality” whose enterprise should be supported, even though he was effectively charging more for a failing business.³⁸ At the same time, the opera business had unique pitfalls. As the *Herald* noted, theater managers facing a shortfall could not simply “close out” their stock as a dry goods merchant might, because their “articles”—performers, scenery, properties—“however pretty they may be, are not *values* in any sense of the term.”³⁹ This question of what kind of good was performance—and, by extension, what kind of work made the good, and what rules should apply to the buying and selling—was introduced during the opera debates and remained unresolved.

The Chorus Makes its First Appearance

By the 1840s, as competing productions of Italian opera began to appear in New York, managers and impresarios struggled publicly with troublesome choruses and musicians. The first to do so was Ferdinando Palmo, the proprietor of a series of successful Manhattan cafes, who was inspired by William Niblo’s success to convert a public bathhouse into a theater suitable for small-scale opera. Palmo’s operation was modest and pitched to a wider audience. Tickets were \$1.00, with no distinction between

³⁸ *Albion*, March 2, 1844, 108.

³⁹ *NYH*, November 2, 1857.

box and gallery, and all seating was benches, instead of the sofas of a short-lived opera house that had opened in 1833. Palmo also instituted a modest subscription plan of twenty-four nights for twenty dollars, which both provided the impresario with liquidity and put his theater on the social map.⁴⁰ His theater served as “fashion’s exchange,” wrote poet and critic James F. Otis, where “circulate the silver tones of woman’s laughing voice, the golden hours of free and unconstrained enjoyment, the ready coin of wit and humor, and the priceless notes of immortal song.”⁴¹ Otis was correct that Palmo cultivated opera’s lasting presence in New York—he staged the first Verdi opera for New York audiences (*I Lombardi*, March 1847) and helped standardize an operatic repertoire—but there was nothing “priceless” about this operation.⁴² Fashion was made to pay at Palmo’s as it had at Castle Garden. By interspersing the full opera with “*vaudevilles*” on the off-nights, and by offering a full-slate of amenities, including “baths, opera, cherry cobblers, sandwiches, comedy, [and] scandal.”⁴³

Unlike most impresarios, Palmo had no experience as a musician and thus began with few connections in the business. He made two-month contracts with singers already available in the city and familiar to New York audiences, which he supported with a twenty-four person chorus, a thirty-two member orchestra (led by Michele Rapetti, a talented violinist on the New York-Havana circuit since 1832) and twelve supernumeraries.⁴⁴ While it was unusual to open without the splashy debut of a foreign

⁴⁰ *Spirit of the Times*, January 27, 1844.

⁴¹ “The New Opera House in Chambers Street,” *Spirit of the Times*, February 24, 1844.

⁴² Ahlquist, *Democracy at the Opera*, 131-134.

⁴³ *NYH*, January 15, 1844.

⁴⁴ If the singers “fail in satisfying public expectation, in point of talent, power, and quality, in every respect,” the public would rightfully demand a new line-up. *NYH*, January 27, 1844. Rapetti had been in New York for at least a decade, having played in the 1832 Italian Opera Company and with the Havana Company. Financial Statement for Performances by the Italian Opera Company, New York, Music

vocalist, critics at first praised his use of “the best talent to be found in the city, without relying on a *Prima Donna* to sustain a whole performance.”⁴⁵ In the end, however, the absence of major names and new stars lead his first season to be judged “a failure, as we expected it would.”⁴⁶ Operatic failure, though, was a specific kind; it was not a death sentence but the usual course of events. Palmo’s closure, which he attempted to stave off with the benefit attended by the city’s elite, was both a speculative failure and a spectacular success, as debates of what might have been or what could still be accomplished kept his venture in the papers.

In Palmo’s next attempt the following fall, his troupe flamed out in even more dramatic fashion after only a few weeks. The curtain was raised late, which rumors through the house attributed to the star tenor’s refusal to sing. When the curtain did not come up after the first act, the orchestra leader announced to a clamorous audience that his instrumentalists refused to play. A detailed account of the subsequent action appeared in the *Herald*:

The talk went round that the “orchestra had struck for wages.” “What!” said one in the lobby, “the d----d fiddlers!” After more delay, and more noise, Signor Rapetti [orchestra leader] came in with a few of the orchestra, and turning round to the audience, made a speech thus: “Ladies and Gentlemen—I am sorry to inform you that several of the orchestra have left because they are not paid. I am willing to go on myself.” He was applauded. More delay. The curtain rose—the chorus came in—but no music. They looked at each other, laughed outright, and went off amid a storm of hisses and laughter. More delay. Several of the chorus were seen peeping from behind the scenery. The plume of Perozzi, or the train of beautiful Borghese swept past at an angle. At last, the curtain rose, and out came Signor Palmo himself.⁴⁷

Division, Performing Arts Library, NYPL; Giovanni Schiavo, *Italian-American History I* (New York: Vigo Press, 1947), 43-44.

⁴⁵ *Albion*, January 20, 1844.

⁴⁶ More than half the net profit (\$7,500 of \$14,000) went to the principal singers, and Palmo was left \$1,500 in debt. *Anglo American*, April 6, 1844, 573. See also Preston, *Opera on the Road*, 122-129.

⁴⁷ “Italian Opera,” *NYH*, October 15, 1844.

This vignette has the hallmarks of drama: pacing and suspense, unexpected conflict from minor characters, comic relief, and cameo appearances from the stars. For once, the supporting players were the centerpiece of the action, from the *mere appearance and exit* of the handful of the orchestra players and the unaccompanied chorus, to the latter's disruptive peeping that drew the audience's attention to the wings. In contrast, the stars were partially visible and identified only by costume. When Palmo finally appeared, he pled the case that receipts were low and compounding his debt. By explaining his misfortune to the audience, he invited them to become players in the improvised drama at hand. The *Herald* reporter's paraphrase of Palmo's speech includes the audience's response in brackets, as if they were stage directions. When the impresario explained that the season "has not been so prosperous as he expected," the reporter added, "[Continued sensation—dandies looked at each other]." The unrest was presented as one act in an evening of entertainment—"a finale never before enacted on any stage," according to the *Spirit of the Times*—and was reported with more detail than any plot summary.

While the *Herald* reporter was at least intrigued, others thought the orchestra and chorus were crossing a line. The flight of the instrumentalists, which threatened to end the night's entertainment altogether rather than just inserting an improvised scene, was a violation of multiple contracts. Some squabbling might help bring in viewers to the Italian opera's "arena of strife," but the balance could be tipped too far if the attacks seemed a slight to the audience. When star singers and managers had previously made appeals to the public they had appeared "ludicrous and contemptible," wrote the *Spirit of*

the Times, a New York paper written for an elite sporting audience, but the revolt was “a direct affront to the body of the audience, and the friends of music throughout the city.”⁴⁸

The orchestra’s boldness may have been due to its increasing prominence and competency. Like the star singers and the impresarios, the instrumentalists’ and choristers technical skill and savvy at navigating an increasingly competitive sector were improving. By the third week of Palmo’s first season, *Albion* critic Henry C. Watson praised “the best operatic chorus we have had here for years,” and anticipated “the best operatic orchestra we have had since *the* Italian company was here” after a few weeks of practice; others concurred that the chorus was “well executed” and “gave evidence of a careful drilling.”⁴⁹ Such a feat was particularly admirable given the linguistic and ethnic diversity of the chorus, “a troop of many nations [...] composed of Germans, Italians, French, English, Irish, &c., &c., many of whom do not comprehend a word of what they are singing.”⁵⁰ If anything, the thirty-two member orchestra was carried away by its own prowess; it was “unusually powerful and effective,” and thus out of proportion to the house. Before the strike, the *Herald* found the orchestra “too boisterous,” and reminded the instrumentalists “that they are subordinate to the singer” and must “follow the voice [rather] than attempt to lead it, and at the same time modulate their sound to the power of the singer.”⁵¹ In this moment, it was clear to even the least sympathetic observers that

⁴⁸ *Spirit of the Times*, October 19, 1844.

⁴⁹ “Palmo’s Italian Opera House,” *Albion*, February 24, 1844, 96; *Anglo American*, February 10, 1844, 382; *Albion*, February 10, 1844, 71.

⁵⁰ “The Opera,” *The New World*, March 2, 1844, 276. This review also includes a sketch of opera’s origins, beginning in Florence in 1594.

⁵¹ *NYH*, February 5, 1844, 2; *New-York Tribune*, February 1, 1844.

changes were coming. “Never again shall we decry the powers of wind and catgut, or ridicule an orchestra in its collective capacity,” wrote *Spirit*, tongue firmly in cheek.⁵²

When Palmo’s was up and running a month after the strike, the subscription money was held by a committee and was to be dispersed in a manner that would “prevent all disputes between manager and performer” and “insure to the hardworking portion of the establishment—the Band—its just claims.”⁵³ This was business as usual, or “failure” followed by a reshuffled cast of managers, performers, and investors. The resolution displaced the conflict, reframing star singers and the orchestra as enemies fighting for the same proceeds and pledged financial management by a committee of subscribers—season ticket holders—as the way to circumvent personality conflicts. Although the company did generate excitement and attendance for the New York premier of *Lucrezia Borgia* at the end of November—with prima donnas Euphrasia Borghese and Rosina Pico—the receipts were not enough to sustain a high-level of production, and the season petered out with a “reduced orchestra and skeleton chorus.”⁵⁴

The temporary move of the chorus and orchestra to center stage was, at least in New York, unprecedented. But it drew from a long tradition on both the Anglo-American stage and in opera of breaking the fourth wall to address the audience. In the New York context of Italian opera, these gestures and statements often referred not only to the specific complaints of individual performers but to the precarious nature of the operatic mode of production. The very first scene on the opening night at Palmo’s was an address

⁵² *Spirit of the Times*, October 19, 1844.

⁵³ “The Italian Opera House,” *Albion*, November 23, 1844, 567; “Opera—Palmo’s Theater,” *Anglo American*, November 16, 1844, 94.

⁵⁴ Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, 267.

made by the stage manager, Mr. Wells, “soliciting the patronage of the public to enable him to carry on his enterprize.”⁵⁵ These announcements kept audiences aware of what was happening behind the scenes, whether they were appeals for continuing support or the attribution of delays, not to faulty infrastructure but to employee disagreements. Conductor Max Maretzek noticed this in his first season in New York, when the manager “came often on the stage, very often, to make apologies” to the audience that his singers refused to perform with each other.⁵⁶ These conflicts were the result of power struggles between star singers and theatrical management for the affections of the audience, as all three parties negotiated who would be held responsible for opera’s success or failure.

The conflicts moved often from the stage to the page, allowing the various interested parties to plead their cases while collapsing the distance between opera’s production and its press coverage. Performers occasionally took to the pages in protest, attempting to win the favor of the public. In the spring before *Palmo*’s closure, stage manager and bass Attilio Valtellina—who was reportedly eating up the bulk of the opera’s profits—was irritated by the applause given to another member of the company. “When he comes before the audience,” the *Herald* reported, “[Valtellina] forgets his good temper, and allows himself to be governed by unworthy feelings, showing disrespect to the audience.”⁵⁷ Valtellina then used both the *Herald* and *The New World* to protest his unfair treatment. It was bad enough to be unjustly accused of jealousy, but even worse was the constant attention to the “squabbles, quarrels, jealousies, etc.” of the company, which he attributed to desires of “intriguers to breed disunion among us [...] from which

⁵⁵ “Opening of the Italian Opera Last Evening,” *NYH*, February 4, 1844.

⁵⁶ “The Great Operatic Case,” *NYH*, December 10, 1853.

⁵⁷ “Italian Opera—The Flare Up,” *NYH*, March 1, 1844.

they undoubtedly expected to reap some benefit.”⁵⁸ Valtellina thus clearly understood the monetization of backstage conflict, which in turn was only possible if audiences were invested in the means of its production.

Valtellina was joined in the *Herald* by fellow Palmo’s employee and Havana veteran Cirillo Antognini. In an early iteration of the accusation that celebrities are paid to do nothing, Antognini was accused in multiple papers of being listed as the *prima tenore*—and collecting fifty dollars each night—simply for “watching the entrances and promenading through the lobbies.”⁵⁹ When Antognini defended himself, he disputed the tone of the accusation but not its content. He likely agreed with the *Herald* that “if Mr. Palmo is disposed to pay this high price to Sig. Antognini for doing just—nothing, it is not our province to find fault with him.” Such a response, however begrudging, recognized that the star singer might be properly paid for his performance, even if it was technically off-stage.

The publicizing of star performer and orchestra dissent at Palmo’s indicated the audience’s interest in the operatic mode of production. So, too, did the popularity of opera burlesque, which at Palmo’s took place on the same stage, on off-nights. While parody critiqued the pretension of opera fans, it also demonstrated a significant familiarity with the original works. Unlike the caricatures of opera that circulate now—the diva in the horned helmet, which can be recognized without any knowledge of Wagner—the antebellum versions followed closely the rhyming schemes (in English) and

⁵⁸ “Palmo’s Opera,” *The New World*, April 20, 1844, 503.

⁵⁹ “Italian Opera,” *NYH*, February 27, 1844. The accusatory letter, signed by “Connoisseur,” also appeared in the *Sunday Times* and *Noah’s Weekly Messenger*.

the music of the originals.⁶⁰ And this impulse was not limited to Palmo's. Three weeks after Astor Place opened, William Mitchell's Olympic Theater mounted *Upper Row House in Disaster Place* at the Olympic, starring Bowery favorite Frank Chanfrau. *Upper Row House* is correctly read as a critique or contestation of opera's elite status. However, this critique was effective because the audience was familiar with what was parodied, and because both proprietors and performers of "lower" forms of entertainment viewed opera as viable competition.

The Shifting Cast of Characters

As the conflict at Palmo's suggests, the changing roles of New York Italian opera's key players were responsible in part for its disruptive character. While prima donnas, musicians, choruses, critics, investors and managers had been around in some form for two centuries, it is worth tracing their specific configuration in antebellum New York. Although the key relationship can be characterized as manager, performer, and audience "bound together in a round of negotiation driven by the impresario's pursuit of economic gain," as Richard Crawford has written, in particular times and places these general categories divided into more particular roles.⁶¹

The first visible figure was the star singer, who had several negotiating tools at her disposal both off-stage and on. The seasonal nature of opera—from the festival seasons in Venice to the summer tours of the Havana troupes—gave star singers increased leverage in certain periods, and the genre's wide geographic range worked to

⁶⁰ Katherine Preston, "Between the Cracks: The Performance of English-Language Opera in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *American Music* 21, no. 3 (Autumn, 2003): 349–74.

⁶¹ Crawford, *American Musical Landscape*, 71.

the stars' advantage. "Opera singers were some of the first artists to have access to a wide international marketplace," writes Susan Rutherford, which "gave them maneuverability of an unprecedented order."⁶² Stars could command payment in multiple forms, although by the 1840s cash was the preferred method, accompanied by the slow retreat of payment in kind such as lodging.⁶³ Star singers could also negotiate for benefit performances with favorable percentages, and use their benefit performances to exert control over a company's financial management.⁶⁴

Recent work in gender, musicology and legal history details the key sources of autonomy for star singers on stage, particularly prima donnas. In *Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance*, Hilary Poriss has argued for the practice of "aria insertion"—the interpolation or substitution of a piece from an entirely different opera—as a standardized modulation of form that allowed star singers to assert their autonomy in an ill-fitting or recently learned role.⁶⁵ Originating in the seventeenth-century, the insertion remained a "prized possession" of prima donnas across centuries and continents. By the 1830s, when composers, publishers, critics and managers attempted to assert their authority over singers with a variety of tools including sarcastic critique, contractual stipulations, or the growing commitment to the integrity of the operatic "work," the inserted aria assumed an even greater significance. The aria insertion was a metatheatrical device, and one of the most important moments where an audience was made aware of the mode of production taking place before their eyes. In *Il barbiere*

⁶² Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 187.

⁶³ Rosselli, Rosselli, "Opera Production, 1780-1880."

⁶⁴ "Financial Statement for Performances by the Italian Opera Company, New York.

⁶⁵ Hilary Poriss, *Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

di Siviglia, the first full-length Italian opera performed in New York, Rossini wrote the inserted aria in the opening of the second act, in which the multiply-disguised Count Almaviva asks Rosina (played by the prima donna), “Che vuol cantare?” – or, “What do you want to sing?” The moment is explicitly marked as “performance.” For the audience, the scene’s dramatic suspension is rooted less in its plot—which was likely not a surprise—than in anticipation of the prima donna’s choice.

Likewise, in the historiography of intellectual and artistic property, the workplace struggles of the prima donna in the operatic mode of production have had long-lasting influence both on commercial stages and beyond, as the performer becomes a model for white-collar work. In her study of employer control of intellectual property and workplace knowledge, Catherine Fisk names *Lumley v. Wagner* (1852) and *Lumley V. Gye* (1853)—both disputes over a prima donna’s contract—as key legal decisions inaugurating a rift between an ideology of corporate knowledge and one of free labor and competition, and as the precursor to today’s non-compete clauses.⁶⁶ In the first case, the court ruled that soprano Johanna Wagner—Richard Wagner’s niece—had signed a contract with manager Benjamin Lumley at Her Majesty’s theatre in Haymarket, and could not accept an engagement elsewhere. The second ruled that Lumley’s rival Frederick Gye could not solicit Wagner while under contract. Together, the decisions meant that while Wagner could not be compelled to sing for Lumley, he could obtain an injunction that prevented her from singing elsewhere. “The shock of the American adoption of the *Lumley* doctrine [in 1874], and the trade secret and restrictive covenant rules that developed at the same time,” argues Fisk, “was that skilled, independent, and

⁶⁶ Fisk, *Working Knowledge*, 160.

professional workers could be compelled not to quit.”⁶⁷ This history demonstrates another dimension of the opera industry’s international character, as well the way it set the terms for other forms of cultural work.

The autonomy of the star singer, and of all performers, has to be understood in relation to the impresario. Serving as an impresario, wrote Havana troupe conductor Luigi Arditi, was “a terrible responsibility” greatly underestimated by those outside the business.”⁶⁸ This term designated the constellations of roles that facilitated but neither wrote nor performed the work of art. In the earliest period of commercial theater, these men acted as director, landlord, banker, entrepreneur, manager and financier; they were on the hook for salaries, theatrical licenses, and taxes; they chose the repertoire, the personnel, and the touring route.⁶⁹ Over time, the increase in large-scale traveling productions required a more elaborate coordination of performers and locations. These tasks today have largely fractured into specific positions or might be designated as the impresario’s successor— “producer”— while manager endures in “stage manager,” or the running of a particular show.⁷⁰ In antebellum New York, these tasks were often still

⁶⁷ Anglo-American law recognized precedent for forbidding enticement, but in the United States this could only be used against indentured servants and apprentices, or workers whose right to quit was already tenuous. American courts in the 1860s and 1870s were reluctant to hold performers to contracts, but in *Daly v. Smith* (1874) adopted the Lumley precedent, and used—for the first time—the matter of trade secrets to prevent an employee from competing with her former employer. The court found in favor of Augustin Daly in part because of Fanny Morant Smith’s celebrity, which rendered her “not only a great actress” but “also a shrewd lady of great business capacity.” Preventing her from working was legal because the damage done to the employer was greater than the threat to her free competition. Fisk, *Working Knowledge*, 161-163.

⁶⁸ Luigi Arditi, *My Reminiscences*, ed. Baroness Von Zedlitz (London: Skeffington and Son, 1896), 17. Trained as a violinist in Milan, Arditi left the conservatory for a position in Havana, assuming a position as a conductor at the Academy of Music in 1854 under Maretzek.

⁶⁹ In New York in 1864, for example, an impresario had to pay a \$500 city license, 2% federal tax on gross receipts, local taxes on capital invested, and income tax on profits. John Graziano, “An Opera for Every Taste: The New York Scene, 1862–1869,” in *European Music and Musicians in New York City, 1840–1900*, ed. John Graziano (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 254.

⁷⁰ One example is the suite of responsibilities of Philip Henslowe, who worked in the era of the cooperatively-owned acting company and whose career thus predated the widespread use of “manager” and

performed by the same person, though often at different moments in their careers. When Manuel Garcia brought his troupe to New York, for example, he was singer, manager, and director. But by the 1840s, touring performers were increasingly likely to hire someone else to do the work of booking and promotion, so as to maximize the number of performances given and minimize the days on tour without performances.

This was the impresario's "managerial" function: his responsibility for the coordination of the performer in terms of publicity, booking, and financial affairs. When the pianist Leopold De Meyer toured the U.S in 1845, he did not book halls in advance or advertise until he had arrived in each new location. The following year, in contrast, pianist Henri Herz gave more than a dozen more performances than De Meyer in half the time, thanks to his manager Bernard Ullman, who would soon move into opera.⁷¹ Under Ullman's management, the pianist Sigismond Thalberg—Liszt's main rival—played 150 times in the first five months of the 1856 season, often at least six concerts a week. In the northeast, Ullman arranged subsequent nights in major cities (New York and Philadelphia, or Washington and Baltimore), or a spoke-and-hub arrangement with a major city and surrounding towns. Moving west, Ullman "leased" Thalberg to Maurice Strakosch, himself a former pianist and Ullman's sometimes-partner and sometimes-competitor, for an exceptionally tight tour. Strakosch had Thalberg's appearances announced three to five days in advance, and he kept him on the same rigorous schedule

the appearance of "producer." Henslowe's power was rooted in his real estate ownership both and in his close relationships with the acting company the Admiral's Men, which retained primary authority. Bernard Beckerman, "Philip Henslowe," in *The Theatrical Manager in Britain and America: Players of a Perilous Game*, ed. Joseph Donoghue, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 19-62.

⁷¹ R. Allen Lott, "Bernard Ullman: Nineteenth Century American Impresario," in *A Celebration of American Music: Words and Music in Honor of H. Wiley Hitchcock*, ed. Richard Crawford, R. Allen Lott, and Carol J. Oja (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 175-6.

of six nights a week. The smaller towns that Heinz and De Meyer had skipped, such as Zanesville, Ohio—halfway between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati—could now host concerts because they could be booked in advance.

In addition to this managerial function, the impresario of the 1850s might also serve as an agent. This role relied on the trust of both labor (performers) and capital (investors or managers) secured often through a background in performance. In addition to his success as a concert pianist, Thalberg partnered with Ullman at the Academy of Music in 1857, providing authority as an artist and his connections with performers in Europe.⁷² Englishman James Mapelson was a “[music] student, critic, violinist, vocalist, composer, concert director, and musical agent” before becoming an operatic manager. His career as a singer was cut short by health problems, but the connections he made while performing in Milan, Lodi, and Verona positioned him to open London’s first musical agency.⁷³ Mapelson used his familiarity with Italian performers to circumvent the competition and claimed to be continually finding new “itinerant” Italian musicians on the street or in Italian restaurants when his current employees proved intractable.

But no one figure better exemplifies the many hats of the impresario than Max Maretzek, the lessee of the post-riot Astor Place, who was involved in some way in every major New York operatic undertaking from the 1850s to his retirement in 1878. His career was one of continual reversals and contradictions. The premier face of Italian opera in its most refined form, he repeatedly and openly borrowed from P.T. Barnum’s playbook. Maretzek was born in Brno, educated in Vienna, and employed across Europe

⁷² *NYT*, January 1, 1858.

⁷³ James Henry Mapelson, *The Mapelson Memoirs: 1848-1888 I* (London: Remington & Co., 1888), 10.

before coming to the United States in 1848 at the behest of his cousin to conduct the forty-three person orchestra for the opera “so laboriously and completely got up” at the Astor Place Opera House.⁷⁴ In continual movement between Havana, Mexico City, Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and London, Maretzek was responsible for bringing many stars to New York, and at very high prices. In 1865 alone he contracted with eight Italian prima donnas, at salaries between \$4,000 and \$6,000 a month.⁷⁵

A key factor in Maretzek’s trajectory is that while he was associated with two of the major opera buildings in New York, the Astor Place and the Academy of Music, he was never involved in the ownership of these buildings, which remained firmly in the hands of their stockholders. Maretzek thus also best exemplifies the rootlessness of the impresario, which he used to his advantage. When stockholders refused his terms, he simply reassembled his singers as another company and took them on the road. The separation of theater ownership and management was thus a major factor in antebellum opera’s itinerancy, as much as the lack of a reliable “permanent home.” In September 1856, Maretzek claimed publicly to be unable to lease the Academy of Music on the conditions he desired. The conflict between Maretzek and the Academy’s stakeholders hinged on the usage of stakeholder’s boxes, which could be shared with friends or left unoccupied. Both the stakeholders and Maretzek submitted competing figures for public review in the extended press coverage, leading the *Herald* to admit that “amid all the confusion it is difficult to form an opinion as to the real merits of the case.”⁷⁶ Maretzek

⁷⁴ *Spirit of the Times*, October 7, 1848; Joseph Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage: From 1750 to 1860* (New York: T.H. Morrell, 1867), 544.

⁷⁵ Graziano, “An Opera for Every Taste,” 254.

⁷⁶ *Herald*, October 20, 1856, 4.

might have been stirring up publicity, because his opera was competing with Thalberg's concerts and the popular German opera at Niblo's. "Art is by no means the principal thing to be cultivated by a management," wrote Maretzek in his autobiography, "that would rejoice in attracting large audiences."⁷⁷

Rather than submit to stakeholder expectations, Maretzek held a series of "operatic concerts" at the City Assembly Rooms, which included a complete production of Verdi's *Il trovatore* and a full slate of stars. Staging a hybrid "greatest hits" / full opera with proven talent demonstrated who was in fact in control of the city's Italian opera.⁷⁸ And New York's loss was soon Boston's gain, as Maretzek soon took his singers and orchestra north. "When managers are tired of producing operas for New York audiences not large enough to pay," reported the *Boston Atlas* with glee, "they turn to Boston with confidence that here they will not only make up their losses, but find an appreciation which is even rarer than money."⁷⁹ After Boston, Maretzek took his sixty-person company of principals, chorus and orchestra to Havana for a six-week season at the Teatro Tacón in Havana and then on to Charleston for a series of concerts.⁸⁰ Having a company beholden only to the impresario gave Maretzek the freedom to continue to grow his reputation and profits elsewhere. While the stability of a lease and a permanent home for Italian Opera in New York City held some appeal, he was clearly still working in his earlier mode that relied primarily on mobility and new audiences.

⁷⁷ Maretzek, *Crotchets and Quavers*, 43.

⁷⁸ *New York Herald*, October 6, 1856, 5. All seats were \$1.

⁷⁹ "The Opera," *Boston Daily Atlas*, October 18, 1856. "We hope our indefatigable Maretzek will use every exertion to procure a good and efficient chorus. Operas here have lacked much more in that respect than in any other."

⁸⁰ *NYH*, December 13, 1856. While Maretzek first announced only one night in Charleston, he added a full performance of *I puritani*, "in consequence of the immense overflow, hundreds being disappointed in obtaining seats." *Charleston Mercury*, February 17, 1857.

Maretzek's career also indicates the ways in which the impresario remained tied to earlier modes of production and exchange. Marriage structured most almost all antebellum theatrical operations, and Maretzek was no exception. Although his marriage to soprano Apollonia Bertucca receives almost no attention in his memoir, their union likely brought him some measure of control over her career and her salary and secured his close connection to performers. For female singers like Apollonia, particularly those who never broke through to stardom, marrying a manager may have brought the promise of reliable employment. Manager-prima donna marriages were not unusual—Maurice Strakosch married Amalia Patti, who came from a major transnational opera family and was the sister of Strakosch's most successful singer, Adelina Patti.⁸¹

Whether managing pianists, violinists or singers, the mid-century impresario performed a standard set of services that utilized his familiarity with the press, with theater owners, and with railroad and transportation schedules. One of the impresario's key roles was to arrange the "humbuggery" introduced into opera by P.T. Barnum's Jenny Lind tour in 1851. Because he was not the performer, Barnum could both promote the star with the full range of publicity tactics and insulate her from accusations that she was in pursuit of fame and fortune. Barnum was a publicity genius, but the impetus for his tactics—the transnational contracting of European star singers—were deeply embedded in show business and long predated his entry. Furthermore, the tools of "Lind

⁸¹ For Maretzek, matrimony also brought access to real estate. Apollonia's great-uncle had served as an officer under Lafayette in the American Revolution and had been granted land in Kentucky, which was deeded to Apollonia. Newspaper reports often made reference to this land when they critiqued Maretzek's avowed pennilessness. "An Operagoer," noted that while Maretzek identified as a "long suffering, unfortunate, insolvent, yet philanthropic sort of angel," in most circumstances "when any one loses money they abandon the speculation." In response, Maretzek responded that the public should care "just as little whether I have houses and lands as they do whether any gentleman connected with the Academy of Music, past or present, has made money by lottery operations, investments in the slave trade, or by a monopoly in the grain market." *NYH*, October 20 and 23, 1856.

Mania” looked quite different when transposed from feejee mermaid to prima donna, and the manager’s separation from artistry was even more significant in opera than in the dime museum. No one expected the feejee mermaid to have “pure” and selfless motives for entering show business, but they did for the woman on stage. The manager’s hand let her remain committed to the purity of art while someone else did the dirty work of spreading salacious rumors, planting puffs, and hiring “deadheads” to pad the audience. The emergence of the manager did both did the actual work of negotiating the performer’s position in the market, but also served as a figurehead that inured the performer from the marketplace. The figure of the “rapacious manager,” which could be claimed and disavowed by actually existing managers, created space between the purity of art and the questionable ethics of an increasingly complex theatrical business.

It is also crucial to acknowledge that there could be no Barnum and no puffery without the New York press and its critics.⁸² More than three hundred newspapers were published in New York alone between 1820 and 1850, facilitated by the steam-press in 1820, the railroad, and the telegraph in 1844.⁸³ Opera notices, reviews, and gossip appeared in a wide range of papers, from the older six-penny commercial journals (*Commercial Advertiser*, *Courier and Enquirer*), the daily penny press that emerged in the 1830s (the *Herald*), and by the 1850s, new weekly or monthly magazines such as

⁸² Richard Hooker has argued that the proliferation and influence of music criticism in this period “[did] not supplement, but *deliberately* constitute[d] the central activity in early American music-making. Richard Hooker, “The Invention of American Musical Culture: Meaning, Criticism, and Musical Acculturation in Antebellum America,” in *Keeping Score: Music, Disciplinarity, Culture*, ed. David Schwarz, Anahid Kassabian, Lawrence Siegel (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 109.

⁸³ David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Louis H. Fox, “New York City Newspapers, 1820-1850: A Bibliography,” *PBSA* 21 (1927): 1-131.

Frank Leslie's and the trade paper *The Clipper*.⁸⁴ The newspaper business closely resembled similar adjustments in commercial entertainment. In the absence of state or political party sponsorship, the growing antebellum press pursued “popular appeal” as an experiment in both tone and in funding streams, establishing a new reliance on advertising, for example, instead of regular subscribers.

The papers diverged in their tone, timing, circulation, and relationship to particular theaters and performers, but their critics and reporters were rooted in a relatively small milieu. They were “men of means and shrewd business faculties, who know how to make the most of their talents and position,” and they wrote quickly, prolifically, and often for multiple papers.⁸⁵ Because Italian opera criticism was a new genre and opera itself was a new entity, critics wrote about what they knew—opera’s political, social and economic context—instead of the close and detailed critiques of performance and composition that we associate with criticism today.⁸⁶ Finally, opera criticism in daily papers brought a new temporality to arts reportage that moved it closer to daily accounts of Wall Street or politics than the weekly or monthly considerations journal like *The Albion* or *Dwight's Journal of Music*. And although these critics wrote about and for a small scene, the flurry of opera journalism reflected the growing number

⁸⁴ Adam Gordon argues that the changes in printing and transportation resulted in an “information price revolution” in the 1830s, which in turn drastically altered the tenor of literary criticism. Once a “cultural organ of conservative Federalist ideology,” criticism as practiced by Poe both refined and opened to questioning the role of the literary critic. Critics became self-conscious because they recognized the tensions of expanding political ideologies within an increasingly robust and centralized publishing system; they were necessary because there was so much one could read. Adam Gordon, “Cultures of Criticism in Antebellum America,” (PhD diss., UCLA, 2011), 1-43.

⁸⁵ “The necessity they are under for constantly producing, and earning about so much every week,” wrote the anonymous critic of critics in *Squints through an Opera Glass*, “prevents them from ever making a serious and sustained effort, to see what they *can* do.” *A Young Gent Who Hadn't Any Thing Else to Do, Squints through an Opera Glass* (New York: John F. Trow, 1850), 16. Many of New York’s critics—White at the *Courier and Enquirer* and Henry C. Watson at the *Albion*—were themselves amateur musicians.

⁸⁶ Ahlquist, *Democracy at the Opera*, 79-81.

of new players, competition between companies and venues, and the necessity of models that could assess, judge and compare long-distance goods.⁸⁷

The paths of critics, impresarios and stars are easier to trace because they expected to be remembered. The people I am most interested in—the unremarked chorus members and instrumentalists—are much harder to identify. The chorus is particularly challenging, constituting what John Rosselli called “the working class of the opera world [...] rough, insubordinate, apt to drink, smoke, and gamble in their collective dressing room.”⁸⁸ While scholars date choral singing in the Western tradition to antiquity, the contemporary version emerged in the eighteenth century and developed into a hybrid amateur-professional model that widely recruited participants for art music.⁸⁹ By 1850, most opera houses across Europe and the Americas had professional choruses, but in transitional periods might still include singing actors, children, students, music copyists, and military personnel. Steven Huebner notes that choristers were often disciplined for keeping time visibly on stage, and for waving to their friends in the audience. The growing number and proficiency of amateur choruses, the increasing length of opera

⁸⁷ Across sectors, the falling costs of transportation and communication, coupled with the greater geographic circulation, meant that the importance of assessing various goods increases. As Naomi Lamoreaux, Daniel Raff and Peter Temin argued a decade ago, successful long-distance trade required solving “the information problems” created by exchange a large quantity of goods among people at significant distances from each other. “If the personal identity of the producer could no longer serve as an indicator of quality, new ways of setting and communicating standards had to be designed.” Opera criticism—made by a relatively small group of people, but highly mobile as information—performed a similar function. “Beyond Markets and Hierarchies,” *American Historical Review* 108, no. 2 (April, 2003), 415.

⁸⁸ Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera*, 204.

⁸⁹ Karen Ahlquist, “Introduction,” *Chorus and Community* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 2-4.

seasons, and the composers' investment in high-quality choral singing all contributed to the cultivation of a permanent and professional chorus.⁹⁰

While a few climbed the rungs to stardom, most labored in an obscurity that was the inverse of the singular star performer.⁹¹ For critics, the chorus was an undifferentiated singular entity which might be casually mentioned in the last sentences of a review. Typical was the praise for a Handel oratorio chorus as "remarkable both for correct singing and neatness and uniformity of attire."⁹² The orchestra was one rung higher, and soloists and conductors would occasionally be referenced by name. For the most part, however, these were roles that were designed to be heard and not seen. Such was the case for the Garcia troupe's chorus at the Park:

Two or three of them, who contrive, we scarcely know how, to sing their parts in a wrong key, ought to be dismissed, and they should all be taught to walk off the stage, as well as to walk on. They seldom accomplish their retreat without jostling the other performers, and, in *Tancredi*, in one occasion half of them marched with unrelenting feet directly across Amenaide's train.⁹³

As was the case at Palmo's, the chorus became something to note when its members moved into a novel relation with the principles on stage, whether as the sudden focal point of action or in literally stepping on the toes of their superiors. In his memoirs, British impresario Benjamin Lumley recalled a chorus "deeply humiliated" by a stage-manager's comment that "choruses were never noticed," a state Lumley felt should be

⁹⁰ Steven Huebner, "The Nineteenth-Century Opera Chorus," *Nineteenth-Century Choral Music*, ed. Donna Di Grazia (London: Routledge, 2013), 30-38. Huebner also argues that the chorus was a proxy for the audience as they witnessed "the representation of private feelings under the gaze of the crowd," 35.

⁹¹ Mary Celia Taylor, the daughter of the Park orchestra, who sang in that theater's chorus before becoming a favorite of the Olympic audiences. Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage*, 242-3.

⁹² *New-York Mirror*, May 4, 1833.

⁹³ *New York Review and Athenaeum Magazine*, qtd. in George W. Martin, *Verdi in America: Oberto through Rigoletto* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 15-6.

embraced. “The performance of this sensitive body was, generally, to say the best, indifferent,” he wrote, “and on one occasion was so utterly execrable as to elicit a hiss from every part of the house. ‘There,’ cried one of the delinquents, triumphantly, ‘we *are* noticed after all!’”⁹⁴ His comment indicates that the chorus was expected to strive for invisibility; it was recognized only when it had done something wrong.

While critical responses were dismissive and vague at best, the major players like Lumley were even more dismissive. Clara Kellogg, the self-styled first American prima donna, remembered her debut at the Academy of Music as an unpleasant one largely because of poor relations with the chorus. The chorus, claimed Kellogg, “was made up of Italians who never studied their music, merely learned it at rehearsal.” Their chief offense was a lack of respect. “The Italians of the chorus were always bitter against me for,” she recalled, “for, up to that time, Italians had had the monopoly of music.” And worst of all, they made no attempt to conceal their frustration. “ ‘Who is she,’ [the chorus] would demand indignantly, ‘to come and take the bread out of our mouths?’”⁹⁵

Italian chorus members were frequent targets of abuse, regarded even by current scholars as “badly-paid part-time singers who were rehearsed just enough to be able to hold their parts as they stood stock-still in a line.”⁹⁶ At the end of the century, one historian approvingly remarked that the chorus singer was “no longer an Italian brigand

⁹⁴ Benjamin Lumley, *Reminiscences of the Opera* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1864), 125.

⁹⁵ Clara Louise Kellogg, *Memoirs of an American Prima Donna* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1913), 40-41. More delicate “memoirs” of Jenny Lind and Madame Malibran, for example, are careful to emphasize the fond relations between the prima donna and the chorus, in which the latter group is a charitable case for the star.

⁹⁶ James Parakilas, “The Chorus,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, ed. David Charlton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 79.

hibernating in America and returning in the spring to his regular business.”⁹⁷ Paired with frequent mention of the chorus’ multilingual cacophony, the Italian language here means insurrection and disorganization instead of authenticity.⁹⁸ In comparison to the singers trained and employed in Paris or in Germany, choruses that sang or originated in Italy retained a high proportion of “amateur” singers who did not read music, and supplemented their income as artisans, cooks, and street vendors.⁹⁹ This was the scene Marezek encountered at an Astor Place chorus rehearsal in a store-house on the East River, where carpenters, tailors, painters and chorus all did their work. To his surprise, most fulfilled multiple roles. “Some few of the choral-singers,” he noted, “such, for example, as a certain Signor Pauselli, were also engaged in the tailoring department, while a tailoress [...] enjoyed the distinction of being secured, in addition, for the chorus.”¹⁰⁰ While it would be logical for their national origins to imbue the chorus with authenticity, this was not the case for the opera masses. Italian prima donnas were the real thing; Italian choristers were trouble.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Charles Lahee, *The Grand Opera Singers of To-Day* (Boston: L.C. Page, 1912), 448-451. While “European routine chorus singers” had not entirely disappeared, the majority of “fresh young voices” of the current were trained in the United States, improving both the “quality of tone” and the “personal attractiveness” of the chorus.”

⁹⁸ During his testimony regarding the libel case, Marezek stated that his Astor Place company was composed of “Germans, Italians, English, French, and some Americans,” but that when hiring, “I usually look to the abilities of chorus singers; I don’t ask where they come from.” “The Great Operatic Case,” *NYH*, December 10, 1853.

⁹⁹ Huebner, “The Nineteenth-Century Opera Chorus,” 31.

¹⁰⁰ Male members of the chorus were playing cards, while the younger women were “dividing their attention with an impartiality of the most praiseworthy character between an operation commonly called mending their stockings and the study of their parts.” Marezek, *Crotchets and Quavers*, 17-19.

¹⁰¹ Instrumentalists were more likely to be on the “good side” of Italianness. When the 1832 Montresor company performed *La cerentola*, the *New-York Mirror* noted that the company was Italianizing the names of the Park’s horn section—Mr. Nidds became Signor Nidus, and players Pentland, Munson and Nelson became Pentlandino, Munsono and Nelsono—to shore up the troupe’s authenticity. *New-York Mirror*, October 13, 1832, 119.

Italian choristers were known to cause trouble in Italy, too. Through a close reading of the nightly reports of the Teatro Regio in Parma, Italy, from the theater's establishment in 1829 to the end of the century, Susan Rutherford has traced the disciplining and organization of the opera chorus as it developed from casual and local corps into a fully professional one. Most of the members were local, and at least one had sung without pay for several years, with hopes of moving out of amateur status. Most were men, and although a few women joined after 1850, the larger unit was still gendered as male in the chorus' petitions or collective reference. Because—as is almost always the case with the chorus—these records are primarily about misbehavior and punishment, Parma's choristers seem to be often fighting with each other about minor usurpations and insults. They missed rehearsal because of their day jobs, and were frequently chastised for talking during the performance, wearing the wrong costumes, making late entries, sitting incorrectly, or remaining on stage when they were supposed to exit; one chorister was fined for making “useless jokes” during the *Aida* finale. Not all infractions were so minor; Rutherford also notes that management closely monitored the political allegiances of the chorus. In the fall of 1850, choristers were required to swear an oath of allegiance to the Bourbon Duke of Parma, Carlos III. At least two were not re-hired because of their sympathies with 1848 and their relationships with “persons of liberal persuasion.”¹⁰²

Improvement also meant an increasing division of labor that was not possible in smaller traveling companies. However, the choristers and instrumentalists playing outside New York had a little more room for error. Touring companies had to choose operas that

¹⁰² Susan Rutherford, “‘Crime and Punishment’: Tales of the Opera Chorus in Nineteenth-Century Parma,” *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film* 33 (November, 2006), 1-11.

could be performed with a small orchestra or cast, or at least adapted, to suit a variety of circumstances. Instrumentalists were often brought in to supplement a theater's orchestra and singing parts could be converted into spoken roles. Stephen Massett, in his first month as an actor in a stock company in Charleston, recalled playing a peasant in Bellini's *La Sonnambula* with the traveling Seguin Opera Company, "[his] duties being simply to come on and go off with one of the female ditto, joining in the chorus loud or soft as the case might be."¹⁰³

In New York, however, the high visibility and competition between companies meant that managers and music directors were continually spurred to "improve" their orchestras and choruses. These improvements were articulated in the language of disciplining, and the chorus was widely characterized as an unruly group of "bad singers."¹⁰⁴ When the *Times* offered its readers a tour behind the curtain of Maretzek's Castle Garden 1854 operation, the bulk of its attention was on the effort required to marshal the chorus and orchestra in a limited period of time. The reporter pointed out that while European companies might have four or five months of rehearsal, New York conductors had to complete the "immense amount of drilling" in only four or five rehearsals. "It is not in the nature of a chorus to sing correctly twice running, and there is in consequence a good deal of tapping from the conductor," observed the paper, "particularly when the trombone, who as all through been recklessly trying to play his

¹⁰³ Stephen Massett, "*Drifting About, or What 'Jeems Pipes of Pipesville' Saw-and-Did* (New York: Carleton, 1863), 42.

¹⁰⁴ Richard Edgcumbe, *Musical Reminiscences* (London: J. Andrews, 1834), 125.

instrument and smoke a cigar at one and the same time, puts in a frightful note at the wrong place.”¹⁰⁵

Opera’s escalating spectacular mode of production entailed larger choruses and greater musical complexity. The Paris opéra chorus grew from fifty-nine members in 1831 to eighty-two in 1848, when they regularly attended rehearsals as full members of the company.¹⁰⁶ The choruses increasing significance was self-perpetuating; as European opera houses included more choristers on the payroll, composers wrote more for them to sing. The chorus also assumed a more significant role in the dramatic action.

Musicologist Ryan Minor calls the nineteenth-century opera chorus a “new character” because “its explicitly political (national, regional, or confessional) credentials as the voice of ‘the people,’ together with its expanded proportions, provided the opera chorus with a moral and sonic authority it had never before possessed.”¹⁰⁷ James Parakilas has argued that opera of this era was concerned with “the drama of bourgeois liberalism,” or the relationship between the freedom of the individual and the health of the nation, in which the chorus appears as “a people with a political destiny of its own.” The chorus could render “the people” as a singular or conflicted entity—quite literally in or out of harmony—in uniquely musical terms. Gifted with this capacity, they “intrude[d] into the music in place where choruses scarcely ever intruded before.”¹⁰⁸ In Italian opera

¹⁰⁵ “The Italian Opera by Daylight,” *NYT*, August 24, 1854.

¹⁰⁶ Between 1831 and 1836, the number of choristers rose from 59 to 82, but their average salary for the season dropped from 1,188 francs to 1,009. In that same period of time, the salaries for the leading singers rose from 10,000 to 25,000 francs. Hervé Lacombe, “The ‘machine’ and the State,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera* (2003), 29.

¹⁰⁷ Ryan Minor, “The Chorus,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, ed. Helen Greenwald (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 470.

¹⁰⁸ James Parakilas, “Political Representation and the Chorus in Nineteenth-Century Opera,” *19th-Century Music* 16 (Fall, 1992), 189, 195. Even the picturesque chorus, which is sometimes regarded as simply scene-setting (as opposed to directly engaging politics), linked the dramatic action to a particular location

specifically, the chorus of the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century (in early *bel canto*, for example) was “decorative, subsidiary, musically neutral,” and could be easily moved from one work to another.¹⁰⁹ But in the parts written for Hebrew slaves in *Nabucco*, rebels in *Ernani*, and Scottish exiles in *Macbeth*, all written by Giuseppe Verdi, the chorus was not simply unique to the opera but also key to the dramatic action. Given the rising stature of the chorus, it should be no surprise that its performers would have desired greater autonomy.

On at least two occasions the “improvement” of the chorus was directly linked to an attempt to assert managerial control. One, the eventual establishment of a singing school at the Academy of Music that introduced this chapter, will be explored shortly. The second was recorded in the memoirs of James Mapelson, who proudly recounted his ability to assert his control over the chorus through the same familiarity with performers that made him a successful agent. In the midst of a particularly grueling schedule, the chorus “banded together” mid-performance of the season finale and refused to appear. The evening’s program was a combination of excerpts which was supposed to conclude with the entire fourth act of Meyerbeer’s *Les hugenots*, an opera that required a very large chorus. In retaliation, Mapelson instructed the principal singers to skip straight to the

and thus participated in the linking of people and place in national-political imaginary. “Before the word ‘nationalism’ even became a part of political discourse,” he writes, “opera began presenting images that defined nations from the bottom up, defined them by the rootedness of a people in their land.” Parakilas offers the Comédie-italienne (a commercial house reliant on public taste) in the 1780s as the beginning the increase in size and significance of the opera chorus, as this theater had more room for experimentation and political flexibility than its competitor, the opéra. He also suggests that the royalty of many nineteenth-century opera characters is tempered by their close relationship to the chorus. The council Chamber scene of *Simon Boccanegra* is good example, in which Boccanegra as Doge presides over an assortment of Genoan political operatives representing each class of society; this is total anachronism and reflects instead the chorus’ increasing function as representing a divided but centrally-represented people.

¹⁰⁹ Philip Gossett, “Becoming a Citizen: The Chorus in ‘Risorgimento’ Opera,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2 (March, 1990), 52.

closing duet, thus “[dispensing] with the chorus altogether.” He claimed that this was the moment when London began “the introduction of choristers from Italy,” which he considered an accomplishment. “I may mention,” he added, “that the members of my refractory chorus were people who had been some thirty or forty years, or even longer, at the Opera-houses and other theatres in London and it was really an excellent opportunity for dispensing with their services.”¹¹⁰ It is also important to note that Mapelson decimated the chorus’ power with the revue format, in which parts of the show could be eliminated without narrative interruption or audience frustration.

A Tenor Leads a Strike Operatic

The orchestra and chorus at Palmó’s had considerable leverage over their proprietor, in part because the theater itself was of middling prestige, was not run by a major impresario, and involved no major stars. By the early 1850s, however, the climate had shifted. In February of 1853 Max Maretzek, the opera impresario and previous Astor Place conductor returned to New York from a two-year tour of Cuba, Mexico, and the US to form a combination company with visiting European prima donnas. In his memoir, Maretzek recalls returning learning in Mexico City that two major European prima donnas, Marietta Alboni and Henriette Sontag, were in New York with their managers.¹¹¹ Concerned that the competition would cut him out of business or render his productions insignificant, Maretzek hired Alboni to sing with his company for the spring season at

¹¹⁰ For the premiere of Verdi’s *Un ballo in maschera* at Covent Garden in 1861, Mapelson had troupe rehearse from 1:30am to sunrise, after the evening’s performance. Mapelson, *The Mapelson Memoirs*, 37-8.

¹¹¹ Alboni’s manager was Le Grand Smith, and Sontag’s manager was Bernard Ullman. Max Maretzek, *Sharps and Flats*, 7.

Niblo's and secured Castle Garden, the only available location for summer opera, for the following months, forcing Sontag's troupe to work with him or remain idle.¹¹²

Anticipating problems with his female singers, Maretzek instead ran into trouble with Lorenzo Salvi, a popular tenor who had toured frequently with Maretzek and refused to appear for several performances in the spring series at Niblo's. Salvi had been contracted to sing thirteen times—and was paid in advance—but only appeared for seven, and his absence meant repertoire changes and cancelled performances.¹¹³ Salvi's unreliability was divisive; critics were not sure whether to lambast his absence or wait eagerly for his appearance. A Philadelphia paper called him “a world wide celebrity,” and James Otis named Salvi a “great artiste” and “a great card in the pack of ‘the Combinations.’”¹¹⁴ Early reports attributed his absence to illness, but in the second month of the spring season the tenor was being hissed on stage.¹¹⁵ “Usually he is hailed with delight,” wrote the *Times*, “but since it has been known that he is the sources of all the present difficulties and disunion, the warmth of his reception has been very rapidly cooling.” Salvi, the paper argued, “will have to learn that there is a public to consult and that the impertinence of a good but *passe* tenor will not be submitted to.”¹¹⁶

¹¹² Maretzek, *Sharps and Flats*, 9-11. Salvi had a repertoire of 115 operas, 45 of which had been written for him.

¹¹³ *Spirit of the Times*, May 7, 1853. Maretzek's complained that when Salvi's requests were not met, he would fall sick for exactly thirteen days, the number allowed by his contract. Maretzek, *Crotchets and Quavers*, 167.

¹¹⁴ “The Opera,” *North American and United States Gazette*, March 12, 1853; *Spirit of the Times*, April 9, 1853.

¹¹⁵ *NYT*, April 2, 1853. In his absence, Maretzek choose to mount an Alboni classic, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*.

¹¹⁶ His absence was first noted and attributed to illness in April. *NYT*, April 2 and May 7, 1853. Salvi's absence—for whatever reason—drove up interest for his return. “Accordingly,” noted the *Herald*, “we had *tout le monde et sa femme*, pretty faces and grim beards, spectacled noses and chaste Grecians, new bonnets and bright rigolettes, sincere lovers of music and people who don't know “Hail Columbia” from “In my Cottage,” plentifully scattered, and in some cases, as we can testify, rather tightly wedged together in boxes and parquette.” “The Opera at Niblo's,” *NYH*, April 9, 1853.

Salvi's misconduct was interpreted as a violation of his partnerships with both Maretzek and the public. He was only one card in the pack, and each fifty-cent ticket holder was an investor. "When people pay their money for any particular amusement they have a right to receive it, and not be subjected to disappointment through the mere freaks or caprice of any performer," wrote a critic for *Gleason's* a month after Salvi's absences. "The latter's part of the contract should be performed in good faith and honesty, the public having discharged their part of the obligation when they pay the price of the performance."¹¹⁷ Conflicts between star singers and managers, when freighted with the expectations of "the public," were thus framed as the result of the Italian singers' greed.

The spotty performances at Niblo's were also picked up by the city's newest entrant to entertainment reportage, the *New York Clipper*, still in its first month of publishing. The *Clipper* located the conflict's source not with Salvi but in the orchestra.¹¹⁸ The paper's "musical cricket" claimed insider knowledge and traced the conflict to a sixth violin player who been attending to his Staten Island candle factory. The violinist in turn agitated a drummer and a trombone player, who then "boldly proclaimed, just as the curtain was about to be 'histed,' *that he had struck!*" Although the manager "appealed to their intelligence and said rather than disappoint the audience he would raise their salaries to an increase of 37 ½ cents per night," the musicians refused. The production's "subordinates"—who were in fact the star singers Alboni, Steffanoni, and Bevenentano— "calmly resisted the result of the 'muss,'" and "were even willing to go on without the big drum, or the sixth fiddle, but as no persuasion could induce the 3rd

¹¹⁷ "A Word about Singers," *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*, June 25, 1853, 413.

¹¹⁸ *Clipper*, May 14, 1853.

trombone man to resume his duties unless he received the full amount demanded, 40 cents per night, they were compelled to ‘back down.’” The paper concluded that while it was not opposed to strikes in principle, it found the conduct of the trombone player “an insult to the profession,” as he was “well paid [...] and in fact was the leader of the opera troupe.” While other players had been “led into the strike” and were “at least entitled to leniency in the opinion of the public,” the trombone player who demanded the raise at a cost to both the manager and the assembled audience deserved to be hissed.

It is not easy to make sense of this account. The *Clipper*’s reporting, particularly in its early days, confided in a gossipy tone that worked through reference and citation. The most likely explanation is that the paper was playing with the readers’ knowledge that it was the star singers who usually prevented the show from continuing, and that to call them the sixth violin or the “subordinates” was a playful check on their egos. And yet there was more at play than just the urge to take the stars down a peg. Both the comedy *and* the threat were that the orchestra musicians—the lowly sixth violins—might make demands that were comparable to stars, and that their limited autonomy as individuals might be overcome if they acted as a unit. According to the *Spirit*, the real threat posed by Salvi was not simply his absence from the stage but his ability to “[breed] a complete mutiny in the establishment—a strike operatic—by demanding that the salaries of the residue of the company should be paid in advance, and at higher rates.” The tenor had “taken them all under his wing [...] and by so doing completely disorganized the plans and prospects of the management, who justly felt that they must shut down in order to avoid gross imposition [...]” The problem of a successful and harmonious opera troupe is

still unsolved.”¹¹⁹ Choristers and orchestra members—the *residue*—did not have the same celebrity leverage at Salvi or Alboni. Their power was their function as a single entity, which Salvi was guilty of stoking.

An additional note of interest in the *Clipper* report is the reference to the Staten Island candle factory. Readers may have known that it was in fact Lorenzo Salvi who was involved with Antonio Meucci’s candle producing operation. At Salvi’s first absence in the spring season, in early April, the *Albion* suggested he had caught cold through his involvement in “the laudable business of making candles (!) and—money—” in Staten Island.¹²⁰ Readers may also have known that Meucci was also playing host in the early 1850s to Italian general and nationalist hero Giuseppe Garibaldi.¹²¹ In his second memoir, Marezek recounts visits finding Salvi at work alongside Meucci and Garibaldi, and he plays up the comic effect of three men known for other achievements with “their arms bare up to the elbows, the perspiration on their brows, kneading hot, melted, and smelling tallow.”¹²² Although the timing of this encounter suggests it was fabricated, Salvi and Garibaldi knew Meucci in the same window of time and likely met. Furthermore, Salvi’s association with the candle factory pointed in two ways. First, when the press wanted to discredit Salvi, they referred to him as the “candle maker,” a workman and not an artist, and one who refused to properly obey management.¹²³ Second, the claim that Italian

¹¹⁹ *Spirit of the Times*, May 7, 1853.

¹²⁰ *Albion*, April 9, 1853.

¹²¹ Garibaldi’s biographer places him on Long Island in the fall of 1850 and in New York the fall of 1853. Alfonso Scirocco, *Garibaldi: Citizen of the World*, trans. Allan Cameron (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 191-194.

¹²² Marezek, *Sharps and Flats*, 10.

¹²³ Several months later, the *Clipper* again revisited the strike in light of the libel case Fry had brought against James Gordon Bennett and the *Herald*. For those who would hold Bennett’s critique responsible for opera’s labor problems, asked the *Clipper*, “how many times have Italian singers insulted their managers and the public by refusing to perform after their names had been duly announced?” The paper refers

performers in chorus were akin to a secret national army—a hibernating brigand—was bolstered by their association with the most famous Italian revolutionary of the period.

As had been the case at Palmo's, a key piece of the orchestra's role in the Salvi revolt was its prominence in the production as a whole. "Never have we had one so well balanced, never one so unanimous," wrote the *Albion*, capable of both "crushing effect" and "the more delicate nuances" of orchestration.¹²⁴ "The great improvement in the modern orchestra has been more apparent in the Italian Opera than in Symphony," the critic added, as the opera conductors and players learned to emphasize "effect" over "classicality." Musicians this feted may have been displeased when their range was limited, as had been the case in *Don Pasquale*, the first opera performed in this season. James Otis noted that the orchestra played at a level that "gives a fair chance to the singers," but that neither the orchestra nor the chorus—"as full as usual, and appeared well balanced and well practiced"—had the opportunity to display their talents.¹²⁵ His impressions were echoed in the *Herald*, which praised the troupe members who were temporarily singing in the chorus and "who might naturally have objected to play subordinate parts," but who instead formed "the finest choruses we have ever heard in Niblo's theatre."¹²⁶ And so, when Salvi finally returned to sing in Donizetti's *La favorita*—what the *Albion* critic called "the greatest operatic representation we have ever

specifically to Salvi's alleged "indisposition," an "indisposition to fulfill [his] contract," and twice called him as a candle-maker. *Clipper*, December 24, 1853.

¹²⁴ *Albion*, April 9, 1853. One exception was the *Herald*, which wrote that "the elaborate ingenuity of the orchestra hardly ever leaves the voice any prominence, so that the attention must be given to a symphony in the orchestra as well as to the voice, and such double attention is not often awarded by the public." *NYH*, May 9, 1853.

¹²⁵ *Spirit of the Times*, April 9, 1853.

¹²⁶ "After such a chorus," the paper noted, "we shall not submit complacently to the second rate fare which has hitherto been served up to us." *NYH*, April 23, 1853.

witnessed in New York”—he was accompanied by a chorus that played a key role in the drama.¹²⁷

The Managers Strike Back

Conflicts between the orchestra, the chorus and management continued to flare up in moments of opera’s visible and reported instability. When the chorus and orchestra struck again four years later, management was prepared. In the wake of the financial Panic of 1857, all decisions and debates about salaries, losses, and schedules were made in the shadow of depression. As the *Clipper* wisely noted, “the trade of an actor is a risky business to learn, and in hard times like the present, jobs come up extremely scarce, and prices rule low.”¹²⁸ New York papers gave comparative reports on various theaters’ profits and losses, offering suggestions as to which would survive (Niblo’s, because its patrons’ “humbler profits” had always kept their amusements modest) and which would crash (the opera, “entirely supported by those who make money easily and spend it fast”).¹²⁹

As Panic mania seized New Yorkers, managers and performers prepared to open the fall season at the Academy of Music, relinquished by Maretzek and now run by his rival Bernard Ullman. The season consisted of seventeen performances between September 7 and October 9 and was a surprising success. However, a week into the winter season—beginning in early November—the creative financing and labor arrangements that Ullman facilitated were not enough. The opera was losing \$500 to

¹²⁷ *Albion*, April 16, 1853, 188.

¹²⁸ *Clipper*, December 5, 1857.

¹²⁹ “Good Managers and Bad Managers—Conditions of the Theater,” *NYH*, October 7, 1857.

\$600 a night. The most recent production of *Rigoletto* had cost \$1,200 but attracted an audience that paid only half that amount, leading Ullman to eventually claim a loss of \$10,000.¹³⁰ The two options placed on the table were to pay expenses from the sinking fund, which was not the preference of the proprietors, or to reduce performers' salaries.¹³¹ Star singers were asked to take a reduction of one-third, and the orchestra and chorus of one-quarter. If his artists and residue would not cooperate, Ullman threatened to close the season altogether.

Primed with extensive newspaper coverage, the zeitgeist of bankruptcy, and a multi-decade tradition of attention to operatic failure, the opera's precarious financial fortunes took center stage, and with heightened excitement. "In the *entr'actes* of the opera last night there were heated discussions in numerous languages," wrote the *Herald*, "and large numbers of incendiary speeches *a la* Tompkins square," a reference to the mass action in early November in which New York's unemployed workers pressed the city for political action. Much to the delight of the press, prima donnas Anna de La Grange and Elena D'Angri had agreed to reduced salaries, the heroic La Grange having sung five times in a week and with a slight illness. The chorus, however, refused to go on, and the orchestra continued to deliberate.¹³²

In a time of publicly-acknowledged and widespread financial disarray, the opera mass' refusal to accept lower pay was a disgrace. "If the employees of the Academy have any common sense, (a rare thing in their calling)," wrote the *Herald*, "they will be very

¹³⁰ "The Panic at the Opera," *NYH*, November 19, 1857. The *Herald* also recommended that singers take a hint from Chickering's "sagacious workmen" and "come forward to the relief of the management." *NYH*, October 10, 1857. \$10,000 is *NYH*, December 5, 1857.

¹³¹ *Clipper*, November 28, 1857.

¹³² As the opposite of the demanding diva, or the temperamental tenor, de La Grange's "devotion to the public and her managers is praiseworthy." *NYH*, November 21, 1857,

glad to get anything during the winter which is approaching.”¹³³ While most instrumentalists relied on engagements at fancy balls given after the holidays, the paper noted, the panic meant fewer would be given this year. The orchestra responded that accepting reduced rates would set a precedent for lower fees that could not be easily reversed; the paper called this “absurd,” claiming that the instrumentalists’ “services are regulated by the same rules that govern every marketable commodity—they will always command a price according to the supply on hand and the demand.”¹³⁴ The *Clipper* chimed in with nativist disdain, a trope that recurs frequently in the critique of foreign musicians. While American citizens were in the streets with “We Want Work,” the “foreign ‘flunkies of the opera’ hoist the rag with their motto ‘We Won’t Work.’ By their silly conduct they have sealed their own fate.”¹³⁵ If a striking orchestra and chorus had been an amusement in an earlier decade, it was now viewed as an embarrassment and a show of ingratitude. While some suggested that the orchestra for Italian Opera had never recovered following Maretzek’s departure, the papers most invested in shaming the orchestra and chorus praised them as well-trained and highly able, and thus responsible for breaking up an impressive artistic feat.¹³⁶

As was always the case, the “failure” of the opera was greatly exaggerated. Although impresario Ullman had announced that the season would close on November 20th, he was soon announcing the eventual cooperation of the orchestra, the chorus, and other “minor employees” in continuing the season, so that star basso Carl Formes could

¹³³ “The Panic at the Opera,” *NYH*, November 19, 1857.

¹³⁴ “The Opera Matinee—Grand Rush of Crinoline to Irving Place,” *NYH*, November 20, 1857.

¹³⁵ *Clipper*, November 28, 1857.

¹³⁶ *Leslie’s*, November 7, 1857, 359; *NYH*, November 21 and December 2, 1857.

make his US debut in Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* in the first week of December.¹³⁷ It also seems possible that the much-praised sacrifice of star singers never actually happened.¹³⁸ Perhaps they had all been appropriately shamed by the backlash or feared their lack of options if they were indeed unable to secure other work. The “hungry furriners,” sniped the *Clipper*, “having nearly succeeded in starving themselves to death, have at length come to terms, and will pay for what they can get.”¹³⁹ The quick reversal revealed the star singer's contradictory role as savior and ruination—Formes was both the largest expense and the only thing that could generate enough attention to revive the Academy. And, in fulfillment of his reputation, Formes was a massive success and universally praised. The house on opening night was “packed like a bachelor's traveling trunk” with 4,800 people. Receipts were reported at \$2,378, an all-time high, and the crowd “was so great that the ladies' dresses were torn into ribbons.”¹⁴⁰ The profits of the first week were reported to make up half of the losses of the previous season, and Ullman planned to extend the season longer than required by his lease.¹⁴¹

The financial panic did not make the opera fail; at most, it intensified the cycle of success and failure that was already opera's norm. Widespread financial disarray did not end the public taste for commercial entertainment—at the end of 1857, the *Clipper* counted eleven theaters “in full blast, and all doing a fair business”—but rather gave

¹³⁷ *Spirit of the Times*, November 28, 1857.

¹³⁸ *NYH*, November 23, 1857; *NYT*, November 20, 1857.

¹³⁹ *Clipper*, December 5, 1857.

¹⁴⁰ *NYH*, December 1, 1857; *Clipper*, December 12, 1857; *New-York Tribune*, December 1, 1857. The *Herald* numbers were reprinted in the *Clipper*, January 16, 1858. Ullman reported 243 employees, including 92 people in the orchestra and chorus combined. “Traveling trunk” is *Albion*, December 5, 1857, 583.

¹⁴¹ *NYH*, December 5, 1857.

managers a greater excuse for control over their employees.¹⁴² On Friday, January 8th, a few weeks into the winter and on the tail end of Formes' successful run, the chorus again struck for higher wages, this time after the performance had commenced. "The manager appealed to the public and asked for permission to go on without [the chorus]," reported *Leslie's*, "which was readily and heartily granted. So the chorus was omitted."¹⁴³ Two days later, several papers published Ullman's "Card" denouncing the continued "conspiracy" of the chorus both to "impose upon him their terms" and to demand he not fire the "ringleaders." Ullman claimed to have honored all contracts since September, and that his only crime had been to schedule additional dates to make up for several months of losses.¹⁴⁴ The press was convinced that the revolt would have little effect, as the star singers were not involved; unlike in previous squabbles such as the collusion of Salvi and the orchestra, argued the *Herald*, "this bolt originated in the orchestra [...] and has now been carried out by a grand revolution on the part of the rank and file in the chorus," while the *Clipper* reported that the star singers remained outside of the "muss."¹⁴⁵ A week later, following "the expulsion of the malcontents," Ullman assembled an entirely new chorus composed largely of amateur singers in *Liederkrantz*, a German social organization.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² *Clipper*, December 19, 1857.

¹⁴³ *Leslie's*, January 16, 1858.

¹⁴⁴ This time, it was the Germans who were "a most inharmonious and troublesome class," in comparison to the "tractable" Italians. "Sudden Suspension of the Italian Opera," *NYH*, January 10, 1858, 1 (card); 4 (editorial). "The bolting choristers demand, some days after the performances have been given, extra pay, and make the demand just before the rising of the curtain for a new opera. The demand is very properly refused; the bolters are discharged, and the manager asks time from the public to form a new chorus, when the season will be continued." Also appeared in *NYT* and *Evening Post*, January 11, 1858.

¹⁴⁵ *Clipper*, January 16, 1858.

¹⁴⁶ *NYH*, January 14, 1858.

