

Playbill Takes the Stage: The Rise of America's Foremost Theatrical Program

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This project presents a history of Playbill, the New York-based company that publishes all theatre programs for Broadway, as well as several other commercial theatres across the entire United States. Theatre programs, or playbills, offer a wealth of information about a production event, including dates, creative team details, and cast biographies. As such, theatre programs have become important primary documents for theatre scholars. However, few studies analyze and interpret these material objects beyond their usefulness in the archive. This project attests that playbills are highly communicative objects that both convey institutional sway and reflect shifting sociopolitical contexts and audience demographics. Playbill, as the leading provider of theatre programs since the early twentieth century, proves an excellent case study for examining how American theatre programs developed over the years. This project sets out to address three primary research questions: (1) How did Playbill contribute to the development of a commercial Broadway theatre? (2) In what ways does Playbill shape editorial content and imagery in order to appeal to potential audiences? and (3) How has Playbill stayed afloat while their competitors have folded? Through an archival exploration of several playbills from roughly the 1850s through 2020, as well as additional primary documents, such as correspondence and institutional manuscripts, this project tracks changes to Playbill's business model, circulation, and editorial content within the shifting American sociohistorical milieu and correlative audience demographics. Through this examination, I argue that Playbill rarely takes risks, by either maintaining the status quo or by venturing into arenas that are relatively "safe" from potential backlash. I further attest that

depending upon the sociopolitical moment, Playbill shifted its reputation either closer to or away from its associations with New York City and Broadway culture, ultimately utilizing this cultural cachet when it suited their business needs. In doing so, Playbill crafted a brand that is embedded in and important to both NYC and American culture.

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Preface

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1.0 Introduction

"Theater can be so ephemeral...Playbill is something from the show that people get to keep."—

*Blake Ross, Playbill Editor in Chief*¹

“Playbill’s got a fabulous brand story,” said Publisher Bruce Hallett in a 2013 interview for the *New York Times*.² Founded sometime between 1884 and 1885 by German American Frank Vance Strauss, Playbill is the oldest surviving theatre program company in the world.³ Its reach is expansive, as Playbill provides theatre programs to many U.S. theatres, all Broadway theatres, and in recent years, international tours. The bright yellow banner with “Playbill” in black lettering is arguably one of the most recognizable logos of the American theatre, becoming synonymous with Broadway over time, which, by its very nature lacks a unifying logo. The logo now appears on merchandise sold by the company: shirts, mugs, and pajama sets, in addition to playbill binders and frames for displaying playbills in collections or as art pieces.⁴ Theatre is indeed ephemeral, as Blake Ross states in the above quote; yet, playbills and Playbill seem to last forever.

Playbills are theatrical documents as well as magazines, imparting useful information to audiences, such as cast biographies and production details. Theatre unions rely on playbills to give credit to performers, stagehands, and various other theatrical laborers. Playbills are also souvenirs, with collectors saving them for days, years, or decades. Some even pass their beloved collections from generation to generation. What is merely a few pages of text and advertising offer, at times, powerful memories of past moments, people, and events. Playbill collectors enjoy reflecting upon their collections, re-reading about shows they loved and re-experiencing their favorite moments. Some collectors consider themselves celebrity “scouts,” bragging about playbills in their collection

that have early biographies of then-unknown celebrities. In general, and as longtime Playbill employee and collector Louis Botto writes, “Few objects in the world convey instant nostalgia more potently than [sic] an old Playbill.”⁵

More than providing nostalgia, however, playbills have been housed in theatre archives, wherein scholars have searched their pages for cast and production details that help them to elucidate their scholarship. As Marvin Carlson describes, the playbill “has long been utilized by theatre historians as a privileged primary document in their research, and many an acting career or theatrical repertoire has been reconstructed largely on the basis of the information contained in such documents.”⁶ Playbills are useful, but their value has consistently been limited to the production information contained within their pages. This project asserts the importance of the playbill beyond its use as repository of biographies and production dates. I maintain that playbills are more communicative than what previous studies have suggested, and agree with Christopher Balme, who notes that playbills are “univocal,” acting as “an institutional means to occupy the theatrical public sphere. . . . [they are] the mouthpiece of the institution.”⁷ If theatre programs or playbills speak on behalf of theatre institutions, what are they saying?

The playbill or theatre program, according to Carlson, is “an important record of changing social and economic forces operative in the theatre” as it “has been a standard part of the theatergoing experience now for at least two and a half centuries.”⁸ Yet, these documents have received minimal scholarly attention as topics themselves. Balme’s own study on playbills agrees that these documents remain “the most neglected category of sources in the theatre historical archive.”⁹ He notes that some of this neglect might be due to the explicitly verbal nature of playbill content, citing, for example, the fact that playbills contain linguistic information about a production that is easily interpreted as to be essentially factual and therefore prohibitive of

analysis. This perspective, however, limits the ways in which theatre scholars can think about playbills by diminishing their potential cultural impact. Furthermore, although there has been little study into what playbills do, much less has been written about Playbill, the company. In fact, there has never been a scholarly investigation or history of Playbill to date.

Strauss founded his company during a time that Isabelle Lehuu calls a “textual transformation,” in which printing became inexpensive.¹⁰ In the years leading up to and immediately following the Civil War, “American society saw the emergence of an exuberant print culture, which took a great variety of forms and catered to the tastes of a diversified readership.”¹¹ Companies could print more items due to an increase in production efficiency and affordability. Due to printing accessibility, Strauss found himself surrounded by several program publishers competing for the same theatre business. Yet, within only a few years, Strauss had established what I refer to as a near monopoly, which Playbill has essentially carried throughout their history. In linking Playbill to “monopoly,” I consider the common definition of the term, meaning, “the sole provider of the entire output of goods and services of an industry” or “when a company and its product offerings dominate a sector of an industry.”¹² With this understanding, Playbill has held a mostly consistent monopoly, having dominated the theatrical program market since the early twentieth century.

A brief note on theatre programs and terminology: a playbill is a printed document or magazine that contains production information, advertisements, and frequently, articles. Referred to as either “theatre programs” or “playbills,” these “booklet-style” documents are distinct from the “single-sheet handbills” that were popular in England prior to the late nineteenth century. Although “playbill” can be utilized as a generic term meaning “theatre program,” for the sake of clarity, I refer to theatre programs published by Playbill as “playbills” and non-Playbill

publications as “theatre programs.” When discussing a specific playbill, I italicize its title (i.e. *Playbill* or *The Playbill*, depending upon when the instance appears in the chronology). Additionally, throughout this dissertation, I refer to the company now known as “Playbill” as “Playbill;” however, the company has gone through several name changes throughout its history. I account for these changes when they occur within Playbill’s timeline, but I generally refer to the company as “Playbill”—both for intelligibility and to suggest a cohesiveness about the company, its brand, and its history.

My project is, at its core, a history of Playbill from 1884 to 2020. I examine how the company has adjusted over time to reflect changes in the sociohistorical milieu, such as shifting