Ullman's response was more forceful than Palmo's or Maretzek's had been in earlier versions of this conflict. A decade earlier, Maretzek bragged of his "complete triumph over insubordination in the ranks of my Orchestra," even though he acknowledged that their demands were reasonable, leaving him in a last-minute scramble for replacements from the city's "highly moral dancing-houses."¹⁴⁷ This time, the climate was inhospitable to ungrateful workers—particularly culture workers, and foreign ones at that—and Ullman had the ear of the press and the authority of the Academy of Music at his disposal. Not only did he fire his chorus, but in March he announced that the Academy of Music would be offering a free singing school beginning in August, as dictated by its charter and in fulfillment of its claim as the New York counterpart to the Paris Conservatoire.¹⁴⁸ Even through political unrest, the Paris Conservatoire sustained the largest and best-trained opera choruses, between sixty and eighty members in this period, all of whom could read music and had strong familiarity with stage directions.¹⁴⁹ The *Herald* praised the "distinguished professors" who would be offering lessons, among them Carl Anschutz, the Academy's Musical Director, and Theodore Thomas, and predicted that the lessons would be "seized with gratitude by many amateurs." Presented as an altruistic gesture, the school was in fact Ullman's way of restructuring the chorus now purged of dissenters. Establishing a school would provide "plenty of recruits to fill the ranks of the orchestra and chorus," wrote the *New York Times*, and give manager Bernard Ullman "a ready means of combating the arrogance of a small but selfish and all

¹⁴⁷ Following a subpar performance and subsequent berating from Maretzek at rehearsal for the debut of *Maria di Rohan*, only two or three of the forty-two orchestra members appeared for the dress rehearsal. Maretzek, *Crotchets and Quavers*, 89.

¹⁴⁸ *NYH*, March 6, 1858.

¹⁴⁹ Parakilas, "The Chorus," 77-78. In comparison, German opera houses had fifty to sixty, San Carlo had thirty-six, and St. Petersburg forty-eight.

powerful band of professionals, who, whenever their services are most wanted, are most exacting in their demands.”¹⁵⁰ And there was no question as to who was behind this change; when the three-hundred member chorus made its fall debut in *Don Giovanni*, the *Herald* again praised the initiative, specifying that it was the manager and not the musical director nor the Academy stakeholders who had enacted this reform.¹⁵¹

The press was merciless in their attacks on the opera’s non-start performers. Even the refined *Albion*, which preferred detailed musical criticism to discussion of finances, praised Ullman’s success at turning the opera into an institution, only to be “assailed with unjust and tyrannical demands for cash, by people whose existence he had absolutely sustained during the sternest season.”¹⁵² The *Herald* and the *Times* showed less restraint. No longer would opera fans have to suffer through a “execrably bad” chorus of “dirty and impudent” men and women “ugly beyond description,” but would be treated instead with singers “who will not quarrel with the manager, and will have no particular abhorrence of soap and water.”¹⁵³ This was not the first time the *Times* used this language—the 1854 Castle Garden chorus was described as “by no means good looking,” “frowsy,” “dirty,” and wearing “the shabbiest of all possible shabby costumes”—but this round brought an even crueller tone.¹⁵⁴

In addition to the establishment of a singing school, the opera panic had a second outcome with an even greater effect. Ullman’s brief mention of additional dates in his “Card” obscured one of the major changes he introduced. As early as September, during

¹⁵⁰ *NYT*, January 11, 1858.

¹⁵¹ *NYH*, November 8, 1858.

¹⁵² *Albion*, January 16, 1858.

¹⁵³ “Free Singing School at Academy of Music,” *NYH*, March 7, 1853; *NYT*, January 11, 1858.

¹⁵⁴ *NYT*, August 24, 1854.

the first “season” of the fall, Ullman’s star singers performed in concerts in addition to their usual schedule without additional pay. In October, the *Herald* had reported “that although the financial crisis came near to ruin the Opera, as all their artists are engaged to sing in concerts likewise, without extra pay, they have been able to go on without loss.”¹⁵⁵ But given the large and public gap between the prima donnas’ pay and the choristers’ — who were identified for the first time in this conversation as male—it is perhaps not surprising that the mass would resist the same compromise.

The panic pushed opera managers to explore additional performances targeting new audiences and in a variety of venues, most of which relied on opera’s reputation but scaled down either its production or its appeal to fashion.¹⁵⁶ Italian opera required speculative spectacle—the combination of star singers, elaborate sets and costumes, large numbers of musicians and choristers, and the premieres of major new works—in order to cultivate celebrity, to attract a variety of publics, and to convince investors. In a competitive landscape where the center of gravity shifted easily between venues, stars, and impresarios, staging opera in this manner was becoming both necessary and too expensive. “We do not believe that the full Opera can be given for less than the present rate of prices, and then it does not pay expenses,” admitted the *Herald*. Instead, the paper noted, “the profits must be gained from the matinees and Sunday concerts, which are admirably gotten up.”¹⁵⁷ Depending on how “whole” the opera was, the primary difference between the matinee and the regular season may have been timing, ticket

¹⁵⁵ *NYH*, October 10, 1857.

¹⁵⁶ Matinees paved the way for the first “cheap opera” night at the Academy, on New Year’s Day in 1858. *NYH*, January 1, 1858. The *Times* called it “completely successful [...] drawn from classes that are not in the habit of patronizing the Opera at regular prices.” *NYT*, January 8, 1858, 4.

¹⁵⁷ *NYH*, November 16, 1857.

pricing—held at fifty cents—and labor costs. Indeed, matinees were a particularly good option for management if the singers could be convinced (or pressured) in periods of publicly acknowledged financial distress to sing for free, even as they were also expected to rehearse and perform in the regular season.

The novelty of fifty-cent opera or matinees should not be overstated. Fifty-cent tickets had thrived at the pleasure gardens for over a decade, while matinees had been introduced slowly and sporadically in the chamber music scene beginning in the 1840s.¹⁵⁸ Beginning in 1845, the lease at Castle Garden only permitted concerts and not staged operas; Maretzek himself had tried a Saturday afternoon performance at the Academy two years prior, starring Anna de La Grange. However, the key difference was that, in 1857, matinees and their audiences were acknowledged as central to opera's success; the panic transformed what had been a novelty into a key plank of the entertainment industry. Together, off-night evening concerts and matinees conjured ticket-buying audiences that had been previously unimaginable. These audiences may have been opera newcomers or simply successful experiments in niche marketing. The Saturday matinee was imagined for out-of-towners who were inconvenienced by the lack of transportation after 8pm, and who now would be able “to reach the city, hear all the musical novelties, and return by the five o'clock train.”¹⁵⁹ The most common observation about matinee audiences,

¹⁵⁸ Adrienne Fried Block has suggested that the first matinee concerts were given for women “associates” of the New York Philharmonic in the 1840s, and then as a series by a Philharmonic off-shoot in 1855. Adrienne Fried Block, “Matinee Mania, or the Regendering of Nineteenth-Century Audiences in New York City,” *19th-Century Music* 31 (Spring, 2008), 193-216.

¹⁵⁹ *Leslie's* reported estimated that there were 1,400 women present at the first Saturday matinee, many of whom came from the country. “We do not exaggerate when we say that there are hundreds of families living but a few miles from the city who are now deprived of the pleasure of attending the opera in consequence of the want of accommodation from the railroads—no trains leaving the city after eight o'clock in the evening. These morning operas, commencing at two PM, will enable them to reach the city, hear all the musical novelties, and return by the five o'clock train. Every publicity should be given by the management to this most excellent and popular undertaking, for we know, from personal observation, that

however, was that they were predominantly female. The audience of the first Thursday matinee reportedly four-fifths women and children, who kept the receipts high as Ullman battled with his employees.¹⁶⁰ Although not as disruptive as the matinees, evening concerts between the opera's regularly scheduled performances also worked to the managers' benefit. Not only did they save on salaries, but they also reduced competition. In the first week of opera's second fall season, prima donnas Frezzolini and D'Angri appeared at Niblo's on Thursday night with Thalberg and violinist Henri Vieuxtemps, performing excerpts from *Don Giovanni*, *I lombardi*, and *Italiani in algeri*, all three of which were performed in full in the following weeks.¹⁶¹ Yet these concerts and additional performances would not have been successful on their own, but had to work in tandem with the full opera, which was the mechanism that created star singers and generated interest. "Cheap opera," introduced at the Academy in January 1858 and named as such, had to follow expensive opera; it could not come first.

Conclusion

In the end, the primary effects of the financial panic on New York's Italian opera was not its ruination or failure, which had long been the genre's status quo. And in fact, at the conclusion of the winter season, Ullman had overseen sixty-four performances,

it only need to be well known to be liberally patronized by out of town families." *Leslie's*, November 21, 1857, 391.

¹⁶⁰ The *Herald* coverage of women's interest in the opera was ambivalent. It was dismissive of the female matinee audience, which it judged as divided between the drama, "scandal," and "an occasional glance at the ornamental young men who fringed the parquet." But the paper also acknowledged that women's attendance at the performances were what kept the entire operation from going under. This ambivalence was the result of both the mixed interpretations of women's consumption as well as opera's contradictory status as luxury good and major industry. "The Opera Matinee—Grand Rush of Crinoline to Irving Place," *NYH*, November 20, 1857.

¹⁶¹ *NYT*, November 3, 1857.

including fifty Italian operas, four German operas, and six oratorios.¹⁶² Instead, the panic brought the intensification of labor in the addition of matinees and concerts; the increased segmentation of audiences; and the particular tools of control over culture workers—the use of amateurs, racially-tinged critiques, and the language of improvement and discipline—in a moment that expressed little patience for the working conditions of musicians, particularly those who did not have access to celebrity.

Shining a light on the flunkies and the residue takes the aftermath of opera's riotous mid-century existence in a different direction than the standard narrative in which opera's contestation in the 1840s and 1850s gives way to its enshrinement as the province of a fully-fledged bourgeoisie in the erection of the Metropolitan Opera House in 1883. But, as the conflicts between non-star performers and managers Palmo, Maretzek and Ullman demonstrate, opera also fomented a new self-consciousness among a certain strata of culture workers. This consciousness, as this chapter has shown, appeared first as a disruptive element visible on stage or in the orchestra pit, more inclined to bring an evening's entertainment to a standstill or shut down a "season" than to successfully regulate hours and pay.

In the years following the Panic, the action of the opera mass was channeled into formal organizing with the action of the Musicians' Mutual Protective Union, the subject of the next chapter and a precursor of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM). The circumstances that provoked the MMPU's formation and the struggles in which its policy and practice were forged had long-lasting effects on how musical labor was defined, purchased, and valued. The conditions that made possible (and necessary) the first union

¹⁶² *NYT*, January 21, 1858.

of culture workers does more than gives us the origin of a “final” form. This history situates the MMPU’s formation as a key moment in its own right in the changing value of artistic work within modern capitalism, a tension that was nowhere stronger than in opera. The connection between labor unions and opera sounds discordant to our ears, but it helps us understand three key points. First, the first musicians’ union in the American Federation of Labor had fundamentally international origins; second, the masculinist AFM grew out of an industry dominated by female stars; and third, the complaint of the exploited chorister or orchestra player was the result of both less autonomy and increased visibility and importance.

The organizing of the opera mass had a distinctly gendered component. A key component of opera talk was debating and critiquing the high salaries of its stars, many of whom were female, and who could employ tactics of autonomy such as the inserted aria. “It is in music alone,” noted the *Spirit of the Times* in the fall of 1848, “that female operatives get more than male.”¹⁶³ This context has to be considered when the prima donna’s “co-laborers” formed themselves into the MMPU, an all-male organization, and into alliance with New York’s workingmen’s unions. The union’s formation thus contributed to what Susan Rutherford has termed the “masculinization” of the operatic mode of production, in which “the development of ‘order’ and ‘rationalization’ is equated with progress and the needs of a modern marketplace.”¹⁶⁴ The union was part of the rising coterie of agents, conductors, directors, publishers, most of whom were men, who slowly seized the prima donnas’ power.

¹⁶³ “Suggestion for the Opera,” *Spirit of the Times*, October 27, 1848.

¹⁶⁴ Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera*, 179.

With organization, however, came loss. The MMPU whole-heartedly embraced the “professional” label, and in the process cut themselves off from amateur performers—or rather more clearly defined “amateur” and “professional” as oppositional terms in a capitalist mode of production—and ultimately from non-star singers. One goal of improvement, disciplining, and drilling of the opera chorus and orchestra was to eliminate the part-time, seasonal, and untutored player epitomized by the Italian chorister Marezek found in the warehouse in 1847. On the one hand, the instrumentalists’ narrowing definition makes sense, as in the case of the 1857 strike, in which Bernard Ullman used a local amateur chorus to avoid paying his current chorus higher salaries. But drawing such clearly defined lines made less sense for an opera or oratorio chorus, which even today is often sung by amateurs in choral societies supporting star singers. Following the muss among the flunkies proves that, for scholars interested in the categories and definitions of cultural labor within capitalism, there is as much to be learned from figures in the wings as there is in the heat of the spotlight.

Chapter 2. The “Mere Mechanics” of the Orchestra: Founding, Enforcing, and Sustaining the First Culture Workers Union, 1853 – 1875

Friedrich Wilhelm Hagemeyer knew the neighborhood, but he had never been inside 10 Stanton Street until a few minutes before ten that Friday morning in February of 1868. As a rank and file member of the newly-formed Musical Mutual Protective Union (MMPU), Hagemeyer was making his first appearance at the quarterly Executive Committee meeting to answer for his violation of the union’s bylaws. On his way into the heart of Kleindeutschland, or “Little Germany,” Hagemeyer passed his neighbors at work in the metal cornice and coffin factories, German Evangelical Church, and variety hall just around the corner on the Bowery.¹ Once inside, and after the previous meeting’s minutes were read and approved, the six-member Executive Committee of the Musical Mutual Protective Union turned to Hagemeyer’s case. After a brief discussion, he was fined four dollars for playing with non-members at a ball three weeks earlier, a violation

¹ This chapter is based on the Minutes of the Executive Committee [ECM] of the Musical Mutual Protective Union, available on microfilm at the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive, Bobst Library, New York University. *Manhattan, New York City* [map]. 1868. 50:1. Perris & Browne, *Insurance Maps of The City of New York II*. NYC Fire Insurance, Topographic and Property Maps, NYPL Digital Collections. 10 Stanton Street was also the headquarters for the Granite Cutters Union, the Tailors’ Benevolent Society, the Social Relief Benevolent Society. The MMPU had no formal “clubhouse,” and its meetings were held in various locations in lower Manhattan with some connection to the Union. This likely kept costs down but also could bring problems. While meeting at 10 Stanton Street on the morning of June 10, 1875, President Papst was appointed a committee of one “to inform the proprietor of this house, Mr. J. M. Schmidt, that if he cannot manage to keep band playing out of hearing during our meeting, we are compelled to change our meeting place.” As the organization was entering its second decade, the EC approved the purchase of a bookcase, or writing desk with large drawers for the safe keeping of books and papers which have accumulated during the nine years of the existence of the association.” ECM, December 10, 1872.

of Section 1, Article III in the bylaws. When called to defend himself, Hagemeyer did not deny the charge. As he explained to the committee,

he did play but a few numbers only, as he was present on the occasion as a guest not as a musician, his children were present for instruction to learn dancing and he played a few tunes out of compliment of the dancing master, without receiving any remuneration.²

As one of hundreds of men fined for this violation in the union's early decades, Hagemeyer's dilemma illustrates the most significant challenges facing the MMPU, the oldest labor union of culture workers in the world. First, the fine demonstrates the difficulty of enforcing what labor historians call a "closed shop" in a line of work with no formal credentialing program and an endless supply of starry-eyed amateurs. It also indicates how the burden of this rule fell on rank and file musicians—men like Hagemeyer and the anonymous member who reported him—and not on employers. While the union was formed primarily to pressure theater managers for fair compensation, the organization's routine administration was directed at ordinary players.

Hagemeyer's dilemma also demonstrates how orchestra players of the 1860s negotiated multiple registers of value. Like the journeyman typographers and tailors who danced to the violinist's quadrilles, instrumental musicians formed protective associations because they saw disproportionate prosperity among theater managers and band leaders, and because they felt that the path to such success and stability was out of reach. But union activity did not mean that musicians understood the market as the sole determinant of the value of their work. The dance floor was a place of work, pleasure, and familial obligation, and players were beholden to union bylaws, social rules, and a spontaneous

² ECM, February 7, 1868.

call to participate. Musicians were responsible to the union, to their families, to social behavior, and to their music, and they had to handle these obligations in real time. The construction and enforcement of union rules offer unparalleled insight into the daily lives of working musicians, making visible the key conflicts faced by people making art within but not fully beholden to the logic of the culture industries.

The most thoughtful writing on musicians' unions names these conflicts as artistry versus labor.³ This is an important component of the story and was often the language used by union leaders and opponents alike. But this framing assumes these poles were self-evident, fully-formed, and oppositional by the time of the union's emergence in the 1860s. Instead, any indication of the dissonance of art and work—the surprise you felt when learning that musicians organized during the Civil War, for example, or the critique made of the “mere mechanics” who called themselves artists and workers—is better understood as a contingent binary created through perpetual activity. This understanding best does justice to the lives of players like Hagemeyer, who did not see an inherent conflict in identifying as artists, laborers, composers, Germans, grocers, New Yorkers, and fathers. It is true that as musicians became more closely aligned with the powerful labor organizations that closed the nineteenth-century—tenuously with the Knights of Labor, and in a more lasting partnership with the American Federation of Labor (AFL)—labor politics likely occupied a larger space in the average instrumental musicians' self-conception. It is our imposition that understands this identification as

³ Sandy Mazzola, “When Music is Labor: Chicago Bands and Orchestras and the Origins of the Chicago Federation of Musicians, 1880-1902 (PhD diss., 1984); James P. Kraft, “Artists as Workers: Musicians and Trade Unionism in America, 1880-1917,” *Musical Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (1995); Michael James Roberts, *Tell Tchaikovsky the News*.

foreclosing others, rather than an experiment within the multiple systems of value that commercial musicians came to occupy.

The opposition between an organization for artists and one for laborers is clearest in the 1890s, and in the historiography that takes this moment as a starting point. This argument focuses on the antagonism between MMPU President Alexander Bremer and Samuel Gompers in 1896, when the AFL recognized the American Federation of Musicians. Bremer's avowal that "no members of the Musical Mutual Protective Union would consent to association with what they termed 'mud-gutter musicians'" has since been understood as the MMPU's refusal to participate in modern labor activism.⁴ But it is also true that the MMPU had already been a founding constituent in the two previous national musical labor organizations, neither of which had served the needs of New York musicians. Furthermore, as a conservatory-trained leader with plum spots in bands and at the Metropolitan Opera and an eye on a political career, Bremer's career was not representative of the wider membership.⁵ Most importantly, the simple dichotomy

⁴ *NYT*, October 19, 1896. Exemplary of this tradition is an early article by John Commons, the Wisconsin labor economist, who tied changes in musicians' self-definition to the development of organizations. According to Commons, musicians relinquished their identity first as artists, in the formation of the National League, and then as members of a profession, with the establishment of the AFM. More recently, James Kraft has argued that the largest obstacle to musicians' unions wasn't changing working conditions but their "their own reluctance to recognize and act on their common concerns as workers." While self-definition is extremely important, this approach assumes that identifying as a worker is inevitable and, once accomplished, permanent, rather than a response to specific changes in the structural changes of commercial entertainment. John R. Commons, "Types of Musicians' Labor Unions—The Musicians of St. Louis and New York," *Journal of Quarterly Economics* 20, no. 3 (May, 1906), 419-422; Kraft, "Artists as Workers," 513.

⁵ Bremer was born in Copenhagen in 1850, accepted to the Royal Opera House training program for French horn at 15, and came to New York two years later. He played in the city's best-known orchestras and bands, and was a particularly vocal opponent of "foreign" musicians during the 1885 Foran Act controversy, as well as a strong advocate for the six-month residency clause and the naturalization requirement, and the rise of the initiation fee to \$100. Bremer was also a minor play in New York's Democratic Party, serving as District Court Clerk, Deputy City Paymaster, Examiner of Accounts, and City Inspector of Music; he was also Secretary of the Morris Heights Property Owners Association. Ernest Erdmann, "Erdmann's Musical Review of New York," *Jacob's Band Monthly* 6 (February, 1921): 84-88.

between artists and workers—in which 1896 serves as the mark of transition from the former to the latter—obscures the MMPU’s earlier use of labor tactics.

In contrast to Alexander Bremer, Friedrich Hagemeyer’s career is both harder to trace and more typical of union members. Born in Bremen in 1824, he sailed to New York in 1845 and, five years later, was living with his new wife and mother-in-law, both German women named Katherine, on the Lower East Side. According to the union’s directory, Hagemeyer worked as a violinist and a violist. He also tried his hand at composing, publishing the piano tune “Amelia Waltzes” with Oliver Ditson in 1867. Unlike Bremer, and unlike the Executive Committee who fined him for playing at the dancing lesson, Hagemeyer never held the stable and prestigious positions in reputable theater orchestras and established bands. The census-taker listed his occupation as “musician” in 1870, but in the preceding decades he was identified as a “grocer” in multiple places and as a mason in the ship’s manifest at immigration.⁶ The violinist also faced many of the challenges of aging musicians; in the last year of his life, in 1880, he was out of work due to a broken finger.⁷ But Hagemeyer’s decision to play at his children’s dancing lesson twelve years earlier paid dividends after his death, as all the traceable Hagemeyer children entered the twentieth-century as New Yorkers either married to or as white-collar workers in New York.

⁶ 1850 U.S Census, population schedule. New York Ward 1 Eastern Division, New York, New York; Roll: M432_534; Page: 27A; 1870 U.S. Census, population schedule. New York Ward 18 District 14 (2nd Enum), New York, New York; Roll: M593_1040; Page: 394B. All subsequent census records are population schedules and were accessed via the www.ancestry.com database.

⁷ 1800 U.S. Census. New York City, New York, New York; Roll: 891; Page: 360D; Enumeration District: 487. The Battery Conservancy has digitized the Registers of Vessels for Castle Garden migrants. Original is *Registers of Vessels Arriving at the Port of New York from Foreign Ports, 1789-1919*. Microfilm Publication M237, rolls 1-95. National Archives at Washington, D.C.

This chapter moves from the opera choruses' strikes to the formal cultural labor organizing undertaken by New York's professional instrumental musicians. This category is more complex than it seems, broad in some ways and narrow in others. With rare exceptions, these musicians were European or European American men who played in theater orchestras and other commercial spaces, and who accompanied the city's many social functions, such as balls, parades, and picnics. Some worked as music teachers, and in the 1860s many mustered into military bands, but many were able to make some kind of a living as entertainers. It is also important to note that the many hats worn by musicians were stratified by race and gender. In the 1860s, white women instrumentalists played in private settings or, occasionally, as touring stars. Black musicians who played for money did so in the most casual settings, often in the context of domestic service at summer watering holes or retreats and, occasionally, in military bands or in the early African American minstrel tours.

Even within the category of European men, the union's players occupied various class positions. Few could make a living solely as "professional" musicians, a term that can be misleading because it implies a close relationship to credentialing and academic training, and because it suggests a permanence or reliable employment out of reach for most members.⁸ A lucky few served as leaders for established bands and orchestras, which often included work arranging and composing; the next rung held semi-permanent positions with bands and orchestras. Most members—and there were 1065 in 1877,

⁸ Burton Bledstein connects the rise of the professions with the expansion of university education and, as a consequence, the endurance of a middle-class identity. While many New York musicians were trained in European academies or in apprenticeship-style relationships in bands, orchestras, and families, the centrality of university training to "the professions" and to middle-classness does not apply in the same way to musicians. Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976).

making the MMPU the largest local of all the musicians' unions throughout the nineteenth century—strung together one-night gigs and occasional month-long engagements. These marginal professional players, whose work made possible the glittering careers of celebrity soloists and conductors, experienced the most dramatic transformations in their working conditions in this period.

A bird's eye view above the Bowery grants us a vision of the arrival of industrial relations in the orchestra pit, from the rise of foremen (or bandleaders) who supervised employees across an increased division of labor to the industrial workers' demand for shorter working days to the mounting influence of proprietors circulating and growing capital investments. But without nuance, this perspective describes a stadial model of development in which orchestra musicians once as artists and then, with the onset of the entertainment industry, were newly transformed into workers. This chapter proposes an alternative model for conceptualizing the condition of the working commercial musician, in which the player navigates the *simultaneous* imperatives of aesthetics and industry.⁹

⁹ All historical subfields debate the efficacy and portability of concepts and paradigms. In labor history this energy is generated both by the political stakes of the project, but also by the field's grounding in stadial models. Labor history does often deal with terms and processes based in developmental stages that other subfields might not. (See, for example, Philip Foner's statement that the American labor movement was "a logical and inevitable concomitant of the industrial development of this county," in *History of the Labor Movement in the United States: From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor I* [New York: International Publishers, 1975], 48). Even when it comes without a prefix, industrialization contains an implied antecedent and successor. One response has been to turn completely against these terms: Christopher Tomlins argued that "industrialization" could not be a paradigm—it had no "developmental pattern with predictable and generalizable causal effects," as it was instead "a set of processes sufficiently variable in their historical expressions as to offer no inherent explanatory capacities *per se* (no-ism), nor a reliable chronology." For Tomlins, "industrial" is an unsatisfying tool of analysis because artisans in the antebellum period moved back and forth between "small businessman" and "proletarianized laborer." Christopher Tomlins, "Not Just Another Brick in the Wall: A Response to Rock, Nelson, and Montgomery," *Labor History* 40 (1999), 48. Movement across categories does not mean that such categories are irrelevant or inconsequential, but instead that they have to be understood in context; the changing valence of the word "mechanic" over the last two hundred years is a prime example. My attempt to think through the dynamic, relational quality of the terms associated with culture workers during industrialization is one way to approach this broader question.

This approach both allows us to see the development of musicians' unions as more open-ended, rather than marching through early failed experiments towards the recording industry, and it keeps the story open to include players who are excluded from unions. Rather than ignoring trade unions because they represented only a small number of workers, I understand the boundaries set by the union to be as important for those who were excluded as for those who were protected.

This chapter begins with the following questions: what were these transformations, what decisions did musicians make in response, and within what structural and ideological parameters? What were the long-term consequences of these decisions for the management, organization, and perception of artistic labor? I begin with an explanation of the MMPU's founding moment, detailing the key social and demographic commonalities of its members, before moving into a thorough examination of the routine difficulties the union dealt with in its Executive Committee. The chapter concludes with an analysis of a key early battle with theatrical managers, which marked the union's most aggressive and public-facing action.

The Founding of the Musical Mutual Protective Union

Understanding how the binary of "art versus labor" became an interpretive framework for musicians requires reconstructing the early history of musicians' unions in the United States. A careful reading of the meeting minutes of the MMPU provides a counterpoint to received wisdom, written primarily from limited newspaper coverage and a handful of scholarly books. Most histories of organized American musicians locate their center of gravity in the twentieth-century, with early chapters extending backwards

to the founding of the American Federation of Musicians in 1896 and its affiliation with the AFL, and, occasionally, to the Musicians' National Protective League in the early 1870s and the National League of Musicians in the 1880s, which were both temporary organizations formed out of independent locals in the Northeast, Midwest, and West. The Musical Mutual Protective Union appears in this litany as one chapter in the AFM's pre-history, in a vague nineteenth-century fog before professional musicians realized their interests were best protected by the militant trade union practices that characterize the 1942-44 wartime strikes under James Petrillo, which remain the longest-lasting work stoppages in the history of show business. This creation story is powerful because it maps onto a familiar narrative where the rise of the recording industry is the watershed moment for instrumental musicians that initiates their replacement by mechanization.

In fact, the earliest stirrings of a musicians' union in New York began a full decade before 1863, the year given in both scholarly accounts and the union's charter.¹⁰ While the later date did mark a new chapter in the union's form, identifying its activity a decade earlier ties the union both to the year of Maretzek's tangle with Salvi and to the very orchestra pit that supported the star singer. Domenico La Manna was a violinist in Maretzek's orchestra at Niblo's and the President of the Musical Mutual Protection Association. "Signor La Manna is one of the best and most painstaking orchestral conductors in the City," wrote the *Times* in 1854, on the occasion of conducting the orchestra for Le Grand Smith's *La sonnambula*. "We are glad to see him in a position where he may earn fame."¹¹ But La Manna, who passed away five years later, spent most

¹⁰ Commons, "Types of Musicians' Labor Unions"; Kraft, "Artists as Workers." Sandy Mazzola's 1984 dissertation recognizes the class structure within the city's musicians, particularly between band leaders and players.

¹¹ *NYT*, October 10, 1854.

of his career at the edge of the spotlight. He was second leader at Palmo's Opera House, where he may have been involved in that orchestra's early strike in opposition to its conductor, Michael Rapetti. La Manna's organization shared both a similar title and some of the same members as its later iteration, demonstrating a clear link between the disruptions on the opera stage and the organized labor activism of the MMPU.¹²

It was not until a decade later, after Bernard Ullman had demonstrated the strength of newly empowered opera managers in 1857, that the city's musicians began to meet on a regular basis as a visible and organized unit. Only one of the officers elected in 1863 had been involved the previous decade, Secretary David Schaad, who remained in this position until his death in 1880, and who took the notes that form the evidence for this chapter. When Schaad moved to New York in 1836 at age twenty-eight, he found work playing the clarinet in the Park Theatre and the old Bowery orchestras. With little interest in or talent for performing—his obituary named his musical training as “merely an accomplishment” —Schaad became the Bowery's music copyist, the first of many men in this dissertation to remain in the industry following a short career as a performer.

¹³ Schaad built a career as a music writer, serving as secretary for the Philharmonic and

¹² *Spirit of the Times*, April 2, 1853, 84. The same paragraph refers to singer Alboni's fellow performers as “co-laborers.” La Manna was born and educated in Palermo, Sicily, before moving in 1837 age at twenty with twenty-one other Italian musicians to New York. He worked first at Palmo's café, then at his marionette theater (as second leader), and then under Rapetti as conductor when Palmo presented opera; post-Palmo, he was a band leader at Niblo's, Wallack's, and the Broadway Theatre. “He was a good musician, devoted husband, fond father, and sincere friend,” noted the *Times*. His funeral was attended by members of the Dramatic Fund, Musical Fund, and the Musical Protection Association. *NYT*, March 15, 1859. La Manna also conducted the Ravels, perhaps the opera's rival for permanent spectacle. *Clipper*, March 19, 1859, 382.

¹³ Schaad's obituary says he was Secretary for the New-York Musicians' Protective Association from 1849 to its demise in 1853; this is probably the La Manna headed organization. Schaad was briefly replaced as MMPU Secretary in January 1867, but soon returned because his successor was overcharging the union for stamps and printing. *NYT*, October 10, 1880. He remained closely tied to the sister industries of the theater and opera; in 1860, Schaad's children were employed as a framemaker (Adam, 25), a clerk (John, 19), a pianoforte maker (George, 16), and a saleswoman (Mary Jane). 1860 U.S. Census, New York Ward 10 District 2, New York, New York; Roll: M653_798; Page: 366.

the American Musical Fund Society.¹⁴ He was also a bridge between two generations of musicians. While Schaad was Dominic La Manna's age, the latter was Italian-born and part of the itinerant antebellum orchestra tradition moving between Europe, Havana, Mexico City, and New York, while Schaad spent his entire New World career in New York.

Like Schaad and Hagemeyer, most of the members in the 1863 MMPU were Bavarian emigrants in their thirties who had moved to New York in the previous decade and started families in Lower Manhattan.¹⁵ Musicians made up only a small portion of the 1.5 million German migrants who came to the United States between 1845 and 1865, many of whom stayed in New York and remade the midcentury working class.¹⁶ In

¹⁴ The American Musical Fund Society was founded in the late 1840s by journalist Henry C. Watson and was one of many benevolent or charitable associations designed to support ailing musicians. Its stated purpose was to provide "the relief of the sick or distressed musicians, to afford subsistence of the aged, to bury those who die poor, to support the widows, and take guardianship of the orphans." Like its counterparts for actors, the Fund relied heavily on donations from celebrity performers (Ole Bull, Fanny Kemble) and prominent citizens. *Circular of the American Musical Fund Society of New-York to the Press of the United States*, printed in the *NYT*, September 3, 1852.

¹⁵ Bavarian immigrants were "overrepresented" in New York, and that most German emigrants were in their twenties and thirties and male. The young, single male Bavarian musician who marries and starts a family in New York is thus squarely in the profile. Stanley Nadel. *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion, and Class in New York City, 1845-80* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 24-6. The following officers were elected for six month terms at the union's founding: President Henry Beissenherz, orchestra leader at New Bowery Theatre; VP George Matzka, Academy of Music; Secretary David Schaad, Old Bowery; Treasurer John George Schneider, Grafula's Band; Trustees F. Reitzel (b. 1825, Saxony), George Wallace (b. 1830, New York, Scottish descent), John Stoebe. The members of the Executive Committee were Edward Boehm (b. 1827, Prussia, Dodworth's Band), Frederick Wannemacher, David Lorenzo Downing (b. 1825, New York, 9th Regiment Band), Edward Schremser (b. 1827, Bavaria, 2nd Lieutenant and Band Leader of 71st Regiment), Ad. Heischman, Dan Wiegand (b. 1825, Bremen, Wiegand's Band, Company Band, New York 8th Infantry Regiment), Anton Straub. *Clipper*, July 4, 1863. The founding named in the state charter a month later are Beissenherz, Downing, J.G. Schneider, Francis Xavier Diller (b. 1830, Bavaria), Henry Gortelmeyer (Dodworth's Band), Jacob Reboun, C.S. Grafulla, David Graham, Ernst Grill, John Senia, George Gipner, Henry Wannemacher, Schaad, Harvey Bradley Dodworth, Carl Bergmann, Carl Anschutz, Wallace, Theodore Eisfeld, Emil Muzzio, Thomas Baker, John Parker Cooke, Edward Mollenhauer, and Louis Schreiber. *Constitution and By-laws of the Musical Mutual Protective Union* (New York: Machauer & Schmetterling, 1905), 3.

¹⁶ These number were surpassed only in the 1880s and 1890s, when almost 1.8 million Germans migrated to the United States. In 1850 Germans made up 17% of New York City's population, and in 1870 were almost a third. Germans dominated many trades and sectors. Between 1855 and 1880, around half of the city's tailors, shoemakers, cabinetmakers, bakers, tobacconists, and butchers were German-born, and many worked also as grocers or peddlers. Nadel, *Little Germany*, 21, 42.

contrast to the “artisan republicanism” of the 1830s, the working classes of the later decades looked like the MMPU: young, male, and foreign-born.¹⁷ Most European migrants to New York were peasants or farmers, though many who stayed in New York City were skilled laborers trained in craft production. A handful of union members were rooted in courtly or cultivated musical traditions, the melodic counterpart of cabinetmakers.¹⁸ Henry Beissenherz, an early union president who played a key role in the 1865 strike, was born in Germany in 1829 to a family of musicians and left an orchestra in Wuppertal at twenty. He played in northern New England theaters for several years where met actress Anna Hathaway; they moved to New York in 1854, where Beissenherz worked as the band leader at the New Bowery, Old Bowery, and the Brooklyn Park and Woods’ theaters. A few rungs below New York’s most prominent leaders but with ambitions to remain above the orchestra rank-and-file, Beissenherz moved West to St. Louis and then Indianapolis, where he advocated for the formation of the American Federation of Musicians.¹⁹ A singular figure, Beissenherz is a good example of an early union members from a cultivated musical background who saw no contradiction in being an artists and a laborer.

¹⁷ Richard Stott traces the decline of New York City’s capital- and land-intensive manufacturing—sugar refining, shipbuilding, machinery and metals—between 1850 and 1870, which corresponds with a rising workforce in labor-intensive industries such as printing, the needle trades, and furniture manufacturing. The trades that grew were concentrated in small shops and “required specialized information, particularly about fashion.” Richard Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis: Class, Ethnicity, and Youth in Antebellum New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 22-23.

¹⁸ George Matzka, employed at the Academy of Music in 1863, was born in 1825 in Coburg and trained as a violinist in the Duke’s School before moving to New York in 1854, playing in both the Theodore Thomas Quartet and then as first violinist in the Philharmonic. *NYT*, June 17, 1883.

¹⁹ *Men of Progress, Indiana: A Selected List of Biographical Sketches and Portraits of the Leaders in Business, Professional and Official Life*, ed. Hugh McGrath and William Stoddard (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Sentinel Company, 1899), 298-9.

Most union members had less illustrious careers as journeymen players from very similar backgrounds. Anton Straub was born in Bavaria in 1829 and came to New York at age twenty-five, listed on the ship's manifest as a farmer. A few years before the union's founding, he married Alice Wilson, and they lived at the edge of Kleindeutschland.²⁰ Other founding officers included John Herrmann Stoebe, born in Saxony in 1834 but soon a resident of Sullivan Street;²¹ George Henry Wallace, born on Pearl Street to Scottish parents in 1830;²² and Edward Boehm, who moved to New York in 1849 in his early twenties and played principal clarinet in the Philharmonic.²³ Frederick Wannemacher was the only musician on his block around the corner from Tompkins Square Park, where he lived with his wife and young daughter, but his neighbors were mostly German speakers employed as cigar, boot, and cabinet, and suitcase makers, as well as a marble cutter and a needleworker.²⁴

As these brief accounts show, these men were neighbors, co-workers, and friends who moved between the city's concert halls and concert saloons, knit together by social

²⁰ Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1820-1897. Microfilm Publication M237, Records of the U.S. Customs Service, Record Group 36. 1870 U.S. Census, New York Ward 15 District 10 (2nd Enum), New York, New York; Roll: M593_1033; Year: 1860; 1870 U.S. Census, New York Ward 14 District 2, New York, New York; Roll: M653_804; Page: 386.

²¹ 1870 U.S. Census, New York Ward 8 District 10, New York, New York; Roll: M593_981; Page: 276B. 1910 U.S. Census, School District 1, Custer, Montana; Roll: T624_829; Page: 6A; Enumeration District: 0077. Margaret was the daughter of a German musician in Baltimore; in 1910, after forty-three years of marriage, Margaret and John were ranchers in Montana.

²² Wallace's father John was also a musician; the younger Wallace founded the Empire Cornet Band and was the bandmaster of the Twelfth Regiment with Colonel Butterfield. He played music professionally from the mid-1840s until 1885. *NYT*, August 20, 1900.

²³ 1880 U.S. Census, New York City, New York, New York; Roll: 878; Page: 414D; Enumeration District: 260.

²⁴ 1860 U.S. Census, New York Ward 17 District 7, New York, New York; Roll: M653_810; Page: 518. 1880 U.S. Census, New York City, New York, New York; Roll: 880; Page: 31D; Enumeration District: 274.

and demographic factors that facilitated the formation of the MMPU beyond the orchestra pit. By the 1850s, their various ways of life began to solidify into a new identity—“German-American”—in the Lower East Side’s “Kleindeutschland,” the third capital of the Germany-speaking world between 1855 and 1880, after Vienna and Berlin.²⁵ MMPU members from Old World musical families had also experienced together the dramatic transformation from a court-based employment to a commercial one.²⁶ Once in New York, they played together in the city’s theater orchestras and non-theatrical bands, such as Dodworth’s or Grafulla’s, and they enlisted in Union Regimental bands in 1861 in tremendous numbers and mustered out in 1862 when regimental bands were discharged for cost reasons.²⁷ New York’s German musicians also shared a very strong inclination towards social organization; many of them were involved in cooperative organizations (the New York Philharmonic), associations or *Vereine* (Aschenbroedel), and benevolent societies (the Musical Fund).²⁸ A shared cultural interpretation of how human activity

²⁵ Stanley Nadel, *Little Germany*, 1.

²⁶ As the public auditorium, the European manufacturing center, and its bourgeoisie replaced the palace chambers, the court, and the nobility as the gravitational center of musicians’ employment, European musicians grappled with an entirely new set of working conditions. While forms of patronage and protection lingered on, composers and virtuoso performers now relied on a mass audience and paying customers for support. Laboring in anonymity and cut loose from disintegrating musical organizations like the court, the town band or the pipers the non-star instrumentalist faced new a labor market with greater opportunities and pitfalls. Celia Applegate, “How German Is It? Nationalism and the Idea of Serious Music in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *19th Century Music* 21 (Spring, 1998), 274-296.

²⁷ Most players in both Confederate and Union armies were German, and their contribution to the war effort and hasty discharge provoked extensive public debate about the role of music in sustaining military morale. Christian McWhirter, *Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 111-136.

²⁸ Most references to the MMPU gives its origins in the Aschenbroedel Club, a social club populated mostly by German musicians and founded in 1860. In 1867, the organization counted 300 members and met at a clubhouse on East Fourth and Second Avenue. According to the *Evening Post*, “whenever musicians are wanted for any large orchestra they can also be obtained at this club.” This permanent location made it more of a hiring hall; the MMPU did not have permanent headquarters until the century’s end. “Clubs of New York,” *New York Evening Post*, May 1, 1867. However, while there was significant overlap in membership, the two organizations had very distinct purposes, and the Aschenbroedel Club continued on concurrent with the MMPU. See “Years of Prosperity: Successful Career of the Aschenbroedel Verein Founded by a Few German Jokers,” *NYT*, January 26, 1896.

was made into something that could be bought and sold also linked the German MMPU members, and may explain why the Anglo-Americans who dominated the theatrical stock companies did not organize into a militant labor union even though their working conditions were undergoing an equally decisive shift.²⁹ As historical sociologist Richard Biernacki has argued, German workers understood the commodification of work as “timed appropriation of workers’ labor power and disposition over workers’ labor activity,” while their British counterparts understood a similar process as appropriation of labor “via its products.”³⁰ Given the absence of a tangible commodity produced by performers, the appropriation of a workers’ time and activity is more conducive to labor activism than a product-oriented perspective.

Far beyond the theater orchestra and the dance band, German New Yorkers played a key role in the city’s labor consciousness, as workers across trades faced deskilling, the rise of outworking, thwarted advancement to master status, limited control over the length of the working day, and reduced wages. Beginning in the 1840s German

²⁹ In August of 1864, the Actors’ Protective Union held a meeting at the Cooper Institute “to take such action as would increase the small salaries now received by the profession, and to ask the cooperation of all actors throughout the country.” The possibility of affiliating with the Workingmen’s Union had been floated, but because the Actors’ Protective wouldn’t be able to send representatives to attend the evening meetings, this was not possible. A key agitator in this body was William Davidge of Manchester, England, who peppered his speeches with references to the corn laws. *NYT*, July 22, 1864. Davidge wrote in his memoir of the rise of the “job actor,” an “exotic entirety of American nativity; begotten conjointly by the exigency of the times, and the shrewdness of managerial cupidity.” The job actor had once played in a stock company but was now dependent on a role in the long run of a single play, with no employment prospects in the approaching season and a salary one third of what he was used to. “Those whose employment is continuous can scarcely realize the full measure of misery such a system is fraught with,” wrote Davidge. “At best, a profession of great uncertainty, is that of the stage; this system of brief engagements has reduced it to the verge of pauperism, which no one possessing the instincts of respect for himself or an art to whose service he has, perhaps, devoted the best period of his life, can long submit to.” Davidge noted that this was only in New York and the stock companies in “the provinces” were protected; this would end in the coming decade. William Davidge, *Footlight Flashes* (New York: American News Company, 1866), 240-2.

³⁰ Richard Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 12. The basis of Biernacki’s argument is the fact that piecework rates in the U.K. were calculated by the density of the cloth, but in Germany by how long it took to produce a bolt.

hand-weavers began to meet and organize into a bilingual carpet weavers' union, which counted over 1000 members in thirty-one factories. In the 1850s German workers formed and dissolved unions with various levels of radicalism, drawn together by inflation and depressed wages, strong leadership and centralized bodies like the Workers' League or the Central Commission of the United Trades and dispersed at times by prosperity and at other times by unemployment. When trade union activity again rose in the early 1860s, as was the case with the MMPU, organized workers were met by organized bosses.

“Industrial disputes were no longer a matter of one employer confronted by his own workers,” writes historian Stanley Nadel. “Now they were tradewide disputes, one side united behind their unions and the other behind their employers' organizations.” This signaled a new kind of permanence in class relations that, according to Nadel, radicalized the workers into “proletarianized artisans.”³¹ And not only did the musicians' union emerge from a particular laboring context, but it was in solidarity with other unions. On August 12, 1869, the MMPU passed a resolution “cordially sympathizing with the operative tailors in their present attitude to obtain fair and reasonable remuneration for their labor, the better to enable them to support their families becomingly,” and made a contribution to the tailor's union. While they faced unique challenges as performers, the members of the MMPU understood themselves as part of a larger fight.

Union Formation, Function and Priorities

The MMPU shared membership with German social clubs and social space with other trade unions, but it had a distinct goal: to standardize musicians' rate of pay in a

³¹ Nadel, *Little Germany*, 123-139.

volatile and expanding industry, and to give instrumental musicians an organized form that could act against the rising power of theater managers. In 1863, the MMPU was one of hundreds of trade unions that were reformed or re-energized by working conditions during the Civil War. Wartime inflation combined with labor scarcity generated both an increased labor militancy among the city's semi-organized workers, while increased demand for production in some sectors—uniforms and boots, for example—intensified processes of mechanization and de-skilling.³² The discharging of more than three hundred (largely German) Union regimental bands in July 1862 also brought many players to New York, increasing competition for employment.³³

In a longer chronological frame, however, union formation was a response to a labor market that was simultaneously expanding and constricting. When the Union started meeting there were seventeen theaters with live music in New York City alone, including ten in the “dramatic line,” Italian and English opera, “melo-dramady and sensation plays, spectacular spectacles, burlesque, pantomimes, horse opera, ballet and bare neck acts,” three minstrel show houses, and “scores of illegitimate establishments.”³⁴ Musicologist John Spitzer estimates that the ten theaters with standing orchestras alone

³² By November 1865, more than 61 trades with 300 unions had advertised in *Fincher's Trades Review*. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*, 338-442.

³³ Christian McWhirter estimates that tens of thousands of bandmen played in Union regiments, and at least 2,000 in the Confederate army. Many of these players were attached to volunteer regiments, but these regimental bands (three hundred in the Union army) were discharged in July 1862 because of expense. Some musicians were transferred to brigade bands, while others reenlisted as privates, the classification for fifers and drummers until 1821. Most players in both Confederate and Union armies were German, and their contribution to the war effort and hasty discharge provoked extensive public debate about the role of music in sustaining military morale. McWhirter, *Battle Hymns*, 111-136. See also *Bugle Resounding: Music and Musicians of the Civil War Era*, ed. Bruce C. Kelley and Mark A. Snell (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004) and Kenneth Olson, “Yankee Bands of the Civil War,” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1971).

³⁴ *Clipper*, August 27, 1863. The *Clipper* noted this burgeoning scene would be expensive to support and estimated an additional fifty to one hundred dollars per night for each house.

employed between eight hundred and twelve hundred players, in addition to the many halls, parks, and steamboats where occasional music was a standard expectation.³⁵ As had been the case during the opera conflicts of the 1850s, orchestra players felt that their work was increasingly requested for this growing number of venues, even as they felt multiply devalued by employers and critics. Like the journeymen of the last half-century who saw their path to master mechanic status thwarted by the dissolution of the artisan workshop, orchestra musicians like Hagemeyer did not have a clear path to orchestra leader positions, let alone theater management or proprietorship. Orchestra leaders earned two to three times what their players made, not to mention the high salaries paid to star singers and instrumentalist soloists that were frequent topics of discussion, as related in the previous chapter. And the denigration of the orchestra musician's status did not exist simply in the pit but also in arts reporting. Critic William Henry Fry noted that while the orchestra was not regarded as a "serious part" of the theater, if it were to be removed "complaints would crowd upon the imprudent inventor" until the orchestra was restored, when "after a burst of complacent welcome, [the orchestra] would rapidly drift again into obscurity." Of all the components of an evening at the theater, there was none "from which more is expected and to which less is awarded" than the orchestra, "the labors of which are always depreciated or misunderstood by the public."³⁶

Six months after Fry made this observation, an estimated 150 musicians, mostly German and all men, attended the first mass meeting held in the afternoon at the

³⁵ John Spitzer, "American Orchestras and Their Unions in the Nineteenth Century," in *American Orchestras in the Nineteenth-Century*, ed. John Spitzer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 104.

³⁶ William Henry Fry, "Theatre Orchestras," *New-York Tribune*, reprinted in *Dwight's Journal of Music*, January 31, 1863, 345. Fry suggested that the audience's "indifference" to the orchestra was the result of its "traditional worthlessness" and a general "public carelessness to orchestral performances of any kind."

Metropolitan Rooms on Hester Street.³⁷ The meeting opened the membership rolls, elected officers, and named an Executive Committee of eleven who would write the by-laws, select a name, and set the next meeting. Press reports specified that it was “the practical musicians of the Metropolis (instrumental performers)” who were meeting. “Practical” had appeared in German unionist language since the early 1850s, and signaled the journeyman musicians’ demands in two ways: first, they were not star singers or chorus members, and second, their demands were those of trade unionists, not political radicals nor mutual aid society members.³⁸ For while notices used the language of “improvement of the profession in general,” the group was primarily interested in establishing a new price list of increased compensation “for that class of musicians who are necessitated to earn their living by the exercise of their profession,” so as to keep pace with the rising cost of living.³⁹ “They claim that they are ridiculously underpaid at [theaters],” wrote an unconvinced *Times*, “and overtaxed by rapacious conductors at [balls].”⁴⁰ A month and a half later, the Executive Committee met and drafted the constitution and by-laws, and a second “mass meeting” was held.⁴¹ After the third general

³⁷ *NYH*, May 1, 1863; “Musicians in Council,” *NYT*, May 7, 1863; *NYH*, May 7, 1863. The officers named were Hugo Von Bartels, H. Schmitz, Edward Boehm, John Hermann Stoebe, George Groscurth, and David Schaad. Francis H. Diller was also present.

³⁸ German activist Joseph Weydemeyer had called for “practical ways” to improve working conditions rooted in cross-shop alliances, and for a process that would be neither “purely political” nor aimed at a single wage increase. Nadel, *Little Germany*, 129.

³⁹ *NYT*, May 4, 1863; “class” observation is *NYH*, May 7, 1863.

⁴⁰ *NYT*, May 4, 1863. Musicians were receiving \$8 or \$9 at theaters, and only \$3.50 at balls.

⁴¹ *NYH*, June 23, 1863. The meeting was held on Friday morning at 9am in the same location. The first Executive Committee Meeting was June 26, 1863 at the Metropolitan Rooms in Hester Street. Present were Boehm, Straub, D. Weigund, E. Schremser, F. Wannemacher and F. Reitzel. This was also reported in *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, July 15, 1863.

membership meeting held in September 1863, the Secretary reported 239 new applications for membership, and the MMPU was off and running.⁴²

As was the case with the first demands of most trade unions, raising and standardizing rates of pay for journeyman players was the organization's explicit chief priority. "Bet a tip they're going to strike for higher wages," wrote the *Clipper* in 1864, as "they have to blow, and scrape, and flugel as hard as ever, for the same money they used to get."⁴³ The primary weapon of standardization was the price list, which regulated fees, duration, and other guidelines (expenses, cancellation policies) for the wide range of engagements that musicians took. Price lists had been a standard trade union practice in New York for several decades, and may also have been familiar to members of Germany's dissolving music guilds. According to the list, the highest paying engagement was at the opera, at fifteen dollars per week. Broadway theaters were fixed at twelve, Bowery theaters and concert saloons at ten, with an additional five if playing during afternoons or Saturdays. Each player was to receive \$5.50 for balls at large venues such as the Academy of Music and \$4.50 for other places. Weddings, dinner parties, regimental parades, and funerals and political meetings with processions were five dollars each, and events without processions were a dollar less. The list also specified time limits, in the musicians' version of the struggle to control the length of the working day. Balls should last no longer than eight hours, and if serenades ran longer than an hour,

⁴² ECM, October 8, 1863. The meeting was held at 173 Mott Street at 10am. Business of this meeting included establishing a bank account for the union and processing "papers containing complaints against members."

⁴³ *Clipper*, May 9, 1864.

players could add overtime charges.⁴⁴ This list reflected the expanding landscape of the city's hierarchy of amusements, and members worked locations across the full spectrum of venues, high / low and public / private venues, from opera houses to street parades to funerals to minstrel halls. The price list was the union's most important tool, an early if unenforceable version of a union-wide contract guaranteed by a collective bargaining agreement. As a result, in its first fall the MMPU printed four hundred copies of its constitution in English, six hundred in German, and one thousand copies of Article 10, the price list.⁴⁵

But the price list also raised problems for the union particular to the conceptual and practical challenges of musical labor. Critics claiming to be sympathetic to practical players argued that a flat rate for all performers, regardless of talent, would harm the "general run" of its members. "Is it to be supposed that any but the best performers will be chosen," asked the *Clipper*, "when a mediocre performer charges as much for his services as is charged by the most skillful?"⁴⁶ While this question could have been raised about any standardized payscale, the enigmatic aura of musical talent made it an easily accessible argument. A second objection to the standardized price list was the lack of credentialing or standard set of skills that could regulate admission to the MMPU, a challenge that has long perplexed musicians' unions. Unlike professional organizations or guilds, there was no formal apprenticeship or training program that could regulate entry. In the 1880s the union adopted a residency requirement of six months in the United

⁴⁴ *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, July 15, 1863. By 1905, the weekly rate for opera had risen to \$35, while the price for a ball at an opera house or theater had only risen to \$8.00. and the available 1878 Constitution and By-Laws, scholars have dated the price list to the late 1870s but it was in fact there from the beginning.

⁴⁵ ECM, October 21, 1864.

⁴⁶ *Clipper*, November 23, 1865.

States but never specified a professional qualification. According to the MMPU constitution, “all efficient and capable professional Instrumental Performers of good character” were eligible.⁴⁷ The key qualification for joining the union was not the musician’s aptitude, but his ability to get hired. Given the membership’s demographic uniformity and the relatively lax admission requirements, it is clear that the job’s most significant gate-keeping occurred before the player even considered applying for union membership. Most of the “problem players” that emerge in the meeting minutes were other European or European American men, or the vague category of “gutter bands” invoked against the Italian chorus in the previous chapter. As a result, the organization’s primary focus was not the regulation of entry but the reform of already-existing employment practices.

In addition to the price list, the second key component of musicians’ unions as they developed across the United States was the closed shop. This was the capacity to forbid members from accepting an engagement from a non-member leader, or to play with other musicians who were not in the union.⁴⁸ In this period before collective bargaining agreements, this could only be enforced by union members. The closed shop was related to the leader system, which was not a union policy but a structural feature of commercial musicianship with profound consequences for how members were employed.

⁴⁷ *Constitution and By-Laws of the Musical Mutual Protective Union*, 16. The qualifications for membership were less stringent than in the American Dramatic Fund Association, which require at least three years in the profession.

⁴⁸ Spitzer, “American Orchestras and their Unions,” 84. Spitzer argues that the German guilds also inspired the pension plan element of the MMPU, which the Union was less enthusiastic about enforcing. One of the most common forms of social organizations in New York were the *Unterstützungsvereine*, or sickness and death benefit societies, which were often linked with specific occupations. Also popular were the *Gesangvereine*, or singing societies, some of which had radical political leanings in the 1850s but soon splintered along class lines. Nadel, *Little Germany*, 110, 113-4.

Leaders—who were members of the union—contracted with theatrical managers or people hiring for a social occasion, and the leader then hired the individual players. While both the price list and the closed shop seem relatively straightforward, the varieties of musical workplaces and the leader system meant these two strategies were difficult to enforce. Furthermore, the *practice* of enforcing these rules further revealed the significant challenges, priorities, and possibilities the union faced. The best window into these dynamics is in the meeting minutes of the union’s Executive Committee.

The Executive Committee and Enforcing the Price List

As will be familiar to anyone who has spent time on such a committee, much of this body’s effort dealt with the minutiae of maintaining an organization: approving bills for advertising, notices, envelopes, and stamps; dealing with new members, resignations, expulsions, elections, and scheduling; wrangling over the collection and non-payment of dues. They also presided over violations of the MMPU’s constitution and bylaws. They adjudicated players’ intentional misbehavior, such as the delinquent dues-payer using two different spellings—Freiberg and Freidberg—to avoid detection.⁴⁹ And while the competitive labor market rarely manifested itself in this way, the Committee occasionally heard complaints that one member was stealing another’s work.⁵⁰

The vast majority of the Committee’s work was enforcing the price list and the members-only policy. At first glance, this reinforces the perception that musicians

⁴⁹ ECM, April 5, 1864.

⁵⁰ “Mr. T.R. Deverell complaint against Mr. E. Kirwan for having made an attempt to get into his place at Hooley’s Minstrels in Brooklyn,” ECM, April 12, 1866. In the union’s second decade, Louis Flos was hired by William Robertson to play second violin at Delmonico’s but was told in the late afternoon by Richard Straub that he wasn’t needed. Straub played the engagement, even though Robertson later testified that he never hired Straub, who had lied his way into the position. ECM, January 11, 1873.

organized into a trade union did so solely in pursuit of higher wages. But haggling over a few dollars or a stray cornet player could also engage major debates about the valuation of cultural work. Theatrical genres assume relative positions in a hierarchy not through a singular declaration—Shakespeare is now “high,” while trick whistling “low”—but through a process of routine and minor negotiations. When the Committee voted that English-language opera at Niblo’s should pay opera rates, they were participating in a four-decade argument about the genre’s boundaries.⁵¹ Decisions like these regarding the taxonomies of the price list not only categorized styles of performance, but they also had material effects on the lives of culture workers. In the summer of 1869, the Board ruled that “racecourses” should be classed as “open air concerts,” which both standardized the location as a viable place of semi-refined amusement and raised the rate musicians could charge.⁵² Seen through the prism of union decision-making, generic categories were both meaningful and in a constant state of fluctuation.

While the price list reveals the instability of venues, the constant policing of members and non-members suggests a similarly indistinct line between categories of players. The shifting grounds of terminology has also long been a rich site of analysis for cultural histories of labor, when new names, categories, and contexts are revealed to have causal power rather than simply reflecting economic changes.⁵³ In this vein, the repeated enforcement of the closed shop helped to establish boundaries between “insiders” and “outsiders,” in the moment when musicians attempting to earn a living were repeatedly

⁵¹ ECM, March 1, 1864.

⁵² ECM, April 29, 1869.

⁵³ Two field-defining examples are the analysis of the terms “hireling,” “boss,” and “freeman” by David Roediger in *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999) and Kathleen Brown’s *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

crossing generic (opera, dance, marches) and institutional (theater, Academy of Music, funeral) boundaries. Eventually codified as a distinction between “amateur” and “professional,” for the purposes of enforcing union rules, it was membership that was the signal difference.

When the union was first established, the heftiest fine (ten dollars) was for underpayment for services, suggesting an initial attempt to standardize musical engagements not through the member but through the employer.⁵⁴ The Committee was sympathetic to players who did not receive appropriate pay for an engagement. One typical case was in the union’s first year, when Philip Straub lodged a complaint against Balthazar Kissenberth, the leader of Kissenberth’s Band, for paying only ten men for the work of twelve at a funeral, and Kissenberth was expelled from the union.⁵⁵ Members playing similar non-orchestra engagements frequently complained that engagements had not proceeded as planned, evidence of an unpredictable and precarious workplace. Leaders or employers were occasionally fined, but the Committee’s primary goal was to have the musicians paid properly, as when two coronet players and one alto were paid \$3.50 each for a botched torchlight procession. “When we came to the place we found the Band incomplete,” they explained, “but at the request of Mr. Connor remained with the party and marched with them about 20 blocks [...] where upon Mr. W. Connor told them they might do as they pleased, play or go home. It being impossible to play for a procession with these three instruments they then left and demand from Mr. Connor pay

⁵⁴ ECM, July 5, 1864. See also P.J. Walsh’s complaint against Thomas Manahan for playing a New Year’s Day parade for only \$5. ECM, February 1, 1866. Adolph Schmidt filed a complaint against George van Kameke, who had hired him “to play dancing lessons with him [Kameke] in a private house,” with each musician paid \$6 for a four-hour period. ECM, 1867. Two members complained of underpayment at a fireman’s parade in Hudson City. ECM, July 29, 1870.

⁵⁵ ECM, May 17, 1864. Kissenberth did not support the 1865 strike.

for the engagement.”⁵⁶ Engagements outside of New York City were also likely to generate conflicts, as when Richard Mollenhauer was abandoned in Saratoga “without one minute’s notice” and was not paid.⁵⁷

But most arguments over wages were less straightforward and enforcing the price list involved more than extracting due payment. Enforcing the price list entailed a variety of mitigating factors: the instability of price list categories, competing stories, logistical details, and the indistinct hierarchy of band leaders, union officers, and players. Leader James McCann was accused of underpaying his players, but countered that “he had considered the engagements soirees and not picnics,” and therefore subject to different rules regarding payment and length of engagement.⁵⁸ When Louis Werner was accused of “playing under price” he explained that he was originally hired at the proper rate but had been fined by the leader, reducing his wage.⁵⁹ Gerhard Rubel complained against one member for underpricing a funeral, and another for hiring ten players for a ball at Harmonie Garden for only \$50.⁶⁰ Philip Loesch, the Harmonie Garden leader Rubel accused, was fined when it was revealed that Loesch had contracted with the Garden manager for a reduced rate and an in-kind payment of “\$3 worth tickets,” but made off with a receipt for the full amount.⁶¹ Although this longstanding practice both predated and outlived the union, the price list did not allow for payment in-kind. Engagements at

⁵⁶ ECM, November 30, 1872. Violinist Alexander Silberberg asked for the union’s assistance in getting “one night’s salary at Terrace Garden for discharging [him] at the evening of August 12 in the garden when I was ready to attend the performance,” which he won “because the defendant failed in notifying Silberberg in time.” ECM, September 5, 1874.

⁵⁷ ECM, September 5, 1874.

⁵⁸ ECM, August 28, 1868.

⁵⁹ ECM, April 1, 1869.

⁶⁰ ECM, December 12, 1865. Both of the accused men denied these charges and brought competing witness forward across several weeks.

⁶¹ ECM, December 22, 1865.

the margins of show business—balls and funerals—were the most likely to allow for this kind of haggling, and thus to generate price list violations.

Leaders tried to have players disciplined by the Committee, but this was less successful, particularly if the so-called delinquent player had a sympathetic story. When J. Kiefer was fined for missing a party, he explained that “his child became very sick suddenly, and as he had lost a child under similar circumstances already, he had to run for the Doctor and could not attend the engagement.”⁶² When a leader attempted to fine several players for abandoning a target excursion in a rainstorm, one player explained that he “was on the spot in time and marched with the Band 45 blocks, but he could not go any further being wet through and through,” while a second explained that “being of delicate health he could not venture going out in such a storm.”⁶³ The committee’s response was an attempt to reform the process rather than punish the players, demonstrating its interest in standardizing the terms of employment rather than enforcing leaders’ quarrels with their temporary employees. The musicians were censured but not fined, while the complainant was chastised for letting off the hook “the other Gentlemen who had likewise failed of fulfilling their engagement,” suggesting that he had singled out Koehler, Schlig and Blass in particular and was using union policy to pursue a personal vendetta.

As these examples suggest, while the high-profile scandals involved New York’s theater orchestras—as in the case of the 1865 strike—the vast majority of violations were in less formal locations. Members were continually accused of underpaying or

⁶² ECM, March 1, 1866.

⁶³ ECM, December 12, 1865.

underperforming at picnics, parades, dancing lessons, target excursions, casinos, and skating rinks. These infractions often occurred in locations beyond Manhattan's theaters: the steamer Plymouth Rock ferrying people to Long Branch, a theater in Philadelphia, the navy yard, the American Institute Fair, Jersey City, a summer nights festival at a brewery.⁶⁴ In these situations, the Committee was attempting to regulate events where music was not the main attraction but was supplemental to other purposes.

Not only were these engagements less clearly bounded in time and space, but they were embedded in other social occasions. As Hagemeyer's dilemma demonstrated, players were often navigating multiple value systems. When William Wiese was fined and expelled for undercharging at a seven-hour engagement in Hudson City, he admitted to the violation but explained that it was "the silver wedding of one of his best friends and therefore he would not charge any more."⁶⁵ Engagements outside the theater also meant that musicians had to make pricing decisions on their feet. When one member was accused of playing under price at the Long Branch resort in New Jersey, he explained that the event was not on the price list and that he had "acted according to common sense."⁶⁶ At the same venue, Charles Mollenhauer explained that, yes, he had employed a non-member for the summer season, but that it was his brother, who had assured him that Secretary Schaad had approved the exception. The board was unmoved, and both Charles and the other members of his band were fined.⁶⁷ As these two examples demonstrate,

⁶⁴ ECM, July 29, 1870; March 14, 1871; navy yard is July 7, 1871; American Fair is October 11, 1871; brewery is September 7, 1872.

⁶⁵ ECM, March 21, 1865. Wise was expelled May 4, 1865.

⁶⁶ ECM, October 4, 1866.

⁶⁷ ECM, September 16, 1875; ECM, October 1, 1875. Only a few weeks earlier, John Rommel complained for additional fees from Joseph Miller for playing an extra "hop" and for travelling expenses at Long Branch. Miller in turn explained that Rommel was a substitute, and that he had paid traveling expenses for a Mr. Reuter, the original employee. The EC also ruled that because the hop in question was "the only

Long Branch was a particularly frequent site of violations because it provided steady but undistinguished employment, both for union members in the 1860s and for the growing cohort of variety players who relied on the expansion of venues in the summer seasons.

The Substitute System

The substitute system, one of the most frequent causes of disagreement within the MMPU, was a direct result of friction between two competing musical schedules. Regular work in an orchestra was desirable because it was consistent, but unless it was the opera, it was not the most lucrative option. On a nightly basis, a fancy dress ball paid more. As a result, players who secured a decent-paying ball or a parade farmed their theater orchestra work out to other members. The Executive Committee records show that it was the individual players who were most invested in perpetuating the substitute system, because it allowed them to balance stability and opportunity. In contrast, the substitute system was not popular with theatrical managers. “It is more than likely that on the first night [a difficult work] is played the dismayed conductor will look around and find new faces in the orchestra,” wrote the *Herald* in an anti-union piece, “many of whom have not one idea of the music placed before them.”⁶⁸ However, because the practice of substituting suggested that orchestra musicians were interchangeable and fungible, the long-term effects of the substitute system benefitted managers and not individual players. Originally pursued to level the hierarchies among musicians and to equalize access to high-paying work, the system instead undercut players’ leverage.

solitary hop played during the season” and the price list allowed one per week, the case should be dismissed. ECM, September 16, 1875; ECM, October 15, 1875.

⁶⁸ *NYH*, March 20, 1870.

Venues with consistent but low-paying orchestra work, like Long Branch, were frequent sites of problems with substitutes. When August Koehler missed the train from Newark and was late to the Atlantic Garden, a Bowery beer hall catering to German speakers, it was William Burmester who was disciplined by the leader; Koehler was fined \$3 for jeopardizing Burmester's long-term engagement.⁶⁹ A few years earlier, a substitute violinist was accused of breaking an engagement and jeopardizing the original contract; the substitute admitted that this was true, but that the fine should be proportionate to the low \$1.50 he was paid.⁷⁰ These examples suggest that Atlantic Garden orchestra positions were neither lucrative nor prestigious, but they were just reliable enough to make the substitute system a viable practice. A beer hall with regular performances, the Garden was typical of the city's expanding repertoire of cheap amusements that mixed alcohol and performance, including concert saloons and variety halls. Such venues were complicated sites for the valuation of cultural labor because they existed in emergent zones between familiar categories of venue. The music was ambiguously incidental; it was necessary to the atmosphere, but patrons did not pay an admission fee and the Garden recouped operating costs and made profits at the bar. And while the Garden's success was due in part to the close social organization of the German community—the spirit of the many *vereine*—it was a commercial, public-oriented establishment framed by an ambitious entrepreneur as both “visited by all classes” and “one of the most

⁶⁹ ECM, April 20, 1871.

⁷⁰ ECM, September 18, 1868.

respectable concert halls in the City.”⁷¹ These factors made the Garden a testing ground for new kinds of commercial entertainment.⁷²

One of the most contentious and prolonged conflicts in the union’s early history grew out of the practice of hiring substitutes at Atlantic Garden. In January, the flutist Thomas Howard complained that John Hoffman had broken an engagement to cover a position in the Garden’s orchestra while Howard took an opera engagement. “He left the City without informing me, thereby seriously disappointing me,” explained Howard, “and by accident I discovered he had gone; had I not done so, I would to a certainty have lost my position. His engagement with me amounted to \$10 per week for four nights certain, and \$4 per night for all additional.” Hoffman countered that he had been engaged for four days and that he had fulfilled his engagement; when he went to ask Howard if additional nights were required, he could not find him. The flautists’ argument was fractious, and secretary Schaad noted that “the debate assumed a very exciting feeling amongst the parties and was laid over till next meeting.”⁷³ Four months later, the case was still unresolved, and both fellow players and the orchestra leader were called to testify. The statement from Carl Kessen, the leader of the orchestra, is worth quoting at length:

I myself engaged Mr. Hoffman, at his own request; (he bringing Mr. Eller to recommend him) for substitute for Mr. Howard in my orchestra Atlantic Garden, to perform on flute on each night (Mr. Howard would be required in the Italian opera). At \$4 per night, \$3 being the price allowed, the extra dollar being paid on the condition that he [Hoffman] would exclusively attend to the business of my orchestra in preference to any other, and giving him to understand distinctly that

⁷¹ *NYT*, January 1, 1869.

⁷² German immigrant William Kramer opened Atlantic Garden in 1858. John Koegel, *Music in German Immigrant Theater: New York City, 1840-1940* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 85-92. In 1869, the Garden was praised for having the largest mechanical orchestra, or “orchestration,” in the city; by the 1870s, the house orchestra was all women.

⁷³ *ECM*, January 14, 1868.

the engagement should continue till Mr. Maretzek's Opera Co. would leave the City for Boston or elsewhere. Having thus engaged him I told Mr. Howard to ratify the agreement, as the extra dollar would have to be paid by Mr. Howard. I have every reason to believe that Mr. Howard engaged him as instructed to by me, since it was to our mutual interest, and that of the orchestra, to have the same man, and not a different one every night Mr. Howard would be away. I think the gentleman [Hoffman] should at least have told me he was about to leave the city, but he did not do so; although it was intimated to me by Mr. Orchsle (who was to be one of the orchestra with him) while he was actually playing with me, that he was engaged to go. I did not believe it at the time, as Mr. Hoffman I judged would inform me, or Mr. Howard in time, were it true. I knew nothing of his positively leaving, till informed so by Mr. Howard further than what Mr. Orchsle told me."⁷⁴

Kessen had sided with his original employee and cast doubt on the substitute's account.

As a counter, both the trombone player Isaac Wrench and oboist Joseph Eller—

Hoffman's reference—testified that Hoffman had attempted to reach Howard to tell him

he could not continue, and were convincing enough that the Committee voted

unanimously to dismiss Howard's complaint.⁷⁵ The case of the two flutists is a prime

illustration of the substitute system. First, the leader preferred either the original player he

hired, or a regular replacement. Second, while Thomas Howard wanted the flexibility to

accept an Italian opera engagement, the Atlantic Garden engagement was important

enough for him to take the case to the union *and* enough for him to pay an extra dollar to

his substitute to be able to return to the orchestra when the opera was concluded.

The case also shows the instability and movement of musicians' working lives, as

each flutist accused the other of leaving town and being unreachable. Members were

often reapplying for membership or contesting their expulsion because work had taken

them out of New York. One member resigned "and went south" and then applied for

⁷⁴ ECM, April 17, 1868. The notes frequently point out that all parties involved spoke "in good English."

⁷⁵ ECM, May 1, 1868.

reinstatement upon his return, while another claimed that he had not paid his dues “on account of being absent from home for several weeks” for work.⁷⁶ The substitute system only exacerbated existing difficulties in communication. Frederick Winke hired a substitute while playing outside New York, and returned to find “an entire stranger” engaged as a leader, who had hired the substitute as the permanent player.⁷⁷ When George Bachmann was fined for skipping an engagement at Irving Hall, Bachmann explained he had been hired as a substitute by an M. Reilly, who had broken his promise “to remind him (Bachmann) a few days before the Ball would take place.”⁷⁸ Anxious to prove his case, Bachmann had his landlord explain three months later that he “had inquired very anxiously whether a note addressed to him had been left at the door, but no note had been delivered.”⁷⁹ The Committee reversed its earlier decision and repaid Bachmann the fine.

Each of these cases illustrates how *personal* the orchestra world was. In the absence of formal credentials and in a line of work where amateurs could step in at any moment, a good reputation was key. Engagements came via recommendations from other players, and backstage gossip tied a loose cohort of players together across a growing number of worksites. The ability to complete an engagement—the player’s dependability—was a much greater uncertainty than the capacity to do the work—the player’s musical competence—which was never raised at Executive Committee meetings. As a result, a member’s reputation was his calling card, and successfully completing an

⁷⁶ ECM, February 15, 1866.

⁷⁷ ECM, October 30, 1868.

⁷⁸ ECM, December 12, 1865. Reilly said he had done so, and the committee found Bachmann guilty of breaking Article 9, section 27, and was fined \$6. By February 1, Bachmann was again ordered to pay his fine or be expelled.

⁷⁹ ECM, March 1, 1866.

engagement was both about making a living and building a reputation, which could undermine or secure a player's next job. One reason the flute dispute dragged on for so long was because Howard, the original player, accused the Executive Committee of using disrespectful language towards him. Howard also used the language of "disappointment," which recurs through the Committee's minutes. Richard Straub filed a complaint against Christian Kaefer "for disappointing him" when Kaefer showed up at a skating rink instead of a Brooklyn picnic grounds.⁸⁰ The disgruntled Nicholas Langenberg was triply fined for making a false charge against another member "with the intent to injure his reputation," for preventing that same accused member from accepting an engagement, and then "for maliciously destroying the property of the Union, at the Secretary's office."⁸¹ The deeply personal nature of the infraction procedure and the constant policing of insiders and outsiders meant that much of the testimony at the Committee meanings hinged on honor and respect.

Playing with Non-Members

A good reputation is always important to musicians, but it took on particular importance as the union attempted to control the musical labor market. After price list violations, the most frequent and *contested* accusation was of playing with non-members. Without the union security agreements won by workers in the twentieth-century, which created the closed and agency shop, the MMPU could not legally compel theaters—let

⁸⁰ ECM, August 19, 1870. Kaefer had recently received financial assistance from the union and spent part of this same year in Blackwell Asylum. When J. J. Schlig failed to appear for an engagement, Charles Mihr offered an extensive explanation of the slight. Schlig "did not exactly say whether he would go, or not, but inquired very minutely where the place of rendezvous would be, about the uniform and the time of starting," giving Mihr "the impression that he would attend." ECM, October 30, 1868.

⁸¹ ECM, November 14, 1867.

alone dancing teachers or party hosts—to hire only from its membership. The burden of attempting to secure a monopoly thus fell on individual players, and required them to remain vigilant and report on each other’s violations. And the punishment was serious. Members were not allowed to resign but were considered expelled by their own action if they accepted work with non-members. Both leaders and players were fined; in the union’s first fall, the Committee fined leader Edward Manahan four dollars for employing a non-member.⁸²

As was the case with the price list, this policy generated a great deal of activity because it was so hard to enforce. New York’s commercial musicians were bound together by familial and social ties that were stronger than union membership, as when Richard Mollenhauer was fined for hiring his brother (not a member) to play Long Branch. When one player turned eighteen, “when a young man can act on his own responsibility,” he asked to be reinstated as a member in good standing, explaining that his musician father had ordered him to resign so that he might “get a place in a non-society orchestra.”⁸³ Yet again, the substitute system complicated matters. When Louis Heller was unable to play with the Ninth Regiment Band for the public reception of Grand Duke Alexis, he hired a non-member substitute. The flautist Thomas Howard, acting as band leader, reported this to the union, and Heller was fined.⁸⁴

When fined for playing with outsiders, members were prepared with an arsenal of reasons. Some argued they couldn’t find the proper instrumentation. “I have done no

⁸² ECM, October 22, 1863. Between players, a typical scenario was Charles Preussen’s complaint against H. Schrimpf for playing with a non-member, which resulted in a \$4 fine and Schrimpf’s eventual expulsion. A month later, John Schmitt (“vulgar Spectacle Schmitt”) was expelled for playing the clarinet at the Wintergarden, where the other players were not members. ECM, April 12, 1866.

⁸³ ECM, July 10, 1867.

⁸⁴ ECM, January 29, 1872.

more than all other leaders,” explained oboist Joseph Eller when accused of hiring non-members at a brewery and on two steamboat excursions, “and supplied their customers with Music through a competent outsider when Insiders cannot be procured.”⁸⁵ Others claimed ignorance of their colleagues’ status, a convincing approach when membership fluctuated and boundaries of the organization were not obvious. When three members were at risk of being fined, they explained that they did not know an “outsider” had been engaged until they reached the gig eleven miles out of town.⁸⁶ Frederick Winke admitted to playing several times with non-members, but argued that he was unable to read the Constitution in English, had only been in the country for a few weeks, “and had no means whatsoever for supporting his family.”⁸⁷ Charles Goffrie tried to shift the focus: “I have not played with non-members,” he explained. “The non members played with me.”⁸⁸ August Seidelbach was the most honest. When fined and expelled for three separate instances of playing with non-members—once at Central Park, and twice at the skating rink in Brooklyn—he immediately admitted to the violation and “excused himself by saying, if he had not taken the engagements, somebody else would have.”⁸⁹ Seidelbach’s observation cut to the heart of the matter. The key qualification for joining the union was the capacity to *get* a job, not to actually play one, which shifted the bulk of debate onto hiring instead of playing.

⁸⁵ ECM, September 7, 1872; similar case July 29, 1870. Born in Germany, sixteen-year old Joseph Eller arrived in New York with his parents Adam and Margaret and two younger siblings in 1856. All four of the Eller men were musicians, including their father; the two sisters were dressmakers. Several years later, this argument was used against Eller. In 1885, band leader Theodore Thomas engaged a Belgian oboist against MMPU policy and amidst the Contract Labor Law debate, putting Eller out of business. Henry Krehbiel, *Reviews of the New York Music Season, 1885-1886* (New York: Novello, Ewer & Co., 1886), 17.

⁸⁶ ECM, October 4, 1866.

⁸⁷ ECM, October 27, 1867.

⁸⁸ ECM, November 22, 1873.

⁸⁹ ECM, September 17, 1869.

After all, there were plenty of musicians in New York who could play a clarinet passably enough to keep a parade moving. The strictness of the union's policy was the inverse of the actual musical labor landscape, in which—as Hagemeyer's dilemma illustrated—players moved through a variety of states. In February 1865, a Mr. Ulrich was found guilty of playing with a non-member, a proprietor of a saloon identified as “a musician [who] played the violin now and then for his own amusement.”⁹⁰ Was this saloonkeeper an employer to be courted? A threat to be neutralized by membership? In the union's early years, while members were fined for playing without pay—what we think of now as the most obvious divide between professional and amateur artistic practice—they were more frequently fined for playing with non-members. This is because many members played with and without pay, often in the same spaces. Remember that although Hagemeyer admitted to playing without pay, he was *fined* for playing with non-members.

In time, the union became less vigilant about this problem outside of theater orchestras. In November 1872, Julius Wolf admitted to playing with non-members for an hour without pay, only “to oblige the proprietor Mr. Karl during the absence of the regularly engaged violin player.” Wolf's violation warranted only a reprimand and not a fine, as it was not a high-profile engagement and could be treated as an exceptional case.⁹¹ But the Union remained strong on the playing with non-members in more formal contexts. A year after Wolf's violation, the request “to play with non-members for three weeks at the Grand Opera House was lost by a unanimous no.”⁹² One result of this

⁹⁰ ECM, February 7, 1865.

⁹¹ ECM, November 9, 1872.

⁹² ECM, September 27, 1873.

refinement of policy was the emergence of the terminology of amateurs and professionals, which did not solidify until a decade into the union's existence. "Michael Mullins testified that the men Henry Jordemann played with were not professional musicians," recorded Secretary Schaad, "and had not played to get paid for."⁹³ At this point, "outsider" had explicitly become "amateur," and was synonymous with playing without compensation. But these categories were far from self-evident, and emerged through the enforcement of union rules in the particular context of commercial musicianship.

The Leader Problem

In addition to the substitute system and the challenge of enforcing the price list and the members-only policy, the Committee dealt with one final serious problem: the slippery position of the band leader. The substitute system wreaked havoc in part because it complicated the chain of command. But the very nature of the relationship between theater manager (or employer), band leader, and player was already convoluted. Because "leader" designated the person who organized the engagement with the theater manager or impresario but did not designate a formal position, the same person could be a leader one day and player the next. This unusual arrangement meant that managers and employees, or labor and capital, belonged to the same organization, and that individuals could potentially cross the line at any time. Still, some members were more likely to serve as leaders than others. Leaders were paid four percent of their musicians' fees in addition to their regular payment, and many of the organization's founders and officers

⁹³ ECM, February 27, 1875.

served often as leaders.⁹⁴ Over time, the gulf between leaders and players continued to widen, creating a hierarchy within the union.

Many of the challenges around finalizing hiring, logistics, and payment were due to the involvement of both a leader and a theater manager giving orders to hired players and their substitutes. When a double bassist accused violinist Otto Vogler of firing him “without notifying him a minute,” Vogler responded that the engagement had been cancelled by the manager that same evening. The case was postponed until the next meeting, “in order to give time to the defendant to furnish proof whether he was really acting by the order of the manager.”⁹⁵ This level of investigation may seem unnecessarily thorough, but the Committee was inclined to find in favor of the player whose engagement had been cancelled. This was both for strategic purposes, to attempt to regulate the free-wheeling employment process, but also because in a freelance context, each missed engagement was a lost opportunity for someone else. As Emanuel Massari explained, his fellow horn player Franz Rubel had hired him for a picnic,

But on the day of the engagement at 6 o'clock in the morning, Rubel informed me that the job for which he had engaged me would not come off that day. Afterwards I found out that the job for which Rubel had engaged me was not postponed but Rubel attended himself, and by doing so I lost an engagement which I had declined relying on the engagement of Rubel's.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, July 15, 1863. “A member may be to-day a buyer that is, an employer of his fellow-members, making a contract for their services, and to-morrow he may be a seller, that is, a wage-earner, contracting for his services with a fellow-member.” Commons, “Types of Musicians’ Labor Unions,” 421.

⁹⁵ When one player tried to get back wages for a parade, the leader “said he never had, and never will receive a single penny for that engagement, as the society [who arranged the parade] is broken off, and no money whatsoever could be collected.” ECM, November 28, 1874. At this same meeting they planned to print a monthly circular recording who has joined, resigned, been expelled or reinstated.

⁹⁶ ECM, July 22, 1871. Massari soon moved to D.C. to join the US Marine Corps band.

Months later, Rubel claimed (with a witness) that he had offered Massari half of his earnings from the picnic, which the Committee found acceptable.⁹⁷

When there was a conflict between player, leader, and theater manager, the union was most capable of settling disputes between members. Once, when a member was not paid for two rehearsals, the leader explained that it was because the theater manager “would have nothing to do with it” and the union ordered the leader to press for compensation.⁹⁸ More often, however, the conflicts were between members. When C.W. Stub arrived in Williamsburg to play a ball, he was informed that he wasn’t needed; Stub blamed the leader, who explained that the orchestra had been reduced but he didn’t know where to find Stub.⁹⁹ Individual players could also be drawn into rivalries between proprietors, a sign of the growing number of venues in competition for the same audiences and players. Yet even in this scenario, the friction settled between players and not between proprietors. When Herrmann Linsenmann accused a band leader of firing him before the end of the season’s engagement at a resort and withholding his payment, the leader explained that Linsenmann “had played in the opposition hotel, contrary to the wish of the proprietor,” and that “he, the proprietor would not pay, and insisted on [Linsenmann’s] discharge.”¹⁰⁰

The porous distinction between leader and player had a more formal counterpart in the difference between a leader and a conductor, which became a major point of disagreement between the union and the theatrical managers in the spring of 1866. The

⁹⁷ ECM, September 27, 1871.

⁹⁸ ECM, March 14, 1871.

⁹⁹ ECM, January 20, 1870.

¹⁰⁰ ECM, September 18, 1868.

outcome was an unspoken rule that separated leaders in theater orchestras from the temporary leaders organizing bands for picnics, parades and balls, creating a hierarchy among musicians that rules about membership had temporarily leveled. The key difference was that conductors were not required to be union members to hire union players.¹⁰¹ Two years later, after the MMPU had taken its struggles public and activated the Manager's Association into being, orchestra players at Niblo's were expelled because their leader was not a member. They asked to be reinstated and to fulfill their current engagements, and asked also that "Leaders and Conductors" who "cannot according to their arrangement with Managers" be members be exempt from the rule. According to these players, the manager of one of New York's most influential venues had asked band leaders to leave the union and behave like conductors.¹⁰² The orchestra's request was approved and the players were reinstated, and three days later, the Executive Committee called a special meeting to "[adjust] the present difficulties with the Theatrical Managers and ascertain what their intentions are in regard to the coming season."¹⁰³ Emboldened, the Manager's Association demanded that the union amend the bylaws to allow members to play with non-members, a standard union-busting tactic.¹⁰⁴ Reflecting the recurring

¹⁰¹ In December 1863, the Executive Committee was notified that the Spanish conductor James Nuno, currently at the Academy of Music, was not a member of the MMPU. The committee concluded that this was not a violation of the constitution, however, because the orchestra was managed by a leader, Ernest Grill, who was a founding member, and that conductors were exempt. ECM, April 19, 1864.

¹⁰² "We are of the opinion [this exemption] would not interfere with the interests of your society," they wrote. "With this understanding we are sure of a speedy reconciliation, and all become again United." ECM, April 27, 1866.

¹⁰³ ECM, April 30, 1866.

¹⁰⁴ "The Committee on Conference with the Theatrical Managers reported that they had met the Committee of the other side and were informed that Section 1 of Article 3 in the by-laws of the Union must be erased first before they would go any further." ECM, May 7, 1866. Article III, Sec. I: "It shall be the duty of every member to refuse to perform in any orchestra or band in which any person or persons are engaged who are not members in good standing, except organists of churches and directors of operatic or singing societies, [...] or conductors of grand opera." *Constitution and By-Laws of the Musical Mutual Protective Union*, 30-31.

problems with this rule throughout the union's existence, the Committee invited its members to weigh in at a special meeting.¹⁰⁵ Several weeks later, a petition signed by forty members was submitted "to allow Leaders [and] Conductors of Theatres, Operas, Ballets, and Concerts to be exempt of being members of the Union," which may have partially addressed the manager's concerns without undercutting the clause's original purpose.¹⁰⁶ This meant that while leaders in formal venues could be exempt, the casual spaces where non-members were most likely to take a position would still be regulated. In the end, the clause remained unamended and journeymen players continued to be fined for its violation, although rarely at high-profile locations.

This argument was a microcosm of a multifaceted process of refining industry positions in relation to each other and to the emerging commercial spaces where MMPU members worked. The conductor / theater orchestra leader / temporary leader gave material reinforcement to the conceptual distinction that a leader was an "executant" who "fixes his attention on the part before him," while in contrast, "the full expression and sentiment is imparted by the baton of the conductor," who possessed the "eye of the poet."¹⁰⁷ By the 1870s, the MMPU leadership dealt gingerly with the city's most powerful conductors and celebrity leaders. At one point, Secretary Schaad was ordered "to ascertain whether Maretzek was engaged by Strakosch as his agent or only as the conductor of Opera," to determine who was giving orders.¹⁰⁸ This began as a practical

¹⁰⁵ ECM, May 7, 1866. This was a special meeting called during period of "theatrical difficulties."

¹⁰⁶ ECM, May 14, 1866.

¹⁰⁷ "The Italian Opera by Daylight," *NYT*, August 24, 1854.

¹⁰⁸ ECM, September 27, 1871. Opera pricing remained a point of contention. In March 1872 eight musicians regularly engaged at the opera testified in an "elaborate debate" over opera pricing, with the result that for opera and operetta seasons that lasted longer than three weeks, the players were to be paid weekly salaries instead of by the performance. ECM, March 25, 1872.

solution to the problem of winning conductors to the union cause, but the exemption laid the groundwork for a distinction between “artist” and “laborer.” This distinction had lasting impact, even though many of the MMPU’s members served as leaders, tried their hand at composing and arranging, and attempted to assemble their own music libraries.

The MMPU faced some of its most significant challenges from leaders who achieved celebrity status and were no longer regular players assuming a temporary leadership role. In each case, all involved parties claimed to be working towards the same thing: high-quality music at prices audiences could afford, and that compensated players appropriately. Because leaders could claim authority both as artists and as members of the union, they were a particularly formidable power.¹⁰⁹ This problem was visible as early as 1864, when Harvey Dodworth—the leader of various commercial and military bands, a frequent presence at Niblo’s, and the son of one of the city’s first band leaders—requested a price list exemption for charitable purposes. Among his other ventures, Dodworth was conducting the Central Park Band, which played free Saturday summer concerts.¹¹⁰ “The music at Central Park has never been paid for by the Public, either by taxation directly or otherwise, or by any private individual,” he explained, and although streetcar companies had made a financial contribution, this did not constitute “a pecuniary interest at all equal to a proprietor of a saloon, at which concerts are given.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ For example, the Executive Committee heard many complaints against Patrick Gilmore, who sent letters through his agent M.K. Botsford promising eventual payment. ECM, November 28, 1874.

¹¹⁰ Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 226.

¹¹¹ ECM, May 17, 1864. Dodworth explained that the players at the Broadway Theatre had been granted this exemption already, and that his request was being made “on better grounds” and with “an interest in the improvement of the public taste.”

The concerts were thus a charitable enterprise. Here is how Dodworth made his case for reduced payment for the members who participated:

It is evident to anyone that the musical performances in Central Park are a Public Good and have created business, by improving the tastes and desire for music and also by example, therefore doing our profession a substantial good, and it seems to me if they were discontinued it would be not only an injury to those who might be engaged but to the profession at large [...] Would it not be policy to allow those musicians, who are willing to perform on these occasions at the above compensation when it is for the good and benefit of the many whose only recreation is Central Park Saturday afternoon? I ask for those who are with me interested to be enabled to accept the amount offered, and it may be understood that the balance is a donation from the Musicians to the public good.

Dodworth named his concerts as a public good in two senses of the term. First, they offered high-quality music for all, even those “whose only recreation is Central Park Saturday afternoon,” and in a setting that included men and women, adults and children, and clerks, nurses, and skilled artisans.¹¹² Playing at a reduced rate was not exploitation but a donation.¹¹³ And playing at a reduced rate had a professional reward, in increasing exposure and stimulating demand. The public good, in this sense, was publicity—and among the many venues and competitors, Dodworth implied, success was largely about being known. More than just an argument for cheap labor, Dodworth’s letter held a specific vision of what kind of “good” a concert was. While it could be the object of “pecuniary interest,” as it was for the saloon-keeper, it was not completely subject to the same laws of commodity exchange as other goods. As a result, the labor that produced this good should then also have flexible rules of governance. This argument, however,

¹¹² Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 226-9.

¹¹³ Dodworth’s proposal was in fact part of a major change in compensation for theatrical work. Benefit performances had been part of player’s standard compensation since the seventeenth-century, but in the 1850s the “benefit” began to take on its contemporary meaning as an altruistic gesture.

was soundly rejected by the MMPU, and Dodworth was required to pay his musicians the full rate.¹¹⁴

The MMPU Strikes

The depiction thus far is of the MMPU as an inward-facing organization that sought changes in working conditions through the reform of its membership, often by enforcing rules about membership or the price list. This was the majority of the union's activity. When the union did move publicly it was not against the casual sites that were the most frequent cause of trouble, but in theaters because they were the most obvious places where music made someone else money. These skirmishes began in a familiar location: the Italian opera chorus and orchestra. In the spring of 1863, as the MMPU was planning its first mass meeting, Marezek boasted of a chorus and orchestra twice the size of his predecessor's at the Academy of Music, even in a period of "great scarcity of instrumental players and of chorus singers."¹¹⁵ When the chorus was asked to apply for positions in the fall, the *Clipper* reported "skirmishing" between Marezek and his scarce pool of players. "Why can't Max draft some new people in the chorus?" asked the *Clipper*. "The 'veterans' must be pretty well used up by this time."¹¹⁶ Nine months later,

¹¹⁴ Dodworth also ran afoul of leadership during the 1865 strike, and when he asked to be reinstated in March 1866 "if such can be done without interfering with my present engagement," they refused. ECM, March 15, 1866.

¹¹⁵ The Executive Committee Meeting Notes begin on June 23, 1863. *Knickerbocker Monthly*, April 1863, 364; *NYT*, March 7, 1863; *NYH*, March 3, 1863. The press denounced the "paltry parsimony of former operatic *undertakers*," in which a small orchestra and chorus were expected to substitute for star singers. Marezek's first move was to kick the band up from twenty-eight to forty-five members, and to similarly increase the chorus. "It may not be generally known," added the *Times*, "that there is a great scarcity of instrumental players and of chorus singers and that this scarcity [...] has been aggravated by the machinations of a previous impresario. *NYT*, March 4, 1863. The spring season closed April 9, followed by the summer season on May 4.

¹¹⁶ *Clipper*, August 29, 1863.

a year after the union's incorporation was approved, the *Times* announced the spring season of Italian opera would be delayed because "a few German chorus-singers supposed that the right time had arrived for a new exaction."¹¹⁷

Max Maretzek was now in his second decade of disputes with the orchestra and chorus, and the increased size and prestige of the opera mass on the heels of "scarcity" meant new demands and novel methods. The chorus and the orchestra wanted to be paid for rehearsals, a new demand that reflected the increasing casualization of theatrical employment. When players in repertory companies were hired for multiple month contracts, the rehearsals were interspersed between performances and included within the salary; when they were hired for shorter engagements, time spent rehearsing became an obvious additional burden. As before, the *Times* framed its critique of the musicians' demands as discourteous to the public. Such demands were expected from stars but were otherwise "the pretensions of the mere mechanics of the orchestra and chorus," a term that signaled the paper's identification of orchestra musicians with the striking cordwainers and tailors who also felt thwarted by the capital concentrated out of their reach. The paper also noted that while musicians were scarce, the monopoly could be broken by increasing the number of players in the city. "Who will undertake the task of importing a few dozen fiddlers," asked the paper, "and half a hundred decent chorus singers?"¹¹⁸ While Maretzek and Mapleson had both recruited musicians to replace instrumentalists and chorus members whom they could not control, the language of "imported" mass cultural labor was new to the 1860s.

¹¹⁷ *NYT*, May 2, 1864. The *Herald* reported that Maretzek planned to raise prices the next season. *NYH*, April 22, 1864; April 28, 1864.

¹¹⁸ *NYT*, May 2, 1864.

Unlike in previous disputes, such as between Ullman and his chorus, the orchestra musicians now had an organized body that could defend itself. At first, the MMPY explained that the conflict was between Maretzek and his “choristers” and not the orchestra, and leader Ernst Grill explained that the orchestra had not asked for a raise.¹¹⁹ Thrust into the public eye, they moved to clarify the union’s purpose. “We have been charged, among other things, with the sudden termination of the Opera season, and with a combination to control not only the prices, but the leadership of orchestras,” wrote President Beissenherz, “and that, from our exorbitant demands, we were likely to interfere with the practical management of the theatrical exhibitions.”¹²⁰ The public strategy the MMPU pursued was to frame itself not as a “combination” but as the defender of cultivated music, by promoting “good feeling” throughout the profession, providing comfort for the infirm, and building a musical hall that could surpass its European counterparts. Furthermore, the union argued that their so-called “exorbitant prices” were simply the going rate. The *Clipper* was sympathetic to the orchestra and chorus but primarily as devil’s advocate, arguing that Maretzek was manipulating the press and that the true reason for the season’s delay was his loss of one of the star singers, Josef Hermanns.¹²¹ Regardless of the cause for the season’s delay, by this point a striking

¹¹⁹ *NYH*, April 29, 1864. “Maretzek may soon bring to reason the rebellious choristers—who, chock-full of notes, have often struck for higher wages, and ought now to be willing to strike up the music without further bother—is the sincere desire of the musical public.” Several days later, the *Herald* printed a response from someone claiming to be in the chorus. “There was no such difficulties existing between Mr. Maretzek and the orchestra of the Academy. We did not ask for an increase of salary, so consequently could not be refused. The writer of the above mentioned article must have been mistaken, or, otherwise, it is a malicious attempt to slander the orchestra of the Academy.” *NYH*, May 2, 1864.

¹²⁰ *NYH*, May 9, 1864.

¹²¹ To be more specific, the *Clipper* was sympathetic to the chorus and orchestra as a way of criticizing its press rivals. “The poor chorus singers, having no advertising patronage to bestow, and no funds wherewith to procure oyster suppers for the purpose of securing the influence of a ‘free and independent press’ [how *are* you, free and independent press?] were pitched into terribly by the critics, who called them some very hard and indelicate names.” *Clipper*, May 14, 1864. “Max Maretzek would have it appear that his

orchestra was the logical accompaniment to a disgruntled chorus, and either party was a reasonable explanation for the postponement.

As had been the case in 1857, theatrical managers moved swiftly in response to the union's public statements, creating the organization that would pressure the union to drop the clause preventing members from playing with non-members. They gathered at theater manager Lester Wallack's residence to form a corresponding "protective union," which the *Herald* claimed was not to "[resist] a fair increase [...] but to secure themselves against a constantly recurring series of extortionate strikes" stirred up by an organization that had "recently been diverted from the legitimate object of protecting themselves into that of injuring and destroying the business of others, [converting] itself from a protective into a legislative body."¹²² This organization was not strong enough to successfully oppose the union's demands, however, and by the beginning of July, the MMPU had been successful in demanding a new price list.¹²³ In 1864, at least, the relationship between theatrical management and the Union was cordial enough to reach an agreement on prices. In doing so, however, the collective action of the musicians had provoked into being a new entity, the Manager's Association, which would return the following year with less willingness to bend.

In addition to presenting itself as an organized body in the press, the musicians also staged their first "monster concert" in September, advertised as "the greatest number

choristers, who have asked a slight advance upon their former salaries, prevent him from going on with his new season [...] All the choristers ask, we believe, is 20 percent on their former scale of prices—little enough, in all conscience, as things go; but we have an idea that the loss of his basso, Hermanns, has something to do with his failure to go on." *Clipper*, May 7, 1864.

¹²² *NYH*, June 25, 1864.

¹²³ *NYH*, July 11, 1864. This is when the Actors' Protective Union forms. "Now, it appears, there is to be a grand conference of actors to make a similar demand, both on their own behalf and that of the female stars of small magnitude—the latter being willing either to accept higher pay or to be provided with wardrobes."

of instrumental performers ever assembled” in the United States.¹²⁴ The meaning of “mammoth” or “monster” concerts was context-dependent. The production could signify the managerial might required to assemble and coordinate a hundred players, or the widespread appeal of a choral production that drew participants across a vast region. In this case, the large number of assembled musicians symbolized itself; six hundred of the Union’s eight hundred members could organize themselves and play for an estimated 10,000 people at Jones’ Wood.¹²⁵ According to the *Tribune*, in spite of the “rude provision in the form of some flooring boards,” the audience was “numerous and thoroughly well pleased.”¹²⁶ While part of the point was to demonstrate that musicians could reach their audiences without intermediaries, the program relied on the pull of celebrity, with popular opera selections—the *Rienzi* overture, and an instrumental medley from *La Traviata* and *Lucia*—conducted by Carl Bergmann, Theodore Thomas, and Max Maretzek. The concert framed the union as the true defenders of cultivated traditions, referencing their intention to build a music hall and a school for musicians. This seems to have paid off, as the notices were positive and appreciative of the organization’s aim to bring “a vast mass of musicians into closer practical alliance.”¹²⁷ In one of its few

¹²⁴ *NYT*, August 11, 1864.

¹²⁵ *Clipper*, October 1, 1864, .

¹²⁶ *New-York Tribune*, September 21, 1864

¹²⁷ *New-York Tribune*, September 21, 1864. The festival “is designed to bring as a beginning a vast mass of musicians into closer practical alliance for the purpose of forming a fund to build a hall and establish a conservatorio for the education of Americans in ordinary and transcendent music—digital, vocal, and scientific. Such a result is needed. We have heard often theories about the tendencies of democracy to do spontaneously for high art what is secured for it by the monarchical or despotic governments of Europe. Up to this time we have not found this theory promising. Art of all kinds in this country is disheveled and contradictory. The largest sums are made by quacks. There is no Academy of Music, except theaters bearing that name, meaning nothing under heavens, except they are let out indiscriminately to this, that, and the other reputable and disreputable object. There is no standard of criticism beyond the *ipse dixit* of individuals which may be good or may be bad. No authority is recognized. Operas are played, but, as a rule, subject to pure speculation, one manager one week and another, another week. So there is no standard for the style of performances, for the number and freshness of the chorus, for the fullness and excellence of

comments on the organization, the conservative *Dwight's Journal of Music* concluded that “the aim of the society is praiseworthy and should be supported.”¹²⁸

While some established musical interests could handle this kind of public activity, the union's movement against theater managers the following fall faced significant resistance. While leaders, instrumentalists, and stars could demand higher salaries, most MMPU members were the “mere mechanics” of the orchestra. Unlike firing members for playing with non-members, major adjustments to the price list exerted pressure directly on management instead of through its members. Although rates were raised across engagements, the hike that attracted the most attention was the \$20 a week rate for players in theater orchestras. In the union's first year, this same rate was raised from \$9 to \$12, and in 1864 from \$12 to \$14. This change was controversial because theater managers, unlike those hiring for balls and parades, were organized and visible. Unlike the previous “strikes” of chorus members and instrumentalists, the MMPU was an organization with clear demands and no element of surprise. “It was known early in the day that the fiddlers intended to strike,” wrote the *Times*, “and it was also known that the managers were fully resolved to resist the movement.”¹²⁹ The union sent theatrical

the orchestra. For concerts—for anything original—the account is still poorer. New York, in a word, calling itself a metropolis of art, is only a provincial town. After hearing and knowing the style in which great works are systematically executed in London with two and a half millions of inhabitants, to witness an operatic performance in this city with one million, as regards details of complete scenery, costumes, properties, orchestra, chorus, ballet, etc., is a fearful descent. Up to the time that managers are supported by certainties, not spasms—by knowledge, not pretence [sic]—by liberality, not parsimony—we perhaps can only look for things as they are. Open-mouthed provincial gawkeys waiting for what is done in Europe—in any foreign town or village—but never originated here, the public stand. If this movement of the ‘800 musicians’ be real and heartfelt, there may be a change—but as yet we can see no logical premises.”

¹²⁸ *NYT*, September 21, 1864. The musical tone of this moment was largely German; Formes was back and performing both in *Faust*, *Robert le Diable*, *Martha*, and Haydn's Creation oratorio. *Dwight's Journal of Music*, October 1, 1864, 320.

¹²⁹ *NYT*, November 2, 1865. *Clipper*, November 4, 1865. Other increases included \$5 for a single theatrical performance, \$40 weekly salary for leaders, and \$25 for repetiteurs (leaders of ballet and chorus).

managers their plan to increase weekly salaries two weeks in advance, and when they released 2,000 copies of the new price list, all parties were prepared to act in pursuit of their best interests.¹³⁰

When theater managers refused to accede to the new list, the union went on strike.¹³¹ Audiences across the city saw a variety of accommodations to this absence. At two theaters, human labor was replaced by machine technology, and a piano stood in for the orchestra; as the *Herald* explained, “a piano or a hand organ costs much less than an orchestra, and it is therefore to the advantage of the managers to make the change.”¹³² At one venue a manager apologized before the curtain for the absence of music, explaining that there was a piano but no one to play it. “The audience took the point and felt nothing about it,” reported the *Times*, “knowing probably that the establishment has a gentleman at its head who would not willingly take part in such a silly emeute.” At the New Bowery, a pianist who had been hired at the last minute ultimately refused to play, “afraid he’d be taking bread out of other musician’s mouths.”¹³³ At Wallack’s, a handful of union members followed their leader Edward Mollenhauer out of the union. The most expensive venues retained their musicians because of a perceived necessity of the full orchestra. At the Academy of Music the full orchestra played at higher rates, “as it would be almost an impossibility to give an Opera without the orchestral effects” and because Maretzek—here in his capacity as a manager, not just a leader—had signed contracts individually with each of his players.¹³⁴ Contracts for higher prices also retained

¹³⁰ ECM, October 31, 1865.

¹³¹ *NYT*, November 2, 1865; *Clipper*, November 11, 1865.

¹³² *NYH*, November 4, 1865.

¹³³ *Clipper*, November 11, 1865.

¹³⁴ *Clipper*, November 11, 1865.

musicians at the Old Bowery, where the MMPU's secretary David Schaad was employed, and at Niblo's, where the manager had been given permission from the Manager's Association to pay the higher rates to accompany the perennial favorite the Ravel Family, who refused to play without music. At the Hippotheatron, the Varieties, and 444 Broadway—all commercial halls on the edge of legitimacy—the evening program was accompanied by a mixed band of non-members and previous employees at the lower prices.

The union was prepared for backlash and retaliation. They passed resolutions preventing new contracts from being made during the interim and to prevent the hiring of players who would play at the old rates. The goal was to stop the mass firing and re-hiring of non-members or the conversion of the major theater orchestras to non-member labor.¹³⁵ To encourage members to remain loyal, in the strike's second week the union pledged to pay each member who had lost his regular employment the new price list weekly rate of twenty dollars, less whatever he made from one-time gigs, to counter the large number of expulsions and resignations. A month into the strike, however, the amount was reduced to the previous rate— \$14 a week—but retained its pledge that members “who have lost their situations by adhering to the stipulated prices shall be indemnified to its full loss, carried unanimously.”¹³⁶ This was an expensive proposition

¹³⁵ “Resolved that hereafter no member of this Union shall sign or make any verbal or written contract for Regular Engagements with any Leader or Manager as regards the salaries until the price is Regulated by the Union.” ECM, November 2, 1865. The Executive Committee voted to send a copy of the resolution to each of the leaders of city's theaters with the following explanation: “That no person shall be engaged in the place of a person discharged while trying to get the price as adopted by the Musical Mutual Protective Union.” ECM, November 8, 1865.

¹³⁶ ECM, November 6, 1865. The following players had lost their jobs: Jacob Lenhard, Louis Stall, John Bleakley (New Bowery), Joachim Weber, M. Kerrigan, William Hetterich, Hermann Megering (Barnum Museum), Silliam Schrader, Charles Kinnecke, Frederick Fornfett (Circus), Salvator Urso (Olympic), Michael O'Reilly (Pastor's Opera House), Carl Saylor (Park Theatre).

that provoked debate, repeal, and reinstatement, and careful provisioning that accounted for income from one-off engagements. It reflects the Union's desire to retain members and appear fair, but also to hold out against the pressure from theater managers.¹³⁷ They made public their commitment to supporting members legally as well as financially, if they were pursued for breach of contract.¹³⁸

The MMPU also flexed its muscle as an organization, forming several committees to reach out to friendly organizations and opening lines of communication with theatrical managers. Their approach to this latter organization was to form a committee to notify the Managers' Association secretary that the lines of communication were open "for the purpose of kindly discussing the differences existing, and if possible make an honorable compromise between the two societies."¹³⁹ They also made contact with and paid dues to the Workingmen's Union, the city's central association of organized mechanics currently agitating for an eight-hour day, which in turn asked for delegates to that body and dues, initiating a relationship that endured on and off for a decade.¹⁴⁰ In return, the Workingmen's Union promised to cooperate as a fellow union and to patronize fundraising concerts. The MMPU retained the support of the cooperatively-organized

¹³⁷ The meeting on November 13 raised the indemnity amount to \$20, expelled another wave, and planned to meet with the Chamber of Commerce. The rates dropped to \$14 on December 2. The meeting on November 15 expelled more, sought contact with military authorities to prevent military bands from stepping in, authorized the printing of 10,000 handbills, and ordered the "Card to the Public" translated into German. ECM, November 15, 1865. The paying Committee was "instructed to indemnify the claimants according to their loss, or at the rate of fourteen dollars per week. Money earned during the week less that amount, to be deducted. All former Resolutions conflicting with this are hereby repealed, carried. ECM, December 2, 1865.

¹³⁸ *Clipper*, November 4, 1865. "One of our managers asked his leader on Saturday last what he intended to do, and he replied, 'demand the increase or else every one of us leave on Tuesday night, the 31st.'" When told that he and his entire orchestra had been engaged for one year up to July 4 at \$14 a week, and that he would sue them for damages, he replied that the association had agreed to stand all lawsuits, and to support any member out of employment."

¹³⁹ ECM, Meeting, December 12, 1865.

¹⁴⁰ ECM, November 18, 1865. The EC approved paying dues at December 2, 1865.

Philharmonic Society, which declared the strike “just and proper,” and that “all those who desert the Union in the present emergency deserve the censure of every honorable and well-meaning man.”¹⁴¹ And the MMPU reached out to musicians’ organizations in other cities. In one of the first communications between what would eventually become linked “locals” in a national organization, societies in Philadelphia and Boston were “to be made acquainted with our present situation and solicited to give us a helping hand in refusing accepting engagements for the theatrical managers of this city.”¹⁴²

Finally, building on their statements to the press in the previous year, the MMPU attempted to make their voice visible in the press. First, they established a committee to handle speaking with and writing for local papers. Two weeks into the strike, they called an emergency meeting to approve a motion to solicit playwright and actor Charles W. Taylor to write a series of newspaper articles on behalf of the MMPU, and to empower the committee to issue “posters, handbills, and circulars giving a clear statement of our case to the public.”¹⁴³ These efforts produced the “Card to the Public” that was widely reproduced in both New York papers (the *Times*, the *Herald*, and the *Tribune*) and beyond the city’s limits.¹⁴⁴ Once the dust had settled, the union began publishing a list of places of amusement that had acceded to the price lists, a move that acknowledged that encouraging patronage at cooperative institutions was as important as boycotting

¹⁴¹ *NYH*, November 21, 1865.

¹⁴² *ECM*, November 10, 1865.

¹⁴³ *ECM*, November 6, 1865; *ECM*, November 11, 1865. They paid Taylor \$15 on March 29, 1866.

¹⁴⁴ This set a precedent for how the MMPU would handle bad press in the future. When the *Herald* ran an anti-MMPU column in March of 1870 railing against the “narrow-minded, illiberal monopoly [...] framed especially for the purpose of retarding the progress of art,” the Union convened a special meeting to hire J.G. Howard to compose a response to “the false and abusive article tending to bring the M.M.P.U into bad repute with the public.” The meeting was held on March 24 and reported in the *ECM* minutes on April 14, 1870.

others.¹⁴⁵

Emboldened by their previous success and by a climate of rising trade union activity, the MMPU embraced the language of capital and labor in a significant departure from the previous public statements that had surrounded earlier unrest in the orchestra and the successful monster concerts. Rather than framing themselves as guardians of cultivated music and keepers of the peace, they highlighted their positions as skilled mechanics, male breadwinners, and members of the city's broader working population.¹⁴⁶ The boldest articulation of this approach came in the "Card to the Public."¹⁴⁷ As long as the public continued to patronize the city's amusement halls, managers could withhold fair remuneration from their employees even as they raised admission. Close cooperation between managers and the press had poisoned New Yorkers against the musicians' claims, painting performers as capricious, unreliable and greedy. And yet "it cannot be denied," the musicians explained,

that the members of the profession, as a class, can justly claim the respect and support of the community at large, for they materially contribute, by their genius and untiring industry, to cater to the entertainment of those who patronize places of public amusement.

Their core argument was that the working musician locked in battle with avaricious managers was "a striking illustration of a truth which is familiar to the working class by bitter experience [...] capital is almost invariably combined against labor." While some

¹⁴⁵ ECM, December 12, 1865.

¹⁴⁶ "The musicians are men of talent, and have devoted several years to the acquirement of skill in their profession. They are mostly men with families dependent upon them for support, and they find that all the necessities of life, from a spool of cotton to a load of coal, have increased three or four fold in price, while their own salaries have not been doubled." *NYH*, November 4, 1865.

¹⁴⁷ The "Card" appeared in the *Times* on November 13, 1865, as well as in the *Herald* and the *Tribune*.

of this language would return in the 1890s, when musicians' unions across the country came together under the American Federation of Labor, this was the closest organized musicians came to claiming a broader identification with workers, and to calling on the patrons of commercial amusement to make the same leap.

The strike also demonstrated the extent of public sympathy for musicians as striking workers. The MMPU had to convince audiences that its members' work was both necessary and underpaid, which proved a challenging hurdle. According to the press, the musician could deserve charity but not demand institutional reform. "We have heretofore advocated the claims of the association," wrote the *Clipper*, "but these continued and repeated demands for extra pay will not meet with general approbation."¹⁴⁸ General interest papers were sympathetic to the claims of individual players, but they did not acknowledge the continuing necessity of the organization. The "fiddlers association" had been formed "when everyone felt the necessity of combination, when all was gloomy," wrote the *Times*, "and to cling together seemed a matter of common brotherhood and prudence." But that time had passed, and these new demands made the musicians appear unreliable. It was true that musicians' work was intermittent and seasonal, providing "but a precarious support," and that that fourteen dollars a week was "less than the majority of skilled mechanics can make, and is not an adequate reward for the time and talent the musicians devote to orchestral work."¹⁴⁹ But the proposed increases were too steep, and the players had waited until the middle of the season to change their mind, after orchestra

¹⁴⁸ *Clipper*, November 4, 1865.

¹⁴⁹ The theaters "were never making so much money before, and are rapidly accumulating large fortunes." *NYH*, October 27, 1865; *Evening Post*, October 31, 1865.

contracts were signed and the fall productions underway.¹⁵⁰ The *Clipper* also invoked the higher wages earned by substituting, claiming that during ball season there could be as many as eight substitute musicians in any given orchestra, and this was on the top of the “day businesses” many musicians had. The musicians’ strategy to handle precarity had become proof of its non-existence. “The fact is,” the musical cricket wrote, “managers have been most too lenient with these people.”¹⁵¹

Some observers also felt that musicians were making claims exceeding their station in a musical and economic hierarchy. With the exception of opera, the absence of an orchestra was unpleasant but not fatal; musical accompaniment was “subordinate additions to the main attraction,” like the buttons on the back of a dress coat.¹⁵² *Leslie’s* acknowledged that the musicians were “so essential to the proper amusing of the public and the success of the managers,” but agreed that the timing and the increase were not justified. Furthermore, the paper added, “we will not recognize the fact of a mere mechanical musician, who can only read the works of the master, being an artiste,” the paper added. A skilled mechanic in another line of work could command respect, but a “mere mechanical musician” was of a lower order. Like the conductor distinction, a player who simply read a poem—who went through the motions—was not in the same category as the poet. And while an exceptional interpretation by a soloist might qualify, a player of this caliber “would not sit many weeks in a theatrical orchestra, and would find

¹⁵⁰ Managers thus rightly refused the raises “first, because it was an unthought-of addition to their current expenses; and second, because there was no certainty that a few days hence the men who had been so faithless would not again demand a further and impossible access to their salaries.” *NYT*, November 2, 1865.

¹⁵¹ *Clipper*, November 4, 1865s.

¹⁵² *Evening Post*, October 31, 1865.

no necessity to belong to a musical union to enforce a recognition of his claims.”¹⁵³ Only the *Herald* was sympathetic. Reducing the orchestra to a single piano player was one in a series of tactics managers employed to increase profits. If the managers had their way, editor James Gordon Bennett concluded, “we shall have Hamlet dying to slow music, played on a flute by himself.”¹⁵⁴ His opinions were as much an attack on theatrical managers, who rivaled his control of publicity and command over the amusement world, as they were a defense of the MMPU. But he was right; managers were testing how much they could reduce labor costs while retaining the spectacular mode.

Bennett was also correct that only the public could make the orchestra a necessary part of the theater, and this did not come to pass. None of the papers mention any drop in attendance or any recognition of the conflict among audiences, and within a few weeks, most theaters had found a way to employ a sufficient orchestra. The substitution of pianos had not “excited the displeasure of the public.”¹⁵⁵ Paying the salaries of all the out-of-work players was impossibly expensive, and the union could not continue to pay salaries to out-of-work members, and preventing unemployment had never been an MMPU goal.¹⁵⁶ The strike also threatened to have repercussions beyond the theaters, as when the manager of Irving Hall pledged not to rent the hall out for any balls employing Union members.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ “Town Gossip,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, November 18, 1865.

¹⁵⁴ *NYH*, November 2, 1865.

¹⁵⁵ *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, November 18, 1865.

¹⁵⁶ The *Clipper* estimated that it would cost the Union \$3,000 a week to pay all salaries if all 175-200 musicians were suddenly unemployed. *Clipper*, November 4, 1865.

¹⁵⁷ Minstrel halls were apparently untouched by the strike. “We also visited all the minstrel halls; but of course the raise did not affect them, as good musicians in a minstrel band get more than what the association demands.” *Clipper*, November 11, 1865.

The key development that undermined the strike, however, was that several prominent orchestra leaders left or threatened to leave the Union. A week into the strike, Mollenhauer, Dodworth, Thomas Baker of the Olympic, Robert Stoepel of the Winter Garden, and Richard Tyte of Old Bowery had all “shook free” from the MMPU.¹⁵⁸ The strike thus exposed a structural weakness in the union—the ambiguous position of leaders in relation to players, conductors and managers, or the ease with which some members moved between employer and employee—that could be easily exploited by managers. While individual orchestra members were frequently changing, leaders were more consistently attached to specific theaters. And for managers who were willing to abandon their leaders, there were plenty of non-union fiddlers willing to play for the old prices. The strike also activated the next major issue that would plague the union, the “importation” of foreign musicians, when some leaders discussed bringing fifty-five musicians from Hamburg unless “a significant number of *artistes* could be found who would abandon the Union.”¹⁵⁹ Although these leaders were the exception and most union members remained committed to the strike, they had both visibility and influence.

In the end, it was Edward Mollenhauer, the popular local leader whose refusal to strike had attracted significant press attention, who facilitated a compromise that brought

¹⁵⁸ *Clipper*, November 11, 1865.

¹⁵⁹ *NYH*, November 6, 1865. Following the passage of the 1885 Foran Act, bands and orchestras were frequently held at the U.S. borders for violating contract labor law. They were travelling on an international performance circuit that predated the laws and institutions blocking their path, which had an amendment written *specifically* in acknowledgement of stage performance’s long tradition of transnational contracts. While the Act forbid American employers from contracting with “foreign” or “alien” workers, Section Five outlined three important exceptions. Citizens or subjects of foreign countries residing in the United States who wished to hire “private secretaries, servants, or domestics” were exempt, the Act did not apply to contracts made with skilled workers in new industries, and the act exempted “professional actors, artists, lecturers, and singers.” This clause invited controversy over orchestra musicians’ status as “artists”—and therefore exempt— or “laborers”—and not. *Clipper*, July 13 and February 22, 1890.

the strike to the end. By the third week, the Executive Committee agreed to accept a compromise of \$17 for orchestra players and reported to be “favorably inclined towards restoring those now playing at the different theatres as members in the Union, provided that our members be reinstated in their former positions.” Mollenhauer requested that the union write a letter to his employer, manager Lester Wallack, justifying this raise “on account of the high rate of all the necessaries of life.” This was of course what the MMPU had attempted to achieve through public action and strike, rather than through personal channels. Mollenhauer promised that Wallack would respond favorably to this request, and asked that all players in his orchestra be reinstated to the union and to support financially any players who would not be able to get their engagements back.¹⁶⁰ Through personal appeal and backroom connections, Mollenhauer achieved the ends of the strike. The trade-off of the compromise was that the MMPU remained a strong and popular organization. Most of the leaders returned, and at the second meeting in January 1866, eighty-three new members joined, and eight were reinstated.¹⁶¹

Although it came to relatively successful conclusion, the strike revealed several key problems that commercial musicians in theater orchestras and one-time engagements would never solve. The strike tested how necessary musicians were to a range of venues, and the answer was more ambiguous than they desired. Musical accompaniment was popular but not always required, and because music was both already casual employment—not easily regulated for entry—and the avocation of many, the orchestra musicians were easily replaced. The strike also generated a widespread conclusion that

¹⁶⁰ ECM, November 23, 1865. The EC asked if the Manager’s Association had forbidden leaders to join the MMPU, which Mollenhauer denied. The *Clipper* reported on November 20 that some of the musicians were still holding out. *Clipper*, November 25, 1865.

¹⁶¹ ECM, January 18, 1866.

musicians demanding higher pay could easily be replaced with mechanization or with fewer players. “A piano, one violin and a cornet will afford considerable music,” concluded the *Clipper*, “and is the only way to bring these foreign fiddlers to their right senses.”¹⁶² The papers acknowledged that musicians had either to back down, or face “permanent dismissal” and “an overcrowding of their labor market.”¹⁶³ Spectacle could be the *visible disciplining* of workers, as in the case of the piano-and-a-speech strategy to deal with striking players. This was an extension of the long-time interest in behind the scenes negotiations moving to the front of the curtain. In an ironic turn of events, the drama of the strike may have generated publicity not for the musicians’ cause, but became another point of interest for audiences already in regular attendance.

Conclusion

New York’s practical musicians had come a long distance from the unwashed choristers to the organized union at the close of the Civil War, and the changes had lasting consequences. First, the MMPU constitution protected only the “instrumental” portion of musicians. While the exclusion of pianists and vocalists was logical, it also isolated orchestra players from both the chorus and star singers. When the musicians organized into a union, the unruly force that had brought them before the public in the first place dissipated. And the musicians soon learned that public attention had advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, it was the audience’s interest in the making of entertainment and the unusual position of stage labor that created space for the

¹⁶² *Clipper*, November 4, 1865.

¹⁶³ *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, November 18, 1865.

grievances of non-star performers. On the other, however, the tide of public sentiment could turn easily against non-star performers if they were seen breaking contracts with both managers or audiences without cause, or as making unreasonable demands.

Public action articulated in the language of capital and labor drew additional attention to the daily doings of New York's cheap amusements. While opera had long been a focus of the city's elite journalism, the day before the strike commenced the *Clipper* noted that other papers were expanding into its territory. "Time was when we alone made record of our music halls, when we alone recorded the movements of the dancers, and singers, and jiggers, and ham fatters, who contributed to entertain the patrons of our music halls," wrote the *Clipper*, "but now, the *Herald* outdoes us in laudation of the artists we have named, of the concert halls referred to."¹⁶⁴ The paper had effectively introduced the theatrical beat, or what it called "our usual round [visiting] every place of amusement in this large city."¹⁶⁵ While both general interest papers and specialty music journals such as *Dwight's Journal of Music* had long both advertised and reviewed performances, the *Clipper's* reporting took on the commercial amusement world as both a geographic and conceptually distinct space with social codes and logics of its own.

The strike also exposed the union's vulnerabilities. The most obvious was the ambiguous categorization of player, leader, conductor, and manager. While the union employed the language of capital versus labor, the actual theatrical structures and practices were more complicated. The union rarely moved against theaters afterwards,

¹⁶⁴ *Clipper*, November 4, 1865. The date of correspondence—when this column was submitted—is October 30.

¹⁶⁵ *Clipper*, November 11, 1865.

instead attempting to reform working conditions and enforce its key mechanisms by applying pressure on and through its members, most of whom played in casual settings. As a result, audiences were not used to thinking of the musicians who played at dances and on steamboats as laborers, let alone organized ones.

The 1865 strike was a key turning point in the musicians' experimentation with organization, and what kind of shape it might take. The strike, coming after two decades of struggle between managers, the public, the press, and culture workers, articulated the key debates that would continue to shape how non-star performers made a case for the value of their work, and how their labor was understood more broadly. The questions raised and conclusions reached by the 1865 strike made it possible, in subsequent decades, for observers to conclude that "the main question [of musicians' organizations] involves the rights, not of labor against capital, but of labor against talent."¹⁶⁶ In this view, the union was the opposite of a flourishing musical culture, rather than its basis. Observers and participants in the strike understood that they were witnessing a small piece of watershed change in how theater was created, even if they could not always fully articulate what shape the show trade was taking. "This interesting incident in our theatrical history is entirely new," remarked a prescient *Herald* at the strike's beginning.¹⁶⁷ The changes that consumed orchestra musicians were not limited to German violinists in New York City, however, but were instead rippling across stages and venues, pulling new performers with different positions and strategies into the maelstrom of show business.

¹⁶⁶ *Boston Transcript*, January 6, 1886.

¹⁶⁷ *NYH*, November 2, 1865.

**Chapter 3. “50 women, attractive, good dressers and fair dancers”:
Variety Theater, Performing Women, and the Origins of the Dramatic Agency,
1855 – 1875**

The evening was routine at first, beginning with the glitzy afterparty that employees had come to expect following a successful premiere. The financial backer, spending amply from his own fortune to finance the production, indicated that the alcohol-fueled event was thrown especially for the women in minor roles. During the party, he developed “an objection for some reason or other” to one of the young actresses and ordered her to leave; when she “openly defied” him, he threatened that she would never work again. Several days later, the actress confronted the producer in public and struck him repeatedly with an umbrella. In reporting the series of events, a leading industry paper editorialized that “we do not sympathize in the slightest in any such female demonstrations” as “there are always several sides to the matters” and “we are not acquainted with the true merits of the case.”¹

The only account of this incident, and the only record I have found of Cuban actress Ms. Weichart, is summarized above from the *New York Dramatic News*. The challenge of verification only amplifies the incident’s uncanny tone in our current moment, when new accounts of male aggression in Hollywood appear daily.

Contemporary conversations tend to proceed as if it is possible simply to remove

¹ *New York Dramatic News*, June 17, 1876. “It is always easy for a man to overcome a woman who forgets her sex so far as to resort to the manual of arms, and, in our opinion, it is a mistaken sense of chivalry which, under such circumstances, prevents the man retaliating in such a way as to teach the woman a lesson which would prevent her ever relying on such a system of vengeance again.”

perpetrators, and that the abuse of power is an embarrassing but ancillary blemish on an otherwise redeemable industry. The history of dramatic agencies, one of the most influential and understudied developments of the nineteenth-century entertainment business, proves otherwise. The entertainment industry's most enduring structural features were established on male management of female talent, a management that made exploitation not only easy and acceptable but necessary.

For while Ms. Weichart cannot be found, the producer Frederick Rullman is difficult to avoid, and his career in entertainment can be summarized in two trends: speculation in money, and in women. Born in Germany and raised in New York by a theatrical scene painter, Rullman's first major move was purchasing the "opera book privilege" at the Academy of Music in the 1850s, which allowed him to monopolize the sale of scores to audiences. He also engineered one of the postwar period's most controversial practices: re-selling theatre tickets at a premium, drawing on strategies he used speculating in gold and stocks.² Based on this windfall Rullman became the go-to theatrical lender, charging major players like Max Maretzek and Bernard Ullman ten percent interest.³ Each of these guises—ticket speculator, opera libretto publishing, financier—hovered at the edge of theatrical production, generating profit through ancillary ventures that both depended on and generated buzz.

But before he made a name in ticket speculating and lending, Rullman was a theatrical agent. It is in Rullman's brief but repeated attempts to run a dramatic agency—

² When Brougham's Theater opened in 1869, Rullman purchased \$1,800 worth of seats and boxes. While the stated purpose of the auction "was to give the public a chance to obtain a seat, thereby preventing them from being gobbled up wholesale by the speculators [...] just the reverse of this has been the result." *Clipper*, January 30, 1869.

³ *New York Dramatic News*, June 17, 1876.

his foray into speculation in theatrical labor—that we should pay closest attention. In 1863, during the first wave of dramatic agencies, Rullman was promoting his “Musical, Dramatic, and Terpsichorean Agency” to managers who wanted to hire female performers.⁴ In the mid-1870s, as he was hosting lavish after-parties for chorus members, Rullman made a second run at the agency business, partnering with the Paris-based Verger & Co. to “obtain and furnish engagements” again for ballet dancers and chorus singers.⁵ From its very initial stirrings, then, the dramatic agency was an entity built by male speculators to facilitate and control the movement of female performers. As the agency grew into the single most important entity in the staffing of theatrical companies across genres, it never outgrew these origins.

Ticket speculating and chorus girls are not part of the standard narrative of agents. The agents visible to the public occupy a world of glamour and celebrity, mirroring received wisdom that they exist primarily to create and promote stars. In addition to Ari Gold and Jerry Maguire, nonfiction chronicles of talent agencies—all of which begin with Hollywood and extend into publishing and athletics—also create the impression that agencies emerged to coordinate the activities of motion picture stars. This is not the case, and in fact, the opposite is true. U.S. talent bureaus formed a half-century before Hollywood—at least thirty separate firms between 1860 and 1880—in order to process the thousands of non-star stage performers whose labor fueled the rise of a national variety industry. The dramatic agencies of the 1860s primarily routed female dancers and singers through a circuit dependent on cheap and interchangeable acts, functioning more

⁴ *Clipper*, May 9, 1863; August 1, 1863.

⁵ *Clipper*, September 26, 1874.

like temporary staffing agencies than as glamorous star-makers. In other words, think Molly Maids or Manpower, not movie stars. Agents framed themselves as necessary support for performers without established connections who sought a way onto the stage, but the agency ultimately rendered much of its “product” fungible, supplying low-priced labor for the benefit of theatrical managers.

The connection between variety theaters and dramatic agencies is crucial and forms the crux of this chapter. The structural demands of variety theaters, which emerged in the 1860s, drove the creation of dramatic agencies. Not only were the needs of variety managers and players well-served by dramatic agencies, but the key early agencies were founded by men who had worked in variety previously, and who continued to move between agent and manager. In emphasizing the variety origins of the dramatic agency, I do not mean to further fragment the study of commercial entertainment. A labor history approach to theater draws alternate lines of difference—not between ballet and burlesque, but between a single ballet dancer and member of a family troupe—and makes visible the fundamental reorientation of the entertainment industry driven by marginal genres. Rather than further splintering the subfield, naming variety’s defining characteristic as a new way of managing of stage labor—moving discrete acts across a loosely-affiliated set of venues, attracting established players and recruiting new ones, extracting and refining the most pleasing acts —demonstrates connections between genres.

For while variety was the origin of the dramatic agency, the agency’s impact extended far beyond any single set of players. Within a decade of existence, dramatic agencies had become the obvious solution for finding employment, and their constant presence was unremarkable. As the *Clipper* noted, “the dramatic agency has become such

a fixed institution that neither manager or performer could get along very well without it.”⁶ This is to say that, within a few decades, most players—trombonists and tragedians alike—worked like variety players. This makes sense if we understand variety not as a style of performance, but as a way of generating, managing, and distributing stage work. This interpretation would be recognizable to its early critics. Variety, according to one observer, was “whatever business outside of the horse lines the innumerable army of show people can do.”⁷ Rullman had not technically worked in variety, but he was fully involved with variety’s key labor force: the “minor” singing and dancing women.

The agency’s primary purpose was to facilitate the sale of stage labor, either by attaching players to touring companies, booking players directly into venues, or routing touring companies through venues. Agent James Conner described his work as “procuring positions for people, and people for managers.”⁸ Agents pitched themselves to theater proprietors who booked a range of attractions for venues from Pittsburgh to San Francisco, as well as the performers who sought engagements and, eventually, the managers of traveling companies looking to assemble companies that would exist solely on the road. Performers made appointments or submitted by mail the details of their acts in hopes of being enrolled on the agent’s books. Managers looking for performers or other employees could consult these books in the office or receive recommendations by mail; those assembling routes could also consult directories of theaters, concert halls, and canvas locations, or read the selection of foreign and domestic trade papers like the *Clipper* or London’s *Era*. After arranging a match between the player and the employer,

⁶ *Clipper*, June 24, 1865.

⁷ *Philadelphia Times*, August 27, 1875.

⁸ *Clipper*, April 21, 1866. Conner moved from Houston to 534 Broadway.

the agent coordinated the logistical details, freeing up managers and proprietors to attend to other business.

Although the agency's purpose was straight-forward, it contained many of the contradictions of the growing industry, including the dissonance of the dull pallor of office bureaucracy as the source of stage magic. Agents attracted clients by emphasizing the agency's physical space, running illustrations of their offices in the *Clipper*, an attempt to establish the legitimacy of a kind of work that could never shake the aura of swindlers. The emphasis on physical space also recognized the appeal of a permanent and protected space for those who were perpetually on the road, where business was often conducted by mail or in a saloon. To handle the range of tasks, agencies soon had entire departments dedicated to correspondence, booking engagements, contracts, and job printing.⁹ "Early and late you will find them at their desks," observed a journalist in an early peek into the sausage factory, "filling up a company here, piecing out a troupe there, and harmonizing conflicting interests of discordant managers."¹⁰ This behind-the-scenes coordination shared center stage with the parade of performers who, although technically off-stage, were never exempt from the intense scrutiny of peers and employers. A second early journalist visitor noted "crowds of professionals, of high and low degree" in search of engagements, but also a gathering of performers simply there to discuss "the situation" and scope out the competition.¹¹ Agencies navigated a delicate

⁹ *Clipper*, April 22, 1871. Thomas Allston Brown had at least four assistants in charge of these departments. Job printing was an important link between printers and theatrical managers, and soon came under the purview of agents. In 1870, the agents Lowell and Simmonds announced that they had made an arrangement with the *Public Ledger* [Philadelphia] and could now directly supply touring companies with theatrical paper. They likely kept a *Ledger* specimen book in the office. *Clipper*, July 17, 1870.

¹⁰ *Clipper*, August 23, 1879.

¹¹ *Clipper*, February 16, 1867.

line between private and public space. They were the physical equivalent of the industry truth that information was currency, and that every private detail could be spun into publicity. In recognition of this, both of the leading agencies in the 1860s boasted a “private office where managers and artists can converse without being listened to,” a service utilized by out-of-town managers.¹²

These conflicts stem from the dramatic agency’s role in pulling performance into the mechanisms of capital circulation. Variety proprietors dealt above all with the fundamental problem of coordinating a new mode of production, even though the challenges they faced are more familiar to us in other contexts, such as livestock, grain, or steel.¹³ And as was the case with unionized musicians and striking chorus members, commercial entertainment was not just another place where familiar patterns play out but a unique test case. The interest in what the agency did and how it worked, the subject of these early “behind-the-scenes” articles, was the result of the stage performer’s complex relation to alienation. If artists were supposed to be the inverse of a modern, alienated workforce, what were they doing surrounded by desk clerks? The representational significance of the theater industry invited people into an understanding of widespread economic processes that were invisible in other contexts. Taking full stock of the dramatic agency thus includes both how it operated on the ground and how it operated in a cultural imaginary, as audiences, managers, agents, and performers made sense of this new institution.

¹² *Clipper*, June 9, 1866.

¹³ Willian Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).

This chapter traces the explosive growth of these dramatic agencies, with attention both to individual agencies and to the conditions that generated and required their establishment. Instead of a comprehensive narrative of variety and its relationship to the agency, I offer here a detailed description of the linked fortunes of Detroit variety proprietor Jacob Beller, agents James Conner and Frank Rivers, and dancer Ernestine De Faiber. I also analyze the particular tasks and forms of the early dramatic agencies. Touring stars had for several decades required the assistance of an agent or manager acting on the star's behalf. But agencies as bureaucratic and fixed entities that recruited new players from amateur or vernacular spaces into a geographically dispersed web of venues were new. Contemporary observers were aware of this distinction, noting that the dramatic agency was "a great institution for unknown actors, who would not otherwise come to the notice of managers."¹⁴ In 1850 there were no dramatic agencies in New York City; fifty years later, there were at least two hundred agents for vaudeville alone.¹⁵ The post-war theater business was a set of linked regional circuits distributed unevenly across multiple continents and built around touring combination companies instead of location-bound stock companies. It was a set of interlocking wheels greased by theatrical agents.

Rethinking Variety: Three New Directions

If you have any prior expectations about what constituted variety theater, you are likely thinking of its defining performance styles: sentimental and comic songs, blackface minstrel routines, acrobatic acts, and women dancing in tights on the fine line between

¹⁴ *Clipper*, May 20, 1878.

¹⁵ Robert Grau, *Forty Years Observation of Music and the Drama* (New York: Broadway Publishing, 1909), 33.

artistry and scandalous display. Recent scholarship on variety has fruitfully pursued its staging of racial and sexual difference, as both changing national demographics and the proliferation of venues brought new groups of people into the theater in unprecedented numbers; this has reinforced older arguments focused on the genre's local appeal to immigrant, working-class, male audiences in New York City.¹⁶ But variety's participants expected not a particular kind of performance but a novel combination of styles, speeds, and scales. In Philadelphia, one variety theater promised "tableaux, combats and terpsichorean performers" in a "rapid succession of performances" that lasted for five hours; "the curtain, like the American Flag," concurred another observer, "*never goes down.*"¹⁷ Visitors noted the presence of multiple class-specific performance styles, which we often assume was obsolete by the 1860s. At this same venue, the parquet audience enjoyed the singing of Miss Lalande, "who has a well-cultivated and powerful contralto," while the upper part of the house—the cheap seats—was "carried away by the joyful chorus of Miss [Julia] Mortimer's 'Gay and 'Happy.'"¹⁸ Variety's pleasure was thus its recombination of recognizable elements into a new format. Without this framing, the genre's coherence unravels immediately. Variety happened in music halls, "free and easies," resorts, concert rooms, pleasure gardens, and casinos; theaters that played full-length dramas used the title "Varieties"—Laura Keene's "Varieties" theater in New York, for example, was a key rival of concert saloons—while variety managers often leased Opera Houses. The *point* of this category of entertainment is that it was fast and

¹⁶ Gillian Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*; Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*; Armond Fields, *Tony Pastor, Father of Vaudeville* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012).

¹⁷ *Sunday Mercury* February 10, 1861; *Daily Argus* [Philadelphia], January 10, 1861. Reprinted in "Opinion of the Press of Philadelphia," American Antiquarian Society. The *Argus* also referred to the Melodeon as a variety theater.

¹⁸ *Daily Bulletin* [Philadelphia], May 6, 1861.

flexible, suited to move with alacrity from a bar to a second-floor hall to a vacant theater. And what was true for venues was true also for performers, who moved with their acts from the circus to the blackface minstrel show to burlesque to the concert saloon.

Shifting our attention from songs and jokes of variety to the way it was made reveals three defining coordinates of the kind of theater that brought the dramatic agency into being: cheapness and profitability, the use of amateurs, and geographic reach. Each of these components shaped how dramatic agencies functioned. Placing a venue in the 1860s ecosystem should start not with venue title but with the admission charge: was there a cover, or was all the profit generated at the bar? Where in the six and a half to fifty-cent range did the cheapest ticket fall? Most venues across the high to low stratum survived on a combination of liquor or refreshment and ticket sales; as the defenders of the oft-maligned concert saloon loved to point out, even New York's elite theaters often had attached bars. But where a venue falls on this continuum determined how likely it was to be targeted by the police, and whether a venue was likely to be shut down set parameters around what kind of acts might be booked, as well as whether the proprietor would invest in a particular venue, or if he would be likely to move locations. Adjusting a venue's revenue stream could move it out of the crosshairs of law enforcement, as cities across the country passed anti-concert saloon laws, but it could also end the most reliable way to generate income. Calculating rates, considering the law, moving players between theaters, cutting costs—these were all a crucial important part of variety.

A second defining characteristic of variety was its ability to move players along a set of related continuums: from amateur into professional status, vernacular into commercial, circus to mainstage, and craft to industrial. Although proprietors may have

stated that “none but artistes of celebrity need apply,” this was never the case.¹⁹ As cities like St. Louis and Detroit attempted to mount productions comparable to the spectacles sweeping New York theaters, they necessarily turned to local amateurs or aspiring performers to fill the ranks. When serial amusement entrepreneur George Lea took over Jacob Beller’s Detroit location in 1863, he advertised in local papers for fifty young ladies at ten dollars a week.²⁰ Even after proprietors switched to professional singers, they continued to run amateur competitions, staging the moment of “crossover” from amateur (unpaid) to professional (paid). In Philadelphia, French tavern keeper J.B. Thomeuf offered \$100 to any singer in the United States who could compete with the Milanese bass Vincenzo Amici, who was singing every night at the Kossuth Exchange Saloon. Like the “free and easy” entertainment offered at concert saloons across the country, Thomeuf’s grab for patrons combined organic barroom entertainment—the challenge performance— with traveling entertainers well-versed in the art music canon.²¹

As will become increasingly clear in this chapter and the subsequent one, George Lea’s call for fifty female dancers was the standard refrain in variety hiring. In addition to female singers and dancers who would have responded to such advertisements, and thus were not likely to already be touring or playing with family troupes, variety pulled

¹⁹ *Clipper*, October 20, 1860.

²⁰ *Detroit Free Press [DFP]*, July 8, 1863. Lea could run this many houses because the daily operations were taken care of by stage managers like W.B. Cavanagh, an Irish tenor who had previously sung at Beller’s.

²¹ *Public Ledger [PL]*, September 13, 1852. Thomeuf made several additions to his Franklin Hall Restaurant on Sixth Street in the 1850s, adding two shuffleboards to his liquor, cigars and oysters. Over the next several years, Thomeuf repeatedly brought European musicians and vocalists (and chilled lager, in the summertime) to his saloon, and these players gave free concerts each evening. He added 6 1/2 cent admission in October. In February 1856, he opened “Thomeuf’s Varieties” three blocks from the Kossuth, with a stage particularly suited to concerts and a twelve-cent ticket option. Ida Duval, sister of Sallie, made her debut at Thomeuf’s Varieties in Philadelphia in January 1858 singing “This Magic-Wove Scarf” from John Barnett’s 1834 opera *The Mountain Sylph*. *PL*, June 3, 1850; June 17, October 22, 1853; January 26, 1856; January 18, 1858.

performers whose work was primarily physical from the circus onto the stage. These players often came from beyond the Anglo-American theatrical establishment, and they leveraged the competition between variety managers for the best possible contracts in a way that was less possible in the circus. When Hollis Jacobs of the Metropolitan Varieties in Detroit refused to pay railroad fares for the Syro-Arabic Troupe, the troupe's agent contacted Jacobs' rival George Lea, who booked them at the Baltimore Melodeon.²² This strategy was not exclusive to the Syro-Arabic Troupe, but was used by multiple performers in similar positions.

Finally, a third defining feature of variety that shaped the dramatic agency is the way the genre complicates our expectations of what was "local" and what was its opposite—national, international, regional—in mid-century America. Although variety is often considered to have local roots, many local favorites in working-class saloons were in fact already part of a robust circuit of venues. Jerry Merrifield, who sang comic songs at William Hitchcock's renowned New York City concert saloon, was a show business veteran who had played low comic roles across the South and West since the 1830s; the Philadelphian Eliza Duval, sister of Sallie Duval who opened the introduction of this dissertation, was "the great favorite of the Toledoans."²³ One of the most popular venues in St. Louis was called "The Bowery." Topical skits were written to reflect the texture of

²² Lea also had his Detroit manager, W.B. Cavanagh, run an advertisement in the Detroit paper shaming Jacobs' conduct. *DFP*, November 4, 1863. The Syro-Arabic Troupe first appeared at Barnum's Museum in New York City in March 1863, and last appeared in the *Clipper* a year later. A notice for Fox's Casino listed five members of the troupe: the sisters Zara and Zulieka, and Seyd, Sidi, and Ali Hassan. *Clipper*, March 26, 1864.

²³ Merrifield was stage-managing and singing at Leavitt's in Albany (*Clipper*, February 27, 1858), Easton, PA (*Clipper*, July 2, 1859), Long's in Philadelphia (*Clipper*, August 6, 1859), the Baltimore Melodeon (*Clipper*, November 3, 1860) and St. Louis (*Clipper*, July 6, 1861). Mary Owens placed Merrifield and his wife Rose Cline in the St. Charles stock company in New Orleans in 1846. Mary C. Stevens Owens, *Memories of the Professional and Social Life of John E. Owens* (Baltimore: John Murphy, 1892), 27. "Great favorite" is *Clipper*, July 21, 1866.

an immediate locale—like the Iron City’s *The Pittsburgh Fireman* or *Did You Ever Send Your Wife to East Liberty?*—but used similar plotlines and recurring characters the ubiquitous Mose. When Frank Rivers opened his Philadelphia Melodeon, his second major undertaking was “The Fairy of Schuylkill,” a pro-Union burlesque fairy ballet with “local matters interwoven.”²⁴ This dynamic was the result of the productive friction of vernacular and mass performance methods, as local references and styles moved between performers and locations, generating interest and appetite as they travelled.

From Local Venue to National Circuit: Jacob Beller and Detroit Variety

Most histories of variety begin on the Lower East Side, where the genre was sanitized and repackaged as vaudeville. But what happens if we start elsewhere? In Detroit, limited competition from touring or local dramatic companies, a growing population, and improvements in municipal service and infrastructure established ideal conditions for a concert saloon, and wholesale liquor and cheese dealer Jacob Beller stepped into place.²⁵ Beller emigrated to the United States from Switzerland at age twenty and moved to Detroit in 1852, where he lived with his family and, eventually, a rotating list of performers above his place of business.²⁶ By 1855, he had converted his storefront

²⁴ *Daily Journal*, March 10, 1861, in “Opinions,” AAS. The manager who oversaw the *Pittsburgh Fireman* had spent two decades watching traveling stars come through the hub city, and the proprietor of the St. Louis Bowery was a salesman from New York.

²⁵ Robert Ross, George Catlin, and Clarence Burton, *Landmarks of Wayne County and Detroit* (Detroit: Evening News Association, 1898), 598-599.

²⁶ Beller moved first to Rochester, NY, in 1844, where he ran a grocery store and sold the city’s first lager beer. He returned briefly to Rochester when Michigan banned the sale of alcohol, and then moved to Chicago after selling his variety saloon in Detroit. Beller returned to the city in the 1870s and built a pleasure garden in Hamtramck, which he ran until his death in 1909. *DFP*, June 13, 1909; “Monthly Michigan Melange,” *The American Bottler* 29, no. 4 (April, 1909), 30. In 1860, there were twelve people living with the Bellers, including two German-speaking waiters, the English vocalist Eva Brent and her one year-old daughter, two male vocalists, a father and son gymnast team from New York, and the singer Robert Edwards and his wife and daughter. Although many of these people were on the move, at least three

to a saloon, and began hosting occasional performances by Lucker's Band for his "friends [...] and the public generally."²⁷ These performances gathered momentum and spurred Beller to expand his offerings, which within two years included a week-long "Grand Musical Festival" featuring five performers playing a classical repertoire. In keeping with variety's defining features, these early players were both foreign—European—and local.²⁸

Like his counterparts in St. Louis and Cincinnati, Beller's saloon grew into its initial popularity by providing space for local activity. As a hub of German-speaking social life in Detroit, and he hosted an anti-prohibition law meeting and the first semi-annual meeting of Grutli's Swiss Society; when he first appeared in the *Clipper*, the paper noted that "Beller understand the wants of the Detroit people, and caters for them accordingly."²⁹ In spite of variety's association with working class audiences, men of all social positions were said to attend, although women did not have access to this same mobility.³⁰ Beller was constantly dodging the familiar charges of rowdy and licentious behavior, and was compelled to assure patrons that he would close his doors to those who behaved "in a boisterous or improper manner."³¹ This was because admission to Beller's venue was fifteen cents plus two drink tickets. In keeping with his origins as a liquor

of the employees at Beller's saloon were still performing or at least traveling as a family unit. 1860 U.S. Census, Detroit Ward 3, Wayne, Michigan; Roll: M653_565; Page: 176.

²⁷ *DFP*, November 27, 1855. The first notice invited "the friends of Mr. Beller, and the public generally."

²⁸ For example, the Viennese pianist Justin Von Juch married Augusta Hahn of Detroit, and their daughter Emma Juch was a major prima donna in the 1880s and 1890s. *DFP*, June 25, 1857; Alan Dale, *Queens of the Stage* (New York: G.W. Dillingham, 1896).

²⁹ *DFP*, July 30, 1856; February 11, 1857; *Clipper*, October 20, 1860. Beller also introduced matinee performances in August 1860, although it is unclear if this was successful. Lawrence Rudick, "The Detroit Theater Comes of Age, 1862-1875," (PhD diss., 1971), 77.

³⁰ Ross, etc., *Landmarks*, 599.

³¹ *DFP*, January 30, 1858.

dealer, alcohol remained at the venue's core.³² But unlike his eastern counterparts, Beller benefitted from the irregularity of competing legitimate theaters, which meant that he could be the only game in town simply by staying open.³³ According to one local observer, "the want of a first-class opera house or theatre is driving hundreds—who would otherwise ignore them—to the patronage of low concert halls."³⁴

Five years into his experiment with live entertainment, Beller committed to running a variety theater. Until that point, his venue was still a locally-oriented multipurpose storefront where patrons came to drink, socialize, and purchase Limberger cheese at wholesale prices.³⁵ The first step was his conversion, in 1857, of two separate storefronts into a single large room with a bar.³⁶ Three years later, Beller's venue became an established node on the variety circuit, with a new roster of players, schedule, and recruitment process. He had been advertising for patrons in Detroit papers since Lucker's band, but in 1860 he turned to the *Clipper* and to Philadelphia's *Public Ledger* in search of employees. In both cities, Beller announced what he was looking for—"first-class singing Lady, danseuse, Negro performer"—and gave the location of a local hotel, where performers could apply to him in person.³⁷ He also advertised these trips locally to stoke anticipation for upcoming bills.³⁸ When he first appeared in the *Clipper*, Beller's roster

³² *DFP*, July 4, 1861.

³³ Local observers noted the absence of competition. The *Free Press* described police court as "the only cheap recreation in the city," as the theater was closed, Beller charged fifteen cents, and the rat pit twenty-five. *DFP*, December 23, 1860.

³⁴ *Detroit Daily Advertiser*, February 17, 1860, qtd. in Rudick, "Detroit Theater," 72.

³⁵ He offered Swiss, Limburger, and Green cheese from his hall. *DFP*, October 5, 1860.

³⁶ Beller replaced the wall with a row of pillars, obstructing the audience's view. Rudick, "Detroit Theater," 72.

³⁷ *PL*, March 28, 1860. In New York, he said he would be at French's Hotel from 10AM to noon for five days and wanted to hear from "first class concert performers," specifically three female singers and a danseuse. *Clipper*, October 20, 1860.

³⁸ *DFP*, January 14 and 17, 1863. Beller had engaged Marietta Ravel.

was a comic, an eccentric, and Master W.H. Lewis, who—in true variety fashion— was identified only as “the Versatile.”³⁹ Within a year, however, his troupe was regularly composed of twelve to seventeen touring players split between men and women, although the women’s names were listed first in the newspaper advertising.⁴⁰ Over the next few years, the most familiar names on the variety circuit all appeared at Beller’s.

As he improved his venue, Beller was also proving the viability of variety entertainment in Detroit. By the time he relinquished the management of his hall in the spring of 1863, there were eight concert halls in Detroit alone.⁴¹ The presence of touring players in Detroit also made it easier for other variety venues to get off the ground, as they both stimulated audience interest and created a pool of temporarily local players who could be poached. In direct competition with Beller during the 1860 and 1861 seasons, the Metropolitan had a stock company that supported week-long stands with touring stars. At Beller’s, in contrast variety, popular “star” performers played longer two-to-three month engagements while offering a more flexible bill each night that could respond to local tastes. As a result, variety at Beller’s attracted 600 to 800 people at its biggest nights, while the Metropolitan Theatre—when playing drama—could not come close.⁴²

When a second liquor dealer re-opened the Metropolitan Theater as the Metropolitan Varieties with a bill of “negro minstrelsy, vaudevilles, burlesques, and

³⁹ *Clipper*, October 20, 1860.

⁴⁰ The Duval sisters and Lida White first appeared in 1860. *Detroit Daily Tribune*, January 3, 1860.

⁴¹ Beller sold the saloon to Josh Hart and Anton Bretz, a local Shakespearean actor and grocer, who operated it as the “Detroit Concert Hall.” *DFP*, April 4, 1863. Others included William Wray, George Winship, and William B. Cavanagh. Beller did not own the building, which in fact had two separate owners, and he could not convince them to build a new building, so he sold the lease to Charles Welch in 1863, who was at that point running the Metropolitan Varieties. Ross, etc., *Landmarks*, 599.

⁴² *DFP*, April 26, 1860.

ballet troupes,” variety had taken over completely. Lewis Bayless’s opening roster included familiar players from Beller’s, but his new location meant twice as much room, a range of tickets prices, and greater ease in mounting matinees aimed at women and children.⁴³ Competing venues brought new proprietors like Bayless into the business, but just as importantly, it altered the strategies of touring players, who could now play competing managers against each other. As the *Detroit Clipper* correspondent noted, the Bayless’s arrival meant that Beller was “getting ‘shooting stars’ where he had expected fixed ones,” as the upstart manager attempted to lure favorites to his venue.⁴⁴ The best example of this was the triangular negotiation between Beller, Bayless, and Dora Dawron, the first variety performer to develop a double-voiced singing act. Dawron came to Beller’s from P.T. Barnum’s American Museum, but she moved almost immediately to the Metropolitan Varieties, provoking a series of exchanges in the Detroit press deliberating the mutual obligations of performer and manager.

The debate hinged on Beller’s treatment and presentation of Dawron, who sang alternately in a soprano and a baritone voice and dressed one side of her body in petticoats and the other in pantaloons. Yet in spite of the Dawron’s association with Barnum, she did not generate interest as a sexual curiosity. As David Monod has written, “she was a vocal ‘freak’ whose physical imposture was the signifier rather than the source of her attraction,” and the unusualness of her performance was not presented as an innate contradiction to be puzzled through but as a skill she had cultivated.⁴⁵ Dawron

⁴³ *DFP*, May 28, 1862. Earlier, Bayless advertised retail and wholesale wine and liquor. *DFP*, December 30, 1860.

⁴⁴ *Clipper*, October 11, 1862. Ida Duval was listed first in a July 1862 promotional blurb. *Clipper*, July 22, 1862.

⁴⁵ David Monod, “Double-Voiced: Music, Gender, and Nature in Performance,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14 (April, 2015), 174. Monod argues that early double-voiced singers like Dawron

went to Detroit to make this distinction clearer, to lift herself out of Barnum's cosmology and establish a reputation as a vocalist. When the relationship between Beller and Dawron soured, the manager retaliated by emphasizing her connection Barnum. In response, Dawron defended herself as "a lady and a performer." The debate over the meaning of Dawron's epicene performance was thus intricately connected with the working conditions of variety, particularly the competition between managers and the possibilities opened up for players by variety's dispersed geography.

When Dora Dawron came to Detroit in the fall of 1862, she had already spent almost two years in P.T. Barnum's employment, first in New York at his American Museum and then in Boston at his summertime Aquarial Gardens.⁴⁶ According to their correspondence as submitted to the *Free Press* by Jacob Beller, Dawron wrote from Boston in search of engagement in July, and Beller offered fifteen dollars a week. Dawron asked for the full railroad fare, and Beller agreed, if he could deduct half of the fare from her salary. After a three-week lapse in communication, Dawron wrote from New York with a new bargaining chip demonstrating her awareness of Detroit's variety scene: "Mr. Bayless wants me, so think you ought to pay all my fare, as he would." By the first week of September, Dawron had arrived in Detroit, and immediately requested a salary advance, as she been out of work caring for an ill child. She added that she had taken a lower salary because she had been promised an advance by a Mr. Conner, and

were evidence of an understanding of gender that understood sexual difference as indefinite and considered it possible for men and women to possess qualities of another gender. "In applauding double-voiced singers, audiences implicitly accepted the idea that a man or woman could have both a female and a male voice, and the capacity to express (without burlesque) female and male emotions in song." By the early twentieth century, however, "double-voiced singing rested on confidence in biological sex and then told a visual lie in order to express a truth"—the truth here being that sexual difference was immutable. Monod, 179, 181-2.

⁴⁶ *NYH*, December 13, 1860. Dawron had been in Boston since June 1862. This was reported by New York papers as well as by the *Picayune* in New Orleans. August 14, 1862.

Dawron proposed to repay the loan with one-third of her weekly paycheck deducted. She also agreed to stay at Beller's for at least two months.⁴⁷

Instead, Dawron left Beller's employment almost immediately. When she was first billed in the *Free Press* on the day of her arrival, September 6^a (as a misspelled Miss Dawson "just arrived from Europe"), the paper promoted her as "something extraordinary, singing in two distinct voices at once," although with no mention of her gender-bending. A week later, the paper noted that Dawron "and her wonderful double voice [...] still draws and fills the house."⁴⁸ Within a few days she left for the Metropolitan Varieties because, as she later explained, Beller's establishment was "not what I expected it to be." By the end of the week, Beller had retaliated through the *Free Press*, which now referred to her as "the latest curiosity at Beller's" but noted that she was "entirely outdone by another monstrosity," a new double-voiced singer who was "the queerest thing we ever saw, and decidedly throws Dora Dawron in the shade altogether."⁴⁹ These promotional puffs, which were technically separate from the advertisements placed by Beller but were heavily influenced by him, spurred Dawron to publicly reject her categorization as a "monstrosity." Beller, she explained, "with a meanness characteristic of the man [...] seeks to advertise his place by trying to injure me, both as a lady and professionally. This is the only method by which I can speak, and I trust a generous public will accord the support and protection due to a woman."⁵⁰ These

⁴⁷ *DFP*, September 21, 1862.

⁴⁸ *DFP*, September 6 and 13, 1862. Dawron wrote from New York that she would arrive in Detroit on Thursday, September 4^a and be prepared to open at Beller's two days later.

⁴⁹ *DFP*, September 17 and 18, 1862.

⁵⁰ *DFP*, published September 19, 1862; the letter was dated the 18^a.

statements called out the manager's vengeful publicity, while claiming a moral high ground based on both gender and professional skill and conduct.

The presence of a rival proprietor allowed Dawron both to escape a bad engagement and to go public with her self-defense. The singer had begun her engagement with Beller already in his debt, which she took on in order to cover half the cost of a new dress purchased for her by Barnum, which Dawron explained would “render my engagement more effective by the change of dress.”⁵¹ The new dress was still a costume split between male and female attire, and was even more spectacular. Her interest in procuring the dress, strong enough to send her further into debt, suggests that Dawron's desire to wrest her performance from Barnum did not mean that she no longer wanted to perform in two voices. Instead, she wanted her performance to be understood as such—as an act. She did not want to be framed as a curiosity or monstrosity on display.

Likewise, Dawron's assertion that the paper was “the only method by which I can speak” highlights the limited control variety players had over their acts, particularly when they were promoted or hired by well-connected managers with strong ties to the press. Beller was no Barnum, but he had made a point once before of removing his patronage from a Detroit paper when it reported negatively on his establishment.⁵² When he responded publicly to Dawron, Beller argued that he was not responsible for the *Free Press* notices, but that either way, they were not out of keeping with the way the singer

⁵¹ The new dress was meant to represent a “syren of the sea [...] with flowing golden hair on one side and an old monk on the other.” *DFP*, September 21, 1862. Beller also reproduced receipts for the paper for his advances and payment to Dawron: \$30 on September 9, an additional 2.50 on the 8th, and for \$15 on the 15th, presumably for her first week of work.

⁵² The *Detroit Daily Advertiser* had handled all of Beller's advertising in 1860, before he switched to the *Free Press* in the summer of 1861 when it reported that his venue had grown disorderly. Beller explained in the *Free Press* that the *Tribune* had made money from his advertising, and that he would take his business elsewhere. Rudick, “Detroit Theater,” 76, 79-80.

had been promoted at the Aquarial Gardens. Holding Dawron to Barnum's promotional choices was a way to keep the performer from shaping her own narrative. So, too, were his swipes at her claims to ladyhood. Beller explained that he was happy to see her leave, and "whether this behavior is lady-like, especially on the part of one professing to be a lady, I leave it to a discerning public to decide." Beller had thus taken the spectacular quality of Dawron's act and used it to undermine her person; in questioning her status as a lady, Beller was using her cross-gender performance to destabilize the singer's reliability and her reputation.

Attacking Dawron was an affront both to the singer and to her new employer, who immediately entered the fray. Initially a third party, Lewis Bayless was the greatest beneficiary of the conflict. Beller claimed that Bayless had lured Dawron away with a much higher weekly salary, which may have been the case; at that point, she had proven a successful act, and Bayless did not need to advance salary or pay her transportation. Bayless took the opportunity to disparage the quality of the rival venue, explaining that Dawron found Beller's "uncongenial to her feelings as a lady and a performer" and preferred a venue "where her talents could be better appreciated, and an opportunity given to show her abilities as a vocalist." Both proprietors had started out as wholesale liquor dealers, but Bayless branded Beller a "*pork-vending-beer-hall-manager*." While Beller had shared his letters with Dawron to prove his upstanding behavior, Bayless took another tack; he claimed that he could refute the facts of Beller's account, but would not publish the private correspondence of a lady.⁵³ Most significantly, Bayless followed the singer's lead and promoted her as a "wonderful musical phenomenon," referencing her

⁵³ *DFP*, September 21, 1862.

prior engagement at Barnum's Museum but attributing her success to "her wonderful vocal execution." And he was right. In early October, the *Clipper* reported that Dawron had "taken the public by storm, the Varieties being crowded nightly to hear and see her" and "she has proved a paying card for manager Bayless," where she played for three months.⁵⁴

Dora Dawron was not the only female performer who used the rivalry between these two proprietors to her advantage. Moreover, the interest in the details of the conflict suggested that contractual violations could be spun into publicity, and that the mechanisms of hiring could be used to sell tickets and papers. As soon as he hired outside of Detroit, Beller had regularly engaged the singing and dancing Duval sisters for several months at a time. The month following the Dawron incident, the *Clipper's* regular Detroit correspondent reported that Bayless had signed a contract with Rose, even though she had been performing steadily at Beller's for at least a year, and that because she continued to play in her familiar location, Bayless had sought a legal injunction. A week later, a different correspondent wrote in to deny the earlier account. Either way, the Dawron conflict had convinced the *Clipper* editors that struggles over a performer were a reliable way to attract attention and make sales; as the first correspondent had appended to his account of the rumors, "I am glad to learn from our news venders that the circulation of the *Clipper* is largely increasing here."⁵⁵ It is not surprising that variety managers were taking a page from the Barnum publicity playbook. The wrinkle here is that the object of consternation was not the veracity of what was displayed on stage, but

⁵⁴ *Clipper*, October 11, 1862. Bayless was in Detroit until June 1862, and in the fall of 1866 he opened the Rochester Opera House. *Buffalo Evening Post*, August 11, 1866.

⁵⁵ *Clipper*, October 11, 1862.

the contractual details of how a performer was hired, and what the mutual obligations of a contract meant in the context of cheap amusements.⁵⁶

Although competition does not seem to have damaged Beller's business, he closed up in February 1863 and moved to Chicago to try variety in a new location. Beller was at the peak of his success, having just brought star ballerina Marietta Ravel to Detroit, but the owners of his two separate storefronts (joined into one venue) refused to let him expand. At the same time, Bayless sold his lease of Metropolitan Varieties to the same man who had purchased Beller's. This attempt to consolidate variety into the Metropolitan Theater building did not last, however; variety thrived when there were multiple locations, and no single manager could retain a monopoly on multiple venues. By March, Beller's was reopened by a new managerial team.⁵⁷

Detroit was the rule and not exception, and variety theaters across the country thrived on local competition and distant talent. Unlike the full-length productions built around stars or stock companies, which had stricter timelines and tighter rules about who could play which part, variety thrived on motion and novelty. Linked variety venues allowed managers to hire experienced but locally "new" players on schedules of their own design, while players like Dawron could attempt to exert control over their acts. But none of this would have been possible if manager and players did not have access to distant locations. In the issue of the *Clipper* that reported rising paper sales in Detroit, variety managers in Rochester, Cincinnati, Providence, Milwaukee, Albany, Baltimore, and Liverpool, UK were advertising for players and audiences. In Philadelphia,

⁵⁶ Cook, *Arts of Deception*, 73-118.

⁵⁷ *DFP*, February 18 and 19, March 23, 1863.

Washington, D.C., New York City, and St. Louis, at least two variety venues were in competition with each other, and the competition was fierce. In Baltimore, George Lea promised to pay a higher salary than any other concert saloon manager in America.⁵⁸ The key point here is only that not only did commercial entertainment in different cities undergo similar transformations, but they did so in a synchronized fashion. This interdependence was necessary, not coincidental.

As the synchronicity of variety theater gathered momentum, it produced a new factor. Lurking in the background of the Beller-Dawron-Bayless triangle was the Mr. Conner who advised Dawron in New York to take a lower salary in Detroit but ask for an advance. This was James Conner, a Philadelphia-based Irish comedian turned variety agent whose invisible presence mirrors how little we understand the agent's role in variety. Jacob Beller had made occasional visits to New York and Philadelphia in search of players, but neither the annual trip nor the performers' direct application to theaters—the previous standard—was sufficient to fill the ranks. Faced with this circumstance, Beller did what subsequent managers in all genres of entertainment could not avoid. He hired an agent.

The Variety Manager Becomes an Agent: Frank Rivers and James Conner

When variety managers wanted an agent, they wrote to James Conner or Frank Rivers, Conner's previous employer. Conner opened a "Concert Saloon Agency" in 1861, and Rivers founded a competing agency in 1866. Both men had worked on and off-stage, as performers and either as a stage manager or as a full-fledged variety manager. They

⁵⁸ *Clipper*, October 11, 1862.

made these new positions out of what they already knew, and for Frank Rivers, this was how to hire and bill the talent. Rivers began his career at age 10 as an Olympic posturer with Rufus Welch's National Circus, making connections with local proprietors that he later utilized as in variety. In August 1847, for example, Welch's played six nights at the American Hotel lot in Pittsburgh, which became Trimble's Varieties of this dissertation's opening set piece, where many of Rivers' clients played in the 1860s.⁵⁹ After an injury in the mid-1850s, Rivers left performing and joined the legion of advance agents required to move circuses across the Americas.⁶⁰ In the winter of 1859, Rivers took over a former minstrel hall at 539 Broadway in New York City and converted it into the Melodeon—"the cheapest place of amusement in the world"—at thirteen cents a seat.⁶¹ It was immediately popular, which the *Clipper* attributed to the strong players Rivers had hired and his capacity to retain them: it was "a very efficient company [and] many of the members are masters in their respective lines of business."⁶² M. B. Leavitt, a rising producer, also attributed Rivers' success to his capacity as a talent scout, his insistence on

⁵⁹ Welch promised an equestrian company "entirely of star performers," a waterproof canvas pavilion that could seat 3,000 people, a double orchestra, the famous clown Dan Rice, Spanish equestrians, a General Zachary Taylor involving a five-person pyramid on four horses, and the Rivers brothers —"the most finished artists in their arrangement and execution of scenes and gymnastic groups." *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, August 26, 1847. As early as October, notices of acts at Trimble's began appearing in the *Clipper*, and in March the proprietor was advertising in the *Ledger* for a lady vocalist and a danseuse for a three-month engagement. *PL*, March 8, 1860.

⁶⁰ In the spring of 1856, he was the agent for Rowe & Co. Pioneer Circus as it toured northern California; the following winter, Rivers was working the Atlantic States and Europe as the agent for Lee & Bennett's Great North American Circus out of San Francisco. *Sonoma County Journal*, June 21, 1856; *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, May 14, 1857; "Rowe's Pioneer Circus" broadside, AAS.

⁶¹ *NYH*, August 8, 1859; English tenors who could sing the new songs were to find the barkeeper at the Melodeon between 5 and 7 AM. The first large *Clipper* ad with "cheapest" line was June 11, 1859.

⁶² *Clipper*, August 20, 1859.

nightly changes to the program, and his circus connections.⁶³ Success at Rivers' Melodeon soon became a calling card for variety managers and audience alike.⁶⁴

Less than a year into running the New York venue, Rivers opened a second Melodeon in Philadelphia, offering five hours of ballet, burlesques, and specialties each evening from "standard favorites of the New York Melodeon."⁶⁵ Although New York commands most scholarly attention, Philadelphia was a hotbed of cheap amusements. John Ricketts had offered the nation's first circus in Philadelphia in 1792, and the first "free and easy" was advertised at the Mammoth Bowling Saloon in 1849, while the city's legitimate theaters struggled to stay open.⁶⁶ In the fall of 1857, when Beller was converting his two storefronts into his theater, the *Clipper* reported that "concert saloons in Philadelphia have become fixed facts and are numerous attended," and added that "these are 'institutions' peculiar to Philadelphia, and the price of admission is so low that crowds nightly attend them."⁶⁷ Rivers applied his circus advertising acumen and his capacity to move performers between venues with this local thriving concert saloon scene. As had been the case with the New York Melodeon, observers praised his ability to deliver high-quality performances at low prices. He was "a thorough-going business man" who had made "a proper consultation of the wants of the pleasure-seekers." As a

⁶³ The performers were extremely versatile and there were no 'one act people,'" recalled Leavitt. "Everybody who aspired to the slightest success was the possessor of a wide range of capabilities." M.B. Leavitt, *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management* (New York: Broadway Publishing, 1912), 183-4.

⁶⁴ When Miss H.O. Lalande appeared at the Canterbury Hall in D.C., she was promoted as "formerly Prima Donna of the Frank Rivers Melodeon Troupe." *Baltimore Sun*, April 17, 1862.

⁶⁵ *PL*, April 10, 1860.

⁶⁶ In the 1850s, the Philadelphia National had been re-converted to a circus venue, and the Arch Street Theatre manager had returned to New York to focus on his interests there, the Chestnut was run by James Quinlan, who mostly sold liquor; only the Walnut remained. Andrew Davis, *America's Longest Run: A History of the Walnut Street Theatre* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2010), 21.

⁶⁷ *Clipper*, October 24, 1857.

result, “he gives it to us [...] in quantities and of a quality to be obtained nowhere else on this continent for the same money.”⁶⁸

Rivers *could* do this because of the connections he had made as a circus performer and an advance agent, and he *chose* to do it because having theaters in multiple cities gave a proprietor several advantages. He could keep the same players on his payroll but rotate them between New York and Philadelphia, promising both steady employment and a change of bill to his patrons. When one venue was under construction, he could move players to the other. It also allowed him to recruit new performers in two separate cities, an advantage given his constant call for ballet dancers and lady vocalists.⁶⁹ Finally, Rivers was experimenting successfully with scale. He could keep his admission fees low but retain quality talent by paying decent salaries and promising steady work. Rivers was not the only New York manager to attempt this same plan, as he was followed to Philadelphia by both Robert Butler and Charles Fox, who had run competing variety theaters in New York.

Rivers was pushed as well as pulled toward Philadelphia. By the late 1850s, a coalition of reformers and legitimate theaters were leveling legal and ethical charges at variety, and Rivers was on the hook. In June 1859, only a few months into his management of the Melodeon, he was fined \$500 for “keeping a disorderly house,

⁶⁸ Philadelphia notice reprinted in *Clipper*, June 2, 1860; “consulted” is from *Sunday Telegraph*, October 20, 1860, “Opinions,” AAS. The reviewer was particularly excited that Rivers was bringing Boucicault’s “The Female Forty Thieves.” Rivers opened the Philadelphia Melodeon in a venue previously called the City Museum, which one reviewer noted had low attendance “because it was considered to be an out of the way place,” but that now people are arriving in passenger cars from all points across the city. *Sunday Atlas*, October 13, 1860, “Opinions,” AAS.

⁶⁹ “Eight or ten young ladies find steady employment at good salary, by applying at the Melodeon,” “twenty handsome young ladies” for the ballet, and “twenty genteel lady waiters, wanted immediately.” *PL*, March 10 and October 6, 1860; *NYH*, April 15, 1863.

particularly on Sundays, when he kept open, and had a band of music playing, besides which disorderly and disagreeable scenes were enacted in his house.”⁷⁰ Reformers in earlier periods had targeted all theatricals, but by this period dramatic venues shared both a moral position and a clientele with the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquent. Both organizations understood the mixture of alcohol, entertainment, and sex as a threat, although the object of the threat was a moving target. The *Clipper* argued that most of the ire directed at concert saloons and variety theaters came from competitors who were angry that variety was driving up salaries and poaching talent from the dramatic stage. Six months into running Melodeons in two cities, Rivers attempted to sell his New York theater and move operations entirely to Philadelphia. This time, the Society had filed an injunction against Rivers and his three major competitors for hosting theatrical exhibits without paying the \$500 licensing fee.⁷¹ Reformers experimented with charges of general disorderliness or licensing violations until 1862, when an Anti-Concert Saloon Bill was finally passed, which targeted waiter girls—the reviled off-stage counterpart to the rising number of women on stage—as the source of moral dissolution.⁷² By then Rivers was long gone.

Indeed, seven months after opening the Philadelphia Melodeon, Rivers took his company on the road for a summer tour from Buffalo to Boston as one of the first variety

⁷⁰ *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 24, 1859. See also Brooks McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon: The Devil's Own Night* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Alan Gevenson, “The Origins of Vaudeville: Aesthetic Power, Disquietude, and Cosmopolitanism in the Quest for an American Music Hall,” (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2007).

⁷¹ Theatrical licenses had been required since the 1820s, but because concert saloons, beer gardens, and music halls were recent additions to the entertainment scene, they had fallen outside the law. In September 1860, Rivers attempted to sell the Melodeon and move to Philadelphia. *NYT*, September 4, 1860.

⁷² In the summer of 1863 he attempted replicate his New York success with the Great Oriental Free Music Hall, where the beautiful “Segar Girls” would be on hand to greet old friends, but New York audiences had moved on. *NYH*, April 15, 1863.

touring companies.⁷³ Drawing on his time as a circus advance agent, Rivers' promotional style and structure anticipated the mammoth touring minstrel and burlesque companies of subsequent decades. At his most extravagant, Rivers promised "More Novelty and Variety of Amusement in one Evening than ever before attempted!" from his cast of seventy-five, including a nightly concert in front of the theater (a subsequent feature of most industrial minstrel companies) and a Saturday afternoon performance.⁷⁴ The following summer, he closed the Melodeon permanently and took his troupe on an extended tour from Portland, Maine to Bloomington, Indiana, circulating a three-page pamphlet of "unsolicited" Philadelphia reviews praising his capacity to deliver "the greatest variety of performance" at low prices.⁷⁵ The advertising demands of a touring variety company were too much for even a hustler like Rivers to handle alone, so he hired an advance agent with no theatrical experience, but who had printed and edited a free *Daily Advertiser* in Lockport, New York.⁷⁶ Rivers' digest of reviews began with notices

⁷³ The last advertisement for Rivers' Philadelphia Melodeon ran in the *Public Ledger* on November 11, 1861. The previous summer, Rivers' may have taken his company on the road for two months. In October 1862, the Philadelphia correspondent for the *Clipper* lamented that Rivers was not around, "as he knows more about the business than three-fourths of the managers engaged in it." October 11, 1862. Leavitt, *Fifty Years*, 183. Leavitt also names Rivers as was also the first manager to introduce variety to Boston in 1861, at the Howard Athenaeum.

⁷⁴ *Boston Daily Advertiser*, July 9, 1861. Program was the "Operatic and Choreographic Drama, the Mountain Sylph," the ballet "La Bouquetiere," the comic pantomime "Lucifer's Frolic," and an olio of Ethiopian Minstrelsy.

⁷⁵ The *Daily Cleveland Herald* reprinted the assessment that "each [performer] is an attraction, *solus*" from the *Philadelphia Sunday Mercury*, November 24, 1862. They played New Haven, Hartford, Boston, Worcester, Portland, Springfield, Troy, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, Louisville, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Milwaukee, Portland and Bloomington. "Scenes which are produced under his management were never before vouchsafed to the million, they were only for the eyes of the millionaires," reported the *Sunday Atlas*, October 13, 1860, qtd. in "Opinions," AAS. The most recent date in the pamphlet was June 1861, suggesting that he assembled it for his first summer tour.

⁷⁶ Lockport was in New York's most fertile theatrical ground, equidistant from Rochester, Buffalo, and Niagara Falls, and Prentiss also did job printing out of the *Advertiser* office, which included posters, handbills, and tickets, which first drew him into the theatrical orbit. The restructuring of theatrical playbills in the 1870s joined the earlier playbill format—a listing of players and acts—to the advertising daily, a combination that was both imaginable and facilitated by the entry of printers like Prentiss into theatrical management. The *Advertiser* promoted shell combs, distillers, banks, housekeeping articles, schools,

praising the female singers and dancers in his employment, including one of the ubiquitous Duval sisters. Following Rivers' lead, the press coverage never failed to mention the ballet corps of twenty women, and the longest promotional pieces included the full names of eight of the principle dancers and listed thirteen of their many routines.⁷⁷ His formula worked, and the troupe was popular; Columbus, Cleveland, and Buffalo papers all recorded record-breaking crowds.⁷⁸ Over the next few years, Rivers continued to work as a manager or agent for traveling variety, ballet, and light opera troupes, establishing contacts with performers and proprietors.⁷⁹

After almost a decade in variety, Rivers moved into a new position that extended logically from the connections he had made as tour manager and proprietor. In the spring of 1866, he opened a dramatic agency at 25 West Houston Street in New York City, where in his first month he was advertising in the three areas that would define his career as an agent: engagements for variety acts, particularly female singers and dancers (including Marietta Ravel, Beller's last hire); non-star players and acts for theaters

plaster, sign painters, ready-made clothing, groceries, tea, paint, flour, lace capes, intelligence offices, and brass band services. *Daily Advertiser*, June 11, 1858. Prentiss was the advance agent for both the 1861 and the 1862 Rivers' tours.

⁷⁷ In Philadelphia, Rivers' ballet troupe was praised as a break from "the bevvies of doubtful limbed and faded feminine 'supes.'" *Daily Press*, February 10, 1861, "Opinions," AAS.

⁷⁸ *Daily Ohio Statesman*, Columbus, December 4, 1862. "Not that there is any particularly fine voice among them," observed a Buffalo paper, "but they are all musicians, sing well together, and thoroughly understand their business." *Buffalo Evening Courier and Republic*, November 15, 1862, reprinting a positive notice from the *Kingston Whig*. The *Rutland*, Vermont paper also reprinted a notice from the *Springfield Republican* calling the Melodeon Troupe "the best company of the kind that travels," with particular praise for the double clog horn-pipe." *Rutland Weekly Herald*, August 21, 1862. In his second summer of touring, Rivers' troupe played a three-part show consisting of a scripted play; an olio of songs, dances, and skits; and a farcical third piece. This is the minstrel show format. Rivers promised a change of bill every night and emphasized novelty. Worcester Theatre, Frank Rivers' Melodeon Troupe, June 25, 1861; Worcester Theatre, Mr. Frank Rivers' Troupe, April 7, 1862, AAS.

⁷⁹ He "chaperoned" a variety troupe of competitor George Lea's favorite players to play at Bidwell's Academy of Music in New Orleans, and he managed opera troupes touring the West. *Clipper*, February 13, 1864. In the Winter of 1865, he toured with Campbell & Castle's English Opera Troupe, *Buffalo Commercial*, January 14, 1865; *Quad City Times*, July 22, 1865.

outside New York (a low comedian to play an eight-week season in a Western theater); and information about halls that could be rented in U.S. and the British provinces for a directory.⁸⁰ In keeping with his two decades in promotion, Rivers did not make a slow entrance. He blanketed the *Clipper* with advertisements, as if it were a wall that could be posted with bills. Between the agency's opening in April to its closure two years later, Rivers ran as many as thirty-four separate advertisements each week.⁸¹ He was non-stop.

When he first opened his agency, Rivers' only competition was his former stage manager, James Conner.⁸² Born in Ireland and raised in Troy, New York, Conner joined the Chapman family showboat as a teenager, playing small towns along the Mississippi. He played Irish low comedian parts without great success before landing in Rivers' bi-city Melodeon company.⁸³ Conner hit the ceiling of his performing career with the British skit "Wanted: 1000 Spirited Young Milliners for the Gold Diggings," and—based on his experience as the stage manager for the New York Melodeon—decided to open an agency.⁸⁴ He announced the opening of his "Concert Saloon Agency" on Houston Street in 1861 with a search of twenty-five waiter girls.⁸⁵ Within five months, Conner was

⁸⁰ He announced the opening of his firm in the *Clipper* on April 14, 1866. This list is from May 12, 1866. In another sample week the following fall, Rivers was hiring "twelve attractive young ladies" for St. Louis and a scenic artist for a Southern theater; he was arranging engagements for bareback equestrians, clowns, gymnasts, and the tragic actress Ida Vernon; and he was managing the rights to illusions, such as the "Enchanted Cabinet" touring with the San Francisco minstrels and the Arabian nights' tableaux series. *Clipper*, October 26, 1867.

⁸¹ The thirty-four is from May 19, 1866. The last significant run of advertising was in April 1868.

⁸² Conner was regarded at his death as the first agent for "Music Hall, Minstrelsy and miscellaneous exhibitions." *Clipper*, February 2, 1867. Conner had advised Dora Dawron in her negotiations with Beller in 1862, and he later handled booking for Lewis Bayless when he moved to Rochester. *Clipper*, June 30, 1866.

⁸³ *Clipper*, October 22, 1859. Founding MMPU officer Anton Straub was the musical director for several years. *Clipper*, July 28, 1860. Conner also leased the Adelphi Theatre in Troy, NY, in 1858. *Clipper*, December 18, 1858. A Troy resident referred to Conner as "well-known in [New York City]." Thomas Riggs, who entered the agency business in 1867, had also been a manager of the Adelphi.

⁸⁴ *PL*, April 10, 1860.

⁸⁵ *Clipper*, March 16, 1861.

advising Dora Dawron in her negotiations with Jacob Beller. The talent agent had arrived, and he was ready to place women in individually marginal but collectively central singing and dancing roles.

While these two agencies were trailblazing, they were also the product of circumstance and opportunity. Conner and Rivers were influential, but they were also both out of the business by the end of the decade. Rivers tried managing a Velocipedrome in Jersey City, managed a touring circus in the Northeast, and ran a venue in Johnstown, PA, but he never came close to his success in the early 1860s.⁸⁶ Conner was frustrated with variety—he felt that the war had lowered the caliber of performers—but he died in January 1867, and his agency closed.⁸⁷ Rivers and Conner are important not because their singular business acumen positioned them to create the theatrical agency out of thin air. Instead, the state of commercial entertainment in which they worked, brought into being by audiences and performers as well as managers, made the agency thinkable, possible, and necessary.

A Trio of Precursors: Corbyn, Parsloe, and Bernard

Before moving into the daily functions of Conner and River's agencies, I want to briefly consider the handful of agents who preceded them. At least three men in New York had previously advertised their services as dramatic agents. Wardle Corbyn, Charles T. Parsloe, and Charles Bernard were old hands in the show business, and they

⁸⁶ *Clipper*, August 22, 1868. Wetmore never matched Rivers' energetic promotional style and lasted less than a year. *Pittsburgh Daily Commercial*, August 23, 1869; *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, January 7, 1870; *Burlington Free Press*, August 4, 1870.

⁸⁷ When he began hiring for the fall season in 1866, he announced that "no variety people need apply, second cooks of steamboats and cabin boys and dishwashers played out." *Clipper*, August 4, 1866.

pitched to an explicitly transatlantic and stock company-oriented workforce seeking employment in the South and West. Parsloe and Bernard were performers, and Corbyn—the son of a ballet master— had worked as a theater business manager and a journalist.⁸⁸ Corbyn was the most English-oriented of the three. His “Dramatic and Musical Agency” of 1848 was for those “about to visit, or now travelling through the United States [...] who are unacquainted with the routine in this city,” and he promised to handle all arrangements between performers and managers, as well as the “purchase and importation of Books, Music, Dresses, and Properties.”⁸⁹ Corbyn also worked on behalf of New York managers who were juggling multiple venues, such as Thomas Hamblin of the Bowery and Park Theaters.⁹⁰ Bernard hired familiar lines of business for theater managers in Pittsburg and Boston, while Parsloe used the *Herald* to find “ladies and gentlemen of acknowledged talent” for the New National Theatre in Boston opening in September.⁹¹ Parsloe also recruited actors to work in Ben De Bar’s theaters in New Orleans and St. Louis, where he had once played, and for theaters in Savannah, Memphis, Mobile, and Montgomery.⁹² Like variety agents, he translated his familiarity with provincial theaters into a marketable skill, and his New York address belied his geographical range.

⁸⁸ *Clipper*, February 12, 1881.

⁸⁹ Corbyn’s office was at 4 Barclay Street, adjacent to both the fashionable Astor House hotel and the offices of the *Spirit of the Times*, the *Clipper* predecessor. *Spirit of the Times*, July 8, 1848.

⁹⁰ *NYH*, May 26, 1848; *Boston Daily Atlas*, June 11, 1849.

⁹¹ *NYH*, November 1 and 24, 1859. Athenaeum is *Clipper*, March 28 to August 15, 1863. Parsloe, *Clipper*, May 23, 1852.

⁹² *NYH*, June 24, 1856; *Clipper*, June 25, 1859. Parsloe also booked engagements for stars James Anderson and Miss Agnes Elsworthy in California and Australia and for Fanny Morant in West and South, leaving from Detroit. *NYH*, September 26, 1856; *Clipper*, November 22, 1856.

Unlike variety agents, however, there was simply not enough business to sustain an agency. These three agents were tied—geographically and professionally—to playhouses and stock companies, and they worked as agents while continuing to perform. When Bernard opened his agency in the fall of 1858, he was six years into a decade-long career as a member of the stock company at Wallack’s Theater in New York, which he also used as his first headquarters.⁹³ Because these agents were engaging performers at a single theater for a full season, the pace was intermittent and seasonal. And there was no potential for major profits by consistently placing a low comedian in stock company roles. The agency in the 1850s was, at best, a side business. After some time away, Corbyn announced he was still registering the names of “professional artists” on his books and keeping his friends “posted up in all events of interest transpiring in the Dramatic World.” Interested parties could find him in the saloon around the corner.⁹⁴

These early agents did share important common ground with Rivers and Conner. Although Parsloe was an actor in stock companies, his signature role was dancing as a monkey in the popular pantomime *La Payreuse*, and his other parts were small and interchangeable.⁹⁵ And while he worked mostly with dramatic players, by the end of the decade he was hiring singers for a first-class music hall and ballet dancers for a Providence theater.⁹⁶ After a prolonged absence, Corbyn returned to the agency business

⁹³ Bernard advertised in the *Herald* from November 1, 1857 to December 31, 1858. Likewise, when Parsloe returned to New York to play “small business” at Burton’s Theatre, he used the theater as his office.

⁹⁴ *Spirit of the Times*, February 28, 1852.

⁹⁵ Parsloe was born in London in 1804, made his New York debut in 1830 before moving the next year to Louisville and Cincinnati, where he worked for Ludlow, and then moved to Mobile and St. Louis, “where he ‘starred’ it in monkeys and other animal characters.” Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It* (St. Louis: G.I. Jones and Co., 1880), 676-677.

⁹⁶ *NYH*, April 28, 1858.

in 1867 with multiple partners, working with both legitimate and variety players.⁹⁷

Charles Bernard's tenure was the briefest, but it was in response to a problem that long outlived his agency: the byzantine process of assembling a dramatic company. Players and managers who wanted to avoid lengthy correspondence and the "difficulty, delay, uncertainty and expense heretofore unavoidably attendant" would find that his firm, "by a systematic organization, embracing legal correspondents, [was] possessed of unsurpassed advantages and facilities for making engagements."⁹⁸ This promise—the quick and easy assembling of touring companies, from full-length plays to a bill of "turns"—sustained the agency through the end of the century. By the 1880s, it was its primary function.

The Form and Function of the 1860s Dramatic Agency

Having laid out the path to the agency, I now give a more extensive summary and analysis of the agent's practices, beginning with Conner and Rivers and incorporating the work of their successors.⁹⁹ Registering with an agent was a relatively easy process and

⁹⁷ Corbyn and Harry Wall ran the International Dramatic, Musical and Equestrian Agency, *Clipper*, July 6, 1867. Wall was in New York, Wardle was in Paris, and Sheridan was in London.

⁹⁸ *NYH*, November 1, 1858. At Bernard's agency, players could pay an additional dollar annual fee which allowed them use of his office "for business purposes, during business hours, for receipt and forward of letters." Managers paid ten dollars for the same office use, in recognition of their higher volume of office work. It was Charles Bernard who found Henry Beissenherz the orchestra leader engagement in Brooklyn immediately prior to the MMPU 1865 strike, and Bernard served as the musician's witness when he sued the manager of the Park Theatre in Brooklyn for being fired simply for being a member of the MMPU. In making the case, Beissenherz's lawyer introduced him as "not a gentleman of wealth; he relies—as probably some of you, gentlemen of the jury, do—upon his daily labor for his daily bread." The case, he added, dealt with "the contest between a powerful Association, on the one hand, and a body of poor employees on the other," providing the jury with "an opportunity, in giving a verdict for this plaintiff, to express their opinion of any combination of capital which has for its object the paralysis of the arm of industry." When the defense questioned Beissenherz repeatedly about the union and its decision to raise the price list, Beissenherz's lawyer pointed out that the Manager's Association was also acting as single entity, and that in contrast, "I don't see why poor men should not band together for the protection of their interests," which was met by "demonstrations of applause from them spectators," many of whom were musicians. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 28, 1865.

⁹⁹ They also sold scripts, costumes, and scenery, and arranged investment partnerships and helped to rent halls; and they also placed scenic artists, treasurers, and advance agents. Harry C. Miner, the variety

could be done by mail or in person. In order to be enrolled in an agent's book, performers submitted their salary requirements and a short description of what they could do, but they did not need a letter of recommendation or a personal reference, which was often used by players who applied directly to a theater.¹⁰⁰ Unlike the agents of the 1850s, who had worked mostly with stock company actors, the variety-focused agents promised to "supply everything appertaining to the profession, from an Italian Prima donna to the smallest side show attraction," finding engagements for singers, dancers, bareback equestrians, clowns, comedians, gymnasts, tragedians, clog dancers, violinists, cannon ball acts, acrobats, and performing dogs.¹⁰¹

The low barrier to registering worked in the agent and the manager's favor. When a manager was in need of performers, he contacted the agent, who would offer a handful of names in response or offer to make the connection himself if the request came by mail. If the manager was in New York, he could consult a longer list at the office. While listings of theaters like Harry Miner's *American Dramatic Directory* were widely available, an agent's roster of performers was much harder to assemble and therefore more valuable. As a result, agents' promotional material balanced quality and quantity of players. When Benjamin Lowell and Morris Simmonds formed an agency in 1868, they requested "the address of every reputable member of the Dramatic, Equestrian and Musical Profession."¹⁰² As new entrants, Lowell and Simmonds hoped to establish an

proprietor and *Theatrical Guide* publisher, had found work as an advance agent in his early career through Frank Rivers. *Clipper*, November 9, 1867.

¹⁰⁰ When actors and musicians applied for a position at the Tremont Theatre in August 1842, for example, they wrote directly to the theater. Tremont Theatre Collection, 1839-1843, Rare Books Department, Boston Public Library.

¹⁰¹ *Clipper*, June 9, 1866; July 28, 1866.

¹⁰² *Clipper*, February 1, 1868.

extensive list in a short period of time by not charging players to have their names listed, a common tactic when building books. They planned to recoup their costs after the player was hired, which—assuming they could actually collect—was where agents made money.¹⁰³ Managers, on the other hand, paid only for access to the agent’s office and did not pay a fee for the players they were supplied.¹⁰⁴

Agents attracted clients by emphasizing their expertise and connections. Rivers claimed that his clients would benefit from “the knowledge accruing from many years of theatrical and musical,” while Conner promised “instructions given and situations procured for ladies and gentlemen wishing to learn the profession by those who know their business.”¹⁰⁵ Conner listed the names of satisfied clients who would be recognizable to *Clipper* readers as a guarantee, while performers invoked his name in person and in print.¹⁰⁶ Other agents followed suit, emphasizing past managerial experience and sustained partnerships across a wide geographic range. Lowell and Simmonds boasted of their “many years passed in active management and business relations with the first Theatrical Managers and Leading artists” in the Atlantic States, Cuba, California, and Nevada, and as well as their connections in London, Paris, and Sydney.¹⁰⁷ When John T.

¹⁰³ John Davis in Cincinnati reminded his clients that there was no fee for adding your name to his book. *Clipper*, January 20, 1866.

¹⁰⁴ *NYH*, November 1, 1858. This dynamic endured a half-century later. The system remained convenient for actors but still favored managers, who simply call the agent and pay no fee for being supplied with a cast. The actor, on the other hand, had to seek out the agent, “and the strong probabilities are that before he hears of a possible opening he goes many times, spending some carfares, wearing out some shoe leather, and his welcome. Then, if he is one of the fortunate ones, he may be sent to several managers, one of whom will eventually engage him. For the privilege conferred by the agent he pays one-half of his first week’s salary. He pays this, also, whether his engagement is for a short or long period, and he is generally glad to do it rather than forfeit the good will of the agent.” *NYT*, July 25, 1909.

¹⁰⁵ *Clipper*, June 9, 1866; June 6, 1863.

¹⁰⁶ *Clipper*, December 21, 1861, he’s listed as a reference for Professor Kirbye and Son, gymnasts and pantomimics, “the most versatile performers in this country.” One short-lived agency, J.C. Hall & Co., also listed bankers in their references. *Clipper*, March 16, 1861.

¹⁰⁷ *Clipper*, December 21, 1867.

Huntley opened an agency, he highlighted his forty-year career as an actor, manager, and prompter.¹⁰⁸ And when Thomas Allston Brown hung out his agent's shingle, he promoted himself as a member of the *Clipper* dramatic department, even though editor Frank Queen published multiple notices that the paper had no interest or connection in any dramatic agency.¹⁰⁹ In establishing their bonafides, these men were both looking for clients and building the profile of the theatrical agent.

In contrast to these statements of expertise and ease, theatrical agents in fact struggled simply to collect payments. This was the result both of the constant movement of players and their attempt to use whatever leverage they could to negotiate the best offer. It took three months for Dora Dawron to get to Detroit after writing her first letter to Jacob Beller, both because she was moving between Boston and New York and because she was attempting to use Beller's competitors to her advantage. Agents could not solve this problem easily because they did not have exclusive deals with players. Not only were players hard to reach when they were on the road, but they frequently ducked contact to avoid settling up. When James Conner was unable to reach performers at Cincinnati's National Theatre, he used the *Clipper* to find home addresses "as there appears to be a rat in the letter box."¹¹⁰ He placed repeated notices threatening to print the names of players in his debt, and even used public shaming to collect \$57.50 from Frank Rivers, whose office was three blocks away.¹¹¹ Rivers borrowed this approach, declaring

¹⁰⁸ *Clipper*, March 19, 1870.

¹⁰⁹ *Clipper*, October 29, 1870.

¹¹⁰ *Clipper*, July 18, 1863. Conner attempted to settle a debt with William Scott, father of Elise the danseuse, currently at Deagle's Varieties. *Clipper*, May 12, 1863.

¹¹¹ *Clipper*, December 12, 1863. "Will that Syracuse manager please forward our money," he asked two weeks later after an initial request, "or does he think we won't mention names?" *Clipper*, December 26, 1863; April 28, 1866.

that he would expose his “premeditated swindlers,” and even Allston Brown, who presented himself as a new generation, threatened to publicize delinquency.¹¹²

As agents experimented with what form this new business could take, they often worked in partnerships. Two years after Rivers entered the business, three of his major competitors were teams: Lowell and Simmonds, Thompson and Riggs, and Corbyn and Wall. Partnerships were useful because they could expand an agency’s geographic and occupational reach—they had previous and ongoing careers as advance agents, business agents, journalists, managers, and performers—while also neutralizing competition. James Conner worked in conjunction with variety manager George Lea and helped launch Cincinnati agent John Davis.¹¹³ Corbyn’s partner, William Wall, was an actor and an advance agent and claimed to know “nearly every manager in the country, besides hosts of performers.” Although Corbyn and Wall were based in New York, they promoted themselves as an international firm, with Wardle in Paris and his son Sheridan in London.¹¹⁴ Corbyn and Wall eventually sold their firm to competitors Lowell and Simmonds, who worked with Allston Brown. Because dramatic agencies relied on the control of information to make connections between players and managers, it is not surprising that they were often working in partnerships that could be easily dissolved and

¹¹² *Clipper*, October 5, 1867; December 26, 1874. Brown started as the *Clipper*’s Philadelphia correspondent and then dramatic editor, served as an advance agent for an opera company and a circus treasurer, and wrote the “History of the American Stage,” which is still cited by theater historians because of its comprehensive reach, before opening an agency in 1870. Brown was not the only *Clipper* journalist to become an agent. J. Austin Fynes was a *Clipper* editor and critic who eventually managed Keith’s Union Square theater and worked as an agent. “The modern vaudeville agent,” recalled Robert Grau, “was practically created by Fynes in his quest for new material. He played no favorites among agents. He was a free lance, who believed in keeping competition alive; and he proved, what is more, that salaries need not increase to the extent that has since become notorious.” Grau, *Forty Years Observation of Music and the Drama* (New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1909), xxxii.

¹¹³ Conner and Lea’s partnership lasted from February 11, 1865 to March 25, 1865; Davis partnership is *Clipper*, May 27, 1865.

¹¹⁴ *Clipper*, February 2, April 20, July 6, 1867; *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 2, 1867.

then recombined. While agents were competitors, they were also building a shared vocabulary and set of interests that marked them off from players and moved them closer to managers.

As the Corbyn and Wall partnership suggest, the growing geographic reach and density of the commercial stage also shaped dramatic agencies. The growth of New York as an entertainment center was thus as much a result of an abundance of venues as its monopoly on the flow of theatrical information. Rivers worked with venues in cities he had toured, either as player or manager: Portland, St. Louis, Boston, Memphis, Pittsburgh, Norfolk, New Orleans, and Havana.¹¹⁵ Conner's map was similar, with regular bookings in Syracuse, Baltimore, Detroit, Cleveland, St. Louis, Boston, Louisville, Nashville, Annapolis, Memphis, Chicago, San Francisco, Troy, Brooklyn, Vicksburg, and Richmond.¹¹⁶ Both agents hired players for their rival George Deagle, the variety king of St. Louis, who had worked as a printer and a Wall Street broker before moving West.¹¹⁷ Deagle advertised and recruited in the *Clipper* immediately on arrival in St. Louis, promising a company "selected with great care from all the principal Concert Rooms in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore" in the spring of 1861, as Conner

¹¹⁵ *Clipper*, August 28, 1866; February 23, April 13, July 20, September 14, October 26, December 21, 1867.

¹¹⁶ *Clipper*, May 2, 1862; January 6 and June 20, 1863.

¹¹⁷ Deagle worked first as a steamboat barker, soliciting business and investment, and then founded a concert saloon called Tammany Hall in 1859. This was before reliable rail service came through St. Louis, and later accounts attribute Deagle's success to the fact that all passengers passing through the city had to spend the night. "It was a time when money was easy and St. Louis had a floating population [...] Spectaculars made big money, but when the tide went out it left [Deagle] broke." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 7, 1894. When the saloon was closed by the sheriff, Deagle opened the city's first Canterbury Hall in cooperation with a local boxing promoter and saloonkeeper, and then took a position as the "general business agent" for the Melodeon. Deagle called his venues Canterbury Hall, Melodeon, and St. Louis Varieties. John Russell David, "The Genesis of the Variety Theatre: The Black Crook Comes to St. Louis," *Missouri Historical Review* 64 (January, 1970), 135-6.

opened his Concert Saloon Agency and Beller his first New York players.¹¹⁸ With assistance from agents like Rivers and Conner, western variety managers like Deagle and Beller no longer had to rely on their advertisements or annual trips east to find performers.

Agencies sprang up at other established theatrical crossroads early on, such as Buffalo, Chicago, Louisville, and Cincinnati, although these agents often took on a distinct focus.¹¹⁹ In 1866, three years after an actor-manager advertised an agency in Buffalo, the *Clipper* noted that “the dramatic agency business in the West has already become one of the most popular paying institutions yet entered into.”¹²⁰ The longest running firm was in Cincinnati, a key antebellum theatrical center, run by Conner’s erstwhile partner John Davis. “We see the necessity of establishing an agency in the Western cities,” Davis explained.¹²¹ Within three months, Davis was working with venues in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Decatur, Alabama, and soon added Memphis and Nashville.¹²² Like his New York counterparts, Davis hired players into supporting roles in Western theaters, in music halls and ballet corps, and variety companies.¹²³ In 1880,

¹¹⁸ *Clipper*, June 29, 1861.

¹¹⁹ Ford and Co. and Faulkner & Co. both advertise as “Great Western Agents” in Chicago. *Clipper*, May 12, 1866. In 1863, the British actor-manager William Ward was advertising as a dramatic agent in Buffalo search of utility players, singing chambermaids, and thirty young ladies for the ballet, while also serving as the stage manager for the city’s Metropolitan Theater. *Evening Courier and Republican*, Buffalo, December 11, 1863. Brown and George S. Thurber, in Chicago, were partners and represented four houses in Chicago, two in St. Louis (Deagle), houses in New Orleans, D.C., Cleveland, Indianapolis, Memphis, Bidwell and Spaulding (St. Louis, Memphis, New Orleans), Omaha. *Clipper*, July 2, 1870.

¹²⁰ *Clipper*, June 30, 1866.

¹²¹ *Clipper*, September 24, 1865.

¹²² *Clipper*, December 31, 1864; July 14, 1866.

¹²³ *Clipper*, October 2, 1869. Davis opened branch offices in both Chicago and New York, but neither of the lasted for more than six months, and by 1867 had permanently returned to Cincinnati. The Chicago branch office—“the head-quarters of the West”— was open from April 22, 1865 through the end of the year at 118 South Clark Street. The agency returned to Cincinnati by January 13, 1866. The New York office was open January 5 to May 11, 1867 at 497 Broadway.

Davis & Co. became “collecting and theatrical agents” specializing in theatrical debts such as hotel bills and unpaid salaries, and this specialization allowed the Davis agency to outlast several of its New York peers.¹²⁴ After all, collecting debts had long occupied the agent’s time. The Davis agency simply expanded this minor area to a primary purpose.

A handful of agencies stretched East from New York, reflecting a consistent transatlantic orientation in the U.S. theater business inherited from the previous century, and used here to the benefit of agents. The agents of the 1850s understood themselves as working in a distant British province, and many performers in U.S. variety theaters came from British music halls. Frank Rivers had worked with international performers since his circus days, and he established a partnership with Edwin Danvers’ agency in London and Maurice De Frece’s in Liverpool within a year of opening his agency.¹²⁵ Like his peers in New York, Danvers hired “artistes in every line of business” for halls in London and in the provinces, sold scenery and costumes, and advertised for entrepreneurs with capital to invest in theater-building and proprietorship, promising “opportunities rarely occurring to speculators.”¹²⁶ Danvers, a comedian and burlesque manager, was a product of this new system.¹²⁷ De Frece, a former music hall manager who was the first to run

¹²⁴ *Clipper*, July 24, 1880; September 28, 1895.

¹²⁵ *Clipper*, August 31, 1867. Danvers opened an agency in the 1860s, and his involvement allowed Rivers to be able to offer copies of the most recent European plays faster and cheaper than his competitors *Clipper*, November 9, 1867. Danvers spent most of his career with the Royal Strand Theatres, but in 1862 became partner to Henry Butler in Butler and Danvers’ Theatrical and Musical Agency. Butler had been a successful agent for twelve years, and the partnership allowed him to scout the provinces for promising talent; Danvers handled the correspondence in London, and registered players in the book. *The Era*, February 23, 1862.

¹²⁶ *The Era*, February 18, 1862.

¹²⁷ Historians of the dramatic agency in England give music halls a central role, suggesting strong parallels across the Atlantic. Harry Fox, the manager of the Mogul Music Hall, was the unofficial coordinator for performers from outside of London seeing variety engagements, and Fox would pass their names along to other music hall managers at the bar. Comic vocalist Ambrose Maynard was then inspired to compile a list

two shows an evening in the provinces, opened his agency in 1858 in Liverpool. Rivers' pursuit of De Frece suggests his keen eye for theatrical geography, as he knew that Liverpool's relation to London was comparable to the pipeline between New York and cities like Cincinnati and St. Louis.

These examples illustrate agents working together as partners, but the lack of credentialing, and the volatility of touring arrangements meant that agents confronted competitors and imitators from day one. In his first month of business, Conner warned against a baker's dozen of "imposter" concert saloon agencies that had sprung up in his wake.¹²⁸ On at least three occasions, agents attempting to establish a foothold in Chicago, Cincinnati, and Buffalo used Conner's name, spurring him to chastise "new aspirants for dramatic agency fame" for copying his materials.¹²⁹ Conner was not alone. Lowell and

of talent that performers could enroll in for one shilling, and eventually—by providing players in a pinch, after a cancellation—Maynard's list was in high enough demand that he opened an office in 1858, where he remained until 1889. Maynard hired performers for a fixed length of time and at a set salary, and then hired (or "farmed," as the system was called) them out to theater managers at a higher rate. He also provided entire companies to managers, and by taking on this additional administrative burden, made a considerable profit even on relatively low salaries and a five percent commission. Maynard was eventually joined by Charles Adolphus Roberts, who came to England from France for the Crystal Palace. Roberts established a niche booking French-language acrobats and family troupes for a host of music halls and opened an office in 1863. Roberts continued to travel through France, Spain, and the UK provinces. Scholars Park and Stuart counted nine agencies for music hall performers in London in the 1860s, many of which had transnational orientations (George Fisher, British and Foreign Dramatic Musical and Equestrian Agency, ends in 1865; George Webb & Co; Parravicini & Corbyn, all continental; Percival Hyatt; Nelson Lee; Harry Fox; Frank Hall; Maurin and N. Perrin; W.R. Julian). Charles Douglas Stuart and A.J. Park, *The Variety Stage: A History of the Music Halls from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895), 115-126. Like variety agents, music hall agents were often remembered for the talent they discovered in provincial free and easies. They were reviled and necessary for two reasons. First, they were expected to have a "business acumen" that can match the shrewdest manager. Second, while an artist was touring the provinces, she could only communicate with managers by letter. Agents, on the other hand, remained in the booking nerve center of London. Agents could also help their performers coordinate the timing of their various engagements, which was most helpful for those playing beyond London. See also Peter Bailey, ed., *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1986), especially Lois Rutherford, "'Managers in a small way': The Professionalization of Variety Artistes, 1860-1914," 93-119.

¹²⁸ *Clipper*, March 23, 1861.

¹²⁹ *Clipper*, April 14, 1866. The Buffalo imitators used his circulars and did not pay up for an engagement. "This is the second Agency of this kind that has tried to oppose us since we started the Original Agency for the concert business." *Clipper*, October 3, 1863. This was probably W.M. Ward, Dramatic Agents, who advertised in the *Clipper*, November 14, 1863.

Simmonds were compelled to announce that they had no branch agencies or partners; George Thurber in Chicago corrected an announcement that he had sold his agency with the promise that he was still very much in business.¹³⁰ This is because Conner and other variety agents were operating in a field that thrived on imitation and replication, as evidenced by the rash of Melodeons, Canterbury Halls, and “star combinations” they were staffing. These were hallmarks of an industry in its growth phase, before control was consolidated in a handful of agencies and locations.

The agent’s primary purpose was facilitating the exchange of stage labor, and they accomplished this by controlling the flow of information. The chief dynamic of the agency, as illustrated in the layout of the offices described earlier, was a combination of publicity and secrecy. Charles Bernard had promised this as early as 1858, stating that “all engagements made through this office will be arranged, as far as possible, between the Manager and Artist only,” although it is unclear to me who might intrude in that transaction other than Bernard himself. He also promised that each player would pay a fee for each engagement made, perhaps instead of a more permanent and exclusive relationship between agent and player, “thereby securing the important advantage of secrecy, and avoiding the inquisitorial system hitherto pursued.”¹³¹ This promise suggests that performers who hired Bernard were sold on the promise that they could make and decline engagements with autonomy.

¹³⁰ *Clipper*, October 16, 1869; January 16, 1875.

¹³¹ He established a “scale of fees on a classification of business” in which individuals were charged “according to the scale of utility.” He charged \$5 for leading roles, including orchestra leader, \$4 for second parts, \$3 for utility and \$2 for ballet corps; “operatic, Ethiopian, and Equestrian Artists” paid “similar fees according to the position occupied.”

Although Bernard was only an agent for a short time, he had identified one of the agent's key offerings. When Frank Rivers announced the opening of his agency almost a decade later, he too added that all business negotiated would be "strictly confidential between the manager and the artist, and for a set sum."¹³² The early agents were thus positioning themselves as *temporary* middlemen who would be involved only in a short-term capacity, as opposed to the longstanding relationship more often cultivated by managers and stars. Although Allston Brown established his agency several years after Rivers and Conner had left the business, he had kept a close eye on its developments as a journalist and *Clipper* editor. When he opened an agency, Brown noted that previous agents had established a monopoly, and that the agency was in fact "a cloak" for speculating, "for while the knowledge of managers' future intentions were made known to them, and which was intrusted [sic] to them in confidence," agents simply used this to their own ends.¹³³ Brown repeated this point often, assuring his potential managerial clients he would not engage in double-dealing, but his accusation that agents might use the information they collected to open their own companies or short-change their clients was widespread.¹³⁴ The agent's promise of confidentiality was linked with his attempt to present himself as the player's exclusive representative, but this was rarely the case in practice. In September 1863, Conner advertised for seventeen acts enrolled in his books, and then explained that "the above artists are under written agreement with us for one year, not to receive proposals from Managers, but in all cases to refer them to their sole Agents, so it will be a waste of time for any Manager to apply to anyone but James

¹³² *Clipper*, April 14, 1866.

¹³³ *Clipper*, November 29, 1870.

¹³⁴ *Clipper*, April 22, 1871.

Conner.”¹³⁵ Statements like these were directed at managers explicitly, but designed also to exert control over performers inclined to break engagements in search of the best possible terms. Furthermore, exclusivity only worked in one direction, and agents had distinct practices for performers and for theater managers. When Conner placed notices for specific theaters or was listed as the New York contact for Detroit and St. Louis locations, it was acceptable for performers to apply through him or directly to the house. This pattern suggests that he expected exclusive control of performers, but did not expect to control theaters’ booking in the same way.

Indeed, although they rarely rose above an occasional paragraph in the *Clipper* and were certainly not recorded in the self-serving histories written by agents, performers were constantly attempting to get out from under the agent or the manager’s control. Like Dora Dawron, the vocalist and dancer Fanny Wilson had hired Conner to help her find work beyond the music halls of Brooklyn and Albany.¹³⁶ Within a couple months of their arrangement, both Conner and the managers of a Varieties in Washington, D.C. ran advertisements accusing Wilson of breaking the articles of agreement signed at Conner’s office and cautioning others against working with her. According to these accounts, Wilson and her husband had presented themselves to Conner, and he booked her to perform in Philadelphia and D.C., but she decided to remain Philadelphia because of a better offer. “We regret being thus compelled to make a public exposition of a lady, as we believe Miss Wilson herself would have fulfilled her engagement had she her own way in the matter,” explained the Varieties manager. “But if managers expect their contracts to

¹³⁵ *Clipper*, September 9, 1863.

¹³⁶ *Clipper*, March 29, 1862; May 16, 1863; first advertisement linking Conner and Wilson is June 13, 1863.

be respected by those who sign them, they must make an example of the FIRST OFFENDERS, as a warning to such unprincipled performers who would serve them in the same manner.”¹³⁷ In an echo of the Dawron incident, Hamblin argued that it had not been Wilson’s choice to break the engagement, as no lady would make such a choice. Although framed as a compliment to Wilson’s reputation, statements like these reinforced the impression that only men made the difficult decisions in the theater business.

As the Wilson episode suggests, it was hard to retain control over performers because it was in the performer’s best interest to retain control over her schedule. This is one of the contradictions of the agency. On the one hand, it gave performers access to venues, routes, and managers they would not otherwise; on the other, however, it introduced another middleman that filled a role that was often previously or otherwise occupied by a father, husband, or some other male figure. Many of the challenges faced by agents presented so far have appeared as structural challenges in a growing industry. But it is also likely that some of these challenges were the intentional avoidance of agents by managers and performers alike. For example, Rivers ran several notices attempting to track down Eliza Newton, who booked an engagement in St. Louis through his agency, but had not acknowledged his recent letters regarding their business arrangement. Within a month of playing in St. Louis, she was placing her own advertisements, which suggests that she was either working with an exclusive agent or doing her own booking. By

¹³⁷ *Clipper*, July 4, 1863. Wilson remained in Philadelphia at Fox’s Casino, where she performed impersonations of Greek statuary until November. She then traveled to New Orleans with George Lea, in a company including Beller’s players Julia Mortimer and Millie Fowler and accompanied by Frank Rivers and remained in one of Lea’s three venues (New Orleans, Baltimore, and D.C.) until April, when she was rumored to be married. Although Wilson was not as famous as Marietta Ravel, she was recognizable enough to have her photograph (in citizen’s dress and eight different Greek statues) sold by Richard Parker & Co., and to have an imitator of her Greek statuary routines at one of George Hayden’s Melodeon, a late-model free and easy. *Clipper* January 30, February 6, March 12, April 9, 1864; April 5, 1865.

February, she was represented by Morris and Simmonds, who had likely promised her better terms.¹³⁸

The actions of both Eliza Newton and Fanny Wilson indicate the growing suspicion that agents favored managers over players, despite agents' attempts to argue otherwise. Because they were constantly soliciting work from both labor and capital, they had to seem to "fully understand all the requirements of both artist and manager."¹³⁹ "It has been said that an agent cannot work for the interest of both manager and performer," Thomas Allston Brown wrote. "This is a great mistake, for if a man is DESIROUS of acting fairly and honestly he can do so with equal satisfaction for both parties."¹⁴⁰ But Brown was responding to an accurate suspicion. Both players and managers benefitted from the agent as middleman, and the agent's fee ultimately came from the revenue generated by a production. However, it was always deducted from the player's salary, rather than included in the company's overhead. Over time, managers and agents were drawn even closer together, as the latter wrote to the former in search of a player's commission, and would sometimes deduct the commission without the player's permission. This struggle, as it emerges in the first decades of the agency, is explored in greater detail in the next chapter. At the moment, it is enough to recognize that one of the fictions that enabled the agency's formation in the first place was that an agent could be fair to both managers and players. While this may have been the case for part-timers like Bernard and Parsloe, it was long-term impossibility.

¹³⁸ *Clipper*, November 9, December 8, 1867; February 1, 1868.

¹³⁹ *Clipper*, June 9, 1866.

¹⁴⁰ *Clipper*, November 26, 1870.

Agents, Performing Women, and Ernestine De Faiber

The significance of the female dancer to the agency was well-known and widely-acknowledged. When Thomas Allston Brown established his own agency, he chastised his competitors for neglecting the “poor ballet ladies” in favor of the stars. This was strategic. Brown knew that female dancers had long provided the bulk of the agent’s business, and he was gambling that this appeal would bring them to him.¹⁴¹ Recall, for a moment, the pitch James Conner made when he first opened an agency. For both Rivers and Conner, it was a short distance from moving players between the Philadelphia and New York Melodeons to running an agency. The early decades of agents’ advertisements suggest a limitless demand for lady vocalists and ballet girls, as new venues and new cities materialized on the variety touring map. In May of 1865, Conner ran eleven separate advertisements in the *Clipper*, ten of which were for female singers and dancers.¹⁴² A year later, thirteen of Rivers’ fifteen advertisements were promoting women.¹⁴³ Variety’s growing female spectacularity also had an exponential impact on the number of women recruited onto the stage. Because Conner’s clients appeared in increasingly elaborate fairy pantomimes, he had to recruit amateur or aspiring “ladies to learn singing and dancing” to dance the supporting roles.¹⁴⁴ And because agencies thrived on working with multiple locations, these numbers continued to escalate. At one point,

¹⁴¹ *Clipper*, November 26, 1870.

¹⁴² *Clipper*, May 5, 1865. They were Julia Mortimer, Marie Balke, Lillie Brandon, Helen Western, Ernestine De Faiber, Adelaide Nixon, Duce Barre, the Walby Sisters, Christine Zavistowski, and Miss L. Creed. Others include vocalist Anne Hathaway (wife of MMPU President Henry Beissenherz), Agnes Sutherland, the Scottish Nightingale, Fanny Forest, Kate Fisher, Henrietta Irving, Marie Zoe, dancer, Mary Radcliffe, T.M. Tyrrell, Lotty Hough, Cherry Petrie, equestrienne Mademoiselle Genevieve, and the clog dancer Dick Sands, who often performed with De Faiber.

¹⁴³ *Clipper*, August 4, 1866.

¹⁴⁴ *Clipper*, July 11, 1863.

Rivers was looking for fifty women — “attractive, good dressers and fair dancers” — to fill positions at variety theaters in New Orleans, St. Louis, and New York.¹⁴⁵ This was not a quirk of Conner and River. When Hal Taylor opened an agency a decade later, he did so in search of fifty ballerinas.¹⁴⁶ In John Davis’ first advertisement, he wanted two women who could sing and dance; when he sought “lady vocalists, jig and fancy dancers, actresses, etc.” for a variety theater, the need was great enough to adjust his usual policy of not advancing railroad fares.¹⁴⁷

One of variety’s chief sticking points the widespread resistance to the value of women’s paid stage work, particularly when it took place outside of the established stock company. It is no coincidence that it was the exiling of waiter girls from New York venues that allowed concert saloons and variety halls to remain open, even as the presence of waiter girls elsewhere still served as guarantee of increased business.¹⁴⁸ Dora Dawron had to argue for respect for her position as both a “lady” and a “professional,” as the two categories were otherwise distinct. Even trained dancers faced a similar wall. When New York variety proprietor Robert Butler lost his star dancer, Annetta Galletti, to a rival theater, he filed an injunction to prevent her from appearing elsewhere. The *New York Times* was skeptical of what it termed this “little private misunderstanding,” and at

¹⁴⁵ *Clipper*, September 7, 1867.

¹⁴⁶ *Clipper*, May 13, 1876.

¹⁴⁷ *Clipper*, September 17, 1864. Davis booked for Annie Gibbons, clog dancer, Mademoiselle Louise, champion drummer, and Emma Marsh, danseuse. In the spring of 1866 (April 21 to June 30), Davis was hiring “young ladies of intelligence and prepossessing appearance” for Charles Reynolds of the St. Louis Varieties.

¹⁴⁸ In the spring of 1863, Northup and Murphy opened a new concert saloon with “free entertainment” in Davenport, Iowa. Patrons heard Miss Marion Webster and J.B. Murphy, singers, and the pianist Professor Knorr. Northup and Murphy also emphasized that they had received direct from one of the largest importing houses in the country, a large stock of choice liquors, wines and cigars, which, with ale and lager beer, would be served by “lady waiters.” This was an attempt to replicate the New York concert saloon, though at this point the performers were not simply audience members who cross over temporarily but are instead on a circuit of similar locations. *Quad City Times*, May 14, 1863.

the heart of its dismissal was an uneasiness about what exactly Galletti did that was valuable. The dancer's "chief talent" was "standing on one toe and throwing the other limb at right angles with the one connected with the magic toe." Butler claimed that Galletti's decision to use her magic toe on other boards was injurious to him, while Galletti countered that "this is her only employment and the manner of getting her living."¹⁴⁹ The judge determined that while in some cases "involving in part the exercise of intellectual qualities" it would be within the court's right to forbid the violation of contracts, but that this was not that situation.¹⁵⁰ In ruling against the injunction, which was technically in Galletti's favor, he was ultimately ruling against her work as the result of expertise and intellect.

This chapter thus far has a double-voiced quality. I have emphasized the causal significance of women performers as a group, but most of the individual historical subjects have been men working as managers and agents. Women in variety did not write memoirs or appear in their former partners' memoirs as brilliant innovators. Our most-cited histories of the business side of cheap amusements has thus far been written by men like M.B. Leavitt, a blackface comic who moved into the established variety circuit in an Annapolis, Maryland hall booked by James Conner.¹⁵¹ The women of variety—Dora Dawron, Fanny Wilson, and the Duval Sisters—experienced a kind of star treatment for a

¹⁴⁹ *NYT*, September 13 and 14, 1861. Before the engagement began, Galletti agreed to appear at the Melodeon for twice the amount offered by Butler, in part because she felt she was being overworked at the Canterbury.

¹⁵⁰ *New York Practice Reports*, New York Superior Court, 1861, *Butler v. Galletti*, 465-6. Final verdict is that the plaintiff, "cannot have an injunction restraining the defendant from a violation" of their contract. This decision echoed through popular pronouncements like the *Clipper's* "ballet girls are not as a rule severely intellectual," *Clipper*, November 1, 1879.

¹⁵¹ *Clipper*, October 31, 1863. Born in Prussia, Leavitt was raised in northern New England by his mother and father, an itinerant peddler.

brief period of time, but their careers did not continue behind the scenes as those of their male counterparts. Unlike their counterparts in drama, I have yet to come across any women who assumed their husband's leases or otherwise moved into management. Fifteen years after performing at Frank Rivers' Philadelphia Melodeon in March 1860, eleven of his female dancers had retired, while only two were still performing, and eight of the retirees were married.¹⁵² Nevertheless, their actions shaped how the agencies functioned, and both the scope of their careers and the parameters of their choices can be pieced together.

Ernestine De Faiber spent one third of her life as a dancer on variety stages in New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Detroit, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, as well as tours with traveling companies throughout the northeast. The youngest daughter of a German cap-maker and his wife, De Faiber made her stage debut in 1855, at age eleven, at Sam Sanford's Opera House in Philadelphia.¹⁵³ She appeared sporadically at Sanford's over the next few years in roles like the "Third Fairy" in the Cinderella parody *Shin-De-Heel-Ah*, and at fourteen went on tour with a troupe from Sanford's, becoming "an immense favorite" in Albany.¹⁵⁴ De Faiber next appeared at Henry Wood's Opera House in New York City, where the proprietor was struggling with a perennial problem for minstrel show managers: how to find players who could be billed as stars, but would not

¹⁵² *Clipper*, December 16, 1876. Rivers, in "temporary retirement" in Philadelphia, had sent in the playbill.

¹⁵³ She appeared sporadically at Sanford's over the next couple years—in roles such as the "Third Fairy" in the Cinderella parody *Shin-De-Heel-Ah*—as Sanford attempted to remake a hall built for the blackface minstrel show into a "resort for families." *PL*, June 23, 1855; August 23 and October 13, 1856. 1850 U.S. Census, Philadelphia High Street Ward, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Roll: M432_816; Page: 187B. 1870 U.S. Census, Philadelphia Ward 20 District 66, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Roll: M593_1407; Page: 436B.

¹⁵⁴ Pete Lane, Sam Sharpley, and Jerry Merrifield, *Clipper*, April 10, 1858. This was at Andy J. Leavitt's Opera House, who was not related to M.B. Leavitt.

immediately reassemble into a traveling company and strike out on their own.¹⁵⁵ Female singers and dancers offered a promising solution.

De Faiber's work at Wood's was good enough to get her on the variety roster at Frank Rivers' Melodeon—at this point, one of the city's most deluxe and well-publicized venues—where she played every evening for the first half of 1860. With several other Rivers employees, including stage manager and comic James Conner, De Faiber returned to Philadelphia as part of Rivers' dual-city Melodeon company—dancing in “The Flower Girls of Venice” and “The Dashing White Sergeant”— for a month, before jumping ship for top billing at one of Rivers' many Philadelphia competitors, McDonough's Gaieties.¹⁵⁶ She then joined performers at Beller's in Detroit, followed by two weeks in Baltimore, a four-month engagement in St. Louis, and a return to Detroit for May to July.¹⁵⁷

De Faiber was successful in variety because she moved with ease across geographic and cultural spaces. As she continued to travel and tour, she developed the capacity to project an intimacy on stage that made her appear to be a local favorite everywhere. As one reporter from Boston noted, De Faiber possessed “that magnetic influence which creates a personal sympathy with the audience, independent of her artistic merit.”¹⁵⁸ Billed as a vocalist, actress and danseuse, De Faiber played two-months at the Broadway Music Hall and then danced a “praiseworthy and tantalizing Papillion” at 444 Broadway, a longstanding home of cheap amusements hewing to “the Great

¹⁵⁵ *Brooklyn Evening Star*, September 1, 1858.

¹⁵⁶ *PL*, April 3 and May 5, 1860.

¹⁵⁷ *Clipper*, November 3 and December 8, 1860.

¹⁵⁸ *Clipper*, August 8, 1863.

American or cosmopolitan principle of rendering the greatest amount of refining amusement for the least possible outlay on the part of the spectator.”¹⁵⁹ De Faiber was a persistent tourer and a consistent crowd-pleaser, and at eighteen she returned to Lea’s Baltimore Melodeon for a three-month contract, where she was paid sixty-five dollars a week, the second-highest salary of all performers.¹⁶⁰ And one success begat another. In April, she began another whirlwind tour: a month at Canterbury Hall in Washington, D.C., two months at the Continental Theatre in Philadelphia (May and June), two weeks at 444 Broadway, followed by a month at the Boston Museum.¹⁶¹

September 1863 marked De Faiber’s eighth year as a performer and her first significant move away from the variety stage, although it was also close to the end of her career. In the fall, she spent two months at the Canterbury Hall in D.C., two months in Philadelphia, then returned to a competing theater in D.C.¹⁶² In her third extended turn in Philadelphia, De Faiber returned to a variety scene actively pursuing a cleaner reputation. She was now at the Continental Theatre on Walnut Street, the same week the theatre announced it would no longer be employing waiter girls, who had emerged as the major moral and legal flashpoint for cheap theaters.¹⁶³ In the spring, Ernestine was hired into the ballet corps of Max Maretzek’s opera company, and was featured in a production of *Robert le diable* presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, which she reprised in

¹⁵⁹ *Clipper*, November 9, 1861 through January, 1862; February 8 and May 10, 1862.

¹⁶⁰ *Baltimore Sun*, October 27, 1862. A usual evening bill included De Faiber dancing two ballets and a tambourine dance and singing a ballad. Lea’s advertisement listed the players’ salaries as well as their repertoires, making their earnings a point of interest for audiences.

¹⁶¹ *Clipper*, April 18 and August 8, 1863.

¹⁶² *Clipper*, January 9, 1864, owned at this point by George Lea. Maretzek announcement is from April 30, 1864.

¹⁶³ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 7, 1863.

D.C. and Philadelphia the following year.¹⁶⁴ When De Faiber returned to the variety stage, she did so in the closest approximation of prima ballerina possible, dancing the lead in *Giselle* at Fox's Casino in Philadelphia and in the pantomime "The Mystic Cave" at Barnum's Museum in New York.¹⁶⁵ In the summer of 1865, at age twenty-one, De Faiber was the headlining dancer at Tony Pastor's Opera House; in September, she made her debut in Pittsburgh, where she announced her retirement from the stage.¹⁶⁶ Although she did not announce this, De Faiber retired because she had married Henry Poujette, a French saloonkeeper in Philadelphia. Her first child, the third in a line of Ernestines, was born the following July.¹⁶⁷ After she retired, at twenty-two, Ernestine lived in Philadelphia for another decade until her death in 1875.

Ernestine De Faiber covered a great deal of ground in her relatively short career, and at breakneck speed. Not only was she always on the move between venues and employers, but her engagements tended to follow each other immediately. For example, she left the Continental in Philadelphia on the January 2nd, 1864, and started at the Canterbury in Washington, D.C. two days later.¹⁶⁸ Making and completing this performance schedule, as an individual and not a member of a troupe, was an unprecedented challenge in the history of commercial amusement. For the first time, there were sufficient comparable venues within reachable distances that could pay their performers enough to make this schedule viable. While touring stars had played one or

¹⁶⁴ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 22, 1865.

¹⁶⁵ Barnum is *Clipper*, August 13, 1864; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 19, 1864.

¹⁶⁶ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 23, 1865.

¹⁶⁷ Ernestine III's birthday is from Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; *Historic Pennsylvania Church and Town Records*; Reel: 639; the wedding was September 5, 1865, *Historic Pennsylvania Church and Town Records*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹⁶⁸ *Clipper*, January 8, 1864.

two nights with local stock companies for several decades, the flexibility of a variety bill meant that new players of all ranks could be added immediately with no rehearsal. Furthermore, while many of her counterparts in acrobatics or in drama came from performing families, De Faiber was one of hundreds of female performers who worked the variety stage without family connections.

So De Faiber hired James Conner as her agent. They had likely crossed paths multiple times, first on stage at Frank Rivers' Melodeons and then when Conner's agency booked the venues De Faiber worked in Detroit, Philadelphia, and St. Louis. By the fall of 1864, De Faiber concluded that it was to her advantage not simply to contact Conner when looking for engagements, but to have him work actively on her behalf and place advertisements in the *Clipper* as the sole agent of the "premiere danseuse."¹⁶⁹ At the time De Faiber was working for Conner's former employer, P.T. Barnum, and Conner may have facilitated De Faiber's permanent encounter with celebrity culture, a publicity *carte de visite* of De Faiber and Barnum [Fig. 1].¹⁷⁰ Agencies decorated their walls with photographs and portraits solicited from clients to inspire confidence in the agent's capacity.¹⁷¹ In the photograph of De Faiber and Barnum, advertised for sale in the *Clipper* alongside Conner's notice of her pursuit of engagements, De Faiber appears self-possessed but suspicious of the ogling proprietor. She spent most of career in a version of this posture, practicing her craft with both the assistance and the perpetual threat of exploitation from the men who managed and booked her performances.

¹⁶⁹ *Clipper*, September 10, 1864.

¹⁷⁰ W.C. Wemyss advertised the photograph in the *Clipper*, April 15, 1865.

¹⁷¹ Specifically, Rivers asked for their *cartes de visite*, which he promises to have framed and hung in the offices. *Clipper*, June 23, 1867.

This photograph may remind you of the gossipy whispers that opened this chapter of Frederick Rullman and Ms. Weichart. Similar accounts are rare but were likely widespread for most of the men in this chapter. After her career had taken off, equestrienne and actress Leo Hudson told an interviewer that Frank Rivers had so “disgusted me by his low vulgarity” during her travel from New York to join Rowe’s circus in California that she had refused to join the company as long as Rivers was still the agent.¹⁷² As Hudson’s story suggests, the most effective power a performer had over an abusive agent was simply to refuse to work with him. But she worked in an industry where the gatekeepers were managers who controlled hiring and show information, to the detriment of those who were slotted and booked into supporting roles. This is not to suggest that all early agents or variety managers were guilty of assault and harassment. It is instead to properly account for the momentum and constraint of women in variety, and how this shaped the particular powers of the theatrical agent. Measuring, appraising, and selling the beauty and talent of their female clients was not simply the agent’s prerogative. It was what she paid him to do.

We have to hold this in our minds alongside the equally important truth that the dancer paid the agent so she could keep dancing, and that the vocalist dealt with the insult so she could keep singing. In rare cases, the audience interest in what happens backstage allowed performers who had wrested artistic control to turn the spotlight on their working conditions. In the summer of 1870, James Fisk hired Katti Lanner’s Viennoise ballet troupe for his Grand Opera House in New York City, and in their second month Lanner performed the starring role in *Sitala, or the Juggler’s Daughter*, a pantomime-ballet she

¹⁷² *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 24, 1870.

wrote and choreographed.¹⁷³ The plot was routine, but the dramatic peak—the scene that the *Sporting Times and Theatrical News* chose to represent—was the “seduction scene,” or the heroine’s successful repulsion of her kidnapper’s sexual advances [Fig. 2]. When removed from romantic emplotment, the “seduction scene” is a harrowing one of stalled assault, in which a male admirer forcibly removes a female dancer from her place of work and forces her to perform her job—dancing—in private, as if by choice, and under sexual threat.

In the engraving, Sitala is balanced *en pointe* on an ottoman, her outstretched leg turning her body away from the leonine kidnapper, while her outstretched arm pours wine across her chest and into his reaching glass. The two make eye contact, but her physical control—delicate but exact—keeps her pursuer at a temporary distance. Like her fictional protagonist, Lanner had been a professional dancer since age six. She had thirty-five years of experience in fending off such advances without ending her career. *Sitala* ended with the heroine’s escape and reunion with her fiancée, out of danger, a compelling romantic fiction. But Lanner’s reality was different. Four years after her U.S. debut, the investing partner of the manager who ran the house where *Sitala* premiered began working as the agent for a group of young dancers trained by Lanner.¹⁷⁴ That agent was Frederick Rullman.

¹⁷³ The ballet pantomime ran for twenty-four performances between August 1 and 27. “This was Lanner’s first appearance in the U.S., and the *Clipper* called the troupe—with fifty-nine people—the largest yet “imported” from Europe. “Her facial acting [...] is sufficient of itself to stamp her an artist of the highest rank,” noted the *Clipper*, adding that “it is certainly a bold venture to produce, at this season of the year, so refined a style of entertainment.” Lanner’s production thus seemed to be a pleasing blend of spectacular refinement; one critic particularly liked the “Champagne Gallop,” in which six women are “entirely concealed from view by mammoth wicker work coverings in the shape of champagne bottles.” *Clipper*, September 3; July 2; July 23; August 18, 1870.

¹⁷⁴ *Clipper*, April 29, 1875. While Lanner was dancing in *Sitala*, Rullman was serving unsuccessfully as the agent for the Viennese Lady Orchestra. Following their last performance in Milwaukee, eleven of the musicians “seceded from the troupe, declaring their intention of proceeding no further with Mr. Rullman,

Conclusion

Dramatic agencies emerged and survived because variety restructured the theatrical hierarchy, pulling thousands of amateur players and circus performers into closer proximity with the legitimate stage. Variety proprietors and players began in local social worlds, making modest profits from liquor sales as the most talented local singers took turns on the stage. As Melodeons and Canterbury Halls mushroomed across North America and in the broader footprint of the British Empire, they were drawn together into a complex and interconnected web of venues. The instant demand for variety performers across the U.S., and for similar entertainments across the British Empire, enticed thousands of aspiring players without family connections or clearly defined paths onto the stage.

Like the blackface minstrel show, variety forever altered the way performers entered the show business. Early agents specialized in moving performers from amateur to professional status; by the late 1860s, dramatic agencies were known as the way into professional positions for a “green hand” without other connections.¹⁷⁵ Davis & Co. promised to “pay particular attention to parties who wish to make their *debut* on the stage, securing for them, at the earliest opportunity, an opening.”¹⁷⁶ Agencies flourished in this period of upheaval, when players without established connections came to

alleging that he had treated them unfairly and had not kept the terms of his contract.” After several hours of attempting to convince them otherwise, Rullman and the remaining members went to Cincinnati, where he attempted to “compel” the rest. In the two weeks since the walkout, however, Rullman had not been successful, “the ladies expressing their intention of proceeding directly to Vienna if they cannot give concerns in this country as they wish to do, under the direction of Madame Blechschmidt, their former conductress in Austria. Public opinion seems to be largely in favor of the ladies.” *Clipper*, November 18, 1871.

¹⁷⁵ Frank Queen gave this advice to an aspiring advance agent and added that finding a position would be a challenge as there were many good agents out of a situation. *Clipper*, December 21, 1867.

¹⁷⁶ *Clipper*, February 23, 1867.

dominate variety stages, shifting commercial performance's center of gravity from stock and repertory companies toward cheap amusements. Agents were a key piece of this process, facilitating this rush of new entrants to the stage. This disruptive power of the agency was limited, however, and as agencies grew in numbers and power, they generated new hierarchies. By 1878, the *Clipper* was advising amateurs that there were no longer bureaus in New York City who worked with novices, and that the aspirant should instead try Rochester or Buffalo.¹⁷⁷

The theater world enabled by dramatic agencies would have been recognizable to earlier show people only from their dreams. With little visible resistance, agencies had become a regular feature of show business. Only the occasional public reprimand of players who refused to honor the terms of a contract suggested that not everyone welcomed the presence of a permanent middleman. Part of this was the result of the close relationship between agents and entertainment journalists. After all, part of what made variety possible in the first place was the media's capacity to put a Detroit saloonkeeper in touch with a Philadelphia dancer. In 1871, the *Clipper* took a moment to reflect on its contribution as "a medium of accommodation for the show people." Ever the paragon of modesty, the paper noted that "its value and influence are incalculable, for through its widespread circulation managers and people are brought into almost direct contact

¹⁷⁷ *Clipper*, June 8, 1878. While upstate New York, as the key gateway between western and eastern circuits, had long been a promising testing ground for novice performers, it had never before been as explicit.

without the expense or fatigue of traveling.¹⁷⁸ In a sense, the *Clipper* was the industry's first dramatic agency.¹⁷⁹

Agencies had other long-term effects. They both facilitated and policed speculative theatrical entrepreneurs. In the 1920s, one of the major demands of Actors' Equity was to end "fly-by-night" companies of unreliable managers who stranded players in far-flung locations. These companies are often understood as a relic of pre-industrial theater, but they were in fact a modern product of the 1860s, created by the dramatic agency and the opening the theater to speculators. Because agents could supply the play, the players, and the scenery and properties, aspiring managers with sufficient capital but no theatrical experience could enter the business in search of a return on their investment. In March 1867, a dramatic agency like Conner's or Rivers' helped two novice managers assemble a company for a New England tour, but both the players and the agents did not receive their payment; some members of the company were not paid at all, and had to leave their trunks behind as collateral.¹⁸⁰ While early troupes had dates that did not pay, they were usually made up of people who were related to each other or, at the very least, had a prior relationship. The touring companies assembled through agencies, the subject of the next chapter, had no such basis of trust.

¹⁷⁸ *Clipper*, June 24, 1871.

¹⁷⁹ By the mid 1870s, aspiring performers who wrote into the *Clipper* in search of an engagement were told that the paper did not secure arrangements or recommend specific managers, but that the aspirant should apply to an agency or advertise in the paper. *Clipper*, November 13, 1875.

¹⁸⁰ "It is about time that professionals opened their eyes and quit engaging to travel with managers who have not a dollar but go out to speculate on the talents of others. The motto of such fly-by-night managers is 'If we do well, all right; I can pay;' if not, they beat the landlord, printer, bill poster, and poor devils of actors and actresses. Such people require showing up and the *Clipper* is the only paper that gives them their just due." *Clipper*, March 30, 1867.

Finally, the arrival of the agency also shaped how people came to know the theater industry. Almost immediately, the dramatic agency became a Rorschach test for the two emergent sides of show business: the alchemy by which a mass of people milling around an office was converted into a theatrical company, and the bureaucratic process by which this was achieved. This dissonance is perfectly captured in the genre of newspaper writing in which journalists visited agencies and record the intrigue coursing through what is essentially an office waiting room. “We love to lounge through the parlors of the dramatic agency where negotiations are going on between managers and people—to listen to the side remarks and witness the by-play,” whispered the *Clipper*. “Are they jealous of one another? Do some envy the good fortune of the more favored of the candidates for place and position?”¹⁸¹ A *Times* reporter recorded his disappointment that the visitors to the agent’s office did not seem like actors, but like “sedate clerks and trustworthy book-keepers wanting a position in a savings bank.” This observation prompted further reflection on the relationship between audiences and performers. “The general public like to read about actors off the stage,” the reporter mused, “but strangely enough are quite disappointed unless they are represented in quite an unnatural manner.”¹⁸² The agency emerged in popular representation as a single location where observers could ponder the questions posed by post-war transformation: the growing presence of capitalist practices in theatrical performance. How players, managers, and performers managed this growth once the dramatic agency had moved to the industry’s center is the subject of the next chapter.

¹⁸¹ *Clipper*, August 23, 1879.

¹⁸² *NYT*, December 9, 1875.

Chapter 4. “So Many One Night Stands I Am Almost Dead”: The Rise of the Specialty Act and the Interchangeable Player, 1873 – 1901

In November 1893, at least one hundred and thirty-two letters arrived in the Manhattan office of agent James Foster Milliken. Milliken was a minor agent in the crowded field that had flourished in the decades since James Conner’s Concert Saloon Agency, but his services were engaged by hundreds of performers in his few years as a theatrical agent.¹ Hailing from all corners of the country, Milliken’s correspondents helped staff the estimated three hundred theatrical companies on the move across the country, bringing melodrama and variety to thousands of audience members.² Not only has this body of correspondence never been the subject of scholarly study, but the analysis that it makes possible—a detailed portrait of the working conditions of non-star performers in the 1880s and 1890s—provides a crucial chapter in the history of culture

¹ The 1897 Trow’s Directory lists 81 Dramatic Agents and ten entertainment bureaus in New York City. *The Trow Business Directory of New York City* (Trow Printing and Bookbinding, 1898), 11.

² This chapter is based on over 800 letters to Milliken held across three archives: the Billy Rose Theatre Division and the Manuscript and Archives Divisions at the New York Public Library, and the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin. The location will be designated, respectively, as BR, MA, and HRC. All correspondence was addressed to Milliken unless otherwise noted. Thomas Postlewait estimates 250-300 combination companies each year between 1880 and 1910, while John Frick lists 250 combinations, 5,000 houses, and 3,5000 cities. Thomas Postlewait, “The Hieroglyphic Stage: American Theatre and Society, Post-Civil War to 1945,” in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, ed. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 152; John Frick, “A Changing Theatre: New York and Beyond,” in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, 203. Peter Davis counts five combination companies in 1872, 100 by 1876, and 282 in 1886. Peter Davis, “From Stock to Combination: The Panic of 1873 and its Effects on the American Theatre Industry,” *Theatre History Studies* 8 (January, 1988), 7. The *New York Dramatic Mirror Annual* counted 239 companies in the 1887-1888 season, while a letter from a managers’ petition regarding the 1887 Interstate Commerce Act estimated 500 companied, if circuses and minstrel companies were included. *New York Dramatic Mirror Annual* (1887-8), 139. The last source estimated 10,000 performers, 3,500 venues, 75,000 people in total working in the industry, \$5,000,000 capital employed in the traveling companies, and at least \$150,000,000 in theatrical real estate.

workers. These conditions shaped how players presented themselves to agents and managers, and how they made claims for the value of their effort. Regardless of the company or the role, they were compelled to develop a performing style that was both unique and interchangeable. Performers were expected to be distinct and memorable, even if they were far from stardom, while working within a structure that rendered them fungible.

These players were part of a watershed change in the shape and design of commercial performance. Cheap amusements transformed the way stage performance was organized, introducing new people, performance styles, and industry structures to a centuries-old model of play production. Scholars narrate this as a transition from the stock or repertory model to a combination company, in which a local, stable, and equitable system was replaced by a traveling, volatile, and star-centric one.³ Yet this sweeping overview—which still generates debate over timing and causation—tells us very little about how the transition occurred and how it was experienced by its participants.⁴ This is because the canon of theater history has long been written from the accounts of stars, critics, agents, and managers, and structured by a corresponding ideology. Several of the key primary texts that scholars continue to reach for when lining out “what

³ Recognizing the centrality of the specialty act clarifies what defined a combination company. Scholars have for a long time understood the combination company as a response to the star system, even though stars were touring the United States from 1810. Once audiences were exposed to stars like Charlotte Cushman or Edwin Forrest, the story goes, they were no longer content with local performers. Dropping into existing companies was a logistical challenge for everyone, however, so stars began touring with their own supporting players. While this is true, there were *many* more combination companies than stars, and a significant number of the players anchoring tours were untested. The key to getting a production off the ground was not the star herself, but the company’s credible proximity to something already established: the concept of a charming soubrette, the title of the attraction, and the show paper and advertising language used to promote the company.

⁴ Peter Davis, “From Stock to Combination”; Rosemarie Bank, “A Reconsideration of the Death of Nineteenth-Century American Repertory Companies and the Rise of the Combination,” *Essays in Theatre* 5 (1986), 61-75.

happened,” such as Thomas Allston Brown’s multivolume *History of the American Stage* or Michael B. Leavitt’s *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management*, were written not by dispassionate observers but by agents and managers with vested interests and a corresponding interpretative framework.

In contrast, a large portion of the letters sent to Milliken came from the people whose voices are absent in these accounts, and whose options and preferences were not aligned with managers and agents. This chapter traces the choices and strategies of players navigating the era of the specialty act, the formal structure that institutionalized their interchangeability. The body of people documented in this archive in hundreds of unique spidery hands is hard to categorize, as they wrote from various points in their dissimilar careers with distinct goals and resources. As a result, I often rely on a composite figure—“players” or “performers”—that seeks continuities across hundreds of performers who were part of a laboring population with shared experiences. The consideration of Harry Eaton’s career at the chapter’s conclusion is meant to reckon with this necessary flattening, and to explore how the logic of the specialty did not apply evenly to all players.

It is also important at this juncture to acknowledge that the industrialization of theater cut in positive and negative ways for performers. The structural changes that opened commercial stages to a wider range of players entailed the clawing back of power and autonomy that a more limited group of performers had previously secured. However, there is one group of people who uniformly benefited from this transformation: the rapidly growing list of managers and investors who wanted to make money from stage performance. The profit motive of touring theatrical companies in this moment meant

that they took on a reliable volatility that performers experienced as a crisis, but which allowed managers to experiment with other people's livelihoods until they identified a "hit."

Focusing on how players were made interchangeable engages up a familiar theme in the history of commercial entertainment. The "slotting" of players into twelve-minute segments is often associated with vaudeville, but the power asymmetry that rendered players fungible in this way is a longer and more fundamental transformation.⁵ Theater historiography cites the formation of the Theatrical Syndicate in 1896 and the corresponding vaudeville as the crowning moment of industrialization in live entertainment. These monopolies were not the inevitable result of progress or brilliant entrepreneurship, but were instead built on decades of managers and theater owners wresting control from players, one one-night stand at a time. This was facilitated not only by the giants of the Syndicate but by agents like Milliken, who were never officially part of the theatrical trusts but who, in their role as middleman, helped to build an industry that answered ultimately to managers and not to players. Industrialization meant the proletarianization of players.

This chapter explores the unequal but not uncontested process that made possible the consolidation of the theater industry at the century's close. First, I give a general introduction to Milliken's correspondents and to Milliken himself, before offering a more careful analysis of the correspondents' expectations and context. I focus on the agent's commission, a particularly fractious negotiation between agent, manager, and performer

⁵ Robert Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Frederick Snyder, "American Vaudeville—Theatre in a Package: The Origins of Mass Entertainment" (PhD. diss., Yale University, 1970).

which solidified the bond between agents and managers, tipping the scales of touring companies towards managers and away from players. The chapter concludes with an extended consideration of Milliken's correspondent Harry Eaton, an African American player and manager whose career demonstrates the way the logic of the specialty act could not simply replicate the racism of the blackface minstrel show, but build it into the new material and ideological structures of the modern entertainment industry.

James F. Milliken

When James Milliken opened shop as a "General Theatrical Agent" in 1888, offering "good new plays, first class people supplied, routes booked," he had already spent several years in show business as a translator, playwright, and manager. Like his predecessors, Milliken promised "to furnish from one person to a full company in any line and on the shortest notice."⁶ Raised halfway between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh by a lumber dealer, he trained as a lawyer and served as the District Attorney and in the National Guard. (He achieved a mild notoriety in Republican party politics in 1877, when he ran afoul of party leaders for arguing that the National Guard did not need to act against striking railroad workers in Altoona.) When Milliken lost a bid for state legislature, he left Pennsylvania for Cairo, Egypt, where he worked as a commission merchant selling "American goods of every description." The British occupation of Egypt eventually drove Milliken out of business, and after a circuitous route through Vienna and Paris, he returned to the United States and became a theatrical agent.⁷

⁶ *Clipper*, September 22, 1888.

⁷ Milliken was born in Fostoria in 1847, on the little Juniata River, and the family moved to Hollidaysburg, PA in 1862. *Altoona Tribune*, April 19, 1871; *Pittsburgh Daily Commercial*, May 19, 1869; J. Simpson Africa, *History of Huntingdon and Blair Counties, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Louis Everts, 1883), 45.

Milliken's experience as a lawyer and in transnational commerce shaped his approach to show business. His most consistent involvement in theater was in translating plays, which he commenced immediately after returning from Europe. He registered thirty-nine compositions with the U.S. copyright office between 1882 and 1909, which he then sold or offered on royalty via the *Clipper*.⁸ While working as an agent and a translator, Milliken assembled the occasional short-term light opera company, moving with ease between casting his own plays and supplying performers to other managers.⁹ Selling plays on royalty was a more reliable endeavor. Milliken's first company played one and two-night stands from Fort Wayne to Altoona, and in the latter city—his grand homecoming—the entire audience was on the free list and the cast was too intoxicated to perform.¹⁰ In 1894, after six years, Milliken sold the agency and returned to work as an attorney and legal counsel. His first cases were secured through his theatrical contacts—he served as counsel for an actress in a divorce suit—and his caseload was soon primarily salary and copyright disputes. In 1903, he was on retainer as the legal representative for Walter Stanton's mechanical bird costume, warning against "brain stealers and would-be

Resignation is *Clearfield Republican*, February 28, 1877; failed run is *Harrisburg Daily Independent*, August 2, 1877. List of goods is *Altoona Tribune*, July 15, 1880.

⁸ Impressed by the commercial strength of European comic opera, Milliken wrote one of three competing translations of Paul Lancôme's *Madame Boniface*. Milliken registered his copyright in December, 1883. *Dramatic Compositions Copyrighted in the United States, 1870 to 1916, Vol. 1* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 1335. Total number of registered plays is from Volumes 1 and 2.

⁹ A week after opening in a new summer opera company in Montreal, actress Gertrude Eastman wrote to Milliken that "if you want any of [the other members of the company] I will speak for you [...] I am sure we will all be glad to go with you," referring to a company managed by Milliken. Eastman may have seen the sudden closing of the company around the corner, for a week later she wrote that the performers were playing on commonwealth system. Gertrude Eastman, June 2, 9, 13 and July 25, 1891, MA; *Clipper*, June 13, 1891.

¹⁰ *Clipper*, October 4, 1884. This was not his first encounter with the *Clipper*; he had sent a program for the annual field meeting of the Alexandria (Egypt) Amateur Athletic Club four years earlier. *Clipper*, February 28, 1880. The Milliken Opera Co. was covered in the *St. Joseph Herald* [Missouri], August 23, 1885 and *Fort Wayne Daily Gazette*, September 14, 1885. The botched homecoming is in *Altoona Times*, November 23, 1885.

copyists.”¹¹ At each step, Milliken’s career in entertainment was predicated on the capacity to separate and commodify the components of theatrical production, and his efforts—although unremarkable on their own—were part of a significant shift in the way theater was organized.

The Rise of the Specialty

Between the 1860s and the 1880s, variety theater moved from the margins of the entertainment industry to its center. This change had profound implications not only for how theater was produced, but also for how performers undertook and understood their work. Many of the most successful productions of the post-Civil War period were built around specialty acts or spectacular feats, epitomized by George L. Fox’s pantomimic turn as the titular *Humpty Dumpty*, the first pantomime to be an entire evening’s entertainment. Fox played the part 1,168 times in New York alone, where *Humpty Dumpty* broke the box office records set by another massive touring spectacle, *The Black Crook*.¹² The rise of this kind of production at center stage has been well documented by historians, but we know far less about what made it possible. The *capacity* to staff companies like this was a direct result of the rise of the dramatic agency, which encouraged performers with a physical talent suited for large-scale spectacle (such as the

¹¹ Defended Musto Publishers when Charles K. Harris sued, *Clipper*, January 6, 1900; Walter Stanton, “sole inventor, maker and patentee of improved devices in mechanical bird costumes,” is *Clipper*, October 17, 1903; other lawsuits in *Clipper*, December 7, 1895; April 29, 1899; September 14, 1907; *Altoona Tribune*, February 20, 1896. Divorce suit for actress Delia Stacey, *Star-Gazette*, Elmira, NY, August 27, 1894. Milliken sued Western Union for failing to deliver a message about a French play, *Altoona Times*, March 5, 1886. At his death, one of Milliken’s colleagues recalled that it was Milliken, as a young district attorney, who suggested the formation of a Blair county bar association. *Altoona Tribune*, September 28, 1917. Shared an office with Lawton B. Garside, an attorney and counsel with a “Theatrical Law Specialty.” *Clipper*, April 5, 1890.

¹² Laurence Selenick, *The Age and Stage of George L. Fox: 1825 – 1877* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1988), 132-149.

circus) to develop portable and flexible acts that could translate in venues of various sizes and to a range of audiences.

The rise of the specialty act, or the touring company built around a specialty act, is a key piece of the familiar story of the decline of the stock or repertory company, the primary mode of theatrical organization through the 1860s, and its replacement by the long run and the combination touring company in the 1870s. In the earlier model, each member in a relatively stable company of actors was assigned what was known as a particular “line of business”—leading woman, for example, or second comedian—and played this common category of role in a roster of plays for local audiences. Beginning in the 1830s, the stock company came under pressure from the rise of touring stars, the long run (a single play running uninterrupted for several weeks), the flexibility of variety, and the spectacle of the mammoth touring company. Forty years later, the local stock company was far outnumbered by touring companies assembled in New York, either around a star or a specialty act; there were fifty stock companies in the nation’s largest cities in 1872, and only seven in 1880.¹³ As Peter Davis has argued, the conditions of possibility that facilitated the growth of the touring combination company were catalyzed by the Panic of 1873, when out-of-work actors cut loose from failed repertory companies were propelled into less permanent engagements in one-night stand troupes and variety theaters.¹⁴ Changes in play production were always bound up with shifts in performers’

¹³ Frick, “A Changing Theatre,” 200-1. Before 1870s, according to John Frick, New York’s reputation as a theatrical center was “due to the quality of its first-class stock companies and its ability to influence theatrical tastes,” but at the end of the decade was “its role as the principle supplier of America’s entertainments.”

¹⁴ Davis, “From Stock to Combination.” Davis was responding to the evolutionary argument made by Jack Poggi that “the combination company evolved naturally from the stock company,” thanks to “gradual changes in audience taste, transportation technology, and star profitability.” Poggi, *Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces*, 3.

employment conditions; the same manager credited with introducing the long run, Thomas Hamblin of New York's Bowery Theatre, was also the first to pay actors a weekly wage instead of a multiple-month salary.¹⁵ The rise of the combination company— assembled to play on the road, as opposed to the stock or repertory model— also elevated the manager over the player, moving theater even farther from the cooperative sharing of profits that had characterized the earliest companies touring the British Empire in the eighteenth-century.

This change was particularly apparent in the diminishment of “lines of business” that had dictated which roles actors played in a stock company. This model was thoroughly undone by combination companies built around specialty acts. In theater historian James Burge's account, the development and enforcement of lines of business was not simply a way of assigning parts in a repertory company, but a way that performers attempted to maintain autonomy in the face of mounting managerial power.¹⁶ Protecting lines of business was a way for actors to maintain some measure of control over the parts they played, and was generally disliked by managers. Dating to the seventeenth-century, lines of business— also known as the right to “possession of parts”— was a mode of transmitting skill and expertise in an artisan workshop. Lines of business regulated entry to the trade and included rights of succession and seniority, meaning that once a player performed a role, it was hers until death, retirement, or

¹⁵ Rosemarie Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 224. Bank also argues that Hamblin's melodramatic adaptations could play for long periods not only because of an increasing pool of playgoers, but also because he had plays adapted quickly, staged spectacularly, and publicized widely.

¹⁶ James Burge, *Lines of Business: Casting Practice and Policy in the American Theatre, 1752-1899* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986). Burge viewed the claiming of lines of business as evidence of “incipient trade unionism” among actors, 5-6.

movement into a more prestigious line within the company.¹⁷ Although this was a centuries-old practice, by the mid-nineteenth century many contracts and posted theatrical rules began to stipulate that management had the right to cast players as they saw fit. In the late 1850s, for example, “Rule Thirteen” at Laura Keene’s Varieties Theatre stated that “A performer refusing a part allotted him by the Manageress forfeits a week’s salary and may be discharged.”¹⁸ Yet in private correspondence, players continued to identify themselves according to particular lines, and—as will be clear in several examples below—to object to violations. Disagreements over parts were thus not just about miscommunication. For players reared or trained in dramatic companies, it was an aggressive violation of existing rules meant to ensure job security.

The rise of combination companies built around specialties instead of stock repertory companies undid this format. As both the companies they were employed in and the way they were hired into those companies changed, even dramatic players—not just clowns or acrobats, but aspiring Hamlets—were asked to work like a variety players. Working like a variety player meant honing and promoting a specialty or a turn, a discrete and portable act that was not attached to any particular production. Because combination company managers were casting primarily for one show, and often one built around spectacular performance, they were not interested in a player’s range or longevity, which were necessary for supporting a company over multiple seasons. This turned a traditional line of business into a character specialty. For example, the manager of the

¹⁷ Players also expected to mimic previous incarnations of parts, which they learned while watching. When low comedian William Florence took over William Burton’s line of the same business, he also purchased bought Burton’s costume, wig, and stage props. Burge, *Lines of Business*, 118.

¹⁸ Jane Kathleen Curry, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Theatrical Managers* (Westport, C.T.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 65.

tour built around Buffalo Bill sidekick Captain Jack Crawford wrote looking for “a good character actor for an oily Mormon elder—a regular ‘yea verily.’”¹⁹ He did not want an actor who could play comic old men in general, but instead one that could play a very specific role.

This change was a problem for veteran actors trained in companies arranged around lines of business. When Walter Fessler joined a company in Seattle, after ten years in stock companies in Ohio and Pennsylvania and a few seasons on the road, he found that the manager had cast another man in his line of “leading heavy,” the principal male role in tragedy. “I also heard that I would have to play anything I was cast for,” wrote Fessler, and when the stage manager told him that “nobody had any choice of parts except the leading man,” Fessler complained to his agent. “I know my business and am competent to fill the position for which I was engaged,” he explained. “If I had signed to play utility business I would expect nothing else. I put my name to that contract in good faith and all I ask + expect is for the manager to keep his word with me.” Fessler was willing to play “most anything” if there was no heavy part in a particular play, but he understood this particular arrangement was a violation of his contract.²⁰

In the era of the specialty, performers trained in the stock company model tried to get additional compensation or to move behind the scenes. “Of course this kind of

¹⁹ Stephen Leach, November 7, 1888, HRC.

²⁰ May 15, 1891, MA, HRC. “Wardrobe is hard to get out here. They are talking of doing Monte Cristo + several plays that require wardrobe. I did not expect to play in anything by modern pieces as you informed me so. However I have sent for somethings in case I need them. Lovely climate here [...] It is an awfully long ride from New York and tiresome until you go up over the mountains. We had a very nice journey and arrived on time without an accident [...] I will send you my commission out of my second weeks salary. I ought to have had \$45 at least for this engagement but I am not kicking and am here to fulfill my contract to the letter. Don’t let anybody know my salary.” Fessler was in the Philadelphia Museum stock company for close to a decade, beginning in 1877, and also played summer stock in Payton, Ohio. He joined Milton Nobles’ traveling company for the 1890-91 season, which opened in Louisville and traveled West and South. *Clipper*, November 10, 1877; June 18, 1887; August 9, 1890; October 8, 1892.

business is not in my line,” wrote William Mulligan, “but if you wish my help I must be paid an artist’s price for my time.”²¹ Walter Fessler turned to playwriting, churning out full-length productions built around the specialty act. “Judged from the all-important standpoint of financial results,” reported the *Clipper* on *The Great White Diamond*, Fessler’s adaptation of a novel set in a South African diamond mine, “the play is a great success [...] but given careful analysis it cannot be taken seriously.” Most importantly, it was not the merits of the script that was responsible but instead the “specialty folk of much ability.”²² Most players simply had to adjust to the slow extirpation of lines of business. When veteran actor Frank Bosworth was in a pinch and needed immediate work, he wrote, “you know my extended experience—my line of bus. (play any line).”²³ Bosworth had been a stage actor since the early 1860s, appearing both in Toledo and Detroit stock companies and on variety stages in comic old man roles. While this had once been a particular line of business, it was now simply a turn that was secondary to his willingness to “play any line.”

For performers who had never had access to this kind of protection, the rise of the specialty act provided an opening to the dramatic stage, which had long been the exclusive terrain of Anglo-Americans. The actress Go-won-go (Caroline) Mohawk leveraged her specialty—horsemanship and archery, as an Indian princess—into a long and successful career as playwright, manager, and star actress, with control over casting decisions, costumes, and scenery. After a brief period with a stock company in Ohio, Mohawk toured the southwest with a combination company based loosely on Jules

²¹ William Mulligan, n.d., HRC. Milliken wrote “fine musician” on this letter.

²² *Clipper*, November 17, 1900.

²³ Frank Bosworth, May 4, 1891, HRC.

Verne's *Michael Strogoff*, featuring a hot-air balloon, an Egyptian juggler, and the feats of "a genuine Indian prince, Go-Won-go Mohawk."²⁴ She played in a handful of similar productions until she had generated enough attention to anchor a production of her own design, *The Indian Mail Carrier*, which she toured with for decades until her retirement.²⁵

Organizing her signature show as a series of specialty acts allowed Mohawk to set the terms of her own career. While she promoted the *Mail Carrier* as a realistic drama "true to the times and conditions of life with which the writer deals," it was essentially a string of specialty acts.²⁶ Mohawk's spectacular feats of Native athleticism and grace, both romanticized and racialized, had roots in the stage Indians of *Metamora*, the "display" of Native people in museums, Wild West shows, and the gender-bending enabled by female equestriennes on stage. Drawing on these precedents, Mohawk primarily played male leads, which allowed her to showcase a wider range of talents than the standard soubrette singing and dancing.²⁷ In this case, her shrewd choice of specialty act that did not rely on gender stereotypes allowed greater range as an actress. Observers noted her comprehensive vision and strong managerial presence, citing Mohawk's

²⁴ *Galveston Daily News*, October 14, 1887.

²⁵ Mohawk toured the Jacobs circuit in the *Indian Mail Carrier* with week-long stands in Patterson, Rochester, Toronto, Cleveland, and Tonawanda, NY. *Clipper*, May 25, 1889, June 8, 1889. By 1908, she had played 3,000 performances of the play. *Grand Forks Herald* [North Dakota], September 17, 1908.

²⁶ *Nashville American*, December 5, 1897. In an early performance in 1890 in Mahanov City, Pennsylvania, one reviewer noted that the play itself was "no good" and that with the exception of Mohawk and a bone player, "the specialties were very ordinary." *Theatre Magazine* 7 (October, 1890), 113.

²⁷ The specific comparison was between an "experienced actress" and "an Indian hired to appear nightly upon the stage." *Daily Times* [Davenport, Iowa], September 20, 1902. The scholarship on Mohawk has been primarily interested in how Mohawk performed identity, and particularly Native womanhood. Most recently, Matthew Reborn has argued that Mohawk "performed a murky gender identity" and that she "deliberately threw out a skein of problematic gender signifiers," giving Mohawk's play a "less racist, more expansive view of the frontier" than the more familiar versions on display in the standard Western shows. Matthew Reborn, *Pioneer Performances: Staging the Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 10.

control of the scripts, the casting, and the costumes. “Winning for herself—solely on merit—both fame and fortune is unusual in the theatrical line,” noted one critic, referring to Mohawk’s primary role as performer, “where success depends so much upon management.”²⁸ Mohawk found an enthusiastic and widespread audience both because of interest in stage Indians at a turning point in U.S. federal policy—Mohawk toured in *Michael Strogoff* in 1887, the year the Dawes Act was passed—and because popular entertainment in this moment was built around the specialty.²⁹ The erosion of lines of business was a loss for dramatic players reared in an older system, but could be a gain for those excluded from that same system.

The specialty era had mixed results for players, but it was a boon for managers. While they occasionally lamented the absence of strong players and criticized the rush of novice players—a favorite topic of complaint for critics—no managers complained about the end of lines of business. Instead, their most consistent request was for performers with “a good, strong specialty.”³⁰ The manager of *A Kentucky Girl* wanted a comedian who would tumble; the manager of the melodrama *The Banker* asked for “a man to

²⁸ *Appeal* [St. Paul], March 7, 1891.

²⁹ The Dawes Allotment Act was a privatization scheme that sought to undo communal land ownership and transfer property to non-Indian settlers. Mohawk’s career thus coincides with the remaking of Indian Others at the century’s close, as traced by Philip Deloria in *Playing Indian*, in which it was the “external Indians” who bore positive qualities that could be admired and copied by Americans, while the “internal Indians”—of a piece with modernity—were assigned the negative. Mohawk played the press brilliantly both within and against these constraints Indian Other, insisting on both her multicultural identity—raised on the Cattaraugus Reservation, educated at a Women’s Seminary in Ohio, and fluent in multiple European languages—and her legitimacy as an Indian Princess. While Mohawk’s performances were framed and received by non-Indian audiences as authentic, her genre was not drama—not realism, no whiff of anthropology—but a mixture of physical prowess, elaborate costume, romance, and slapstick. Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 103-4. See also Elizabeth Hutchinson, *The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American America, 1890-1915* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

³⁰ “Be sure and get me a couple of good people [...] You know, strong specialty people who can sing.” Neil Florence to Harry Cortiss [Milliken’s one-time partner], April 16, 1990, HRC.

double old man (sea captain) and police officer (one to do specialty as officer).”³¹ Sam Gryce, who managed an opera company anchored by his wife Elaine, needed a character old woman and a skirt dancer within twenty-four hours; the skirt dancer had to speak a few lines, and the old woman needed a specialty.³² As was the case in Go-won-go Mohawk’s career, specialty acts that could be easily dropped into any plot drove play production. Managers rejected scripts because “the opportunities for introducing the specialties are insufficient.”³³

Indeed, the centripetal force of the specialty act was so strong that entire productions were now assembled around it. In Marxist terms, while lines of business was a social division of labor that distributed parts and provided job security within the theatrical company, the specialty act was a form of specialization that reduced players’ capacity to contribute, a form of deskilling wrapped up in the process of alienation. The point is not simply that there were companies of variety players competing with plays, but that new plays were written specifically for this purpose: not as showcases for star players, but as vehicles for specialty acts. For his new production dramatizing the life of Jack Sheppard, infamous English highwayman, manager James Silver’s only demands for his leading lady was that she “must do a good, catchy specialty Irish dialect part” and do it for cheap. The part he was casting was less a role than an impersonation, as the actress would be posing off-stage as Lottie Sheppard, playing her famous ancestor Jack.³⁴ The dominance of the specialty player was strong enough that managers had to specify when

³¹ February 15, 1893, MA; November 3, 1893, MA.

³² Sam Gryce, December 11, 1892, MA.

³³ WD Mann, January 22, 1891, HRC.

³⁴ “Am making money + paying salaries, will not advance more than RR fare unless I know the party and will not pay put \$20 and board, show is booked 3 months ahead, all small winning towns only carry 6 people,” James Silver, November 21 and 27, 1893; October 18, 1893, MA.

they did *not* want this kind of player or script. In describing the range of his leading lady, Lizzie Evans, manager C.E. Callahan explained that “Miss Evans is not a specialty woman” and “we want something in which she can act.”³⁵ Callahan’s request was an exception. By the 1890s, even companies that were playing from a script required performers who could do a specialty, or who could slot easily into a specific show.

The Specialty Players

One risk with the language of “industry-wide transformation” or “the rise of the specialty” is that it can suggest an even, frictionless transition instead of messy, complicated, and gradual change. The changing numbers of stock companies and combination companies are useful in describing macro-level shifts, but few performers experienced such singular or abrupt distinctions. Instead, the stage performer’s life was full of rapid transitions and upheavals on a much smaller scale, experienced as bad luck or the rewards of hard work. Rather than throw up their hands at the impossible odds, most players believed that they could either avoid or mitigate the most challenging aspects of a life on the stage. Read in isolation, a single letter simply states salary demands or requests work on a particular route. Read in aggregate, however, the letters reveal a body of strategies designed to build a satisfying and stable life on the stage.

Performers of all kinds wrote to Milliken. They were neophyte Irish comics, bird-whistlers, and veteran tragedians; a dancer making her first foray into the business, and a comic whom Milliken had placed in six of his last thirteen engagements.³⁶ They included

³⁵ C.E. Callahan, July 3, 1888, HRC.

³⁶ Vernor Somers, February 18, 1894, HRC.

twenty-seven year old Adolf Popper, promoting his opera *The Rat Charmer of Hamlin* “in which I appear in my great original character creation introducing my 150 educated rats,” and George Robison, a self-identified “old stock actor” in search of a “good reliable Co.” for himself and his wife.³⁷ The agency promised a lifeline for aspiring players at a distance from New York, pulling them into world otherwise out of reach. “I am so far away that I cannot show myself to professional eyes,” wrote a Kansas City clerk who wanted to specialize in imitations of misers, “and managers of companys [sic] passing through will not pay any attention nor allow me to show them.”³⁸ Whether a “new beginner” or an old hand, players wrote to agents when they were looking for an engagement, either because they were currently “at liberty” or were unhappy in their current company. If the latter, the most frequent cause of distress was the disrespect or abuse of managers and co-workers, a poor or unfulfilled part, or the non-payment of salary.

In spite of their differences, however, most players wanted similar qualities in their employment. The geography and timing of engagements, salary, the roles they were offered, and the reputation or “class” of the potential company were constant concerns. “Please book me for next season as I am really anxious to have a permanent engagement with a reliable specialty co.,” wrote lady whistler Lillian Randall from Cincinnati. “I am tired of traveling this way, not positive of work every week though I have not missed one

³⁷ Adolf Popper, February 24, 1890, MA. Mrs. Robinson played juvenile and boy parts, while George took character and heavies. May 21, 1893, MA.

³⁸ W.J. Meenaghan, Kansas City, May 18, n.d., MA. The more a writer spoke of their passion for the stage, the less likely it was that they had ever performed professionally. “I am a new beginner and would be pleased to see you put me on the road.” Henry Schott [a dairy farmer in Buffalo], n.d., MA. The son of a Mississippi farmer responded to Milliken’s *Clipper* advertisement that “my friend and myself have decided to go on the stage next season.” December 6, 1893, MA.

week in three months and played with success throughout the West.”³⁹ Even amateur players knew the likelihood of companies “bursting up” on the road and stranding them. “I do not desire to go with any snap companies,” wrote self-described amateur D.C Burns, using a common term for unreliable companies. “I’ve been there once, and once is enough for me.”⁴⁰ When companies fell apart on the road, not only did performers have to make their own way home, but they were also at risk to have their possessions seized as collateral if the manager had local debts. This was a serious problem for performers who supplied their own costumes or props, because holding a trunk was effectively seizing the tools of their trade. Katharine Roland, whom Milliken annotated as a “strong emotional actress,” wrote that her company had only been playing every other week, and that the manager had held her trunk in St. Louis against her consent.⁴¹

It was not only lady whistlers and rat kings who struggled for permanence. *All* members of touring companies worked in an industry that was both prosperous and unstable, and this was widely acknowledged. To be a success, wrote one manager grimly, you had “to leave your company busted as often as possible, put the money in your own pocket, go on the square and boast of it, behave as badly to the individual members of the company as possible, and then form another co.”⁴² As had been the case in with New York opera, managers spoke of expecting financial loss. Actor Ali Strange wrote from Shreveport, Louisiana that his company had closed after only nine weeks because of poor business, and that they would not go out again for at least a month. “Suppose this is an

³⁹ Lillian Randall, April 8, 1890, HRC.

⁴⁰ “I am an amateur, with 4 years experience with amateur companies.” May 27, 1891, HRC.

⁴¹ Katharine Roland, February 16, 1894, HRC.

⁴² Harry Norman, January 9, 1887, HRC.

old story to you, Col., as so many “Cos” have been collapsing,” he wrote. “But as I know that you are acquainted with what work I have done I thought I would drop you a line to say that I am liberty to accept any good offer you may know of.”⁴³ Performers given notice because of low turnout were often told that they would be re-engaged once the manager regrouped, but few were able to wait.⁴⁴ When a company hit a slump, players tried to find out from the agent if the company was going under permanently. Robert Rogers wanted to know if his tour of one- and two-night stands across the South and West was supposed to be taking a break two weeks in the middle of the season, as it was his understanding that the only lost time was while they were traveling in Yellowstone Park and Holy Week.⁴⁵

What performers knew as a problem—the short lifespan of touring companies—was in fact what kept the agent in business. Agents thus both facilitated and thrived on the volatility of touring companies, there to fill a role in short notice and vouch for the player at the same time. As they had done with variety in the 1860s, agents facilitated the quick stitching together of companies, attaching scripts and players to managers and then placing those “attractions” in theaters. It was no secret that dramatic agencies thrived on what was hard for everyone else, finding players at the last minute when scheduled performers were sick, delayed, or simply unappealing to managers. As agent Tony Smith noted on his letterhead, “filling cancels and disappointments a specialty.”⁴⁶ From the manager’s perspective, the agent not only filled the manager’s company but promised to

⁴³ Ali Strange, November 13, 1893, MA.

⁴⁴ November 26, 1893, MA. “I can’t and won’t wait for that moment to come,” explained one correspondent, who had been thus reassured, “so please keep an eye open for me.”

⁴⁵ Robert Rogers, January 28, 1894, HRC. “I hate juveniles worse than snakes.”

⁴⁶ May 18, 1893, MA.

do so with players with some stamp of approval. In explaining why he would not send a portion of the salary in advance, a manager explained that “an actor whom I know, or of whose ability I know, can have what money he needs before he steps on the stage for me—but no unknown man, five hundred miles away, who asks a salary he never has got before, who has no wardrobe [...] can’t get more than his railroad ticket till I set eyes on him.”⁴⁷ Managers hired agents to mitigate this anxiety and vet new players. This allowed the business to retain the appearance of the social intimacy that had long held together theatrical companies and had sustained the MMPU, even as companies were increasingly staffed by people who were strangers to each other.

The shift from repertory to combination companies included a remapping of theater’s geography. While dramatic players had often traveled to join new companies, they did so with the expectation of a semi-permanent relocation. Performers seeking work in combination companies, in contrast, expected to be on the road. This was possible because agents could attach players to new companies through the mail, without requiring them to ever pass through New York City. A Pittsburgh actor offered twice the usual rate so he could avoid coming to New York, and Almira Strong wrote from D.C. that she could be in New York soon, “unless you advise me that matters dramatic are too stagnant to make my presence there either necessary or advantageous.”⁴⁸ Players who did not expect or desire to ever play New York still used agencies based in the city, as when

⁴⁷ Charles E. Cook, November 8, 1888, HRC. If no one would take the part for the ten dollar advance, Cook told Milliken “blow it in on those mint juleps we used to be stuck on down in the corner bar.” Because players often had to supply their own train tickets and wardrobe, they often requested salary advances from managers. This was an easy way to get into debt. A minor player named McIntyre, who was making fifteen dollars a week while touring with Haverly’s Mastodon Minstrels, was \$8.75 in debt by the end of June, 1892, and three of his colleagues had received salary advances. MS Thr 556 (87), American Minstrel Show Collection, HTC.

⁴⁸ J. Wilson Philips, October 9, 1892, MA; Almira Strong, n.d., HRC.

the Orpheus Mandolin and Guitar Club of Cleveland wrote in search of dates in Northern Ohio.⁴⁹ Blanche Noteman wrote from Lansing, Michigan in search of a new engagement that could be arranged “without my presence in the city.” The actress may never have played New York at all; in the previous season, she handled ingénue parts in dramatic repertory—*Ignomar*, *The Serf*, *Pygmalion*—with a company playing “all the principle [sic?] one night stands” of the Midwest, including Lima and Kalamazoo.⁵⁰

While it was possible to avoid New York, many players viewed an engagement there as a rung in the climb to stability, if not stardom. For non-star players, stability was a position in a company that would not leave the performer stranded or withhold her salary. This was not an exception to touring, as few of them remained in New York permanently, but good notices in New York could lead to a better touring engagement. A few years before Milliken opened his agency, the *Herald* noted that ambitious actresses were hiring New York theaters for a week to create a “metropolitan reputation”—or, more accurately, its illusion—so they could tour as a New York star. “Stock actors who never made any particular impression upon anybody have made up their minds to go to ‘the provinces,’” explained the *Herald*, “that they may bring back to the metropolis both fortune and reputation.”⁵¹ Comic duo Morton and Slater wrote from Cincinnati that they had not played East in three years and were looking for engagements in the city; Stella Rosa explained that her brother, currently playing in the West, would cancel any date he

⁴⁹ December 13, 1893, MA.

⁵⁰ Blanche Noteman, April 22, 1893, MA. “All the principle one night stands” were Lima, Findlay, Kalamazoo, *Clipper*, March 10, 1892.

⁵¹ *NYH*, August 12, 1879. Sixty troupes had been organized for the road in August alone, many of which were headed by “young girls who five years ago were ‘walking ladies’ and ‘utility,’ but who have had the good fortune to achieve a single ‘hit.’”

had for one in New York City.⁵² Annie Williams, a soubrette with Charles Parsloe's *A Grass Widow*, wrote that although she "wouldn't want to travel with a better man than Parsloe," she would "like to be located in N.Y." Williams may have been attempting to get out of her current company without criticizing her employer because she was fired shortly. The manager "thought he could talk to me as he pleased [and] thought I ought not to resent it, but I did, so he said he would not have anybody of the co. talk back to him so he gave me two weeks notice," wrote Williams, adding that "the quarrel was not regarding my playing, but he accused me of laughing at the leader of the orchestra."⁵³ In her explanation, Williams was careful to point out that it was not her technical failing but instead her refusal to be disrespected at work that had ended the engagement. Her stated desire to be in New York, then, could be either truthful or strategic (or both), but because it was a familiar request it would not have been suspect.

Although the relationship was an exploitative one, players were constantly searching for their next engagement, and agents could arrange future dates while the payer was still on the road. This was often last minute: Florence Hastings wrote from the Palace Theatre in Boston that her company closed on Saturday night and that she could begin rehearsals in New York the next day.⁵⁴ A musical director currently in San Francisco but from South Orange, New Jersey, wrote to get his name on Milliken's books before he returned "in case anything in my particular line develops before I return."⁵⁵ While some of these players may simply have been reaching the end of their engagement,

⁵² Morton and Slater, March 24, 1890, HRC; Stella Rosa Harry Cortiss, April 22, 1890, HRC.

⁵³ Annie Williams, November 18, 1888, HRC; November 29, 1888.

⁵⁴ Florence Hastings, February 5, 1892, HRC.

⁵⁵ J. Clarence West, May 24, 1891, HRC.

more likely for summer venues or variety players, it was also because touring companies fell apart as easily as they were assembled. When Albert Denier arrived in St. Louis to join Moore's Imperial Opera Company, he found a shuttered venue and had to make his way to Chicago without any salary.⁵⁶ When the comic Tom Peasley first started with the Grab Bag Company in Kansas City, he wrote to Milliken that he was a big hit, but within two weeks was "left out here to eat prairie dogs" when the company folded in Provo City, Utah.⁵⁷

Players attempted to retain as much control as possible over their routes, attempting to avoid long periods of unemployment as well as overwork, which was equally threatening to a player's livelihood as being out of work. Negotiations over touring geography were thus also about timing, as players, touring managers, and venue proprietors each attempted to establish schedules that best fit their needs. Unlike managers, however, only players were concerned about their capacity to play as much as they were asked. As soubrette Edith Murilla explained in turning down an engagement, even though the manager had said "there was nothing to the part, I could not be ready in such a short notice."⁵⁸ Lillian Randall, the lady whistler, rejected a position as "too much work for such small consideration."⁵⁹ Touring companies were grueling, and stage performance was physically demanding. This reality is often obscured by show business glamour, but comes through clearly in performers' own words. Six months before her death, nineteen year-old actress Ethel Langdon explained that she was "very much run

⁵⁶ Albert Denier, July 16, 1892, MA. Notice of stranding in *Clipper* is also July 16, 1892. Denier (1866-1920) was a member of the Denier family (acrobats, clowns, rope-walkers) and had made his debut at eight on the variety stage twenty years earlier. *Clipper*, August 1, 1874.

⁵⁷ Tom Peasley, June 23, July 13, August 28, 1891, HRC.

⁵⁸ Edith Murilla, n.d., MA.

⁵⁹ Lillian Randall, June 15, 1891, HRC.

down” after a recent eight-month engagement, but still wanted to be notified of any possible openings.⁶⁰ Dancer Blanche Edith Robinson gave notice because of a hip injury sustained while doing a split on stage, which put her out of work for several weeks. “I never could stand the work that I have been doing the season out,” Robinson added, “even if the salary warranted it, which it does not.”⁶¹

Salary—understood by Robinson not as what the market would bear but as the monetary value “warranted” by her effort—was also a key point of negotiation. Players were more likely to offer hard numbers on what they would or would not accept, while managers were less direct. John J. Collins, manager of the *Money Mad Company*, explained that “the salary would depend upon who the applicant was.”⁶² While investors and managers often wrote in search of risk, players wanted to mitigate this possibility. “I prefer salary to glory,” wrote Maurice Hageman, a mid-career opera comic who had played supporting roles from Oregon to Louisiana to Eastern Canada.⁶³ Others were willing to take a small salary if it was dependable, the touring performer’s version of the theater orchestra engagement. Harry Winsman, the whistler, explained that he “would rather take small money and be sure than large and close.”⁶⁴ Frank Devlin explained that “my object is not salary so much as to get with a good solid Co.”⁶⁵ Devlin and Winsman were not uninterested in salary, but they were prioritizing permanence. Some tried to buy

⁶⁰ Ethel Langdon, November 9, 1893. In June, she was ill with consumption and passed away at age 20. *Clipper*, June 16 and 24, 1894.

⁶¹ Blanche Edith Robinson, October 27, 1893, MA.

⁶² John J. Collins, June 4, 1891, HRC.

⁶³ Maurice Hageman, December 1, 1892, MA. In 1887, Hageman was in a company with Frank Rivers’ stage manager, Fred A. Dubois, as treasurer. *Clipper*, February 12, 1887.

⁶⁴ Harry Winsman, June 18, 1891, HRC.

⁶⁵ Frank Devlin, December 14, 1893, MA.

their way into a good engagement; Fred Welsh, on a string of skeletal one-night stands in upstate New York, offered to pay a week's salary "for character or comedy, sure money."⁶⁶ Each of these requests, although articulated differently, were the player's attempt to achieve a measure of stability.

Most players wanted a consistent touring schedule with a reliable company that would not strand them, broke, in Utah. In contrast to the *Herald's* suggestion that all players wanted to build a "metropolitan reputation" and tour the provinces as stars, returning to New York with fortune and reputation, many were happy to settle for some degree of regularity. What company could best guarantee that regularity was less clear. While earlier generations of players indicated their lines of business, performers seeking work after the 1880s were as likely to request a genre or kind of company, as players came to associate specific working conditions, paths to stardom, and likelihood of success with particular genres. And yet, there is no clear consensus from the letters to Milliken of which kind of companies were best—but only the shared conviction that some were preferable to others. This was yet another factor that placed performers at the mercy of theatrical agents.

Repertory, burlesque, and musical comedy were divisive genres of company, appealing to some players and repugnant to others. "I should prefer joining a good repertoire company if possible," wrote one comedian, while another specified "No 'repertory' under any consideration whatsoever."⁶⁷ After two years of supporting Verona Jarbeau's Mazeppa act, musical director Clarence West wanted work in "legitimate

⁶⁶ Fred Welsh, October 12, 1892, MA.

⁶⁷ Alex Calvert, October 31, 1889, HRC; D.B. McCarthy, May 24, 1893, MA.

burlesque.”⁶⁸ Jessie L.R., on the other hand, explained that although she enjoyed her current company, “I feel pretty blue about this change into a burlesque company + cannot see any hope for it from that standpoint.”⁶⁹ Because musical directors and actresses occupied different positions in burlesque, their calculations for joining the company were different. Female performers in burlesque had to weigh the social cost of the genre, which threatened to discount good wages. When Norma Ferrer was deciding to join a burlesque company, she wanted to know the manager’s name and the highest possible salary, as well as if she would have to wear tights.⁷⁰ Players were also divided on the emergent genre of “musical comedy,” or song-and-dance acts linked with a light plot. Marie Carlyle requested “nothing but light comedy ingénue or soubrette, and no musical comedy,” which may have been a way of resisting the specialty.⁷¹ Lucille Remson, on the other hand, preferred musical comedy, as long as she would be making more than thirty per week and without having to provide her own costumes.⁷² Regardless of which genre the player preferred the reasoning was usually a combination of where a performer had experience and what kind of compromises— artistic, social, or financial—were required of a particular individual.

Players were also interested in the “class” of a company. “First-class” was a frequent descriptor, used both to recruit audiences and attractions to theaters, and touring

⁶⁸ J. Clarence West, May 24, 1891, HRC. Three months after this letter, West attended a conference in New York of traveling musical leaders “for the purpose of making arrangements for a permanent organization, with the view of improving the condition of theatrical orchestras and to raise the standard of music furnished by them.” *Clipper*, August 15, 1891.

⁶⁹ Jessie L.R., n.d., MA.

⁷⁰ Norma Ferrer, October 31, 1889, HRC.

⁷¹ Marie Carlyle, October 20, n.d., HRC. Carlyle also wanted “some nice squibs + notices and I will pay you what you like—every week to be ‘puffed up.’”

⁷² Lucille Remson, n.d., HRC.

managers frequently expressed displeasure when they were booked into a “low variety house.”⁷³ For players, the class of a company was less about the moral or aesthetic quality, and more about if they would be well-treated and paid fairly, or would they soon be looking for work again. “Class” here functioned in two ways: it referred explicitly to the hierarchical ranking of taste—cultural capital—and to class as a diagnostic of power, determining which players would have access to workplace autonomy and self-determination. “I consider my time and talent to [sic] valuable, [and] I wish to be identified with first class people only,” explained actor Charles Perry, before adding that he would consider “a second class troupe under good management.”⁷⁴ Good management might mitigate the lower salaries and grueling schedules of companies with lesser reputations. “You know what one night stands are on a fellow who has to not only do his own work but a half a dozen others also and act in the bargain,” wrote Edward Wiebe from Chicago. “I have no faith in the new show and I have two parts and scenery + props to look after,” he added in a separate letter. “I think it is too much but I will keep it till you can place me somewhere else.”⁷⁵ The cheap amusements of Coney Island, first

⁷³ “How to express the great disappointment of being compelled to go twice a day to this low variety house and give a performance of the beautiful play “The World Against Her” is beyond me,” wrote touring manager Sam Villa. “We are damned forever on this ‘eastern circuit’ and surely you must have known the standing of the house [...] We have not played enough to pay for the paste that it took to post up our beautiful paper.” While Villa was upset about the “class” of the house—low variety—he was most upset that they were raising the curtain twice a day to nothing. November 21 and 23, 1893, MA. Batcheller, the manager of the Front Street Theatre in Worcester that had so disappointed Villa, responded that “you cannot expect ordinary drama to do much business,” as the house was usually burlesque and variety. He also cancelled Harry Eaton’s company “as I do not see their routes and understand their Co. was not good.” November 22, 1893, MA.

⁷⁴ Charles Perry, October 5, 1893, MA. In a few years, Perry was in stock company at the Boston Ideal. The manager reported receiving 386 letters in response to his advertisement for players. *Clipper*, June 9, 1898.

⁷⁵ Edward Wiebe, November 14, 1892; n.d., BR. “The one night stands are somewhat trying but the company and star are so pleasant that we forget the disadvantages of excessive travel,” Ida Sollee, Grafton, ND, March 2, 1891, HRC.

considered by John Kasson forty years ago, offered discount goods to consumers because they were often exploitative of their laborers; performers knew these venues as perpetual sites of easy work, low wages, and scattershot working conditions.⁷⁶ Stranded at Vacca's New West and Casino on Coney Island, comic vocalists Bertha Ernest and Edith Vernon planned to remain "only until we hear from you, which I most earnestly hope will be soon, as we dislike the island [...] Please excuse writing with lead pencil, but really the accommodations at Coney Island does not admit of much better."⁷⁷

Performers emphasized different skills and assets depending on the position and on their time in the industry. Experienced performers had a practiced range of pitches that emphasized their years on the road, using their knowledge of how companies were assembled and run. Amateur performers were the most likely to reference their academic training, while experienced performers listed previous parts and employers. "I have a soprano voice (very strong) good figure, and am 'up' in all the comic operas, having been in opera concert and comedy work for eight years," wrote Florence Bernard. "Mr. Brower the musical director says I am one of the best chorus girls." Bernard added that she needed details on salary, time, and location of opening, as she wanted work immediately following the close of her current season.⁷⁸ As Edward Weibe's letter suggested, male

⁷⁶ John Kasson, *Amusing the Million*.

⁷⁷ Bertha Ernest and Edith Vernon, June 1, 1891, HRC. "Please try to arrange work for us as soon as possible, I am sure you would not be sorry, as we both have very strong voices." Both Ernest and Vernon had been in specialty companies in the New York for about a year and continued to play in variety and burlesque over the next few decades. By August, Ernest and Vernon were playing two of bevy of beautiful female boarders in a burlesque Rip Van Winkle sketch at Harry Miner's new vaudeville house. Vernon was still billed as "a singing and dancing soubrette" almost twenty years later. *Clipper*, August 9, 1890; August 29, 1891; January 26, 1895; January 30, 1909. Hugo Korsach also wrote to get out of a Coney Island engagement, which he would give up "right away for a good reliable company." July 7 and August 14, 1891, HRC.

⁷⁸ Florence Bernard, July 7, 1891, HRC.

players in one-night stand companies also promoted themselves as useful and versatile beyond their performing capacity.⁷⁹

Specialty players could emphasize neither role nor training, so they offered other kinds of proof of their popularity. The versatility they offered was within a specific role, rather than across productions. Serpentine dancer Lois Eaton asked if Milliken could place her even “with all the hungry people in the market,” and sent along her programs, “shots,” and a list of current dates she was playing.⁸⁰ “You know my ability, A.1 wardrobe, specialty none better, and you have my photograph,” wrote Harry F. Winsman, the “Whistling Soloist, Warbler, Human Flute and Nightingale.”⁸¹ Performers who had been pitching their specialties for some time knew to emphasize the structure of their act as much as the content, which was proof of their versatility across companies. M. Ainsley Scott, a California minstrel performer, developed an act with his wife Isabella. The act was ten to twelve minutes long and “calculated to entertain a refined and Music loving audience,” explained Scott, even though thus far “our trademark is unknown.”⁸² Like repertory players in one-night stand companies, specialty players were keen to emphasize the full range of skills they would bring to a company. Not only did O.H. Hovey have a stereopticon with “the finest dissolving views in America,” but he also played saxophone and tuba, and was an “expert typewriter” and could work as secretary to the manager.⁸³

⁷⁹ “I did everything in the show for the past three years,” noted the pantomime clown Andy Morris. May 22, 1891, HRC.

⁸⁰ Lois Eaton, November 28, 1893, MA.

⁸¹ Harry F. Winsman, June 18, 1891, HRC. “Challenges all whistlers any amount and style of music. No Reed Whistles or Bird Imitators need waste time.” *Clipper*, January 17, 1891. Winsman toured Europe, played the Keith and Odeon circuits in 1893 and 1894, as well as Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Montreal, before switching to management. *Clipper*, June 9, 1892; September 24, 1898; October , 1901.

⁸² M. Ainsley Scott, June 3, 1891, HRC.

⁸³ O.H. Hovey, October 3, 1893, MA.

Players came up against the competing demands of theatrical managers, who wanted to wring the most effort from players at the lowest cost. Their demands thus echoed the language of performers, but with a distinctive tone and purpose. They wanted “good specialties” from sober players who were a quick study, and would do the most work for the least pay—“salary must be low” was a constant refrain.⁸⁴ Managers often wanted players with a wardrobe, which could double as test for reliability: “Must dress well on street and have dress suit for orchestra work, no drinking man wanted,” wrote A.L. Wilbur.⁸⁵ While players were carefully diplomatic about their employers, managers did not conceal whom they thought was in charge. “I want no kickers,” wrote Edward Warren, who managed a series of companies booked through Milliken, “but people who do just what I tell them.”⁸⁶ When players were let go for being a poor fit for the part, this was often a cover for an internal disagreement, as when Annie Williams of the *Grass Widow* company was fired for back talk. Actor Robert Rogers was almost fired for being miscast— “I never made any pretensions to play juveniles, but being an actor could tackle anything,” he explained—but it was his involvement in a love triangle in Topeka that finally got him cut.⁸⁷

The competing desires of managers and players is clearest in the negotiations for female players, particularly for those who would sing and dance in the chorus, and for

⁸⁴ M.S. Moseley, October 17, 1893, MA. Fred A. Thomas asked Milliken to “do a little ‘skirmishing’ and let me know who you can get and their salary, which must be very low as times are very hard.” December 9, 1893, MA.

⁸⁵ A.L. Wilbur, November 9, 1888, HRC.

⁸⁶ Edward Warren, January 13, 1894, HRC.

⁸⁷ By Salt Lake City, he was told that the company would “get rid of objectionable people,” meaning, presumably, him. “I think I’ll quit playing parts and go ahead of some show,” he explained, “There are so many ham fatters now.” Robert Rogers, October 6, 1893; October 31, 1893, MA. This was not an option for women with similar conflicts.

soubrettes who anchored touring companies. Not only did companies need more women to fill these particular parts, but managers also hired male players from their social worlds, personal friends they knew from theater district bars or fraternal orders. “The men’s parts are filled—through personal friends—should they not suit will notify you,” explained manager Edward Warren.⁸⁸ As a result, managers spilled significant ink explaining their expectations for female employees. This included how they should look, dress, and act, and how much they were worth. J.R. Painter explained that he would pay no more than twenty dollars for a chorus girl in the farce comedy *Bubbling Over*, and at this high rate “she must be a good soprano and able to dance, good looking + stylish.” “Must be good,” Painter repeated, “have had to return 3 already.”⁸⁹ A manager from Tiffin, Ohio, wanted a woman who was “good looking, aged about 20 to 22, play a fairly good part and do a first class specialty.”⁹⁰ M.B. Leavitt wrote that the change dancer recommended by Milliken “has been seen too much,” and that instead he wanted to hear the lowest terms for “some of the names on your book [...] extra good looking.”⁹¹ This was not exclusive to practiced managers. In pitching himself and his wife as opera chorus members, sugar refinery clerk E.H. Burt boasted of his high baritone range before adding that “my wife’s figure is light but very fine and would make a very good showing in tights.”⁹²

Touring managers did more than specify what kind of women they wanted to hire. They also had expectations for how women would behave while on the road, and they did

⁸⁸ Edward Warren, 1893, MA.

⁸⁹ J.R. Painter, 1888, HRC.

⁹⁰ July 6, 1893, MA.

⁹¹ M.B. Leavitt, June 15, 1892, BR.

⁹² E.H. Burt, June 14, 1891, HRC. Written on American Sugar Refining Co. stationary.

not hesitate to enforce these standards. Their complaints centered on performers' reluctance to comply with their expectations for conduct, as when Annie Williams was let go for laughing at the orchestra conductor. For women, the critique was often articulated as a lack of professional commitment on the players' part. "I am a little afraid of ladies who are in the business for fun," wrote Charles Gardiner, after one of Milliken's recommendations left his company abruptly.⁹³ Another manager complained that an actress had quit after signing a contract because the engagement was only to last ten weeks. "I have a poor opinion of a lady who will sign a contract and a few days afterwards break it," he wrote. "She knew the condition of the contract when she signed and should have kept the part."⁹⁴

When faced with such accusations, female performers could refute the managers' accusation and hope (against odds) that the agent would take their word for it. In stark contrast to the above comment that actresses did not respect contracts, they often tried to use these documents to get out ahead of predatory or exploitative managers. Actress Edith Hall explained that while the company's musical director had suggested they stay at the same hotel, she "did not," and that "consequently, I am no good." Having rejected the controlling sexual advances of her superior and been fired for this, Hall demanded that the agent hold her employers to the terms of notice enshrined in her contract.⁹⁵ The actress's swagger—she called the show "rotten" and added that "I was as perfect as any one + better than many"—was her attempt to convince Milliken that she was fired for her confidence and not her performance. She added also that the stage manager was trying to

⁹³ Charles Gardiner, November 11, 1892, MA.

⁹⁴ D.A.K, October 7, 1893, MA. Added "make the lady sign an order for your commission."

⁹⁵ Edith Hall, n.d., HRC.

give his wife her part in the *Mikado*, Pitti-Sing, but that she had been engaged for “second parts” and that the part was her contractual right.

Unfortunately, the dismantling of the lines of business casting model meant that complaints like Hall’s were increasingly ineffective. The relative ease of replacing a leading woman who need only to play one part—and who was hired either for her specialty or for her presence—meant that managers could afford to act on their critiques. In the first month of a tour, manager A.Z. Chipman reported that he had “to discipline our soubrette for insubordination and she seemed likely to leave me in the lurch,” but that he had kept her on because she was popular with audiences. “Still,” he added, “we should be glad of your assistance in keeping on your books a number of good, versatile women who we can use at short notice.”⁹⁶ C.H. Smith asked that Bessie Lear, whom he considered “tough by nature,” be placed on a blacklist for falsely requesting an advance and fighting with other members of the company.⁹⁷

Amateur Hour

The instability of performers’ working was intensified by the enlarged pool of players available at the last minute, the growing number of amateurs who could now be attached to traveling companies through dramatic agencies. Managers used the term “amateur” as a criticism, but it could also be a compliment if the player came cheap. Amateur theatricals had coexisted alongside professional theater since the latter’s emergence, but the rise of touring companies built on specialties created a larger pool of

⁹⁶ A.Z. Chipman, November 10, 1892, BR.

⁹⁷ C.H. Smith, April 20, n.d., HRC.

amateur players aspiring to play for compensation. In this particular context, amateurism is thus best understood not as a metric for how talented a player was or for how long she had been on the stage, but—when used by managers—a way to assess how pliable a player was. “Miss Dulce Durant can neither sing, dance, nor act,” wrote a manager in Augusta, Georgia, while another player “had never spoken a line in his life” and knew nothing of stage business.⁹⁸ Amateur players were most damaging to the few remaining repertory companies, and particularly in locations where managers had reputations to defend. “I want none but professional repertoire people and it’s no use trying people who wish to become actors,” wrote a manager in Roanoke, Virginia. “I haven’t time to teach them and pay them also [...] I know my territory + don’t want to lose it.”⁹⁹ And yet managers were quick to criticize players as amateurs when they were uncooperative, they often requested this category of player. The manager of the *Veteran Detective* tour would take “any good amateurs, ladies and gentlemen anxious to become actors,” although they had to accept low salaries, and should be “People of sence [sic] who prefer eating Pie than striking.”¹⁰⁰

Both the presence of amateurs and the accusation of amateurism is complicated. On the one hand, it suggests the lowered barrier to entry made possible by the agency, as aspiring players with day jobs attempted to maneuver onto the professional stage. Augustus Oelrich, a Brooklyn clerk, wanted an engagement that would not require daytime work.¹⁰¹ Seventeen year old Joseph Murphy of Patterson, New Jersey, a brass

⁹⁸ November 11, 1893, MA.

⁹⁹ M.S. Moseley, October 28, 1893, MA. James Mitchell, in Scranton, reported that “One of the people I had engaged was rotten so I had to jump on and strengthen the cast.” January 25, 1893, BR.

¹⁰⁰ Harry Bernard, Newark, December 1, MA.

¹⁰¹ Augustus Oelrich, January 28, 1892, HRC. “Could one who is employed during the day hold a city engagement in your agency and about what salary would I get,” M.V. Eyre, n.d., MA.

fitter, asked “how to get in an agency and if there is much show for Irish Comedians and how much do you charge for getting engagements,” as Murphy and his partner are “not up in agencies but good in Irish sketches.”¹⁰² And, as had been the case with the chorus several decades earlier, they were willing to make trade-offs in order to learn the business that could undermine professional players; Stella Tucker was “willing to sing (gratis) for a time in order to sing and learn by note.”¹⁰³ On the other hand, the frequent complaints against amateurism indicate the relatively steep learning curve required in traveling companies that were assembled quickly, often with little or no rehearsal by managers with no long-term investment in the performers.

Many of the amateurs who wrote to Milliken were young women, who had long been the primary players keeping an agent’s door open. He placed advertisements in at least three papers including the *New York World*, which was read by Blanche Kendal, who was then moved to write from her Bushwick boarding house. “I read you advertised for chorus girls,” wrote Kendal, “I am a singer and have been told have quite a voice and would like very much to get in opera + have been in amateur but always anxious for an opportunity. I have a good figure being model in cloak house at one time please send me word should there be any chance for me + can call over any time to see you.”¹⁰⁴ Even though Kendal was a novice, by her own admission, she knew what was required of her: amateur talent, experience displaying her body in public, and the public declaration of her

¹⁰² Joseph Murphy, June 17, 1891, HRC. 1905 State Census of New Jersey, 1905, Trenton, NJ, Reference Number: L-06; Film Number: 37. New Jersey State Archive.

¹⁰³ Stella Tucker, n.d., HRC.

¹⁰⁴ Blanche Kendal, c/o Mrs. Bonidi, August, 1891, HRC. “I have a strong desire to be an actress,” wrote Clara Valois, a French-Canadian dressmaker and weaver in the Woonsocket Mills. “Have never been on the stage, but have read at concerts, played the organ and sung in church choir [...] I am in earnest, very ambitious and am sure I shall succeed if I only get a chance to begin.” July 5, 1891, HRC. 1900 U.S. Census, Woonsocket Ward 5, Providence, Rhode Island; Page: 18; Enumeration District: 0184.

willingness to bend to the agent's demands. This last quality was often a constant theme in letters from women seeking positions in the chorus. Elmina Mackey, a domestic servant in Hightstown, NJ, had also seen the advertisement and offered "to come to the city if you will rite [sic] me and tell me when you can see me."¹⁰⁵ Cousins Florence Feeney and Nettie Prentice saw Milliken's ad "regarding young ladies for the stage" and responded that they would "would very much like to make an application, if you should prefer having a personal interview you can communicate with us."¹⁰⁶

The lure of amateur female performers also drew managers to agents. Agents made a living connecting women like Florence and Nettie to W. Fleming in Reynoldsville, Pennsylvania, who wanted an amateur with a "good figure, dresser and some ability, will make an actress of her if it is in her," as long as he could pay less than twenty dollars a week.¹⁰⁷ Charles Gardner wanted a "small and pretty" woman who was "not an actress [...] I will take her dress her and treat her well, teach her business."¹⁰⁸ Managers saw in inexperienced female players the twinned opportunity to cut costs and, if they gambled correctly, create a leading lady. "Have you on your books a young, handsome and talented lady—ambitious for an opportunity to reach position and gain experience in the profession?" inquired Frederick Bert. "NY is full of such women, you should know of them, if so, send me her photograph with particulars at once."¹⁰⁹ John Cameron wanted one or two ladies who could join his tour that same afternoon, and

¹⁰⁵ August 13, n.d., HRC. There is an Elmina Mackey listed as a domestic in the 1893 Camden directory, and her occupation was listed as "housemaid" at her death at age 85 in 1963. Pennsylvania (State). Death certificates, 1906–1963. Series 11.90 (1,905 cartons). Records of the Pennsylvania Department of Health, Record Group 11. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

¹⁰⁶ Florence Feeney and Nettie Prentice, August, 1891, MA.

¹⁰⁷ W. Fleming, March 20, 1893, MA.

¹⁰⁸ Charles Gardner, March 2, 1893, MA.

¹⁰⁹ Frederick Bert, November, 16, 1888, HRC.

would take “anyone reliable who could + would like chances [...] on salary.” His company was on the verge of disintegration and closed within the month.¹¹⁰ This approach depended on the large numbers of aspiring actresses who could not simply switch to working as advance agents, treasurers, or business agents, and had to remain on the stage or out of the business. Some managers have hired an excess of women at the start of a tour in anticipation of letting them go. Florence Stevens wrote from Montreal that other actresses were fired because “they overburdened the company with girls, had too many.”¹¹¹ But as long as Milliken was receiving letters like Tessie Henderson from Chattanooga—“It has been the dream of my life to go on the stage, I am 20 years old and have no one to object if you will assist”—then managers could not only fill but also overstaff their companies.¹¹²

The Commission Debate: Cutting in the Middleman

The logic of the specialty act required more than rat kings and lady whistlers—it was equally important that it be possible to move players into companies on terms that best served touring company managers. The large pool of ready amateur players helped to grease these wheels, but so, too, did the close relationship that formed between agents and managers, rather than between agents and players. Both managers and players kept the agent updated on how an engagement was working out, but only players requested

¹¹⁰ John Cameron, January 24, 1894, HRC. The company closed a month later. *Clipper*, February 24, 1894.

¹¹¹ Florence Stevens, January 19, 1891, HRC. In May, she asked for a new position, “if you are not entirely disgusted with me,” because she had not taken the last offer. “Had I but two days vacation to attend to some affairs here, I would have gone.” Stevens was at home in Youngstown, Ohio, and could not afford to come to New York, “not that I am mercenary but I am absolutely without, I am sorry to trouble you but I promise you I shall stick closer to your advice hereafter.” May 29, 1891, HRC.

¹¹² Tessie Henderson, n.d., HRC.

that the details be kept secret. Although it may not have been protected in any formal documents, it was an extra-contractual expectation that players brought to the partnership and had since the variety agencies of the 1860s, when agents had made the promise of privacy central as they recruited clients. “I would like you to treat this letter with strictest attention and also in confidence,” explained Marion Elliott, as she sought an alternative to her current position, “and the same you may expect from me.”¹¹³ Players were constantly admonishing Milliken to keep their salaries secret, not to repeat their plans for the upcoming year, to give “not a word to anyone” when a company was about to fall apart, and not to inform others about their new engagements.¹¹⁴

It is hard to know if Milliken respected these requests, but there was certainly an expectation from managers and other agents that he was willing to share information about players. When Richard Fitzgerald, another vaudeville agent, learned that Milliken was looking for a dancing trio, he asked Milliken to “let me know what figure you can stand for the act and if I run across any other turn of that nature I will advise you at once.”¹¹⁵ The offices of Klaw and Erlanger requested information about “the whereabouts of Miss Ethel Harris; she calls herself an actress and we want to get some information concerning her.”¹¹⁶ While agents paid lip service to their equal commitments to players and managers, the fact that they respected requests for secrecy only from managers highlights the performers lack of power, which reinforced the insecurity of employment in a touring company. While Frank Rivers had promised a “private office where

¹¹³ Marion Elliott, October 17, 1893, MA.

¹¹⁴ Catherine McLean, April 15, 1891, HRC. “Close here + salaries are already in arrears [...] next season you know what we want Col + you are the responsible party if we don’t get it [...] I may star in a new domestic drama next season but ‘for goodness sake don’t say I told you.’” Kate Clark Perlet, n.d., HRC.

¹¹⁵ Richard Fitzgerald, February 3, 1890, HRC.

¹¹⁶ February 24, 1892, BR.

managers and artists can converse without being listened to” in 1866, the actual practice of the agent had gone in the opposite direction.¹¹⁷

In addition to the one-sided secret-keeping, managers and agents were also drawn closer together in the struggle over the payment of the agent’s commission, or the fee that Milliken collected for placing an actor in a company. These negotiations reveal the increasing power asymmetry in the world of touring companies, as the agent helped shift control from player to manager. This was both a run-of-the-mill activity, and one that engaged the most contentious dimensions of the relationship between managers, performers, and the middlemen who negotiated the terms of employment. According to the agency’s registration form, players were charged booking fees as well as a portion of their salary.¹¹⁸ These rates were calculated according to location, length of engagement, and time in the profession. New York City residents were charged a two dollar booking fee, those who lived outside the city paid a five dollar fee, while amateurs paid twenty five dollars in advance. Players paid half a week’s salary for season-long engagements, while shorter engagements were a percentage calculated by the week (ten percent for a one-week engagement, eight for a two week, etc.). The agent’s commission was the topic most likely to provoke performers into apoplexy, as it forced the very function and utility of the agent to the fore. “As far as the agents go to hell with the lot of you, what have you ever done for me I should like to know,” wrote William Lavelle, who had played supporting parts in touring combination companies for more than twenty years. “One engagement from Brown for \$25, one from Curtis which was a failure [...] Do something

¹¹⁷ *Clipper*, June 9, 1866.

¹¹⁸ Edwin Walter intake form, HRC.

for me other than talk, I have not received the benefit of any of the agents to the amount of \$1 for the last 8 years.”¹¹⁹ The reactions provoked by the commission problem are thus worth exploring in greater detail.

While the intake form indicated that players were to pay the commission when the contract was signed, this was rarely the case. This was because many of the companies that Milliken arranged were on the road for an indeterminate period of time, canceling or extending dates on very short notice. Players wrote of companies ending mid-tour or of salaries withheld, which in turn made it impossible for them to pay the agent. Walter Mack, in his first week with *The Sewing Machine Girl*, had played the first week without salary and was unable to calculate the commission, let alone pay it. “Of course you know that there is no telling how soon the season may end,” he explained, “and as it has just commenced at this date we cannot call it a season.”¹²⁰ Seven weeks into the tour of his light opera company, James Donnelly’s salary was reduced by 12.5% but Milliken still pressed for the commission, which was a full week’s salary at the original rate.¹²¹ “Salaries, No!” wrote Odell Williams in the second week of *The Judge’s Secret*. “No such thing has been heard of in Texas this season. Nothing would give me more pleasure than to show my appreciation of your kindly efforts but I haven’t got a damn cent.”¹²²

As Williams’ comments suggest, performers were in the indelicate position of owing their agents but also requiring their good favor to continue to find work. They

¹¹⁹ William Lavelle March 7, 1892, BR.

¹²⁰ Walter Mack, December 12, 1892, BR.

¹²¹ James Donnelly, January 9, 1894. Played in *Bohemian Girl* and *Pirates of Penzance, Clipper*, May 17 and June 21, 1890.

¹²² Odell Williams, January 3, 1890, HRC. Tour was announced in December, but Williams was gone by February, playing instead with the *Beacon Lights* company. *Clipper*, December 14, 1889; March 1, 1890.

could afford to burn bridges with individual managers, but remaining in the agent's good favor was a consistent priority. As a result, many letters both gently chastised the agent, defended the players' honor, and kept the door open for better options on the horizon. "Have a little patience + don't say you've had enough patience," wrote Blanche Holt. At the same time, Holt asked if there was a better engagement available—she had played "so many one night stands I am almost dead"—and if next season she could play "boy parts" and *not* in opera.¹²³ For those who were in failing or closed companies, the performer had to both explain why the commission was delayed or impossible, while also asking Milliken to continue to keep them in mind as they looked for work. This was thus a test of the performer's off-stage agility. She needed to protect her standing in her current company and prepare for its likely dissolution while remaining in the good graces of the agent, who could wield control over her future employment prospects.

Even players in companies that were not on the verge of dissolution were expected to pay their commission out of their first or second week's salary, which was a particularly inconvenient time. New actresses like nineteen-year old Dorothea Wolbert often had to cover their own transportation costs and were not paid for rehearsals. "You forget that we rehearsed ten days in Baltimore at our own expense besides the railroad fare from N.Y. which I had to repay," she explained. E.J. Holland had to delay the commission because he need to buy a full dress suit and wig, which cost a week's salary.

¹²⁴ But he insisted that this was a temporary circumstance. "My record is clean so far,"

¹²³ Blanche Holt, January 24, 1891, HRC. "Don't mention anything I say in my letters to you for they are confidential."

¹²⁴ E.J. Holland, n.d, HRC, Misc. "Why have you singled me out to send me such a letter. When I send commission, I will also tell you a piece of my mind."

explained Holland, “I have never owed an agent a cent.” Like Holland, most actors were insulted by the suggestion that they were kickers.

Many performers argued that it was the manager’s negligence that was holding up the commission, even though the weight of payment fell on the player. Harry Groesbeck explained that he and his wife had not been paid in several weeks, even though business was good and they were both “making a hit.” Unfortunately, Milliken would have to take their word for it; the advance agent would not allow positive notices of any members of the company except his favorite to appear in the papers.¹²⁵ By controlling what appeared in the press, the touring company’s infrastructure not only influenced how audiences were recruited but also how players could negotiate the terms of their employment. On a separate occasion, H. Wayne Ellis gave a detailed account of his manager’s shortcomings—no reliable financing, a cast of players without good specialties, etc.—before concluding with the statement that his letter to Milliken was in fact “an open letter to Mr. Wedgewood through you, his agent; and I respectfully ask for a decisive answer, in writing, as to whether the contract shall be lived up to.” Ellis was not a novice soubrette, however, but the author of the play at hand, *Rapid Transit*, who claimed property in the production and whose primary concern was that Wedgewood would get hold of the manuscript and produce the play elsewhere. In this case, the conflict was significant enough to halt production. Ellis’ keen understanding of what the manager could be pressured to do came from his own experience in the position. In a few months he had a touring company of his own that was reporting unpaid salaries and board.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Harry Groesbec, October 31, 1892, MA.

¹²⁶ H. Wayne Ellis, December 17, 1892, MA.

Although agents claimed not to favor either manager or performer, as they had since the 1860s, the commission struggles demonstrate that this was not the case. The more power a touring manager had, the more likely he was to treat his players as interchangeable pieces. On at least one occasion, the relationship between manager and agent was so close that a player hired directly by the manager was told to contact Milliken because he had been hired to fill the company.¹²⁷ Deducting commissions from the player's paycheck drew the agent and the manager into closer communication. Because traveling managers had access to a company finances, and knew which players were in debt to the company or were otherwise experiencing hardship, they could share this information with Milliken.

Managers occasionally pushed back against the agent's requests, not because it was unfair but because it was a hassle. One manager of multiple companies asked to not be contacted about this topic, "as I am frequently on the road and besides those are matters for the individuals or the manager of the Company to attend to."¹²⁸ "I was not aware that the commissions for obtaining engagements for artists were charged to managers," wrote E.A. Warren, "and I do not hold myself responsible. When the people that I engaged through you are out of debt it would be well to ask them first."¹²⁹ Gus Bernard explained that although he had originally contacted a player through Milliken, she had rejected the original engagement and instead joined for the regular season, which meant she did not owe a commission. He added, too, that although he had collected two-

¹²⁷ October 18, 1893, MA.

¹²⁸ James H. Shunk, November 29, 1893, MA. In an earlier letter, Shunk wrote, "the majority of performers are absolutely devoid of all sense of justice and of all feeling of honor." James H. Shunk, October 13, 1893, MA.

¹²⁹ E.A. Warren, March 8, 1893, BR.

thirds of another actor's commission, "he has been in hard luck and I have had to take it weekly."¹³⁰ Indeed, managers were acutely aware of the difficulties their players faced. "I want to protect you," wrote the manager of Chipman's Players, "but I don't want to be too hard on people who are leaving and have got to get back."¹³¹ Most of the time, however, managers used their knowledge of the actors' finances to win favor with the agent. When T.C. Hamilton sought a list of juveniles who could double as a stage manager, he also inquired about the commission of another company member, who had been paid and had no excuse.¹³² W.J. Benedict, a manager in the Catskills, wrote in the same letter that he needed a character old woman immediately, and that Milliken should respond with his bill for the company's commission: "I will protect your commission, as I agreed."¹³³

Players objected to this closeness because they understood it was to their disadvantage. When May Mortimer learned that Milliken had contacted her manager, she asked that Milliken "be a little lenient" as she was in considerable debt, but that whatever he decided, "Mr. McAndrews will do as you request."¹³⁴ Others argued more forcefully for a fair implementation of their arrangement. "To me you should send your bill," wrote Elsie Davis, after learning that Milliken had sent several letters to her manager, "I made the arrangements on one side you on the other, and it is out if my salary it has to come."¹³⁵ Likewise, when Milliken sent three letters to the manager of the "Enemies for

¹³⁰ Gus Bernard, December 6, 1893.

¹³¹ A.Z. Chipman, November 24, 1892, MA.

¹³² T.C. Hamilton, January 8, 1892, MA.

¹³³ W.J. Benedict, December 4, 1893, MA.

¹³⁴ May Mortimer, November 19, 1893, MA.

¹³⁵ Elsie Davis, May 12, 1892, MA.

Life Co.” in pursuit of nineteen-year old Dorothea Wolbert’s commission, she responded immediately: “I am very sorry that you bothered [Davey] about it,” she wrote. “If you wish to hold any communications on this subject please do so with me and not Mr. Davey.”¹³⁶ This was her first time on the road at the beginning of a long career—which eventually included 147 films—and Wolbert knew only a theatrical world built around specialties and touring companies.

In contrast, when twenty-year stage veteran Winona Bridges wrote to Milliken contradicting her manager’s assertion that she had asked to have her commission withheld from Milliken, her tone was conciliatory and intimate. “I have on the contrary been worried nearly to death ever since it fell due to you, but as my expenses were very heavy they refused to let me have it in advance until this week,” explained Bridges. “I have never cheated a person in my life, and I don’t think I would commence doing so with you of all persons.”¹³⁷ While performers adopted a range of approaches to this problem, and Bridges may have felt a genuine personal relationship with Milliken, she was also raised by a family with immediate memory of the stock company system, and that she had dealt with players and agents in the earliest moments of variety theater. Bridges’ mother was a long-time actress in Kansas City stock company, and Winona had sung and dance on variety stages since her teenage years. At seventeen, Bridges married

¹³⁶ Dorothea Wolbert, December 18, 1893, MA. Wolbert was born Julia Dorothea Wolbert Minzter in Philadelphia in 1874 and spent twenty years in theater before appearing in 147 films between 1916 and her death in 1958. George A. Katchmer, *A Biographical Dictionary of Silent Film Western Actors and Actresses* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2002), 405.

¹³⁷ Winona Bridges, November 14, 1893, MA. Bridges was the daughter of Charles H. and Eloise Bridges Erwin, a long-time member of a Kansas City stock company who had played in the original cast of Rip Wan Winkle. Winona was born in 1860 in New Orleans and began dancing in variety theater as a young teenager. *Clipper*, May 29, 1875; April 4, 1891; July 26, 1902.

William Shires, Jr., the son of the proprietor of Cincinnati's first variety theater. The theatrical worlds known to Dorothea Wolbert and Winona Bridges were very different.

Harry Eaton

Most of the players who sought work through James Milliken were European and European American. In contrast, the correspondence between the agent and comedian-manager Harry Eaton reveals the unique pressures exerted on touring specialty companies pitching themselves—more by force than choice—as “colored.” Eaton's struggles reveal how the logic of the specialty era was not applied equally to all players, and how the growing control concentrated in the hands of touring managers and theater owners could be particularly punishing for performers of color who could not spin the specialty into a career as Go-Won-Go Mohawk had. On the one hand, African American performers were already considered part of an interchangeable mass, as the opportunities in popular entertainment had been limited largely to minstrel or, by the 1880s, jubilee singing companies.¹³⁸ At the same time, this enforced limited range meant that the same players were not considered in the pool of interchangeable performers who could be slotted easily into, for example, an Irish dialect soubrette part. Already rendered fungible but only within a circumscribed racial boundary, the calculus of the specialty act did not apply to Harry Eaton in a way that made it possible for him to win.

Throughout the course of his twenty-two year career (1882 to 1904), Eaton moved between three kinds of companies: small-time venues with a comedian partner,

¹³⁸ There are exceptions to this rule, particularly if “commercial stage” is considered in its most expansive role to include lecture circuits and classical musical.

African American minstrel companies, and mid-sized touring companies run by Eaton, like the Afro-American Vaudeville Company. This is the company Eaton engaged Milliken to book engagements for, but after two months Eaton cancelled the tour to merge with another similar troupe, promising to be in touch once he had assembled “the best people from both companies.”¹³⁹ The combination was the result of an unprofitable turn; after two months on the road, Eaton could not pay salaries, but the company stayed on the road until January, when it sputtered out in one-night stands in central Pennsylvania.¹⁴⁰ The collapse of the Vaudeville company was one peak in a familiar sequence: he built name recognition while touring as a duo or part of a larger ensemble, recruiting players and financial backers for companies that could travel under his direction. His movement through these formats was not linear but cyclical, and there were important differences within each. For example, Eaton could expect a steadier schedule on an established circuit (i.e., the Omaha-Minneapolis-St. Louis Sackett and Lawler circuit, which he played in 1892) than with the ad-hoc concert halls of his earliest days.¹⁴¹ Cheap amusements delivered a small but regular paycheck but could not provide

¹³⁹ Harry Eaton, October 17, 1893, MA. Eaton was writing from Bridgeport, CT. “Everything new and original. Acknowledged by the press and public as having no equals in our line. We are capable of playing any theatre or following any company.”

¹⁴⁰ *Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 26, 1893; *Indianapolis Journal*, August 29, 1893; *Detroit Free Press*, September 24, 1893; *Clipper*, September 2, 9, 16 and October 7, 1893. Billy Young and Tom McIntosh left in November, and the *Clipper* reported on plans to consolidate, hard times in Albany and Hartford, the hiring of a new business manager, and a plan to head West. *Clipper*, November 18, December 2 and 23, 1893. The company closed in Scranton. *Scranton Tribune*, January 30, 1894.

¹⁴¹ In the fall of 1892, Eaton and long-time partner Alf Weathers opened in Omaha on the Sackett and Lawler circuit, playing week-long engagements in Minneapolis, St. Louis, and Wilkes-Barre alongside “The Belle of Minnetonka,” a spider-and-bug boxing exhibition, and trained dogs. *Clipper*, September 3 and 17, October 29, November 5, 1892; March 4 and 18, April 8, 1893. The *St. Joseph Herald* [Missouri], September 18, 1892, noted an illusion titled “Lot’s wife,” “the latest songs and sayings in black face, Dutch, Irish and Hebrew,” wizards, and the “many specialties” of “colored performers, Eaton and Weathers.” At the Gem Theater in Lynn, Eaton was a “colored entertainer” on a bill with acrobats, comic tramps, and a bioscope. *Clipper*, December 29, 1900. In this duo he also played Austin & Stone’s in Boston and had an eight-week run at Keith’s in Boston. *Clipper*, January 5, 1901; *Indianapolis Freeman*, April 20 and 27, 1901.

lasting success or creative autonomy. In contrast, running his own company with creative control and the perpetual promise of financial windfall was the goal, but it was also the hardest to sustain. In pursuit of these goals, Eaton experimented across genres and with organizational formats, attempting to negotiate a system built to funnel money through from audiences through Eaton and into the pockets of managers and producers or other backers. He was particularly skilled at finding work in summer exhibit halls or tours in overlooked territories.¹⁴²

The most important cultural force in Harry Eaton's early performing life was the growth and success of the African American minstrel company. The Knoxville-born Eaton began his career as one of half of the "Tennessee Team" with Tom Williams, a banjoist, in a concert saloon in North Carolina.¹⁴³ After a few years of medicine shows and summer amusement parks, they were hired into several of the African American minstrel companies that multiplied following the success of Charles Callender's Georgia Minstrels in the early 1870s. They played with Richards and Pringle Georgia Minstrels before joining the Hicks and Sawyer Minstrels tour at the end of 1886, where Eaton worked as an endman alongside long-time collaborators Charles and Ben Hunn, Tom

¹⁴² After the Memphis Students fell apart, he spent May and June touring the Canadian Provinces. When he left a collapsing minstrel troupe in Fredonia, Kansas, he was able to immediately book a ten-week tour on the Eden Musee circuit, beginning in Omaha. *Clipper*, March 23, June 22, August 17 and September 28, 1889. Two years later, he ran the Mozart Specialty Company from Great Falls, Montana to Chicago. *Great Falls Tribune*, Montana, July 2, 1891; *Clipper*, June 20, 1891.

¹⁴³ They played Minnie's Hall, in Wilmington, NC. *Wilmington Morning Star*, November 28, 1882. A few weeks later, Williams and Eaton were playing with Dr. Payne, an "Indian Physician," in what was likely a medicine show. The *Ansom Times* noted that "the acting of Harry Eaton was particularly good—in fact he was born for the stage." *Ansom Times* [Wadesboro, N.C.], December 21, 1882. Williams and Eaton continued to play over the next several years, playing in Decatur, IL a few months before joining Hicks and Sawyer. *Decatur Daily Republican*, June 29, 1886. Eaton was "working an Alabama Minstrel Co. through Kansas" in the winter of 1886. *Clipper*, February 6, 1886.

McIntosh, and the Mallory Brothers.¹⁴⁴ These companies have a complex legacy.

Performers were expected to work within a grammar of mutable but hegemonic racial caricature which, in its singular fixation on blackness, defined (through both denigration and admiration) what audiences expected of African American performers.¹⁴⁵ Yet, in addition to jubilee singing, these companies offered access to commercial stages and large, paying audiences for performers like Williams and Eaton, and they were also the tiny handful of companies that were not managed (if only for brief periods) by white men. Unlike most prior and subsequent tours that Eaton joined, Hicks and Sawyer was managed and financed by Charles Barney Hicks and A.D. Sawyer, who were themselves former players in African American minstrel companies.

¹⁴⁴ R&P tour is mentioned in *Clipper*, July 3, 1886. When mainstream papers praised Eaton and his companies, they could not think beyond racial categories provided by minstrelsy. “Modern minstrelsy in the march of progress seems to have lost that essential element of the native article which is only found in the negro. In other words—metaphorically speaking—the picture is only recognized by the frame. It is, therefore, something of a relief when the simon-pure, dyed-in-the-wool specimen is found, and it is probably due to a realization of that fact that Hicks & Sawyer’s Colored Minstrels were last night greeted with a full house. This combination of negro talent, in the *tout ensemble* of their performance, commended itself by an originality in their way of saying and doing things which was most appreciable, even though the time-honored first part was religiously adhered to.” The only mode of praise is racial accuracy; explanation of success and popularity is racial essence. This review mentioned Eaton by name. *Times-Democrat* [New Orleans], December 28, 1886. A.D. Sawyer was Amos D. Sawyer, listed as a waiter in the 1876 and a manager in the 1878 New York City directory at 65 E. Houston Street, the same address where A.D. Sawyer of the Jubilee Singers conducted his business. In 1870, twenty-year old Amos Sawyer, born in North Carolina and employed as a waiter, lived with his older brother John. Sawyer started out as the manager (and likely a performing member) of the Original Alabama Jubilee Singers, who first appeared in a production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at Wood’s Museum in New York City. *Clipper*, April 1, 1876; Year: 1870; Census Place: *New York Ward 15 District 8 (2nd Enum)*, New York, New York; Roll: M593_1033; Page: 224B; Family History Library Film: 552532; In 1876, the critic for the *New York Dramatic News* wrote of seeing waiters in restaurant whom he recognized from Steinway Hall, where they sang advertised as students in a Southern University. *New York Dramatic News*, April 22, 1876.

¹⁴⁵ Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997); Harry Elam, “The Device of Race,” in *African-American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, ed. Harry Elam and David Krasner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

By the time Eaton joined the tour, they had already played from D.C. to Des Moines to record-breaking crowds in Cleveland; Logansport, Indiana; and Omaha. Eaton joined the second half of the tour, which played from New Orleans through Mississippi, Florida, and Texas through St. Louis, Chicago, Ohio and into the Northeast. The tour was successful and well-received, playing to large mixed-race but segregated crowds. Of the Jacksonville engagement, a *Clipper* correspondent—possibly a member of the Hicks and Sawyer team—wrote,

Hicks & Sawyer's Minstrels packed the Opera house and the verdict here is that it is the best minstrel show ever brought to Jacksonville. It was patronized about equally by whites and blacks. The whole of the balcony was set aside 'for our colored brother,' and he filled it. It was refreshing to see the pride manifested by our colored citizens in such a good show, run entirely by people of color.¹⁴⁶

The company played at Tony Pastor's Theatre twice within five months, a rare occurrence that Eaton could not reproduce, to a "large and much delighted" crowd.¹⁴⁷

Eaton returned to the company in the fall of 1887, and they continued to tour until the spring, when the partnership dissolved and Hicks took the company (without Eaton) to

Australia.¹⁴⁸ The next large tour that Eaton joined was the "Georgia Minstrels" branch of

¹⁴⁶ *Clipper*, February 5, 1887. The dates, in order, were, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, Des Moines, Detroit, Anderson, IN, Ottumwa, IA, Akron, Springfield, Lincoln and Omaha, St. Louis, New Orleans, Jackson, MI, Vicksburg, Jacksonville, Sanford, Houston, Waco, Fort Worth, Hot Springs, AR, Fort Scott, KS, St. Louis, Chicago, Marion, OH, Indianapolis, Albany, NY, Bridgeport, CT, Boston, and then a closing at H.R. Jacobs' in New York City. August 21, September 18, October 9, October 23, November 13, December 4, 11, 18, 1886; January 1, 15, February 5, March 12, April 16, May 21, June 18, 1887. The played one night to week stands; for example, Thursday night in Jacksonville, IL, Friday in Springfield, Saturday in Joliet and Monday in Michigan City.

¹⁴⁷ Pastor's appearances are in *Clipper*, May 28 and September 24, 1887. Williams and Eaton split in 1885 and join together again July 3, 1886. When H&S played at Koster and Bial's in NYC in 1886, the *Clipper* called it "the first venture of the strict combination system tried in this place." *Clipper*, August 28, 1886. Skillings was music director. *Clipper*, September 4, 1886.

¹⁴⁸ Eaton remained with a company calling itself Hicks and Sawyer through May 1888, *Hartford Courant*, May 2, 1887; *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, April 28, 1888, offering "new and original ideas." He joined Halladay's Colored Minstrels in 1888. *Nemaha County Republicans* [Sabetha, KS], December 8, 1888. The acrimonious split of Hicks and Sawyer was noted in *Clipper*, August 20, 1887; Hicks' Australia company (sans Eaton) was listed in *Clipper*, August 11, 1888.

W.S. Cleveland's minstrel conglomerate, which moved more than fifty performers east from Arizona to New Jersey in five months.¹⁴⁹

Throughout the rest of his career, Eaton attempted to reproduce the success of the Hicks and Sawyer against a set of barriers specific to non-white performers and amusement entrepreneurs. Unlike the white W.S. Cleveland, who ran his "Georgia Minstrels" as one of multiple tours and could thus absorb temporary losses, African American promoters were constrained to a much narrower set of generic options and did not have access to reliable financial backing. When one of the companies Eaton toured with as a comedian "went to the wall," the players decided to reorganize on a profit-sharing model and adopt the name Memphis Students, with Eaton as manager. This lasted less than three months.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, after the Afro-American Vaudeville Company folded, Eaton started running companies under the name "Colored Sports," which he assembled while playing dime museums and summer engagements on Long Island.¹⁵¹ After two summers performing at North Beach to good audiences, Eaton convinced the pavilion owner to invest in his "Colored Sports" tour, which he served as amusement manager.¹⁵² Eaton had assembled a standard specialty line-up of comedians and "change performers," banjo players, contortionists and hand balancers, and soprano Bessie Lee. In the tour's third week, however, the investor abruptly pulled his backing. The business

¹⁴⁹ Utah, Nevada, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Indiana, and Ohio, closing in NJ in March. *Daily Times* [New Brunswick], March 9, 1891.

¹⁵⁰ *Clipper*, January 5 and March 23, 1889.

¹⁵¹ Eaton left the Afro-American Vaudeville company in January to join a trio at New Haven, although company went to Scranton, and remained temporarily settled in Boston, where he began organizing "Colored Sports." *Clipper*, January 13, March 3, April 14, 1894; *Hartford Courant*, December 25, 1893; *Scranton Tribune*, Jan 31, 1894.

¹⁵² Eaton advertised in the *Clipper* that Kohler had invested \$1,000 in cash, and that the company would play only three night and week stands. They opened the fall season at Miner's Bowery Theater in September. *Clipper*, March 14, May 2 and 30, June 27, August 8, September 5, 1896.

manager attempted to honor the contracts and continue the tour, dividing profits after expenses among the players, but receipts could barely cover expenses and the company closed. They scrambled to regroup with new backers, but were soon one of multiple acts at dime museums in New York and Boston.¹⁵³ At Eaton's death, journalist and critic Sylvester Russell recalled how a white manager had "starred" Eaton in a specialty company but removed his backing before the end of a season. Although Russell did not say so, it is likely this happened multiple times.¹⁵⁴

When Eaton engaged Milliken, his use of both "Afro-American" and "vaudeville" in the company's signaled his bid for a new kind of visibility and status. Scholars have long understood the introduction "vaudeville" in the 1880s as a bid for female and middle-class audiences by variety and dime museum entrepreneurs such as Tony Pastor and B.F. Keith. For African American player-managers like Eaton, however, promoting "the only legitimate colored vaudeville company before the people" was more about access to new venues than attracting audiences—or rather, it was the former as a way to the latter.¹⁵⁵ "Vaudeville" was primarily a new marketing distinction, as the players on his roster were giving the same acclaimed performances they had offered on less exclusive stages. The show was specialty heavy, with comics Tom McIntosh and Billy Young, the Mallory Brothers, the pantomimic Cicero Reed, the male impersonator Florence Hines, and the trick skater Christain, all of whom were minstrel show

¹⁵³ *Clipper*, October 17, 24, and 31, December 19 and 26, 1896; January 9 and 16, 1897 (Howard Athenaeum, Boston); February 20 and March 13, 1897 (Pittsburgh, on stage at Eden Musee, with Hindoo Fakirs); May 1, 1897 (El Dorado Casino, New Jersey). The new backers were Harry E. Daly of Troy and the Melbourne Brothers; Moses remained as business manager and Eaton as Amusement Director. They sent the same update to the *Clipper* (July 31, 1897) and the *Freeman* (August 7, 1897), reporting on their vacation in Cape May, and plan to open new season in August in Pittsburgh.

¹⁵⁴ *Indianapolis Freeman*, March 12, 1904.

¹⁵⁵ *Scranton Republican*, February 2, 1894.

veterans.¹⁵⁶ Both the company's title and the hiring of Milliken, then, were primarily about access to a new set of venues. One of Eaton's signature moves was to turn his birthday into a publicity event, and when he turned thirty in Easton, Pennsylvania—two days before his first engagement in New York City in five years—the comedian-manager announced that his next tour would be a “colored vaudeville company [...] to play vaudeville houses only.”¹⁵⁷ Indeed, one major signaling difference between Eaton's vaudeville company and his rivals was that the talent of the players was Eaton's central selling point, not the size and scale of the company. Yet even when Eaton had the most talented players in his company, he could not keep them for long, and none of the companies he organized had been able to play New York until this year.

Taken in aggregate, Eaton's career provokes questions about the comparative advantages and disadvantages of playing in companies and venues that we would now describe as racially integrated or segregated. When Eaton was one-half of a comic duo at ten cent houses Scranton and Milwaukee, he appeared alongside acts a wider range of acts than when he toured with his own companies. At the same time, being the sole “colored” act on the bill could be a solitary and equally restrictive position. It was a meagre living, with no promise of future success. As detailed in the subsequent chapter, playing in the large minstrel companies provided both social stability, constant work, and some room to experiment—if often in the off-hours—with new sounds and performance styles. The Hicks and Sawyer company, which was Eaton's first major tour and the only one run by African American player-managers, was both the most successful and the

¹⁵⁶ Opening cast also included Madame Lucille, W.B. West (juggler), and Prof. Wiley's Dog Circus. *Clipper*, August 26, 1893.

¹⁵⁷ *Clipper*, January 28, 1893.

best-received tour he had ever participated; almost fifteen year after the company disbanded, a *Freeman* journalist recalled that “Harry Eaton never did any work to amount to anything after the Hicks-Sawyer force were disbanded.”¹⁵⁸ This is likely because, once managers like Cleveland and Jack Haverly fully grasped the commercial potential of African American minstrels, they ruthlessly pursued takeovers.¹⁵⁹

When these companies were part of a minstrel conglomerate, as was the case with the W.S. Cleveland tour, the distinct organizational structures and touring schedules established a racial hierarchy that separated “refined minstrels” from “Georgia Minstrels,” *even as* the promotional material praised the authenticity and, occasionally, superiority of the latter. After the pavilion owner pulled his backing from the “Colored Sports” company, Eaton and his partner Alf Weathers joined the first season of Sheridan and Flynn’s “Big Sensation” company.¹⁶⁰ Less than a year after Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Exposition Speech, Eaton and Weathers were the Afro-American comedians in the “two distinct and separate companies” that comprised the double-show was a perfect illustration of racial segregation. Press materials repeated in newspapers from Boston to Indianapolis explained that the show was “not dependent on any one performer [...] and no one act dominates it.” Instead, “each part and each performer are placed fittingly according to the general plan [...] The first part is divided into two acts, first introducing the Creole artists and colored comedians as a prologue to the appearance of the

¹⁵⁸ *Indianapolis Freeman*, April 5, 1902.

¹⁵⁹ Cleveland ended his career as a vaudeville agent; Haverly built his career with a hostile takeover of Callender’s. *New York Star*, December 19, 1908.

¹⁶⁰ They played through end of 1896 and again in fall. *Clipper*, October 13 and December 21, 1895; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 24, 1896; *Wilkes-Barre Times*, September 14, 1896. The company was owned by Matt Flynn.

whites.”¹⁶¹ Rather than building a combination company around a single star, as many of play-based tours of the 1890s did, Sheridan and Flynn show staged asymmetrical integration. The tour also demonstrates a key distinction between Irish Americans playing Irish acts and African Americans playing in minstrel shows. While Sheridan and Flynn expanded to a “double show” and absorb a team of “colored sports,” the reverse was not possible.

Because Eaton was working within a segregated industry and not outside of it, he pursued the same strategies as the other male performer-managers who worked in the specialty era. You could argue that he had to be more experimental, in theatrical production if not aesthetics. After his success with Hicks and Sawyer, Eaton announced that he would play in England in the spring of 1892, although I have found no evidence that he toured beyond North America.¹⁶² In the single greatest example of a songwriter peaking before his time, he wrote and published the ballad “Sweet Caroline,” which was featured on the song sheet at B.F. Keith’s Boston theater.¹⁶³ Eaton was also a long time reader of and contributor to both the *Freeman* and the *Clipper*, which he used both functionally (to find players and engagements) and strategically (to generate interest in his touring productions, by slowly releasing the names of players who had joined his companies). Eaton and his first partner had used the *Clipper* to find engagements as early as 1883, which was how they found their first engagement with Charles Taylor’s

¹⁶¹ *Boston Post*, September 25, 1895; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Dec 8, 1895; *Pittsburgh Express*, April 16, 1896; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 29, 1895. Eaton and Westers are listed as “Afro-American comedians.”

¹⁶² *Era*, December 36, 1891. “Eccentric Comedians and Song and Dance Artists” were to appear in March, thanks to agent was Hugh J. Didcott. I have found no evidence that Eaton toured outside of North America.

¹⁶³ *Indianapolis Freeman*, May 4, 1901.

Alabama Minstrels, and the following decade he offered “long engagements and sure salary” for players willing to join his company in Bismarck.¹⁶⁴

It is thus no surprise that after a decade of hiring specialty acts for his various companies, Eaton entered the agency business. He co-founded a vaudeville exchange with Charles Hunn at 218 Tremont Street in Boston, where he was “prepared to furnish vaudeville attractions in unlimited quantities, and all first-class people.” Because legitimate theaters were closed to African American actors, Eaton in fact booked a wider generic range of players than other vaudeville agents, including the Philadelphia tragedian R. Henri Strange.¹⁶⁵ Like the many agencies before him, Eaton opened with an advertisement for “50 Ladies,” which he later claimed attracted three times as many interested performers.¹⁶⁶ The agency drew Eaton closer into entertainment journalism and he became the Boston *Freeman* correspondent, contributing updates on performers in the city as well as his own business. For example, Eaton noted that comedians Bert Williams and George Walker had played to standing room only, that a summer company managed by Eaton would soon be opening in Vermont, and that comedian Clarence Powell had rented a desk in the Exchange, which he was using to write “some very clever parodies.” Although he often submitted identical updates to the two papers, Eaton’s contributions to the *Freeman* were more likely to call out the industry’s racism. “We certainly appreciate the Freeman’s many kindnesses during our efforts to establish a Vaudeville Exchange in Boston,” wrote Eaton in his second month as agent, “but are sorry to say that even in

¹⁶⁴ *Clipper*, July 14, 1883; *Clipper*, July 4, 1891. Like everyone, he wants men who double in brass and lowest salary.

¹⁶⁵ *Indianapolis Freeman*, June 4 and June 22, 1901.

¹⁶⁶ Eaton and Hunn announced plans for three simultaneous shows, one for Austin and Stone (where they were currently on stage) and two for summer parks. *Indianapolis Freeman*, June 1, 1901.

Boston there are those who do not like colored people and therefore, we are compelled to announce our second removal, but we are still in the business.”¹⁶⁷

At Eaton’s death, Sylvester Russell noted that Eaton’s career was haunted by bad luck a characterization repeated by Abbott and Seroff in the only recent scholarship to consider Eaton. But Eaton faced the same problems year after year, which suggests that it was not poor luck or even failure. Eaton made the same claims of exceptionalism and uniqueness as his white counterparts: as advertised in his stationery, Eaton’s company was “The only company of its kind in existence.” When made by other combinations, the claim carried less significance—it was one of many boasts about size, talent, and artistry. But in this particular context, the claim to exceptionalism could be twisted into an exclusion; companies like Eaton were rare—so particular—that audiences would not brook this particular repetition. Eaton tried to preempt this challenge by promising that his troupe was “capable of playing any theatre or following any company,” but there is no indication he was successful.

This is because, unlike the African American-owned touring companies that played under canvas and considered in the next chapter, Eaton was subject to the theater manager’s gate-keeping. When L. M. Boyer, the white manager of Hyers’ Sisters tour, wrote to a manager in Cedar Rapids for open dates and terms in the upcoming month, he included a standard card with a request for a line in the contract. Interested managers must promise

NOT to play an attraction that carries colored people for at least 30 days prior to our dates. I ask this provision on an account of the many inferior infringements or steals and imitations, which, on account of the wonderful success of this attraction

¹⁶⁷ Local actor James W. DeCosta was their secretary. *Indianapolis Freeman* May 18 and 25, June 29, 1901. “The parks around here will be open shortly, and there will be plenty of work for colored performers.” *Indianapolis Freeman*, June 1, 1901.

for the past 23 seasons, have sprung up. It as much to your interest as mine to protect our dates, as by doing so you will get the original, and which I can say without fear of contradiction is the best performance of its kind on the road today.¹⁶⁸

This brief statement contains two important truths regarding Eaton's career. First, *all* touring companies in this period dealt with, and even thrived on, imitations. The challenge for the Hyers troupe, as was the case for the African American minstrel companies that Eaton played in, was that "infringements, steals, and imitations" would be made by white-run companies with greater access to capital and connections, thus putting both managers and players out of business. Second, the death knell of imitation was a problem only for "colored attractions." The calculus of singularity and interchangeability—the fundamental logic of the specialty, where an attraction or performance was both unique and completely independent from the rest of the production—was thus different for racialized players, who were by default judged to be representative of a mass or a people. To be categorized as a truly versatile specialty, performers needed first to have access to a kind of universal individualism that allowed them to be a whistling act, and a whistling act only. The players in Eaton's companies were always already interchangeable, but only with each other.

Conclusion

Fully grasping and theorizing the touring theatrical companies of the post-Civil War period has long been a challenge for historians, who recognize that the combination replaced stock or repertory model but do not agree on the cause of this change and have

¹⁶⁸ L.M. Boyer to Cedar Rapids manager, November 22, 1897, Folder 11.9, Minstrel Collection, HRC.

failed to grasp the significance of this change. The plays of this period are often denigrated as cheap translations of European schlock, while the defining structural changes cluster in the organization of national circuits across theatrical genres in the 1890s, with the formation of the vaudeville trusts and the Theatrical Syndicate. This argument fits Alan Trachtenberg's identification of "incorporation" as the defining cultural phenomenon of Gilded Age America, as the key to the control of these syndicates was their monopoly on the booking process, which required exclusive agreements between owners of theaters and managers of touring companies.¹⁶⁹ However, before theater owners and touring managers could make such agreements, there needed to be a relatively frictionless way to fill companies with players who were completely beholden to changing schedules and repertoires. Although the rise of theatrical trusts in this period is usually attributed to technological advance (railroads), entrepreneurial genius, or the inevitability of corporate consolidation, it was instead the result of several decades of agent-coordinated efforts that staffed touring companies while shifting the industry's center of gravity toward managers.

This was possible because of the rise of the specialty act, a way of organizing theatrical labor that originated in variety and minstrelsy but soon became the dominant logic for all but the most rarified theatrical productions. Players were now encouraged to develop a specialized turn that could be easily plugged into any company, or to transform what had once been a range of roles—comic old men, juvenile female—into a one-

¹⁶⁹ Trachtenberg's interest was in the cultural forms and meanings that accompanied and interpreted the shift from self-employed proprietors to salaried managers. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, 25th anniversary ed., (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007). See also Arthur Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

dimensional and one-off character part of “oily Mormon elder.” Most of the companies that Milliken cast produced only one play, and this play was often built around a specialty act. When experienced dramatic actress Ida Van Cortland and her husband Alfred Tavernier pitched their company to Milliken in 1887, they described an unusual feature of their production that would have been standard two decades earlier. “A combination playing an extensive repertoire in these days of ‘one play’ companies and ‘one part’ actors,” explained Tavernier, is a new departure.”¹⁷⁰

Cortland and Tavernier were the outliers, as most players by this period were pushed to cultivate an interchangeable way of performing. This was most challenging for performers who had experienced an earlier mode of organization, even as it opened up access to the stage for players from different backgrounds. Neither a singular net positive nor negative for players, the specialty era was good to touring managers. In fact, many more managers could enter the field in charge of touring companies, when they previously may have been attached to particular theaters or troupes.¹⁷¹ Access to a readily

¹⁷⁰ Alfred Tavernier, January 6, 1887, HRC. Cortland was born in England in 1854, moved to Chicago, orphaned in 1871 Great Fire, began as a school teacher, and at twenty-three moved to Toronto as a single mother, renamed herself, and made her stage debut in the ballet corps. At twenty-five she was the leading juvenile in a combination company touring the Maritimes, with two stars from Mrs. Morrison’s Toronto Company, doing standard melodrama. When the company fell apart, Cortland returned to New York. “Unfortunately the requirements on the part of actors were becoming less and less,” she wrote in 1918, “the one play company had come to stay, the stage had been so filled with amateurs during the successful run of Pinafore, amateurs that were willing to play for anything or nothing.” In 1882, Cortland and Tavernier begin to tour in the Maritimes and Great Lakes. SW Ontario is closer to Boston than Chicago, Cincinnati or Toledo; Richmond, Montreal, and Buffalo are all same distance from NYC. When touring, Tavernier could either pay a flat fee (up to \$300/wk) or a percentage (30 to 50), both of which usually were equal. By the early 1890s, however, it became a challenge to persuade touring companies that this was worthwhile. They began instead to pay a fee to an insurance company or to the house to get a flat \$100 fee per performance—this was called a certainty. When it came from the house manager, it was called a guarantee. Kathleen Doris Fraser, “Theatrical Touring in Late Nineteenth-century Canada: Ida Van Cortland and the Tavernier Company, 1877-1896,” (PhD diss., University of Western Ontario, 1985).

¹⁷¹ Milliken also received letters from tour managers in search of plays and backers with capital. Although his operation was much smaller than the well-known syndicates of the later 1890s, even a one-horse agent like Milliken had enough contacts to help a new manager get a company off the ground. Managers who were touring with one of Milliken’s plays were most likely to make full use of Milliken’s capabilities.

available pool of players, prepared to begin at a moment's notice with little rehearsal, low salary, and a string of one-night stands, made it much easier for managers to recover from failed tours.

This chapter has suggested the many ways that players negotiated this landscape, in which touring managers were increasingly in charge, thanks in part to their capacity to exploit the agent-manager relationship. This is particularly evident in the conversations around confidentiality and the agent's commission, two examples which make clear the growing asymmetry of control in the touring manager's favor. In spite of the moves that players made around managers and agents—withholding information, spinning positive narratives, playing nice—it was easier for players in the 1860s to play managers and agents off each other, because the network of agents and managers was still inchoate.

This was not the exclusive experience of performers, as many audience members were also encountering an invigorated managerial presence in their own workplaces. Some players chose to build on this parallel by literally pulling back the curtain on their work process. When Lawrence St. Gardens wrote in search of vaudeville engagements for his Grecian Picture Dance, he made clear that this was not the old Grecian dance, but instead “is changing slowly from one pose to another in view of the audience instead of the old way of dropping a curtain + changing back of a curtain.”¹⁷² St. Gardens was striking a balance between novelty and a tried-and-true audience favorite, pitching his

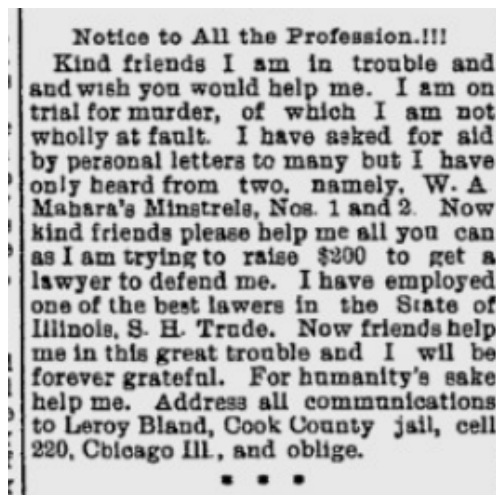
“Will you join forces with me if I furnish the Capital?,” asked Samuel Reeve, requesting that Milliken handle casting and arrange the route for a play with few people. “I am going out to try and make money the rest of this season.” December 31, 1887, MA. Quincy Turner, the nineteen year old son of a Des Moines farmer, wrote to Milliken in response to an advertisement he had seen in the *Clipper* for a package deal of a new play and a route booked. It does not seem that either Milliken or Turner followed through, but it was at least imaginable for a teenage Iowan to read the *Clipper* and feel called to participate. October 7, 1893, MA.

¹⁷² Lawrence St. Gardens, December 10, 1893, MA.

specialty as improved versions of what was already available. But his revision played on audience interest in the making of performance, so that the central focus of his act was the actual moment of transformation which had been previously concealed. Unlike the opera chorus strikes, however, this interest was used to not to disrupt what was happening in the theatrical mode of production but to give St. Gardens a better shot at employment. Unlike the striking members of the dissertation, St. Gardens was largely alone and isolated, angling for a spot in a line-up rather than a place in company. The best bet for players in this position was calling together some kind of like-minded public who could share information, call out bad managers, and sustain a body of performers across distance and difficulty.

**Chapter 5. “Hello to all other black thespians”:
Organizing the Industrial Minstrel Tour in the *Freeman*, 1890-1912**

In September of 1902, Leroy Bland was arrested for murder. He reached out to his friends with the tool he knew was most likely to find them: the sixth page of the *Indianapolis Freeman* newspaper.¹ This was his request:



Notice to All the Profession!!!
Kind friends I am in trouble and
and wish you would help me. I am on
trial for murder, of which I am not
wholly at fault. I have asked for aid
by personal letters to many but I have
only heard from two, namely, W. A.
Mahara's Minstrels, Nos. 1 and 2. Now
kind friends please help me all you can
as I am trying to raise \$200 to get a
lawyer to defend me. I have employed
one of the best lawyers in the State of
Illinois, S. H. Trude. Now friends help
me in this great trouble and I will be
forever grateful. For humanity's sake
help me. Address all communications
to Leroy Bland, Cook County jail, cell
220, Chicago Ill., and oblige.
* * *

Figure 1. Letter from Leroy Bland, *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 8, 1902

This was not the first time that Bland’s plight appeared in the *Freeman*. Two months earlier, when he was first taken into custody, readers learned that Leroy Bland, a female impersonator and countertenor “well-known to most performers” had been jailed “unjustly” and was “in desperate need of funds to secure legal assistance.”² Bland had been arrested for striking Harry Lovelace, a white housepainter who had insulted Bland on the street in Chicago’s Bronzeville neighborhood. Lovelace died the following day,

¹ *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 8, 1902. All further references are to the *Freeman* unless otherwise noted.

² September 27, 1902.

and after a witness came forward, Bland admitted to the altercation and was taken into custody.³

The *Freeman*'s regular correspondents immediately took up the accused performer's cause. Sylvester Russell, a newly-minted journalist transitioning out of work as male soprano in minstrel companies and into a position as the leading critic of African American theater, embraced Bland's case with gusto.⁴ After Bland's November letter, Russell announced the "Bland Fund," to be collected in twenty-five and fifty-cent installments and overseen by the *Freeman*, adding that the endeavor "should appeal to the hearts of every brother actor without hesitation."⁵ Russell argued that all players who read the *Freeman* should support Bland's cause.⁶ "I am not personally acquainted with Mr. Bland; I have never even seen him," Russell explained. "Yet because he has no home or relatives that he can look to for aid [...] every actor should rally to his support."⁷ Such sentiments were echoed in a letter by "The Senator," stating that Bland's situation required "concentrated action." He continued:

³ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 1, 1902. The *Tribune* reported that Bland had admitted to striking Lovelace on Saturday night, August 30, and that three men in addition to Bland had been arrested in connection with Lovelace's death. Lovelace. The doctor who cared for Lovelace reported "no marks of violence" and attributed the death to "excessive drinking." The *Evening Times-Republican* of Marshalltown, Iowa, reported that Lovelace had been found early Sunday morning with a head wound, and that he died later that evening in the hospital. A witness claimed that Lovelace had been knocked down by three men, and both papers reported the arrest of the three men (not including Bland) in connection with Lovelace's death, though none were held as long as Bland or brought to trial. *Evening Times-Republican*, September 2, 1902. None of these details were reported in the *Freeman*. On May 1, 1903, the *Tribune* reported that Bland was charged with the murder of Lovelace, but he seems to have been released and was on tour by June.

⁴ Russell toured briefly with the Mahara's East (2), September 23, 1899.

⁵ November 14, 1902.

⁶ For example, J. Ed. Green, the correspondent for the Black Patti Troubadours, included in his company's weekly roundup, "Help Bland, fellows, accidents will happen." December 27, 1902.

⁷ December 13, 1902.

The time has arrived for Afro-Americans who cater to the public to lessen the sorrowful moments of business perplexities [...] The Caucasians [sic] have their organizations for mutual fellowship and helpfulness and we see absolutely no reason why the Afro-American performer cannot unite and do the same. The case of Leroy Bland makes it an imperative necessity that an organization be formed on the lines of the 'Actor's Fund,' which shall keep the members in friendly touch with each other professionally. While Negroes are advancing in other callings [...] are the dispensers of mirth going to be laggard?⁸

Both Russell and "The Senator" understood Bland's situation as a clear demonstration of the need for an established system of mutual aid for African American performers, and the capacity of *Freeman* readers to carry this out.

The creation of this kind of organization soon became one of Russell's priorities as he moved into a position of prominence at the *Freeman*.⁹ Because he was trying to establish himself as the preeminent voice of African American theater, Russell wanted sole credit for this idea, and he criticized "The Senator" for making a recommendation from outside the profession. "If you desire to start a fund for us," he wrote, "give us some money and we will name our own officers and carry on the business ourselves."¹⁰ But Russell's arguments were partial, too. The most prominent mutual aid organizations for black performers—the Benevolent Order of Colored Professionals—had been organized in Indianapolis several years earlier.¹¹ As Russell likely knew, the crucial factor in

⁸ November 29, 1902.

⁹ December 19, 1903.

¹⁰ December 20, 1902.

¹¹ The B.O.C.P. was formed in February of 1898 in response to "a long felt want among the profession," February 19, 1898. It was modeled after the Elks and the Knights of Pythias, which many performers were already members of. The officers were local Indianapolites Archie Greathouse (in 1900, a saloonkeeper), A.R. Moss (barber), George Bailey (insurance agent); and S.N. Edmonds: also J. Harry Jackson (corresponding secretary and journalist), Billy McClain, Henderson Smith, Jesse Ringgold (porter), Adam Miller (barber), Elwood Knox, Joseph H Ward (doctor), Henderson Skinner (porter). "Members of the colored profession throughout the United States should join this organization. The benefits to be derived from it are manifold. In case of sickness, death or many other things that might arise, when being a member of the B.O.C.P. much relief can be secured. All members wishing further information concerning this may address J. Harry Jackson." February 28, 1898. In the next few years, additional lodges were formed in

establishing a new organization was the paper in which he was writing. It was the *Freeman* that had made a community of performers legible as a cohesive entity in the first place.

After four months of entreaties addressed to the *Freeman* readers—which included growing tallies of contributors and frequent editorial goading that “all eyes are watching to see what the profession will do”—the Leroy Bland Fund grew to \$66.85, collected from performers in five traveling companies and from the Domino Theater in Fernadina, Florida.¹² Touring players often raised money for members in adverse circumstances, but this usually happened within rather than across companies. Following the death of an “old friend and member” of A.G. Allen’s New Orleans Minstrels, the company raised “quite a sum of money” for his widow, whom they promised continuing “assistance when called upon.”¹³ And when Eugene Hillman lost his foot in an accident, “a big purse was gotten up among our performers” so that he could recover and purchase an artificial foot.¹⁴ Bland’s case, in contrast, was both expensive and involved a miscarriage of justice, so it was a more glaring offense. By mid-March, Russell was thanking “all the performers who so liberally and promptly contributed” on behalf on Bland, “whose burden of sorrow we have partly shared.”¹⁵ In May, due in part to the

Chicago, St. Louis, New York, and Toledo, and *Freeman* correspondents occasionally mentioned assistance or social outings with other B.O.C.P. members, but the organization went quiet by 1900.

¹² “All eyes” is December 13, 1902; amount is January 24, 1903. Just north of Jacksonville, the Domino Theatre was one of several venues in Florida that supported and nurtured African American players. For an excellent analysis of Jacksonville, see Peter Dunbaugh Smith, “Ashley Street Blues: Racial Uplift and the Commodification of Vernacular Performance in LaVilla, Florida, 1896-1916” (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2006).

¹³ May 31, 1902.

¹⁴ January 1, February 12, March 26, 1898. A cornetist was buried by members of the Chicago union. September 5, 1903.

¹⁵ March 14, 1903.

contributions that helped pay for Bland's lawyer, he was tried and acquitted.¹⁶ "I wish to thank from my heart everyone who contributed," wrote Bland, and "I wish I could shake hands with every one and speak to them that which is in my heart."¹⁷ He returned to his touring company at the end of May, where he was "meeting with encores nightly."¹⁸

The story of Leroy Bland is both singular and ordinary. You have never heard of him. He found steady if unglamorous employment in the minstrel company tours that boomed in the 1890s, when thousands of African American men and women entered commercial stages for the first time.¹⁹ He never played New York, he did not publish his material as sheet music or joke books, and he was never named a founding blues patriarch, as was his colleague W.C. Handy. For people who worked constantly and were seen by multiple generations, yet worked far from the limelight of Harlem and the restorative passion of the folk revival – performers who staffed the Tom shows, mammoth companies, Creole reviews, and Tampa honkytonks – this was standard. As J. Harry Fidler, another slightly-known performer from Indianapolis, described his own level of fame:

Hundreds Know Me! Thousands Never Heard of Me!! Millions Never Will!!!²⁰

¹⁶ May 23, 1902; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 1, 1903.

¹⁷ May 30, 1903.

¹⁸ Bland re-joined the company in Brainerd, Minnesota, on May 21, 1903. In September, a year after his arrest, readers learned that Bland was "certainly doing the act of his life and taking more encores nightly than a dozen average performers." July 4 and September 5, 1903.

¹⁹ I use the term "industrial minstrel tour" to distinguish the organizational form of the 1880s-1900s troupes from their earlier counterparts, despite continuities in the content of the shows.

²⁰ July 21, 1900.

But the fact that we don't know Fidler and Bland today should not be mistaken for lack of appreciation or significance. Bland was a popular singer—he had “temperament magnetism and dramatic instinct,” an impressive vocal range, and stage movements that garnered comparison to Ada Overton Walker—in the exceptionally close-knit world of African American touring performers at the turn of the last century.²¹ “The general stage folk,” in the terminology of singer and frequent *Freeman* contributor J. Ed. Green, were the majority of the theatrical working class during the early years of Jim Crow, as jubilee singing, country blues, cakewalking, buck and wing dancing, comic monologues, and specialty acts were transformed into the beloved and acclaimed modern performance styles of stand-up comedy, tap, and jazz.²²

The center of the touring player's world was the *Indianapolis Freeman*, founded in 1888 and owned by barber and politician George Knox, and a key promoter of “the self-help ideology of racial uplift” that characterized the response of educated and business class African Americans to segregation.²³ Rooted in the social world of its owner and local readers, the *Freeman* reached far beyond Indianapolis. Unlike a social club or educational institution, a circulating text that could pass through many hands and was open to forms of use that were at odds with its owners' intentions. This complex junction meant that the *Freeman* coverage of performance included both local piano

²¹ Sylvester Russell, “Leroy Bland,” June 15, 1912; vocal range from *Morning Olympian* (white), November 24, 1896.

²² March 12, 1904. As the *Freeman* noted when Rusco and Holland took over the Georgia Minstrels, one of the oldest African American minstrel troupes, this company was widely known as “the school where nearly all the prominent colored stars of this country and England received their training. Many of the leading vaudeville organizations of America are proud possessors of an artist from the ranks of the ‘Georgias.’” August 14, 1897.

²³ Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

recitals and touring opera stars, as well as, by the late 1890s, a one-page lightly-edited message board called “The Stage,” where critics, advance agents, managers and players posted employment ads, upcoming routes, complaints, and wedding announcements. At the time of his arrest, Bland had spent seven years touring year-round with Mahara’s, and like many of his peers he was involved in the *Freeman* as an extension of the intense and intimate workplace that was the industrial minstrel show. In his scholarship on band leader P.G. Lowery, one of Bland’s high-profile colleagues, Clifford Watkins names the *Freeman* “the circulatory system of black show business.”²⁴ This apt metaphor that captures its critical, life-sustaining role in an enterprise balancing hundreds of performers, thousands of audience members, and twenty to thirty troupes on the road at any given time, concentrated in the middle of the United States but extended across the globe.

With the exception of his fund, Bland used the *Freeman* the way most of colleagues did: he found engagements, promoted his acts, and kept the rest of the “show folk” updated on the general conditions of his life. Bland made regular appearances in the weekly dispatches from the Mahara’s correspondent, listed “among the many prominent artists” or given a line of his own: “Leroy Bland and Dan Avery are closing the olio with big success with their new act,” “Leroy Bland is making the hit of his life singing ‘Give Me Back My Clothes,’” and “Mr. Leroy Bland is still puzzling his audiences, singing ‘He Was Certainly Good to Me,’ with success.”²⁵ Readers learned when Bland was visiting family, when he was on the sick list, and when he had a new partner.²⁶ He also showed

²⁴ Clifford E. Watkins, *Showman: The Life and Music of Perry George Lowery* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), 19.

²⁵ June 12, 1897; January 1, 1898; October 14 and February 11, 1899.

²⁶ April 28, 1900.

up as the recipient or sender of “regards” to his fellow itinerants. “Am improving slowly, but there is hope. Be sure and keep me posted where you are,” wrote L.B. to Bland; “Leroy Bland would like to hear from Helen Ogden and Billy Young [two of Bland’s previous partners in Mahara’s], send pictures immediately to 607 Grand Ave, Des Moines, IA.”²⁷ When the *Freeman* correspondent in Clarksville was invited into the Mahara’s car for a peek behind the curtain, it was Bland who gave the account of their recent tour through Florida and into Cuba, where he reported that they had played for 6,000 people nightly.²⁸ At the end of his career, after he left Mahara’s, Bland used the *Freeman* to find new partners or engagements, one of the most common uses of the paper by both performers and managers.

These announcements may seem trivial, but they should be contextualized as the workplace-based strategies of a distinct cohort of performers, much like the orchestra musicians of the MMPU. Taking full measure of the *Freeman* first requires acknowledging its unexpected geographies, where the culture workers’ terrain is neither Chicago nor New York but the midsized cities of the South and West. This is the case both for the *Freeman* as a paper and most of its active correspondents. Like many of his peers in industrial minstrelsy, Bland was born in the Midwest to parents who had left the South in search of social and economic equality and in flight from racial terror. These players spent years on the road, often seeing old friends and families when the touring company passed through their home towns. In addition to “The Stage,” one of the most popular reader-driven advertising sections of the *Freeman* was the “Lost Relatives”

²⁷ September 5, 1900; February 22, 1902.

²⁸ March 17, 1900.

column, where readers searched for family members. In this same vein, the brief “regards” exchanged between players like Bland held together a generation dispersed by post-Emancipation migration and compounded by a peripatetic line of work. From the first mention of Bland’s arrest, the *Freeman* noted that Bland was requesting assistance through “personal letters” to his colleagues in addition to the general call for the fund. But the *Freeman* is best understood not as the public counterpart to private appeals, but as an intermingling of personal correspondence and public address built through a decade of reader participation. When he was arrested, Bland pivoted the *Freeman* from its usual purposes to a slightly different one built entirely in keeping with the community of readers and correspondents who kept the paper alive.

Bland’s arrest not only garnered support for his cause, but, given the placement of his appeal in the *Freeman*, also brought to the fore long-simmering questions about the working conditions of the industrial minstrel show. As they did for the many players writing to Milliken in the previous chapter, “working conditions” include issues such as salary, length of engagement, and workplace safety, but also the higher-order concerns that such details underpin. For the culture worker, the drive for workplace autonomy and respect, room for advancement, the chance to acquire new skills, and a voice in how an organization operate shared space with the specific challenges faced by employees who experienced multiple investments in their work beyond wages. Unlike the MMPU or the fledgling actors’ associations that would crystallize into Actors’ Equity in the coming decades, the catalyst for the Bland Fund wasn’t a conflict between a worker and an employer but the experience of a black performer imprisoned in the Cook County justice system. The establishment of the “Bland Fund” can be understood as intensely contextual

and contingent form of labor activism; it was built on a shared occupational consciousness and an information network. It is an excellent example of workers excluded from existing labor organizations along color *and* occupational lines (or rather, at the place where a color line was transmuted into an occupational line)—and of how these workers assembled their own models of collective support and protection.²⁹

This chapter opens with a detailed examination of the life of Leroy Bland, which grounds the subsequent discussion of how players used the *Freeman*. I describe the evolution of the *Freeman* into the primary hub for African American commercial performance at the turn of the century, and analyze the limits and possibilities of the various organizing strategies that emerged through the *Freeman*. Throughout, I analyze the *Freeman* and the networks it helped form from two vantage points and culture concepts: as a business tool created by a black professional-managerial class, epitomized by the paper's long-time proprietor George Knox, and its appropriation and uses as a resource by workers within its networks. The bit player's use of the *Freeman* mass communication form resembles similar efforts by groups as diverse as the Populists, Wal-

²⁹ When the *Freeman* readers came into contact with organized labor, it was rarely good. "We find lots of colored talent working here in the city," wrote one correspondent from San Francisco in 1903, even though "the white union performers are trying to shut the colored performers out." January 31, 1903. For Charlie Pope, who had been in Australia since Hicks & Sawyer troupe disbanded 1888, the behavior of the White Rats, the vaudeville union, suggested that "their prime object is to eliminate the Negro from the stage," and that as a result, "the Negro professional [...] must go where their talent is desired, or seek employment along other lines." For Pope, the answer was the Antipodes, where he had been "welcomed and appreciated." Though he may have abandoned the U.S., he was still a constant reader of the *Freeman* and the *Clipper*, which both were "eagerly looked for upon the arrival of the American mail." June 21, 1902, 5. Furthermore, when the white vaudeville union, the White Rats, struck, this meant opportunities for black performers.

Mart employees, and Garveyites, all of whom appropriated the tools of corporate capitalism while understand themselves as well outside its strongholds.³⁰

Leroy Bland

Leroy Bland spent his working life traveling across the American Midwest, a journey he made first as child in the company of his family. He was born John Henry Stone in Nashville around 1870 to Reuben and Eliza Stone, two Tennesseans who were in their twenties when the state ratified a new constitution outlawing slavery in February, 1865. After Eliza's death, Reuben moved John Henry and his older brother William first to St. Louis—where John Henry attended school, fourteen-year-old William worked in a seed-grinding mill, and Reuben joined a roofing crew—and then to Davenport, Iowa by 1882. At some point between 1885 and 1894, John Henry Stone of Davenport became Leroy Bland, female impersonator, of McCabe and Young's Minstrels. He may have gone first to Chicago, but he also might have joined a touring company playing the multiple towns seated at the confluence of the Rock and Mississippi Rivers. In December of 1889, for example, McCabe and Young—"doing the largest business of any colored troupe on the road," according to the "The Stage"—played their routine stop in Davenport.³¹ Bland's first troupe was owned and run by Billy Young and Daniel McCabe, two of the few African American performer-producers who achieved the success that eluded Harry Eaton. Bland had joined one of the most desirable companies on the road. In one of the few advertisements in the *Freeman* from musicians seeking

³⁰ See, for example, Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), and Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

³¹ *Clipper*, December 14, 1889; "largest business," February 22, 1890.

work, a cornet player “who reads music well and has considerable experience” sought a “position with some first class colored Minstrel Co.,” but noted that he “prefers to join McCabe & Young’s minstrel.”³² Like this cornet player, Bland left no record of why he joined show business. He may have wanted to chart a path that remade mobility and personal reinvention into a valuable asset.

Bland stayed with McCabe & Young until October 1894, when he joined Mahara’s Minstrels, one of the best-known, longest running, and artistically innovative industrial minstrel tours. The company was named for its manager, William Mahara, a former McCabe & Young advance man, but Mahara soon left to become the proprietor of “McGinty’s Troubles,” an Irish specialty act. Regardless of which racial or ethnic stereotype Mahara was selling, his operations shared two key qualities. They were always based in the Midwest—out of Des Moines, Shullsburg, Wisconsin, or Canton, Illinois—and his advertisements sought players who could “double,” or play multiple parts: a soubrette singer and dancer, a trombone player who also did a specialty act, and a comedian who could play bass drum in the band. This emphasis on “doubling” was an extension of the logic of the specialty act, adapted for touring companies that were less likely to fall apart on the road but that stayed together because of the multiple roles required of its players. The men who move into management do so by wringing as much as they could out of their performers in a form of a speed-up in production. These conditions were not exclusive to Mahara’s companies, but were instead the circumstances that players reading job listings in the *Freeman* were facing.

³² April 16, 1892; Doug Seroff and Lynn Abbott, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1895* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 65-66.

By the time William Mahara had his own minstrel company, industrial variety—whether it was burlesque, minstrel, Irish, melodrama, or some combination of the above—was a well-oiled machine. Not only did the troupe primarily include players and administrative staff reorganized from McCabe & Young’s touring company, but Mahara’s Minstrels followed an almost identical route through the Midwest and West, dipping into Mexico. In its fifth season of existence, the company could open on August 6th in Bellvidere, Illinois with only a week of rehearsal because it was “composed of all experienced show people.”³³ The performer’s workday included a midday parade and the three-part evening show, which ran between two and three hours. Bland sang sentimental songs in the show’s first part—he did what was called a “soubrette impression” with tunes like “My Soldier Boy”—and performed in song and dance skits with a partner in the olio, the second part. He also likely appeared in the full company finale. Female impersonators were a familiar feature of the industrial minstrel show, and tenor singers like Bland “had peculiar responsibilities,” recalled W.C. Handy, specifically, “[jerking] the tears” for “those who came to a minstrel show to cry as well as to laugh.”³⁴ While several reviews suggest that audiences were “kept guessing” by Bland’s act, it is more likely their attention was held not by shock but by the pleasure of gender impersonation in a suite of masquerades.

³³ *Clipper*, September 5, 1896.

³⁴ W.C. Handy, *Father of the Blues* [1941] (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 37. Allison McCracken makes a similar point in *Real Men Don’t Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 16-18. Originally a vernacular Scottish term, crooning first appeared before American audiences in the blackface minstrel show, a sonic marker of intra-white racial difference that distinguished Anglo audiences from Irish performers singing beyond the pentatonic scale in “novel, wild, irregular, even barbaric” tones. McCracken argues that the increase of women in the audience and in minstrel troupes disturbed the all-male milieu of the minstrel show, making the female impersonator’s role more dangerous—because of the sexual charge between female audience members and an explicitly romantic or sentimental stage performer—and, ultimately, less appealing. McCracken, 65-73.

A Mahara's tour was a long and difficult slog. The company played one-night stands across for forty-two week long seasons. Performers had to be dexterous and agile across a range of venues. One member recalled "wildcatting" during the Nevada Gold Rush for audiences of miners and gamblers. In Ely, Nevada, they may have met the woman who answered the *Freeman* ad for a "girl piano player who could read and play ragtime for \$3 a night plus board." When the company was at risk of a night without a performance while crossing the Rockies, they stopped near a town, hung out the red and black wood-cut lithographs, built a ring of blankets with the train car as anchor, and put on a show.³⁵ Mahara's also played to a range of audiences, who were multiracial but segregated if it was an established house, and less carefully demarcated if playing under canvas.³⁶ Yet, compared to the scattershot dime museums and summer amusement parks that Harry Eaton was often relegated to, a Mahara's tour was a good engagement. As W.C. Handy recalled, playing with Mahara's was "a chance to travel and, better still, an opportunity to rub elbows with the best Negro musicians of the day," particularly the vocalists like Bland, whom he said were "amazingly well-trained."³⁷

After his arrest, Bland spent the final decade of his life and career back on the Mahara's tour and in small-time vaudeville in the Midwest, where he adjusted his act to new circumstances. Between 1903 and 1907, Bland toured Utah, Manitoba, and

³⁵ F.M. Shortridge, "Reminiscences of Some Agents I Have Known," *Billboard*, May 16, 1925.

³⁶ In Little Rock in 1899, they played to overflowing houses of "frequent and hearty applause," leading that the manager to announce, "it's my first and last experience with colored spectators, and they'll never darken the doors of Glenwood again so long as I am manager." *Arkansas Democrat*, October 3, 1899.

³⁷ Handy joined the tour in August, 1896, through a friend. He played for six dollars a week at first, but took on work arranging, leading the band, and working as a soloist, all of which paid more. Handy also recalled an act called the "Musicians' Strike," where the Mahara's band would pretend to fight, get arrested, and quit, before reassembling around the corner with "the most sizzling tunes of the day." Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 36.

Wisconsin with Mahara's, with a brief stay in California's small-time vaudeville houses. On the Pacific circuit, Bland developed a two-man act called "A Dream of Dahomey" with his partner Edward Frye, which he called a "classical Hindoo, African act."³⁸ Bland's act was a concatenation of racial caricature which drew no distinctions between indigenous people across three continents, as in the song "In A Hindoo Canoe," which he performed for years. In March 1907, he wrote a very accurate assessment of the company that was his life's work to his friends in *Freeman*: "While many of the good ones are going under, we are on top, for we belong to the small class, but we deliver the goods."³⁹

By August 1907 Bland was done with Mahara's, but he never strayed far from his original material and style. He continued to expand his "Dahomey" act with a new partner on Chicago's "stroll" and in vaudeville houses in Illinois, Indiana, and West Virginia. If Sylvester Russell was correct that Bland had rejoined Frank Mahara's tour out of obligation—Russell wrote in Bland's obituary that "during the [1903] season he paid back the obligation to his benefactor"—this transition may have carried even greater weight. Like many small-timers working dime theaters, Bland shared the stage with film and other new forms of amusement. His style of performing honed under canvas appeared old-fashioned—one critic noted, "he is a rather young man, but old to the stage," and Robert Motts engaged him at the Pekin to pay homage to "an almost forgotten theatrical pastime, the Minstrel"—but this did not mean audiences were displeased with the older style.⁴⁰ Juli Jones, a *Freeman* Chicago correspondent, claimed that Bland's act was "the favorite of the stroll," and predicted great success if "Dahomey" made it to "the

³⁸ June 1, 1907.

³⁹ March 9, 1907.

⁴⁰ October 2, 1909 and August 24, 1907. At the Monogram Theatre in Chicago, Bland shared a bill with Blondie Robinson, another small-time player who had worked the California circuits and did a cowboy act.

big wheel,” meaning the Keith-Albee or Orpheum circuits that controlled vaudeville booking across North America. Almost two decades into his career, Bland appeared before 2,000 African American patrons on a special bill at the Garden Theater in Louisville, where his cowboy act was declared a “knockout.”⁴¹ A review from a similar Indianapolis show at the end of his career is particularly telling:

For elocution he leaves nothing undone. He was an extremist when it comes to gestures; he did the work greatly, seeming to go on the theory of orators that everything is fair that adds to the effectiveness of the rendition. The little theater went wild over his singing, over his acting during the singing. He made a hit here, hit after hit, and more likely he does the same everywhere he goes [...] The audience called him repeatedly, but the law of vaudeville is as that of the Medes and Persians—without charge—he could not respond, saying that his partner just had to hold the stage while he was making his change for his next appearance.⁴²

In an echo of the previous decade, after making only intermittent appearances in the *Freeman* after 1910, a letter from Bland was published in April 1912, asking for help with expenses resulting from being shot in the hip by a Chicago policeman.⁴³ A benefit was organized in his honor at the Chicago theatre the Monogram, where he often performed, and Bland publicly thanked his supporters in the *Freeman*, but it was too late; the following day he was “pushed down by a white woman” in a department store, which dislodged the bullet in a fatal direction, costing him his life. Bland was not yet fifty.⁴⁴

⁴¹ July 15, 1911.

⁴² October 2, 1909.

⁴³ April 13, 1912.

⁴⁴ The immediate details of his death are from Russell’s obituary, June 15, 1912.

George Knox and The Freeman

Indianapolis is three hundred miles southeast of Davenport and three hundred miles dead north of Tennessee. Like Leroy Bland, George Knox had also moved to the “old Northwest” from the Nashville area, where he eventually purchased the *Freeman* from its founding proprietor, Edward Cooper. The paper largely reflected the experience and ideology of its second owner, a prosperous barber and activist in Indiana’s political, cultural, and social sphere. Knox was born in Wilson County, Tennessee, and moved to Indiana, where he trained as a barber. A savvy political operator, Knox’s successful barbering business gave him access to both white politicians and social capital in the African American professional community.⁴⁵ He soon owned four barbershops and employed fifty barbers, moving into Indianapolis’ black bourgeoisie.⁴⁶ This was a world far removed from Knox’s origins; unlike his white peers in printing and newspaper publishing or his new neighbors, Knox could not read until he was thirty years old.

In June 1892, as Knox was preparing to attend the National Republican Convention as the delegate-at-large, he embarked on another new venture: newspaper proprietorship.⁴⁷ The *Freeman* was the third black weekly paper published in Indianapolis and had been in print for four years.⁴⁸ The first publisher, Edward Cooper,

⁴⁵ Knox was one in a cohort of black barbers who made considerable money running independent businesses that were fairly exceptional for black professionals in the post-Reconstruction era. They occupied an unusual middle ground between the middling respectable classes (clergy, professionals) and the sinners (performers, sporting men). See Quincy T. Mills, *Cutting Along the Color Line: Black Barbers and Barber Shops in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013) and Douglas Walter Bristow, *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2009).

⁴⁶ In 1889 he had twenty-two employees. January 5, 1889.

⁴⁷ June 11, 1892 was the first issue under new management.

⁴⁸ The *Freeman* followed the *Leader* (1879) and the *Colored World* (1883) and was followed by the *Recorder* (1897). These last two papers, like the *Freeman*, lasted into the 1920s. Emma Lou Thornbrough, “American Negro Newspapers, 1880–1914,” *Business History Review* 40 (Winter, 1966): 467–90.

moved to Indianapolis as a teenager and worked as book agent while still in high school—according to his obituary, “he was a hustler [...] capacious in brain”—and then as a mail clerk on the railway route between Indianapolis and Louisville. His experience of print on the move may have sparked Cooper’s interest in publishing, as he then worked on the *Indianapolis Colored World* and the *Baptist Watch-Tower* before founding the *Freeman*. Cooper was a salesman and not a businessman, and he had to mortgage the *Freeman* from its second year of publication.⁴⁹ When Cooper could not pay the paper’s bills, Knox—who had facilitated the *Freeman* mortgage in 1890, and spent several years fending off Cooper’s requests for more loans—agreed to take over.⁵⁰ Knox had resisted proprietorship for some time, but was convinced by Cooper and his editor, William Allison Sweeney (born in Superior, Michigan and educated in Ann Arbor) that if the paper failed, “it would be a disgrace to Indianapolis, to [Knox] and the race generally.”⁵¹ Convinced that he could guide the paper to solvency, Knox promised that the paper be “a through and through race paper,” and that “its eight pages will be given to the race to be used as an arena in which the questions which concern its present and future weal from every standpoint of view and interest may be discussed.”⁵²

Knox’s political career was thwarted at multiple junctures, and like other African American activists of the period who found that electoral politics were no longer a

⁴⁹ “His business was in the front office and on the street button-holing and jollyng men into his way of thinking.” July 18, 1908.

⁵⁰ Cooper was critical of the Republican’s racial homogeneity and the party’s embrace of “trusts, monopoly, syndicates and combinations.” Marvin D. Jeter and Mark Cervenka. “H. J. Lewis, Free man and Freeman Artist,” *Common-place* 7, no. 3 (April, 2007).

⁵¹ George Knox, *Slave and Freeman: The Autobiography of George L. Knox*, ed. Willard B. Gatewood Jr. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press), 167.

⁵² He announced at his purchasing that “in politics it will Republican; in other matters strictly racial.” June 11, 1892; January 6, 1894.

feasible outlet for their prodigious efforts, he chose to concentrate instead in civic, social, and cultural spheres.⁵³ His story illustrates the apparent contradiction that the era most commonly associated with the repression of black life after slavery—Jim Crow—is also known for the flowering of the black press. The *Freeman* was one of hundreds of black newspapers were founded between 1880 and 1914, a broad assessment that recent digitization efforts such as the Black Press Research Collective and the Colored Convention Project will both enlarge and make more precise.⁵⁴ As scholars have long argued, and as the *Freeman* publication history suggests, these papers were founded explicitly to cultivate African American social and political discourse, and to build a communal space that could stand as a bulwark against the dismantling of freedoms associated with Reconstruction. Early advertisements promoted the *Freeman* as “a political paper,” but also “an historical paper,” “a literary paper,” “an illustrated paper,” “a general newspaper,” and “an advertising medium” which had no equal, “reaching as it does a class of people not reached by the white papers.” The paper had a wide range of divisions from the beginning, including “Our Journalists and Literary Folks,” “Our City People,” “The Waiter,” “Our Women,” “Club, Lodge, and Society,” “Political Arena,” “Race Gleanings,” “Light from Other Shores,” and “Public Opinions,” which together reported on educational and church news, travel, marriages and deaths, and hirings and firings in various professional and civil service jobs. But the *Freeman*’s oft-noted eclecticism was not an editorial quirk. As the *Freeman* owner and readers felt the

⁵³ Knox had been closely connected to the Indiana Republican party since the 1880s but was increasingly frustrated with all levels of party politics, so he turned to other projects.

⁵⁴ The figure of “hundreds” is from Thornbrough, “American Negro Newspapers, 1880–1914.”

territory of party politics shrink, they pushed the public sphere's horizon of possibility from the inside out.

Shifting political energies is only one part of the story, as it does not necessarily hold that a paper founded for political reasons would become a major force in the entertainment business. After all, black players had read and published in the *Clipper* since the 1860s. Yet the upstart *Freeman* seems to have travelled as widely as the *Clipper* in its first decade, and held its territory in the face of competition from the highbrow *New York Dramatic Mirror* and *The Billboard*, a billposters' paper out of Cincinnati that soon covered the *Clipper* and *Freeman* amusement beats.

The *Freeman* had a wide reach for a reason. Most white weekly papers were printed in towns of less than 10,000 and could make a profit selling to a local audience, but comparable black papers had to circulate on a state or national level.⁵⁵ From its earliest years of publication, the *Freeman* was advertised as a "national colored weekly paper" (1889) and then as a "national illustrated colored newspaper" until its folding. Knox was not given to modesty; in his second week as publisher, the *Freeman* claimed it was read by more than 100,000 each week, and that it was "the best advertising medium in the United States."⁵⁶ He energetically pursued the expansion of the printing and business and the paper's circulation, moving the operation to larger quarters and built up the job printing department, which was a crucial way for black papers to stay in business and one that tied them closely to entertainment advertising and bill posting. And he also

⁵⁵ Thornbrough, "American Negro Newspapers," 475-6.

⁵⁶ June 18, 1892.

dabbled in sheet music production as the E.C. Knox and Company music publishers, named for his son Elwood, the *Freeman*'s business manager.

The *Freeman* leadership also encouraged ways to circulate the paper that relied not on white sales infrastructure but on already existing African American social networks and patterns of movement. The *Freeman* had a substantial team of correspondents and traveling agents positioned across the country, which reflected its readership's connections in cities and town of all sizes across country. "The *Freeman* wants honest, active, intelligent agents in every city, town and hamlet in the U.S.," announced a recurring early announcement.⁵⁷ Much of the paper's content as submitted by zealous readers or advertisers. These correspondents were two-way conduit between the paper and the readership, serving as journalists as well as a street team. As one correspondent wrote from Galesburg, Illinois, upon learning that the city's *Freeman* agent had closed his services: "I hope someone will take hold of the paper. No intelligent community can do without the *Freeman*, as it takes in the broadest scope for gathering news than any paper I have read."⁵⁸ And although Indianapolis did not have the cultural capital of Chicago or of New York, its central location at a railroad hub was a huge asset for distribution. Knox made a deal to have the *Freeman* picked up by Pullman porters as they travelled through the city and distributed along their route.

Across the various sections of the paper, the *Freeman* excelled at responding to its subscriber interest, calling its readers together into a semi-organized public. The popular

⁵⁷ *Freeman*, January 4, 1889, 2. Other black papers cultivated like the Robert Abbott's *Chicago Defender* cultivated an equally responsive relationship with their readers, because they relied on subscription sales and not advertising. Mary Stovall, "The *Chicago Defender* in the Progressive Era," *Illinois Historical Journal* 83 (Autumn, 1990), 161. Abbott also relied on Pullman porters to distribute his paper, although this was after Knox.

⁵⁸ November 29, 1890.

column “Lost Relatives,” in which contributors paid a small monthly fee to ask for the whereabouts of siblings, parents, and grandparents, was a direct response to reader demand. In February 1891, Eldora Gaines wrote in from Des Moines that she had “learned through the columns of the *Freeman* that you assisted persons in finding their friends and relatives,” and was looking for her parents’ siblings.⁵⁹ The following week an appeal from Eliza Dyson in Saint Louis for the whereabouts of her people in Delta County, Mississippi, appeared in the advertising columns.⁶⁰ In subsequent issues, Dyson’s request was joined and then replaced by others, until many weeks had as many as ten requests. Many ran for multiple weeks—Addie Johnson was looking for her brother Octavius Oldwine from March to October, 1891—and there were occasional successes. In July 1891, the *Freeman* noted that William Rochester of Natchez had spent three weeks in Louisville with his sister Mattie Davis and other relatives he hadn’t seen in over thirty years, and whom he found by advertising in the *Freeman*.⁶¹ The series continued to grow after Knox’s purchase, and was now headed with an illustration of the “searcher’s” postcard mailed to lost relatives, the recommendation that the *Freeman* “goes to all parts of the world and has been the means of bringing hundreds of Lost Relatives and friends together,” and a note that the service cost \$1 a month.⁶² Contributors wrote in from Austin, TX and Bristol, England; they sought that those they had not seen or heard of since “before the war,” as well as those who had taken traveling work in subsequent decades.⁶³ By the mid-1890s there was no longer a dedicated section

⁵⁹ February 7, 1891.

⁶⁰ February 14, 1891.

⁶¹ July 7, 1891.

⁶² July 2, 1892, 2.

⁶³ On February 4, 1893 Jiles and Missouri Burleson of Austin, TX were looking for their son, who had left home at age seventeen in 1879 for a railroad fireman job in north Texas; Charles Fairleigh of Bristol, UK

to “Lost Relatives,” although the occasional advertisement continued to run alongside the entertainment page, as in January 1900, when Louise Janes Jones wrote looking for her husband and two sons, whom she had not seen in twelve years.⁶⁴ These factors combined to make *Freeman* a leading black weekly, as by 1903 Knox claimed a circulation of 16,000, rising to 20,000 a decade later.⁶⁵

The Stage, Act One

“The Stage” fully embraced the *Freeman*’s participatory model, growing quickly into one of the paper’s most permanent features. This makes sense, as perhaps no other reader constituency benefitted as greatly from its wide availability, openness to correspondents, and reliance on advertising as those involved in the show trade. Although “The Stage” made its debut in March 1889 and was a consistent presence until the paper folded in the 1920s, it went through several iterations that demonstrate the *Freeman*’s symbiotic relationship with commercial entertainment. In its earliest versions, “The Stage” printed news on a wide variety of theatrical entertainments, but was soon dominated by participants in the rapidly proliferating industrial minstrel shows. As the artists trained in these shows moved onto greater (and whiter) fame—in major vaudeville houses, the “legitimate” stage, and Tin Pan Alley—“The Stage” gave more room to criticism and to meta-commentaries on what later commenters called “the biz.”⁶⁶ In this

was looking for his brother Alexander Ferguson, sold from Richmond to Columbus, GA before the war; Patsy Crockett sought the whereabouts of her four children, Frank, Henry, Jane and Ben, whom she believed might be somewhere in Kentucky or Missouri. February 4, 1893.

⁶⁴ January 27, 1900.

⁶⁵ Knox, *Slave and Freeman*, 32.

⁶⁶ In 1902, Ed L. Anderson of Gideon’s Minstrel Carnival sent regards to “friends in and out of the ‘biz.’” March 22, 1902.

process, the geographic center shifted from the Midwest and South—the territory of the touring companies—to New York, and “The Stage” lost its eclectic, freewheeling tone.

The early column was sparse and miscellaneous. In the very first column, “The Stage” featured nine entries announcing the current activities of concert companies and a singing quartet.⁶⁷ While these troupes remained the backbone of the early “Stage,” within a year readers heard from elocutionists, violinists, panoramists, contortionists, “the tallest man on earth,” humorists, “female impersonating artists,” trick musicians, Tom shows, Indian tableaux, jubilee singers, operatic companies, musical associations, minstrel tours, sacred music groups, and juvenile bands.⁶⁸ The venues included halls, a Y.M.C.A., a school house in Panther Creek, courthouses, fraternal lodges, firemen’s parades, dime museum, and churches.⁶⁹ The first years of “The Stage” also set a geographic precedent, striking a balance between intensely local and distant, with a firm anchor in the urban Midwest; those first nine entries mentioned Chicago, Indianapolis, Michigan, St. Louis, Springfield, IL as well as New York City and Memphis.⁷⁰ Within the year, the Fiske Jubilee Singers wrote in of their success in India, a member of Charles Hicks’ troupe reported that ~~the~~ they had disbanded in Australia and were in “in embarrassing circumstances,” and Orpheus McAdoo confided his optimism for a tour in China.⁷¹

⁶⁷ March 30, 1889.; January 3, 1891.

⁶⁸ Of the sixteen performers mentioned by name, nine were female concert singers and elocutionists, including stars such as Flora Batson, Marie Selika, and Henrietta Vinton Davis, as well as Mademoiselle Estella—“the Nightingale of the West”—Mattie V. Hall, a Philadelphia soprano, and Mrs. M. Porter and Mrs. J. Jackson DeHart, jubilee singers from the Midwest. Contralto Leander Smiley is September 13, 1890; Indian Tableaux is Oct 4, 1890.

⁶⁹ The *Freeman* attributed this to performers’ choices. “A majority of ‘stars’ prefer the church benefit plan of operation,” the paper explained. “They say that combinations are very risky investments because of the widespread objections on the part of religious colored people to attending theaters.” July 21, 1890.

⁷⁰ March 30, 1889.

⁷¹ February 1 and February 22, 1890.

This early range of performers meant that many of the entries in this period centered on women. Readers learned that Madame Preston, the Detroit elocutionist, and her daughter were entertaining Kansas audiences; in this particular issue, all seven performers mentioned by name were women.⁷² In an interesting parallel, women with strong connections to the entertainment business also played key roles in the early running of *Freeman*, too. Lillian Thomas was the correspondence editor and compositor when Knox purchased the paper, and she both conceived of and executed—as correspondence editor—“The Stage.”⁷³ Thomas moved from Wisconsin to Indianapolis after graduating from high school in 1883, where she began a career “as a chaste and polished reader” until taking a position at the *Freeman* in 1891. “The special features of The Freeman,” noted her biographer in 1892, “such as ‘Race Gleanings,’ ‘Church,’ ‘Stage’ and ‘Friendly Reminders’ are to be credited solely to her discriminating compilation and original creation.”⁷⁴ Like Thomas, Leota Jefferson was hired as a text compositor in January 1891.⁷⁵ Two years later, she married a young man from her hometown of Washington, Iowa named Robert T. Motts, who later founded one of black Chicago’s most venerable institutions, the Pekin Theatre.⁷⁶ Jefferson and Thomas are never mentioned in histories of the *Freeman*, which focus (as I have) on owners and critics who publicly set the newspaper’s tone. But Jefferson and Thomas set the type, which was just as important. Perhaps they chose to emphasize dispatches and routes from

⁷² May, 5, 1890.

⁷³ January 8, 1892.

⁷⁴ September 17, 1892.

⁷⁵ January 31, 1891.

⁷⁶ November 11, 1893. Jefferson was only mentioned one more time in the *Freeman* three years later, when she was entertaining guests as Mrs. Leota Jefferson-Motts at 276 Fayette Street. The *Freeman* had a staff of twelve in 1892.

female concert singers; perhaps they intentionally included amateur women and music teachers over male minstrel stars. This is not mere speculation. If Lillian Thomas was still working “The Stage” in December 1892, she slipped in notices of her own career: “Lillian Thomas, of Indianapolis, is pronounced the most versatile dramatic reader and dialectician in the West.”⁷⁷

Although it would eventually become a weekly staple, in the first year “The Stage” was a modest affair that appeared once a month, and did not distinguish between amateur and professional performers. The section was rarely longer than a quarter of a page, and most items were sentence-long announcements. These early notices tended to simply record the event of a performance, with an occasional note that it was “highly appreciated” or “a great success.” There were no reviews, no descriptions of what a performance entailed, and no notes of critique. The early “The Stage” covered celebrities like Madame Selika as well as “local colored talent”—in one issue, the editor praised Billy Kersands alongside a Shelbyville, Tennessee production of *Richard III*.⁷⁸ Amateurs and professionals even occasionally occurred on the same stage, as in an evening’s entertainment at the Masonic Temple Theatre, Louisville, which includes actors from the Charles Winter Wood Tragedy Company of Chicago and eight of “Louisville’s favorite amateur artists of local fame.”⁷⁹ “The Stage” printed occasional employment-related asks—from Miss Blandiner Duncan’s Afro-American Dramatic Co., seeking “someone with capital who wishes to take a good company on the road”—but the rare note from people seeking engagements or performers were in the “wanted ads” on a separate page.

⁷⁷ December 24, 1892.

⁷⁸ January 11, 1890.

⁷⁹ May 23, 1891.

And while its focus was always on African American performers, “The Stage” tracked both segregated and integrated *spaces* from the beginning. As writers submitted reviews and descriptions of performances over the years, the paper’s attention to audience racial dynamics accelerated, but even early notices were attuned to black performers in positions of power. This could be as instructor, as when Edward E. Robbins of Muncie had a class full of white pupils learning the banjo, or lead performer, as when star comic Tom McIntosh was playing with a white company at the Park Theater in Indianapolis.⁸⁰ Black stars who made it into big-time vaudeville or to Broadway would shortly command significant media attention, as when Bert Williams joined the *Ziegfeld Follies* in 1910. But in the 1890s, “The Stage” let readers know when this was happening out of the spotlight. Readers learned that B.F. Underwood, a tenor from Milwaukee had “recently appeared at an entertainment given by the North Star Lodge (white) and was repeatedly encored,” and that the People’s Orchestra of Cleveland, “the leading colored orchestra in the country [...] are kept busy filling engagements for the swellest white entertainments.”⁸¹ Some of these changes came about as theaters adjusted to new modes of booking, as when the Jones, Grant & Jones trio were the first black performers to play the Indianapolis Grand since it was converted to vaudeville.⁸²

Although these mentions were brief, they demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the challenges of integrating public amusements by not simply celebrating the mere existence of mixed race audiences as progress. In the paper’s second year, readers learned

⁸⁰ August 23, 1890; October 17, 1891.

⁸¹ May 17, 1890. A decade later, W.S. Levard wrote that in between engagements with touring minstrel companies, he had been the first black performer to play the Dewey Theater in Watertown, New York. April 13, 1901.

⁸² April 2, 1902.

that “for first time in the history of the oldest inhabitants of Denison, Texas, and much to the astonishment of the colored citizens, they were allowed to occupy reserved seats in the opera house.” The author attributed this not to “the diminution of race prejudice” but because the segregated balcony was full, and a result “it was several days before the affair ceased to agitate the colored Denisonites.”⁸³ A few years later, the McAdoo company wrote in to demonstrate how they had turned their “rough time in South Africa on account of their color” into material for the stage. In the joke, one of the comedians explains that he’d like to be buried in a Dutch cemetery because it was “the last place the devil would go to look for a black man.”⁸⁴ No one knew better than *Freeman* contributors the price African American performers paid as they courted white audiences.

In its earliest iteration, “The Stage” introduced two structural features that shaped the way performers, employers, and readers came to know about each other. First, the editors explained that each contribution to or concerning “The Stage” would be printed, as “all questions concerning the stage will be answered not by mail but through this column.” Second, “all artists are requested to send their route for publication free of charge.”⁸⁵ The paper also published a tour’s upcoming dates and locations, although in this early period the routes were in paragraph form. These decisions made financial sense for both performers and the *Freeman*. Companies with limited capital could get free

⁸³ October 18, 1890. “The Stage” continued to report on theater discrimination, a key emancipatory struggle since before the Civil War. In one of many examples, in 1853 abolitionist Sarah Parker Remond was kicked out of the Howard Athenaeum in Boston, where she had purchased a ticket to see prima donna Henrietta Sontag in *Don Pasquale*. Remond refused to sit in the gallery, was removed with excessive physical force, and promptly sued the theater. In 1896, Henry T. Richardson sued David Henderson, manager of Chicago Opera House, for being refused a seat after having purchased the ticket. A similar case reported was reported in Montreal three years later. November 28, 1896; January 21, 1899.

⁸⁴ December 4, 1897.

⁸⁵ September 14, 1889.

publicity, while the paper could present itself as transparent and equitable, while turning reader-generated questions into content. This was particularly desirable because the *Freeman* cultivated a reputation for creating its own material rather than reprinting others.

The shifting direction of “The Stage” came with its first named editor, known only as Trage. In January 1890, he announced his intention to make “The Stage” as pleasing to his readers as the *Dramatic Mirror* and *Clipper* were “to the whites.” He acknowledged that “our method of collecting such news is somewhat limited” but that it would improve with the “aid of well wishers,” promising that “we have no space for favorites” and “are dealing with all fairly to the best of our ability.”⁸⁶ Slowly, he began to publish announcements that peppered route announcements with criticism. The first public performance of the Peerless Banjo Quartette had not been a success, marred by low turnout and a headliner—elocutionist Miss C. Williams—who spoke in a weak voice with “unbecoming gestures.”⁸⁷ Once the column began to receive more than route announcements and local notices of dramatic troupes, criticisms not only of players but also of managers began to appear. “The Stage” warned readers that J.R. Smith, who had managed the Tennessee Jubilee during a West Indies tour, “and of whom it is said did not use the troupe well,” was trying to take another company abroad. “A burnt child dreads

⁸⁶ January 11, 1890. Trage gave his address as 115 Meeting Street, Providence RI. In 1880, 115 was occupied by black residents Mary and Daniel Morse, a dressmaker and a justice of the peace; Thomas and Rachel Glasgow, an herb doctor and domestic worker; and Lucinda and her son William Purdy, a housekeeper and a hotel waiter. It’s possible that William Purdy was Trage, as he was a waiter and a shipping clerk, and would have been in his mid-twenties in 1890. 1880 U.S. Census, Providence, Providence, Rhode Island; Roll: 1211; Page: 185B; Enumeration District: 011.

⁸⁷ February 1, 1890.

the fire,” noted Trage, “and yet there are those who still jump at the idea, simply because Smith is a white man.”⁸⁸

Trage disappeared from the *Freeman* on April 12, 1890 after only a year, and with his departure “The Stage” returned to shorter, sporadic appearances. Between July 1890 and 1893, when Knox purchased the paper, the column appeared twice a month at most and with regular monthly absences; it did not appear at all between the end of July and December 1892.⁸⁹ The column then ran on an uneven quarterly schedule until June 1893, before disappearing completely for two years. News of performers appeared in other sections, where readers could learn about Indianapolis comedian Billy McLain and dramatic club playing at the Shiloh Baptist Church, but stage news was not the organizing rubric for these mentions, and they were not presented for performers.⁹⁰

By July 1895, although the column was still intermittent, the lady elocutionists and amateur Shakespeare had been replaced by the industrial minstrel tours. These brief notices reported both on the routes of the company, as well as important details about what life was like on the road. Almost half of the items were related to the Mahara’s tour, listing the performers and the Pullman car “Maharajah” they travelled in, “thus doing away with the bad feelings that always exists in trying to get in the Southern hotels.”⁹¹ A February 22, 1896 update on the route of Lew Johnson’s minstrels and description of a ceremony honoring “well-known amusement manager” Lew Johnson, a black minstrel

⁸⁸ February 22, 1890.

⁸⁹ Specifically, July 16, 1892 to December 24, 1892, 4. There was no column from July 19 to August 16, 1890 or from February and April of 1891; it ran monthly until Knox’s purchase in the spring of 1892, and then appeared sporadically, perhaps twice a month. The entries were rarely more elaborate than a name and location.

⁹⁰ September 3, 1892; October 28, 1893.

⁹¹ July 27, 1895.

show owner whose companies toured the West and “whose name has been before the public for past 32 years.”⁹² Both of these notices were likely submitted by Johnson or a member of his team, as were the earlier notes updates on Mahara’s. More importantly, unlike the single-line items that had previously announced performances, these notices assumed the cadence and strategy of the press agent or advance man.⁹³ The new “Stage” had arrived.

The Stage, Act Two

In the fall of 1896 “The Stage” returned in full-force, with the industrial minstrel tour at its core. Unlike earlier iterations, this time the column was focused almost entirely on traveling shows, particularly the large-cast touring minstrel companies. “Each season brings more colored companies upon the road,” noted the second line item, and before giving accounts of the personnel in Sam T. Jack’s “Creole Show,” Isham’s “Oriental America,” the Nashville Students, Richard and Pringle’s, “The South Before the War,” Al. G. Field’s “Darkest America,” and the Colored City Sports Company. In addition to the increasing frequency of the column and its newly revived constituency, the *Freeman* introduced a mail forwarding service in March 1898, which let players send private letters to each other through the newspaper’s office. This brought communications between players even more tightly into the *Freeman*’s orbit, while also facilitating correspondence between players with mobile addresses.

⁹² February 22, 1896.

⁹³ September 12, 1896.

The change in direction at “The Stage” was due both to the sheer number of companies on the road and the way they were welcomed into *Freeman*. As had been the case with Trage, the arrival of new editor kicked “The Stage” into a higher gear. In early October 1897, J. Harry Jackson—identified as “an old attaché” of the Forepaugh-Sells circus “now connected with the Freeman”—wrote the first attributed “Stage” column (as “Jay H. Jax”) in seven years.⁹⁴ In his work with the circus, like Frank Rovers, Jackson had likely been responsible for production logistics or had worked as an advance man. Both departments required a sophisticated grasp of postwar political and cultural geography, as they required either moving a touring company of unprecedented size or anticipating this movement and preparing communities along the railroad circus route. While Trage’s sensibilities and connections shaped a “Stage” with a variety of performance styles, Jackson was firmly located in industrial tours—in addition to his time with the circus, he soon left the *Freeman* to join the Rabbit’s Foot Tour as proprietor Pat Chappelle’s secretary. Jackson began signing his full name in February 1898, after noting—in response to the *Baltimore Weekly Guide* observation that “metropolitan colored journals are featuring the doings of the mimic world” and “the Afro-American is in the business to stay”—that it was his paper that was the pioneer. “We have noticed from time to time that several of the ‘metropolitan’ (?) journals have clipped from our columns and in several instances have taken the whole column,” he wrote, “without giving the proper credit.”⁹⁵ Unlike Trage and his pseudonymic successor Woodbine, Jackson used his tenure at the *Freeman* to build a public profile, and he may also have

⁹⁴ October 2, 1897.

⁹⁵ February 19, 1898. In April, the *Freeman* reprinted a *Colored American* comment that Jackson “has made the stage a noteworthy feature of The Freeman and has done much to give the Negro actor a firm footing in the professional world.” April 9, 1898.

leveraged his connections to bring the industrial minstrel tours to the center of “The Stage.”

As Jackson took the helm, the *Freeman* began publishing more formal route lists for the touring companies crossing the middle and west of the country. “We desire weekly information as to dates, etc.,” the *Freeman* announced, “of Afro-American professionals which will be published gratis, address Jay H. Jax, care The Freeman.”⁹⁶ In the 1899-1900 season, more than thirty unique companies announced routes in “The Stage,” ranging from companies with more than fifty people to small potato operations. If a conservative estimate gives each company thirty players, and we allow for some overlap between companies, this means over one thousand performers on the road over the course of one season.⁹⁷ By the year’s end, “The Stage” editor noted that “our leading companies are working their way into opera houses hitherto tightly closed to colored performers, and their ambitious attempts are winning the highest encomiums from the press, which would have, but one or two years ago, been received with the greatest

⁹⁶ November 6, 1897. This was also the moment when the Benevolent Order of Colored Professionals was launched, with Jackson as secretary.

⁹⁷ These included the Black Patti Troubadours (NJ); Boyer’s Oriental Octoroons (DeKalb, IL); Oliver Scott’s Refined Minstrels (MW); Isham’s Octoroons (NYC); P.T. Wright’s Nashville Students (MW); RPRH (MW and South into AR and TX); Washburn’s Double Minstrels (MW); Vogel’s Mastodon (was Darkest America) (OH); South Before the War; The Big Afro-American Company (opens in Bryan, OH, Sylvester Russell is stage manager); Stetson’s UTC; Oriental Troubadours (Charles Puggsley is business manager, Salem Tutt Whitney is stage manager); Big Sensation (MW); Creole Belles (Robertson & Cox); Canadian Jubilee Singers & Imperial Orchestra; Imperial Colored Minstrels under Pat Chappelle; Quaker City Comedians (Louisiana; six person troupe, playing sugar making districts); Williams & Walker; Johnston & Cole; Genuine Southern Specialty Co. (John Graham, tours NE, includes Tom McIntosh); Georgia Up-To-Date; J.F. Stowe’s Incomparable Uncle Tom’s Cabin Company (started in St. Louis, toured for 37 weeks, does summer season under canvas with 20 white and 12 black cast, two bands); A.G. Allen’s New Orleans Minstrels; Log Cabin Concert Company (runs February to July, “we must acknowledge the truth that we did not know there was such a valuable paper in existence until by chance we engaged Richard H. Barnett as one of our comedians and stage manager,” July 1, 1899); Leland Melroy’s Real Negro Minstrels + Yoshi Hosokawa’s Imperial Japanese (St. Louis); Melroy, Chandler & Co. Minstrels; Giles & Brown’s Colored Comedy Co., (NE); Robertson & Cox’s Creole Belle Specialty Co; Coontown 400 (35 people touring IL and OH; Eisenbouth and Henderson Theatrical Company (Wheeling, WV); M.C. Johnson’s Cake Walkers (Columbus, MO though AL, GA and MI in summer only); Ellsworth Comedy Co.

derision and laughter.”⁹⁸ And as touring companies proliferated and entered new kinds of theaters, performers clamored to see themselves in the *Freeman*. Albert S.D. Taylor wrote from Saint Louis asking for greater coverage of the Gateway City for its 500 “unattached professionals—musicians, singers, and utility men,” all of whom were eager to see themselves in the “Colored Clipper.” Taylor understood that expanded coverage was good both for them and for the paper; after all, he noted, “more news of the St. Louis means the sale of more *Freemans*.”⁹⁹

While the scope of “The Stage” grew, the center of the United States still anchored both the tours and the performers. This was due in part to the *Freeman*’s Indianapolis home, which meant that the first illustrated profiles of performers were short biographies of local performers. But it was also because the Midwest was the starting point for ninety percent of the companies mentioned. At the beginning of the 1897-1898 season, Mahara’s rehearsed in Joliet, Illinois; Al. G. Field’s “Genuine Negro Minstrels” rehearsed in Columbus before opening in Piqua, Ohio; and Richards and Pringle’s opened in Racine, Wisconsin.¹⁰⁰ In addition, most of the players profiled in the *Freeman* hailed from Iowa, Ohio, Illinois, Kansas, Arkansas, and Indiana, and considered this their home turf. This shared center of gravity meant that one player could go home to Columbus during a weekend layover and get married, before returning to work on Monday.¹⁰¹ While New York and Chicago may have been the most visible destinations, the *Freeman* community knew where to find the industry’s beating heart. As gossip

⁹⁸ December 26, 1896.

⁹⁹ December 10, 1898.

¹⁰⁰ July 31 and August 14, 1897. This was also the case for smaller companies. “The Gondolier Mandolin Club, of Topeka, Kan., will shortly start on an extended tour of the West. They are under the direction of L. Vernon Grey, the clever young mandolin soloist,” November 13, 1897.

¹⁰¹ February 12, 1898.

columnist “Tom the Tattler” noted, “we have no complaint to offer against Gotham, but would only say that almost every performer there either hails from the West, or received his training there.”¹⁰²

In the late 1890s, touring companies of a range of sizes began taking out large advertisements on a regular basis, which indicates that their previous methods of finding performers—in the *Clipper*, on the road, or through personal networks—were falling short. Mahara’s Minstrels was one of the first companies to place an advertisement seeking “good colored musicians,” with the promise that “young men having musical ability can find employment with Mahara’s Colored Minstrels for forty weeks.”¹⁰³

Smaller outfits also sought employees, like William J. Smith of Carmi, Illinois, who worked as a barber but sought “a colored soprano singer, elocutionist, pianist or organist,” as well as “first-class people on string instruments—man and wife will do.”¹⁰⁴ These seemed to have been successful, as the *Freeman* often published letters from satisfied advertisers; Tom Logan wrote that his notice for performers and musicians at his theater in Louisville brought two hundred and sixteen applications.¹⁰⁵

Players, too, began to use the “The Stage” to find employment. They used similar language as the specialty performers writing to James Milliken in the previous chapter, but they must have expected better luck in writing directly to the managers. Harry Eaton had written to Milliken in his capacity as a manager, not as a player, and had found his previous engagements as a player without an agent. In “The Stage,” players announced

¹⁰² September 22, 1900.

¹⁰³ August 24, 1894. Permanent address at Empire Printing Co., Chicago.

¹⁰⁴ November 13, 1897.

¹⁰⁵ May 14, 1904. G.W. Alexander wrote that he was “repaid for [his] ‘ad.’” October 3, 1903. J.W. Bailey of “Great Southern Minstrel and Concert Company” claimed 45 responses. January 21, 1905.

that they were at liberty and seeking an engagement with a first-class company, and gave their name, specialty, and address, often care of the *Freeman*. Some purchased advertising space to notify readers of their upcoming tours, or simply to make potential fans aware of their presence; in the December 17, 1898 issue, eleven performers published this type of notice.¹⁰⁶ Most announced their availability the regular column, letting potential employers know who “has refused several offers for the coming season” and who “has not yet been booked.” These notices helped players, particularly those working as a duo, secure engagements in advance and avoid long periods of unemployment. When S.N. Edmonds closed with John W. Vogel’s *Darkest America* at Quincy, Illinois, he went directly to Pittsburgh, where he and his partner Edward H. Winn planned to rehearse for one week before beginning their summer engagement. “Mr. Edmonds is in first-class condition,” the *Freeman* reported, “but thinks himself a little overworked.”¹⁰⁷

In addition to advertisements and route listings, much of the information about industrial minstrel tours came from a new kind of reader submission. Instead of single-sentence notices about new engagements or routines, touring companies began to submit longer paragraph descriptions with the heading “Notes from [x].”¹⁰⁸ The dispatches were written by “special correspondents,” men like J. Ed. Green, Edward Mallory, S.N. Edmonds, Clifford Brooks, Fred W. Simpson, Edward O. Green and J. Harry Fidler, who

¹⁰⁶ December 17, 1898.

¹⁰⁷ March 19, 1898.

¹⁰⁸ One of the earliest “Notes” came from not from an industrial minstrel tour but from a circus, the Forepaugh-Sells Brothers show. This makes sense, as many of the white personnel managing the minstrel tours had started with circuses, as had many of the promotion and advertising strategies. Another early came from the Nashville Students, describing personnel, repertoire, and praising P.G. Lowery as “the greatest colored cornet soloist the world has ever known,” January 16, 1897.

began as performers and became stage managers, vocal directors, bandleaders, and occasionally proprietors.¹⁰⁹ These dispatches followed a standard formula, and they spoke in industry jargon. They were almost universally sanguine about their company's fortunes, and while they listed performers and routines, they were *not* reviews. Most opened by boasting of the tour's success, measured occasionally with box office or audience numbers but more frequently with qualitative measures like "appeared to good houses," "good business," "big business," turning people away at the door, or hanging out the "Standing Room Only" sign. One correspondent reported that 46 of their 48 weeks on the road had turned a profit, proving that "the keynote of the amusement lovers desire had been struck."¹¹⁰ This optimism concealed the reality that most touring companies were not successful, particular those that were not as well-established as Mahara's. A typical example was the Darktown Swell Co., which went to the wall in Bothwell, Ontario with "not \$10 in the company," and six weeks of salary due to all players. This update likely came from one of the stranded players, who called the show "a success in every way" and attributed its downfall to poor management.¹¹¹ But the closest acknowledgement of this reality from the "Notes from" correspondents came in an occasional brief line about "fair business" in Mississippi, "a poor state for us this season."¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ J. Ed. Green (R&P, A.G. Allen's, joins Oliver Scott's after posting an "at liberty" listing on February 2, 1900); Edward Mallory (Isham's Octoroons); S.N. Edmonds and Clifford Brooks (Darkest America); Charles H. Williams (Kit Japanese Remedy Co.); Fred W. Simpson (Oliver Scott, previously Fields); John A. Milton (South Before the War); Edward O. Green (Nashville Students); H. Augustus Hall (Black Patti). They follow similar paths as Rivers, Conner, and Eaton.

¹¹⁰ July 16, 1898.

¹¹¹ February 23, 1901.

¹¹² May 17, 1902. From A.G. Allen's New Orleans Minstrels.

After the breezy announcements of success, these dispatches included a list of performers on the roster, which might include a few lines about a new song or skit, as well as notifications of players who had just closed or acts that had recently been added. These lists were surprisingly detailed, as there was a mixture of players who moved around and those who stayed with the same troupe for several years. Many performers, particularly comedians and dancers, worked in pairs and would often move between shows as single entity.¹¹³ In addition to new and departing members, these dispatches would also include members were “convalescing” or had recovered from illness.¹¹⁴ Reports from larger tours included details of their private rail cars, which owners liked for their efficiency and players liked for the safe accommodations in places where hotels were either unsafe or completely closed to African American travelers.

The most elaborate “Notes from” also included anecdotes about life on tour, such as an elaborate celebration, reporting special visits to the tour, meetings with other companies, and the welcome visit to an old friend or relative. Cumulatively, these accounts depict a working community that was intensely social and familial. While some players made “flying visits” to neighboring Midwestern locations to visit home, others had families join them on tour; Pearl Moppin’s wife spent three months on the Mahara’s tour with her hoop rolling (and trombonist) husband.¹¹⁵ Readers learned that John Pittman was “all smiles owing to the company’s going on Thanksgiving to Vicksburg, his former home,” and that during an engagement in Oneida, New York, Laura Moss spent the day with her mother. “Miss Moss had not seen her mother for six years,” reported the

¹¹³ For example, “The Cheatham Bros. have joined Richard and Pringle’s Georgia’s.” October 9, 1897.

¹¹⁴ J. Harry Fiddler, of Isham’s, has been very sick for the last eight weeks, January 16, 1897; Miss Zoe Ball of Sam T. Jack’s Creoles is quite ill, February 6, 1897; Ed Goggin is convalescing, July 17, 1897.

¹¹⁵ December 6, 1902.

correspondent, “so it was a joyful meeting.”¹¹⁶ Performers, particularly young women like Tillie Shelton, the lady bugler in a Tom show, were often taking time off to visit sick relatives, as Shelton did when she went to care for her father in Baltimore.¹¹⁷

This sense of familial connection was reinforced by the frequency of life milestones reported in “The Stage.” Obituary notices, published either as part of the tour dispatch or as a free-standing article, allowed a company to publicly honor its members, as when Isham’s Octoroons company held a funeral for baritone Fred J. Piper.¹¹⁸ These were often the most extensive descriptions of players who were not otherwise known.¹¹⁹ “The Stage” also passed along news of players’ relatives, as when readers learned that the “aged mother of B.R. Moore of Oliver Scott’s” had passed away in Zanesville, Ohio, where she had lived for fifty years and was “highly respected and beloved.”¹²⁰ On a happier note, many correspondents reported on new marriages. These were often between two players, occasionally of the same company, as when James Brown and Levama Jones of the “Black Rats Co.” managed by James’s brother Tom were married.¹²¹ Such announcements were so frequent that the *Freeman* gossip columnist lamented the players tendency to “indulge in marriage pretenses as soon as he or she was settled in a

¹¹⁶ November 28, 1903; Isham’s Octoroons, March 4, 1899.

¹¹⁷ September 26, 1903. “Miss Laura S. Logan, coon shouter and classical singer” in Hottest Coon in Dixie visited an ill mother in New Orleans. January 21, 1905. In 1910, Laura was still in New Orleans, where she was working in a local theater as an actress. The census taker noted that she had been out of work for several months. 1910 U.S. Census, New Orleans Ward 3, Orleans, Louisiana; Roll: T624_520; Page: 25B; Enumeration District: 0034.

¹¹⁸ March 5, 1898.

¹¹⁹ February 9, 1901; February 23, 1901. The *Freeman* was also used to notify living relatives. When Bonaire E. Perry killed by train at Princeton Junction, an attempt was made to reach Sarah M. Bonaire in Columbia, PA. December 17, 1898. Eugene Brewer, who had been with Mahara’s for three years, drowned while swimming with the company in Reedsburg, Wisconsin. Brewer was “well liked by everyone,” noted the *Freeman*, “and was considered a good actor.” October 5, 1895.

¹²⁰ August 4, 1900.

¹²¹ August 24, 1901.

company,” collecting a spouse for each new season.¹²² While many couples lasted for years, Tom had correctly recognized the frequency of wedding *announcements*, the practical advantages of spousal/professional partnerships, and the challenges of maintaining these partnerships through itinerancy.

Because these companies were knit together into extended families, either legally or through friendship, the pleasure of reunion extended beyond immediate relatives. While on the road, Leroy Bland reported that he had seen an old friend, and “a pleasant evening was spent by them together.”¹²³ In Lincoln, Illinois, Akron native and violin prodigy Frank M. Hailstock—who had assumed the leadership of the Al. G. Field’s orchestra at twenty—was entertained by a former music school classmate, now the local opera house orchestra leader.¹²⁴ Players on long-running tours often ran into former members who had settled in towns along touring circuits. “We met an old friend and professional, Miles Terry, here,” wrote one correspondent from Wheeling, West Virginia. “He is playing with Walter’s Orchestra and doing well.”¹²⁵ In Denver, a troupe was entertained by their former bandleader, Charles Johnson.¹²⁶ The dispatches also noted when local favorites were welcomed back by audiences. When comedian Gordon Collins joined Mahara’s, he was soon “meeting many old acquaintances, who remember him from 1890 when we were though [sic] this country with McCabe and Young’s

¹²² “Tom the Tattler,” March 8, 1902. Tom was most upset that high wedding rate made all show people look like “human garbage” when many were in fact “of good repute.”

¹²³ March 3, 1900. The same evening, Mahara’s member Will Garland saw his brother Frank of A.G. Allen’s, whom he had not seen in seven months.

¹²⁴ November 5, 1898.

¹²⁵ February 5, 1898. Miles Terry, from Pittsburgh, “claims the distinction of being the first colored trombonist in the United States,” and was a member of the Sprague’s Georgia Minstrels band under W.C. Harris as early as October 1876. April 9, 1898.

¹²⁶ March 19, 1898.

Minstrels.” Collins had helped bring out “over two thousand colored people [...] several of whom gave a ball and reception in his honor and to which all members of the company were invited.”¹²⁷ While Gordon Collins is not a familiar name in the history of performance, he clearly had a following.

The dispatches emphasized the many pleasures of the social life of touring. To celebrate the birthday of a stage manager and comedian, the company cancelled its afternoon show and attended a concert by a different touring band, which returned the favor in the evening.¹²⁸ After four nights in Grand Rapids, Oliver Scott’s Minstrels met up with the Slayton Jubilee Singers, who had played a white Methodist church in Muskegon; the two troupes were then honored by the Muskegon Elks Lodge.¹²⁹ These meetings were both congenial and functional. They allowed players to exchange information that might be too intimate for the *Freeman*, while serving as a kind of professional development, as companies watched each other perform on stage and played in casual, after-hours settings. Touring companies frequently ran into each other in the road because they toured in each other’s footsteps, visiting the same towns in a similar order. When the Allen, Quines & Oakes’ New Orleans Minstrels were in Paris, Texas two days after Mahara’s Minstrels and one day ahead of the Georgias, the Georgias arrived two hours before the New Orleans troupe had to leave, so the performers “talked of old times and the future.”¹³⁰

¹²⁷ February 3, 1900. Bland was on the tour at the time.

¹²⁸ August 24, 1901.

¹²⁹ April 15, 1899.

¹³⁰ October 13, 1900.

The accounts also described the elaborate reception traveling companies received from local elites and fraternal orders, including fetes, banquets, benefits, and receptions. These dispatches offer glimpses of the pleasure and autonomy that life on the road could bring. When the Black Patti Troubadours played in Nashville, they were “royally banqueted” by “a very prominent colored fireman” and “some of the south’s most prominent colored people.”¹³¹ The Darkest America company cheered on the Page Fence Giants baseball team of Adrian, Michigan as they beat the Franklin and Pere Marquette RR team. According to the correspondent, the Page Fence team were the counterpart of Darkest America—“all refined gentlemen and high-salaried artists in their profession”—and that in the case of George Wilson, the nonpareil pitcher, “it is only his color that keeps him out of the National League of white professionals.”¹³² In Elkhart, Indiana, a troupe visited the headquarters of Conn Instruments, where they heard Jules Levy play and returned the favor with a “highly appreciated” trombone solo.¹³³ And in Riverside, California, the one company toured “one of the largest shipping establishments of California,” where they saw state-of-the-art machines sort oranges by grade.¹³⁴ In Washington, D.C., members of Isham’s Octoroons set out in bicycles to “take in the city on wheels,” stopping “at every point where our fallen heroes have seen fit to deck our

¹³¹ January 12, 1901.

¹³² May 21, 1898. The Page Fence Giants had a great deal in common with Darkest America—they were formed with white capital, spent most of their time on the road in Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan and traveled in a private car, and they were self-styled consummate professionals. They were extremely popular and tested their audience’s racial imaginaries from a segregated position.

¹³³ February 26, 1898.

¹³⁴ “Among the interesting departments was that of where the organs were graded by machinery. They are heaved into a large colander and as they glide down the grade they seek their quarters according to size. The packers never count the oranges for they know how many it requires according to the section from which the oranges are taken.” January 28, 1899.

nation's capital with its many monumental souvenirs" and singing.¹³⁵ Such lighthearted moments of both familial and sightseeing pleasure are particularly poignant when placed in context with the tours' violent lows, and with the kinds of migration that many players' friends and families endured.

In the penultimate sentences of the dispatches, correspondents rarely failed to mention much they loved the *Freeman*. While many troupes had multiple subscribers, players also shared whole papers amongst themselves or made copies of the route lists that could then circulate independently.¹³⁶ A.L. Tutt, who billed himself as "The World's Champion Cake Walker," wrote from Montreal he had recently signed up sixteen new subscribers for the "Colored Clipper," and that "it should be read by all the progressive performers in the business."¹³⁷ Mr. Thompson, band director for Al. G. Field's, "highly commends the *Freeman* and he is not satisfied unless he gets one every week."¹³⁸ The cumulative effective of these comments was to standardize reading the *Freeman* as a regular part of being in show business.

This style of knowledge production about performers does in some way resemble celebrity culture, which generates a feeling of intimacy between fans and distant players by revealing key details of a star's "personal" life.¹³⁹ This is certainly the case for the people who repeatedly appeared in "The Stage," particularly in the illustrated Christmas editions. But the sheer volume of people from short-lived tours and small towns who appeared only once or twice suggests that this was not the primary purpose of these

¹³⁵ October 1, 1898.

¹³⁶ Special Correspondent Napoleon Johnson castigated the members of his troupe who were "too cheap to spend five or ten cents a week" on their own copy. November 14, 1903.

¹³⁷ April 23, 1898.

¹³⁸ September 11, 1897.

¹³⁹ See Joseph Roach, *It* and Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens*.

missives. The constant notification about the lives of players and their families in combination with the frequent “regards” suggests that much of this correspondence was genuinely for a reading community who knew each other and not simply for fans. “The Stage” was thus an unusual kind of entertainment reporting, located between the routine listings that the *Clipper* had become by the 1890s and the fan magazines that emerged later in the decade.

In addition to keeping people in touch with each other, then, “regards” served the additional professional purpose of making a social world and one’s place in it visible. In every single issue *Freeman* I have read in the post-1896 version—which is all of them—“The Stage” also includes “regards” between performers, which began the column after the route listing and closed almost every “Notes From” dispatch. Players used this format to look for friends, to swap inside jokes, to reconstitute previous teams—J. Ed. Green sought “the whereabouts of Edward Laforce, former male alto with the Diamond Quartet,” which Green was now managing—and, most often, simply to say “hello to all other black thespians.”¹⁴⁰ “Regards” were sent to “Dude Kelley and all the boys at the Greasy Front,” from “‘big squirrel to little squirrel,’” from “Miss Marion Henry, of Isham’s Octoroons” to “the ladies of the Williams and Walker combinations,” from “Fred Simpson, trombone soloist, to his old friend, John Rucker, of Darkest America, who wishes to inform him, that the best ‘proof of the pudding is the eating,’ so he had better keep quiet.”¹⁴¹ Given the centrality of the *Freeman*, this was a reliable way to reach your friends. Lew Hall successfully reached contacted his old friend Ben Hunn and convinced

¹⁴⁰ February 5, 1898.

¹⁴¹ June 27, 1903; September 3, 1898; October 1, 1898; November 27, 1897.

him to play four weeks in Memphis.¹⁴² Some of the “regards” were hard-to-decipher messages between performers that could only have been understood and identified by their intended recipient: “To Tom Logan—The buttons are all right. I found them the next day.”¹⁴³ This only reinforced the intimacy and close-knit feeling of “The Stage.”

As they drew people together across distance, these dispatches filled out the emotional dimension of the frequent turnover in touring companies. When baritone and cellist Henry Graves left his company to attend to family business in Minneapolis, his colleagues noted that “his absence makes a noticeable difference,” and “we want Mr. Graves to know that he leaves a crowd of brothers here.”¹⁴⁴ When Claude Richardson, a baritone player, left tour because of illness, his co-players expressed a similar sentiment. “We hated to lose him, for he was so well thought of by the members,” the correspondent wrote. “He was a very quiet boy and has caused the show no trouble, always at his post until sickness overtook him.”¹⁴⁵ When Jason Hollis became ill in Columbus, Georgia, of his company left him with a family expecting to reunited with him in Macon, but the troupe learned upon arrival that he had passed away of pneumonia. According to the notice, Hollis was a “phenomenal double voiced vocal, high tenor, male soprano and falsetto singer,” as well as the oldest member of the troupe and first African American man employed by Allen.¹⁴⁶

In addition to reporting pleasure and communal bonds, the dispatches could also speak of serious trouble on the road. The rare but searing dispatch detailing violent

¹⁴² June 27, 1903.

¹⁴³ March 8, 1902.

¹⁴⁴ June 28, 1902. They added that he would be missed also as “master of the beverage department.”

¹⁴⁵ June 23, 1900.

¹⁴⁶ March 17, 1900.

attacks reminded readers that African American touring companies—even with the protection of private cars and immense popularity—faced ever-present white violence. These submissions remind us of the remarkable historical conjuncture that made the South and the Midwest both the capital of touring black theater and a relentless danger. Following their encounters with violent white audience members and police, performers used the *Freeman* both to warn against dangerous towns and to speak the truth of anti-black vigilantism to a trusting community of readers.

In February 1902 in New Madrid, Missouri, a town of barely 1,000 people on the Kentucky Bend of the Mississippi River, twenty-two year old Louis Wright of the Georgia Minstrels was lynched by a crowd of masked men.¹⁴⁷ Brief references to the murder and to the recovery of other members in the troupe appeared in the *Freeman*, but a month later a writer calling himself “A Georgia Minstrel” used “The Stage” to set the record straight. Wright’s murder was “the most heinous crime that was ever perpetrated upon a travelling organization,” for not only was there no gun among the troupe, justice was so unevenly distributed that “if we had shot one white man in New Madrid there would be not one of us left to tell the tale.” The writer explained the details of the situation, “presuming that the *Freeman* would be interested in the cause of justice.” When the players were returning to the theater after the early afternoon street parade, a group of young white men attacked with snowballs and racial slurs. Wright asked them to stop and they continued; according to “A Georgia Minstrel,” he was visibly upset and cursed. This angered the perpetrators, who came to the show that evening and, at its conclusion, rushed the stage entrance. The sheriff took the players into custody and they

¹⁴⁷ February 22, 1902.

were forced to identify who among them had fired a non-existent shot and injured one of the attackers. The next evening, a group of locals lured Wright out of his cell by telling him that he was being called to testify. “He was hanged,” wrote his troupe member, “because he dared to curse a white man, thereby resenting an insult. This is a true and accurate account of the murderous affair.”¹⁴⁸ But the troupe continued on. Cornetist James H. Wilson had been shot while in the orchestra pit and spent a night in jail without medical attention, but he continued to play each night and while under the care of a member of the Ninth Cavalry with medical expertise.¹⁴⁹

The response to Wright’s murder is one example of how contributors to “The Stage” navigated and attempted to alleviate the risks of traveling with an industrial variety tour. *Freeman* contributors were aware of the similarities and differences between Wright’s lynching and the more mundane forms of workplace discrimination and exploitation. They knew how the threat of the former underscored the latter, compounding the problems white players faced when abandoned on tour or slandered behind the scenes. Most issues included at least one complaint against unfair managers, in the public airing of grievances that Milliken’s correspondents had expressed to their agent. Stranded players complained that “The South Before the War” had closed in St. Louis a full month before the scheduled end date in Chicago after a successful thirty-one weeks, but the manager had abruptly ended the season in violation of “professional rules” by skipping the customary two weeks-notice and closing “at a foreign point.”¹⁵⁰ Such

¹⁴⁸ March 15, 1902. Wright had also played with Mahara’s, and Handy recounts this story in his autobiography.

¹⁴⁹ March 8, 1901. The concert singer James Smith was murdered in city jail in Omaha after being arrested for “boisterous conduct,” April 19, 1899.

¹⁵⁰ March 27, 1897. The *Freeman* then listed the players who had been stranded in St. Louis (Paul Floyd, Indianapolis; Hi Tom Gilliam, Minnie Campbell, and Lulu Goodman, Detroit; Thomas H. Hale, Chicago;

notices served multiple purposes: they warned performers of bad managers, while notifying players, fans, and potential employers of the whereabouts of a cast. Some players used “The Stage” to respond to poor treatment during the contract process; although William Hallback had previously announced his position with Mahara’s, he was now accepting offers from “responsible managers only [...] owing to an insulting letter received from W.A. Mahara.”¹⁵¹ Managers used the names and images of performers who had not signed contracts, as when the managers of the Black Patti troupe used a photograph of the McClains even though they were touring with another company, and Billy McClain responded quickly to point out this error.¹⁵² In the rarest of occasions, *Freeman* readers learned of players who managed to pull one over on their employers, as when Daisy Harris wrote herself a family emergency telegram, was released from Black Patti tour with a cash advance to return home, and then promptly requested her trunk be sent along the route of her new engagement.¹⁵³

On at least one occasion, a player used “The Stage” to register a complaint with another performer. “The Stage” could be used to claim authorship over one’s work, as when D. Ireland Thomas complained that two comedians were using his act “Rapid Transit” and posing as its authors. Thomas was less interested in preventing circulation and more about ensuring proper attribution and self-promotion. “I simply write this so that the public will not be misled,” he explained. “What consoles me is that the act must be good or they would not have grabbed it so quickly.”¹⁵⁴

Buddie Frey) and those who had returned to their homes (Ed Hood and J. Ed Green, Chicago; William Dixon, New Orleans; Virgie Lacy, Lexington, KY; Mamie Corbin, Georgetown, KY).

¹⁵¹ August 16, 1902.

¹⁵² November 26, 1898.

¹⁵³ September 17, 1898.

¹⁵⁴ July 21, 1900.

But complaints about poor managers were intermittent, scattered among glowing accounts of success on the road and vague references to “bad luck.” This is because the *Freeman* served as both a place to air grievances and as a hiring hall, a place to call out a bad employer and to find a new one immediately. Much like in the physical space of the agent’s office, all interactions in “The Stage” were visible to both employers and performers. The positive light that framed most theatrical employers was also a result of star players’ and critics’ ample text defending and promoting African American tour proprietors and managers, in keeping with the *Freeman*’s political project of supporting “race men” in business. These writers paid close attention to the fraught relationship between African American performers and proprietors, which was exacerbated by the symbolic dimension of the partnership and what were often undercapitalized productions. “I cannot too severely condemn the growing disposition of colored performers to treat with indifference, if not contempt, colored managers,” wrote performer-turned-manager Ernest Hogan. “The combined opposition of white performers and white managers is already too keenly felt by us [...] With a united front the colored artists can win despite opposition: divided, they will be completely eliminated from the American stage.”¹⁵⁵ For Hogan, racial solidarity was the clear answer to both the player and the proprietor’s problems.

This problem reared its head most forcefully when Patrick Chappelle—by far the most visible and argumentative manager to use “The Stage”—successfully sued long-time white competitors Rusco and Holland for hiring away his band leader and

¹⁵⁵ March 9, 1901.

trombonist Amos Gillard.¹⁵⁶ Lingered over this case was the multi-decade history of white minstrel managers copying or simply taking over the few touring companies owned by African Americans. Chappelle had owned a few rowdy concert halls in northern Florida—his “miniature gold mines”— before launching “The Rabbit’s Foot” in 1900, a long-running spectacle of specialty acts that played from Miami to Texas to Virginia under Chappelle’s ownership for over a decade.¹⁵⁷ The case against the tour proprietor was tried in the *Freeman*, which ran letters from the “poached” trombonist and one of Chappelle’s current musicians, clarinetist Lewis Williams, each defending their choice either to join a white company or to stay with “Rabbit’s Foot.”

This public-facing discussion of what African American proprietors and players owed each other engaged crucial culture worker questions about training, mutual respect, and autonomy. Like violinist William Hagemeyer or double-voiced singer Dora Dawron, Williams and Gillard were navigating multiple registers of value that were shaped but not defined by the dictates of entertainment capitalism. Unlike these prior examples,

¹⁵⁶ This was reported across the press color lines. In *Billboard* it was reported as \$1,500 “for the allegedly foisting away of a member of his negro band,” March 21, 1905. The *Freeman* reported that Chappelle won \$700 of a requested \$1,100, and that the suit was against Rusco and Holland; at this point, however, I think the two companies were presenting the Georgia Minstrels together. “Valuable Bandmaster,” February 11, 1905. Chappelle also wrote a letter to the *Freeman* in response to several notices from performers that they “do not go with the ‘A Rabbit’s Foot Company,’ even though according to Chappelle he had their signatures on contracts “as any other first-class organization of this kind would.” Chappelle then announced that he would be suing players who did not honor their agreements. “We just want to show some of these supposed ‘smart’ performers that a colored man is fully capable of doing business in a business-like manner—as a white man.” August 10, 1900. For more on Chappelle, see Larry Eugene Rivers and Canter Brown Jr., “The Art of Gathering a Crowd”: Florida’s Pat Chappelle and the Origins of Black-Owned Vaudeville,” *Journal of African American History* 92 (Spring, 2007), 169-190.

¹⁵⁷ At least I think this is Chappelle, writing about himself for the *Freeman*, June 30, 1900. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Louis Jordan, and Rufus Thomas all played in “A Rabbit’s Foot.” Many key major players of the Harlem Renaissance had deep, long-lasting roots in Jacksonville —James Weldon and John Rosamond Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, and, A. Philip Randolph— where they were raised in a world of commercial amusement that remains relatively obscure. Paige McGinley has made the best case for the aesthetic significance of the commercial blues of the traveling show. Paige McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

however, Chappelle's employees faced the additional burden of representing "the race." "I am a black man, and I am interested in anything that a black man does," wrote Williams, "and will do all in my power to make it a success." Chappelle had always been "a perfect gentleman," and the clarinet player was "learned with this show, and it belongs in Florida, where I do, and I know that Rusco and Holland would have never picked me up as Mr. Chappelle did and learn me."¹⁵⁸ Gillard quickly fired back. He played the trumpet as a "business proposition, and not friendship," and Rusco and Holland had offered more money—race pride, argued Gillard, was "no reason" to make a business decision. Furthermore, Chappelle was no gentleman, known to open his employees' mail if he knew they were negotiating with other managers. While it was true that most specialty players learned their skills on the road, this relationship should not be misconstrued. "A company," he added, "is no school." Finally, Gillard argued that it was not the case that only Chappelle could be counted on to employ African American players. Rusco and Holland larger and more established than Chappelle's tour and had a greater hiring capacity, "for they are picking your kind up every day, and if they show any ability they are given a chance."¹⁵⁹ This case illustrates how managers' appeals to racial solidarity often felt hollow to players, and that the *Freeman*—in spite of its readership—was a place where this frustration could be voiced.

The dispatches and the advertisements together suggest a novel development in the structure of touring companies that was extremely important for the *Freeman*'s most active participants. By the turn of the century, many of the industrial minstrel tours had

¹⁵⁹ December 24, 1904.

been incorporated under the leadership of a handful of white amusement entrepreneurs. When John Vogel purchased Al G. Field's company and decided to combine this with the "Afro-American Mastodon Minstrels" he had already assembled, his advance team took out a large advertisement for the "grand consolidation [...] forming in its entirety the most stupendous alliance of Colored organizations extant," which would require one hundred performers.¹⁶⁰ In January, 1900, Rusco and Holland owned the Nashville Students (cast of fifty), the Richards and Pringles Georgia Minstrels (cast of forty-five), and the Richards and Pringles Big Minstrel Festival (cast of fifty-five). This roster included two companies founded by African American managers—P.T. Wright's Nashville Students and Charles B. Hicks' Georgia Minstrels—a pattern that continued when Pat Chappelle's company was purchased after his death in 1909 and toured the South under white management into the 1960s.¹⁶¹ While Chappelle's contentious relationship with his employees suggests that African American performers could be exploited by men of any race, it is certainly the case that the process of purchase and consolidation only further increased both the capital and the influence of white entrepreneurs, while erasing the history of black theatrical proprietors.

For the stage managers, vocal directors, and bandmasters of the touring minstrel shows, however, it is possible that some of the expansion made touring conditions more bearable. It meant that white managers could not be on the road with their companies most of the time, which devolved leadership to their more senior performers. This version of the absentee landlord elevated the role of "stage manager" and "vocal director"—

¹⁶⁰ Vogel was also looking for singers and dancers who could double in brass; he was based in Columbus, Ohio; "consider silence a polite negative." April 12, 1899.

¹⁶¹ This is the company that Levon Helm saw, and the basis for "The W.S. Wolcott Medicine Show," a staple of The Band's live shows in the 1970s.

which was often also the *Freeman* “special correspondent”—into a key leadership role. On a mobile shop floor predating the development of scientific management and the clear division between manager and employer, these “stage managers” were sometimes foremen and sometimes artists and usually the most experienced hand with the best hustle. Like the second or third-generation industrial workers who operated, in David Montgomery enduring phrase, with a manager’s brain under a workman’s cap, these players were intimately familiar with industrial sense of time and discipline but turned their vast experience into “a form of control of productive processes.”¹⁶² Harry L. Gillam and S.H. Dudley were both stage managers of the Nashville Students; Gillam became the director of the Faribault Co. Band in northern Minnesota, while S.H. Dudley went onto a lengthy career in stage and recording work.¹⁶³ Even Sylvester Russell worked as a stage manager for the Big Afro-American Company, while still performing in the show, too.¹⁶⁴ While few stage managers were ever proprietors of large traveling companies, some moved into work as agents or songwriters. Others left show business, but remained in touch the *Freeman*. George Moxley, a stage manager and ballad singer in Mahara’s, opened a successful barbering business in Martinsburg, West Virginia, where he was the tenor soloist for the First Methodist Church.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² David Montgomery, “Workers Control of Machine Production in the 19th Century,” *Labor History* 17 (1976), 487.

¹⁶³ Other performer-stage managers included George Titchner, Arnold L. Stevenson, J Harry Fidler, Sidney Perrin, Richard H. Barnett, Jesse Shipp, William S. LeVard, John D. Toll, James H. Gray, and Charles S. Sager. Musical directors included J. Ed. Green, John West Jenkins, Dan Desdunes, and William J. Accooe, among others.

¹⁶⁴ September 3, 1898.

¹⁶⁵ October 17, 1903. W.C. Handy was a huge Moxley fan, known for his tour hijinks. “White in appearance, Moxley was by birth and at heart a Kentucky Negro.” Moxley wrote to Hand that Mahara’s was the only minstrel company that he traveled with, but that he had traveled with a couple white tours and even performed in a white Elks lodge in Shreveport, LA, where “they would have hung me [...] had they known I was colored.” Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 37-40.

These companies were often criticized for having no artistic leadership, establishing a pattern of thought that continues to devalue the aesthetic quality of the industrial minstrel tour.¹⁶⁶ Yet performers may have benefitted from the fact that their employers were known to have no interest in the content of their production, which allowed the participants in the already flexible minstrel show format to have greater artistic autonomy. J. Ed. Green, who worked as both a stage manager and vocal director with a variety of troupes, was “the first and only colored vocalist producing stereopticon view in the South.”¹⁶⁷ In the Oliver Scott company, the correspondent reported that “Mr. Watts is now arranging a new medley for his new act,” and that “B.E. Johnson is now featuring his own composition.”¹⁶⁸ It might also have let them simply continue in their favorite routines without pressure for continual improvement. As the leaders of this adaptable format, stage managers were the closest thing the industrial minstrel show had to a director, a theatrical position that was only just emerging. “Since [Julius] Glenn has taken charge of the stage it is altogether a different show,” wrote the correspondent for the Georgia Up-To-Dates. “He gave the show an overhauling and put on a new act which he just completed, entitled, ‘Dark Shots in Gay Paree.’”¹⁶⁹ Experienced stage managers of long-running tours ran a tight ship. Veteran performer Tom Logan praised one company’s “absence of stage waits and the clockwork like regularity with which one turn succeeded another.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ There is a strong parallel in the tension between the plays of Tyler Perry and those of August Wilson, as articulated by Henry Louis Gates. Gates, “The Chitlin Circuit,” *The New Yorker*, February 3, 1997.

¹⁶⁷ February 12, 1898. Green called this an “illustrated repertoire” and sang the songs “Asleep at the Switch,” “Take Back Your Gold,” and “Just for the Sake of My Daughter.”

¹⁶⁸ January 28, 1899.

¹⁶⁹ January 7, 1899.

¹⁷⁰ October 3, 1903. Stage “efficiency” is most associated with vaudeville and may have encouraged Tom Logan to look for this quality in the minstrel tour.

Most, but not all, of these positions were occupied by men. On the rare occasion that women moved into leadership or management roles, they did so through family connections. Ida Lee Wright had been the treasurer of the Nashville Students for some time when her husband P.T. Wright, the founder, passed away.¹⁷¹ She continued to work with Nash Gideon even as the show came under the control of the Rusco and Holland. Jenie Jacobs, who earned a law degree from N.Y.U. before joining “Isham’s Octoroons” as a chorus girl, moved quickly from the stage to administration. She was John Isham’s secretary and soon led his operations from New York. Jacobs then founded her own successful and popular own talent agency, where she was not afraid to make enemies of the major vaudeville houses. At her death, *Variety* called her “the only woman agent to make good solely upon her own initiative and effort, and as such she stands unique in this theatrical generation.”¹⁷²

The Stage, Act Three

While “The Stage” remained until the *Freeman* closed in 1922, by the time Leroy Bland rejoined the Mahara’s tour it had begun to transform yet again. The biggest difference was the arrival of Sylvester Russell as a permanent presence in early 1902, which slowly remade New York as the center of “The Stage,” and the critic as its most important voice. “All good attractions need a New York endorsement,” he declared in his

¹⁷¹ “The Stage” printed a letter from Ida Wright to George Knox noting that the ads in the *Freeman* “brought as many letters as one in the Clipper would have done.” September 3, 1898.

¹⁷² Jacobs was raised in an orphanage in Rochester, New York, before attending NYU with the patronage of Helen Gould. Jacobs spent her life with Pauline Cook of the vaudeville sharp-shooting duo Cook and Clinton, and together the two women ran a series of apartments for performers. Jacobs died without an estate, because she was known to be “generous in the extreme” to the artists she represented. *Variety*, February 28, 33, 70.

first column, before detailing a theatrical hierarchy arranged by “classes of performances,” where “barnstormers and haphazard actors” continued to work in Tom shows and “white Southern plays,” while those with talent could find fair and meaningful work in New York. Comments like these have moved theater historians to identify Russell as a cranky defender of cultivated traditions, but his position was more complicated. It is certainly true that Russell censured performers who crossed over into musical comedy for bringing the costumes, material, and performance styles of industrial minstrel tours. He was particularly dismissive of performers and proprietors who brought these forms to New York, dismissing Patrick Chappelle’s lone New York “Rabbit Foot” engagement as proof that Chappelle was “green from the South” and that his performers were “not of a better element.”¹⁷³

But when Russell wrote passionately in defense of artistic criteria he was not defending a time-honored hierarchy so much as attempting to create one. “I am [not] trying to force the legitimate standard upon the present criticized actors [Ernest Hogan and Billy McClain],” he wrote, “but I will establish the standard for the benefit of the rising generation at the expense of all the greatest performers of the present time.”¹⁷⁴ This strategy was grounded in his first-hand experience of the limits of the industrial minstrel tours, which had also lead him to Leroy Bland’s defense. Before he was a critic, Russell was the “phenomenal Male Soprano Vocalist” of the Georgia Minstrels, and he also sang

¹⁷³ February 15, 1902. Chappelle later explained that he was a man of “commercial characteristics,” and was not beholden to “bohemian fads and fancies.” “Business Man of Rare Ability— Afro-American Theatrical Manager of National Repute Who Has Achieved Success by Hard Labor— Bohemian Fads Have No Place in the Life of Pat Chappelle,” October 12, 1909.

¹⁷⁴ Russell argued that Hogan and McClain had reduced “the legitimate bearing of the show to a vaudeville farce” by both their act and their attire. December 6, 1902. I have edited this quotation to reflect the *Freeman*’s correction to weeks later, which stated that Russell had accidentally omitted the word “not” in the first phrase. December 20, 1902.

as a solo artist throughout Northeast and as a featured singer with Mahara's and Al. G. Field's Minstrels.¹⁷⁵ Russell knew the difficulties solo performers faced as they moved into white-dominated circuits. At his death, the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that he was the "first colored single singer" on the Keith circuit, beginning in 1893.¹⁷⁶ For Russell, a clearly delineated hierarchy would allow players to find secure and meaningful employment. If players and critics did not take initiative to make this happen, the industry would grow into more exploitative forms. "The colored American stage has now become so distinguished that the future prosperity of its actors and organizations depends solely upon themselves," he explained.¹⁷⁷ The health of the theater *for performers*, in this schema, required both an enforceable artistic standard that made space for African American artistry and a system of mutual protection that could support players like Leroy Bland.

But even if Russell was moved to act on Bland's behalf, his growing presence in the *Freeman* accompanied a shift in the paper's tone from player-generated to critic-oriented, from the Midwest to New York, and from small-time performer to celebrity.¹⁷⁸ This was the case even in the echoing calls for benevolent societies, social clubs, and

¹⁷⁵ This was at the Palace Theatre in Boston, *Clipper*, March 26, 1892. Most of Russell's solo engagements were in medium-sized cities in Boston and New Jersey.

¹⁷⁶ *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 24, 1930.

¹⁷⁷ February 15, 1902.

¹⁷⁸ This was subtle and incomplete, and the continuing reliance on reader submissions could bring additional voices of critique into the fold. When Edward W. Saddler, a twenty-three year old "saloon porter" in Memphis, Tennessee, saw the Ernest Hogan vehicle "King Rastus" in the spring of 1901, he wrote in to express his great displeasure. "As a whole the show was one that the citizens of this place care not to see repeated," he explained. "It is a slander on the Negroes of America." Saddler was most disgusted with the song "Every Nation Has a Flag but A Coon," which he forcefully argued ridiculed black participation in politics. "The white people enjoyed this flag business [...] but we cry shame, shame, shame!" Saddler did not turn against commercial entertainment, however, but merely pointed out that "Memphis is waiting to fill the Auditorium when the Nashville Students give their performances here," a company that had long been under the guidance of Lash Gideon, a black manager. March 30, 1901.

booking agencies. In 1906, the celebrity comedian George Walker argued in the *Freeman* that players needed “to make themselves valuable and the question of pay will take care of itself,” and that they could do so by “improving themselves” and “attending summer plays where they might learn many good lessons.” This would not have worked for the many players who worked year-round tours, or balanced winter tours with summer amusement work. Walker also proposed that the leading men found a “Colored Actors and Actresses Club,” a physical location where “all professional colored people can meet and exchange views and feel perfectly at home.” The club was to be more than just a social space. Like the *Freeman*, it would serve as an information hub, or what Walker called a “bureau of general and particular information [...] where facts about all colored shows on tour can be had daily and weekly.” The club would give players some measure of control over the hiring process, which had in New York become increasingly the purview of white agents and talent bureaus. But while Walker’s club was very much the product of the peripatetic player’s experience, it wouldn’t have served the thousands of touring performers who only rarely visited New York City, if at all. It would not have worked for Leroy Bland.

Conclusion

Although Bland’s arrest catalyzed the efforts to assemble formal organizations in support of touring African American players, these groups were rarely as effective as the *Freeman*. As this chapter has demonstrated, it is not the organizations alone that deserve our attention, but the organizing tools that made benevolent societies, fraternal orders, and unions possible. In the case of the structural, political and social conditions of the

industrial minstrel tour, the most important mechanism of worker solidarity and shared consciousness was a newspaper that had staked its success on the participation of its most active readers, rather than organizations like the Colored Actors' Fund, the B.O.C.P., or their successors, like the Negro Actors' Guild. Not only did the *Freeman* help establish both a communications network and a discursive starting point for formal organizations, whether they were benevolent societies or unions, but given the dispersed and contingent nature of the touring company workforce, the paper was in some ways the most effective way to address workplace problems. These modes of protection and enforcement weren't perfect. After all, the *Freeman* was widely read and used by black and white managers as well as players. Given the undercapitalization of many black-owned touring shows, companies like Pat Chappelle's "Rabbit Foot" were notorious for being some of the lowest paying and most dangerous. And "The Stage" was both read and in some ways written for a multiracial public, which could render its black readership vulnerable to an intensified exploitation.

Bland and his colleagues labored in an oft-maligned corner of the amusement world. The industrial minstrel show is occasionally mentioned as one of the forms from which everything good emerged, but it is rarely considered on its own merits, or to have had any appeal for any viewers or participants other than white managers looking for profits and white audiences looking for conformation of their superior caste. Condemned both for political and artistic failings, the industrial minstrel show is prologue or footnote at best. But the *Freeman* allows us in closer to the shows, past the lithographic advertisements and song sheets, to the people of the trade.¹⁷⁹ This is not to say that the

¹⁷⁹ Arguments about the performance of industrial minstrel tours based solely on advertising materials are misleading, as most "paper" was designed by firms separate from the performances. Not only did mass-

entertainment practices visible in the *Freeman* to historians now—and to readers then—in the *Freeman* were unmediated. It is quite the opposite. “The Stage,” in its mediating role, helped to keep this social world alive.

Many audiences, including black viewers, enjoyed the industrial minstrel tours; many performers in these shows took pride in their work—in their ability to make art, to take pleasure in the company of the peers, and to make a living.¹⁸⁰ This was the player’s engagement in multiple registers of value. While the non-commercial investments in this list could be as important as earning a wage, they also contributed to the vision of the player’s employment as less alienated than other forms of wage labor, opening the performer up—as Amos Gillard had argued—to greater exploitation. The *Freeman* correspondent from Mahara’s recorded the troupe’s experience as the first black company to play in Rogers, Arkansas, where a white postal agent had been amazed to learn that the players’ significant salaries (compared to white residents of Rogers) were sent home to

produced advertising fail to capture the nuance of routines that played with racial caricature, they rarely depicted the range such routines. These included S.N. Edmonds’ peculiar oddity “I Vander Kin Dey Answer Vill I Wrote” with Darkest America” and D. Ireland Thomas’ “colored jew impersonations.” February 12, 1898; September 2, 1899. J. Harry Fidler, the comic from Indianapolis who was stage manager and special correspondent, joined Richards and Pringle’s in 1898, and when they came through Indianapolis, Jackson noted him doing “something new (by a colored performer) in his impersonations of prominent men of the United States,” including Presidents Harrison and McKinley and Admiral Dewey.” August 13, 1898. A few months later, Fidler and his wife Mattie had a comic act called “An Afternoon in the White Folks Parlor,” January 21, 1899, 5. “Whiteface” by African American performers had a variety of meanings; see Marvin McAllister, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

¹⁸⁰ In attempting to hold performers to a new artistic standard, Sylvester Russell condemned older practices that had long been a reliable way to make a show successful. While Russell did approve of Ernest Hogan’s performance in “The Smart Set,” he dismissed the work of Ben Hunn, and older performer who had great success in Florida and in the Rabbit’s Foot tour. “When Mr. Ben Hunn requested the audience to whistle in the chorus of ‘Turkey in the Straw; the gallery policemen at once rapped on the floor and exclaimed (more than once) in a loud voice that could be hard all over the theatre: ‘No whistling allowed in this house!’ But the whistling and the policeman’s protest together was worse than being on the Bowery. I have no personal cause to criticize Mr. Hunn and I deeply regret to state he has been unwise if he persists in lowering the standard of the best colored show on the road playing legitimate houses. His injustice to his associates and the management in so doing will affect his future success.” November 22, 1902. Both the participation of the audience and their solicitation by the performer suggests that black theater was going through a sacralization process similar to the one described by Lawrence Levine in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*.

families, and that Paul Lawrence Dunbar was a Negro. Such experiences were proof the writer that “all eyes are on the Negro,” and that “the colored showman can and does play a great part in changing the color prejudiced minds of the white race.”¹⁸¹

Many of the players who read and contributed to the *Freeman* did this kind of work outside of urban centers and away from the spotlight, carrying the political and artistic capital of industrial minstrel tours far beyond the usual contours of New York or Chicago stages. Harry Gillam—stage manager, special correspondent, Hebrew impersonator, and musical instrument dealer—wrote the *Chicago Defender* from Wells, Minnesota in 1925 to plug the radio program he had developed for his four juvenile bands. He wrote, “I am of the opinion that these [bands] have done more toward making a ‘race problem’ an unknown quantity here.”¹⁸² None of these observations undo the truth of the racial caricature in many of these shows, nor do they equalize the access to capital that made it possible for white proprietors to seize companies they had neither assembled nor nurtured. But performers in these companies were acutely aware of the dangers they faced and the representations they participated in, and they worked with and through these limitations in creative and thoughtful ways. Leroy Bland and his colleagues may never have hit the big-time, but their efforts are a crucial chapter in the history of the U.S. entertainment industry, and in the way we can understand the major structural and ideological problems that culture workers confront.

¹⁸¹ December 6, 1902.

¹⁸² *Chicago Defender*, February 23, 1924 and March 28, 1925. James Osborne, who had once toured with the Georgias, took a position with the “ofay city band and orchestra” in Victoria, British Columbia. May 17, 1902.

Conclusion. The Death Grip of Live Nation

We are told on a daily basis that the future of work is creative. The 4.7 million employees in the arts generate more than \$698 billion annually for the U.S. economy, while creativity has become a virtue celebrated far beyond the concert hall or artist's studio.¹ At the same time, we hear that what once counted as creative labor—music, theater, even journalism—no longer operates in a sustainable fashion. We're thus faced with an apparent contradiction: creativity as psychological process or social status is valued, while the work itself—particularly when done outside the spotlight of celebrity or without the backing of capital—is not. This condition has intensified in our alleged “post-industrial” moment, but culture workers have in fact long labored in a world of large profits, fluctuating social value, and marginal working conditions. This dissertation makes sense of this incongruity by excavating a history of the creative economy and locating the roots of our current situation in nineteenth-century entertainment industry.

Contemporary parallels have nipped at this project's heels from the start. As I was writing the prospectus and first chapter, a group of hackers released hundreds of emails from Sony Pictures, revealing confidential data about salaries and incriminatory gossip. Although Sony attempted to block discussion and publication of this private correspondence it was media catnip, and the “low” salary figures for female stars sparked

¹ This number constituted 4.32% of GDP, a larger share than expected sectors such as construction or transportation. Department of Commerce and the NEA, 2012. (<https://www.arts.gov/artistic-fields/research-analysis/arts-data-profiles/arts-data-profile-6>).

some of the subsequent gender-based activism in Hollywood. This is the contemporary equivalent of opera gossip—an interested in salary, stars, and the work of theatrical production. I thought often of Black Twitter as I wrote about the *Freeman* correspondents, and of the role this public has played in the success of contemporary black showrunners like Donald Glover and Issa Rae. Both Glover and Rae began in sketch and web comedy, but instead of grueling stand-up tours or supporting roles in Hollywood blockbusters, they have found critical acclaim and creative autonomy on premium television platforms that can be easily streamed on any device. Cardi B had already left stripping when I started writing about women in variety, but her path from the club to reality television to the pop charts is the gold standard for how a woman performer with few connections and no capital gets from the margins to the center. Lida White’s jig seems quaint now, but Trimble’s was as socially threatening and as culturally generative as strip clubs are today.² This is all the more reason to be heartened by efforts like the 2017 NYC Stripper Strike, and to see dancers’ activism as of a piece with labor organizing among journalists, domestic workers, video game voice actors, and adjunct faculty. In this light, I offer an extended consideration tying the twilight of this dissertation to the contemporary moment.

The defining entertainment genre gathering steam in the period when this dissertation ends was vaudeville. Vaudeville set the standard that characterized all subsequent forms of successful mass culture; in Robert Snyder’s terms, “it reached

² Lauren Greenfield, director, “Inside the Atlanta Strip Club that Runs Hip Hop,” in *Magic City*, episode 3 (*GQ*, 2015).

people as individuals yet knit them into an audience of massive proportions.”³ It was also the structural kernel of later monopolistic culture industry giants, when the Keith and Orpheum circuits merged as RKO and formed the basis for one of the five major Hollywood studios. Before film was spliced and distributed, vaudeville fine-tuned the specialty act for ease of distribution as if it were an intermodal shipping container. Vaudeville’s circuits were elaborate configurations sorted by geography (from “Western” and “Eastern” wheels to regional circuits based in Lynn, Massachusetts or Macon, Georgia) and price (the “small-time” terrain of Harry Eaton and Leroy Bland to the “big-time” of the Orpheum and Keith-Albee circuits). These circuits had occasional intersections that served their powerful managers, pulling some acts into the more expensive theaters and cooperating—or more accurately, occasionally not competing—on booking across regional and national borders.

Show business looked like this not because of the “brilliance and audacity” of its architects, but because its most powerful owners controlled the sale of performance.⁴ Whether in vaudeville or “legitimate” theater, these men began with the ownership of a handful of theaters but truly came to power when they secured exclusive control over the booking of theaters they did not own. The founders of the Theatrical Syndicate owned thirty-three theaters among six men, but they controlled the booking for between 500 and 700 additional theaters.⁵ This arrangement provided guaranteed business for the touring companies or “attractions” they produced as well as a fee or percentage of receipts from

³ Robert Snyder, “The Vaudeville Circuit: A Prehistory of the Mass Audience,” in *Audiencemaking: How the Media Create the Audience*, ed. James S. Ettema and D. Charles Whitney (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1994), 216.

⁴ Snyder, “The Vaudeville Circuit,” 218.

⁵ Vincent Landro, “Media Mania: The Demonizing of the Theatrical Circuit,” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 13 (Spring, 2001), 25.

ticket sales. Controlling multiple theaters had long been the desire of aspiring magnates, from Noah Ludlow in the 1830s to Jack Haverly in the 1870s, but these plans were undone when one theater in a circuit hit hard times. In contrast, trust and syndicate owners were not financially responsible if the individual theater failed. They did not have to deal with the challenges of theater ownership, from licensing laws and anti-vice reformers to agitated stockholders.

At its core, this route to success was predicated not on ownership per se but the management of booking. And the management of booking was, fundamentally, about the control—the hiring, disciplining, and distributing—of stage labor. In his explanation of what created the vaudeville trusts and the Syndicate, Jack Poggi argued that “the combination system created a demand for a centralized form of booking, and only businessmen cared to provide it.”⁶ Yet the suggestion that “businessmen” simply responded to a demand ignores both how centralized forms of booking predated the combination system and the power dynamics at play in this process. By the 1890s, a half-century of moving opera singers, trombone players, jig dancers, tragedians, and female impersonators across the country had created an infrastructure of people (players, but also advance agents, touring managers, stage managers, proprietors, journalists, playwrights, entertainment lawyers) of unprecedented geographic range and density. Any account of popular music, theater, or mass culture that does not reckon with this fact and process is incomplete.

People have asked me why I wrote a theater history project when what I really want to know about is popular music. The answer is that nothing looks as much like the

⁶ Poggi, *Theater in America*, 9.

current music business as the concluding chapters of this dissertation. It is a great pleasure to live in the Golden Age of Television and to listen to my favorite Ohio indie rappers on Soundcloud, but this flourishing co-exists with entertainment trusts as powerful as those of the 1890s. When most of us think about how music works now, we think of digital streaming and its capacity to transcend boundaries of time and space. Yet the rise of streaming platforms has hurt record sales, not concert attendance. In 2016, Live Nation—the global concert behemoth that owns Ticketmaster—generated more revenue than the top two record companies (Universal and Sony) combined. In 2017, 86 million people attended a show booked by Live Nation, which operates not by owning venues but by controlling ticketing and booking, like its predecessors.⁷ Live Nation even uses the language of vaudeville “wheels,” albeit unintentionally, describing their approach as a “flywheel strategy” in which ticket sales, booking contracts, merchandise, and sponsorship have a multiplying effect. This is a culture industries model that looks more like the booking-based grip of the 1890s than the vertically-integrated Hollywood studio system.

There are two interesting parallels between Live Nation and the earlier monopolies. One is that where there is a monopoly, there is also inequality. In 2017, the CEO Live Nation was the country’s third-highest paid top executive, and employees earning the company’s median pay of \$24,406 would have to work for 2,893 years to equal his compensation for last year alone.⁸ The second is that Live Nation and its only competitor, AEG, did not materialize out of a CEO’s dream journal. These entertainment

⁷ Dave Martino, “Live Nation Leads the Charge in Concert Business’ Booming Revenue,” *Variety*, February 8, 2017; “Live Nation Entertainment Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2017 Results,” Live Nation Press Release, February 27, 2018.

⁸ David Gelles, “Want to Make Money Like a C.E.O.? Work for 275 Years,” *NYT*, May 25, 2018.

conglomerates are built on years of infrastructure. If you want to see a show at the State Theatre in Portland, Maine's most impressive music venue, you have to go through Ticketmaster. Built as an Art Deco movie palace in 1929, the State was a porn theater in the 1960s, closed in the 1980s, and was renovated and reopened in 2010 by a former Phish follower backed with capital from Vermont's most successful microbrewery, Magic Hat. Not only do the owners have an exclusive deal with Live Nation for ticketing, but they also hired a local promoter and cool girl Lauren Wayne as General Manager. Wayne worked for a local concert promotion company that was purchased by Live Nation before serving as the conglomerate's Boston-based regional marketing director for thirteen years. In his explanation of why Wayne was hired, the State owner explained "we needed someone who was part of the community, who understood what Portland was like, what Mainers wanted to see and had connections with the community."⁹ Providing "the community" with the acts it supposedly wanted to see has, in turn, made the Portland music scene less open and experimental. As the State puts the city on the map as a welcoming place that can attract major touring acts for young professionals, it has become less feasible for the people who built the local music scene in the first place.

Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to balance the study of industry transformation with the decisions made by performers as they navigated a system rigged against them. The players in this project were not simply exploited victims of rapacious managers but active participants, often with great passions. Managers and audiences also made choices rather than acting out a script of consolidation and monopoly. And because

⁹ Todd Richard, "Who Kidnapped the State Theatre?" *Portland Monthly*, December, 2009; "Women to Watch—Lauren Wayne, State Theatre" *Mainebiz*, August 11, 2014.

we live in similar times, we too can make choices beyond a Netflix subscription. This is my plea to you, reader, to go see a show in a venue not booked by Ticketmaster.

An uncomplicated story of inevitable monopoly includes assumptions about the non-star players who fiddled and danced the culture industries as we know them into existence, and where they fall in a set of linked pairs: professionals or amateurs, hacks or geniuses, advocates of beauty or pursuers of profits, sell-outs or purists, workers or artists. The formation of the culture industries in the nineteenth-century required performers to be both artists and workers at the same time. The condition of the modern culture worker requires occupying contradictory positions, particularly when dominant logics suggests this is impossible. The disruptive Italian choristers, striking musicians, back-talking soubrettes, and minstrel company violinists who rejected specious arguments equating work and school were not only agitating for better working conditions. They were also fighting to define the value of their work across multiple registers.

This argument is simple but often unspoken, and it has implications for both the labor historian and the labor activist. Sliding for a moment into the latter position, I offer my final request: be suspicious if the person who pays you says you are not a worker. This argument is made to distance an employer from responsibility and to excuse exploitation. It is a frequent theme throughout this dissertation, from Harvey Dodworth's appeal to not pay musicians in the Central Park concerts to the touring manager's requests for amateur women players to the characterization of Patrick Chappelle's tour as a benevolent school. But it has wider implications, particularly as employers fight to categorize new kinds of jobs as independent contractors instead of employees. It is no

coincidence that this kind of work is in those positions that early political economists identified as “non-productive”—domestic service, education, and performance—and that they are often considered either menial, unskilled, or the luxury of those who get to “do what you love.”¹⁰ Those of us who find ourselves in these positions should think strategically about how to best join forces and demand a better world.

¹⁰ As Miya Tokumitsu writes, the ideology of “do what you love [...] leads not to salvation, but to the devaluation of actual work, including the very work it pretends to elevate — and more importantly, the dehumanization of the vast majority of laborers.” Miya Tokumitsu, “In the Name of Love,” *Jacobin* (January, 2014).

Appendix A



Figure 2. Ernestine De Faiber and P.R. Barnum, ca. 1864. Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.



The Seduction Scene from the Ballet of "Sitala," as Performed by the Viennoise Ballet Troupe, at Fisk's Grand Opera House, New York.

Figure 3. An engraving of Katti Lanner, dancing the lead role in *Sitala*. *Sporting Times and Theatrical News*, September 16, 1870. American Antiquarian Society.

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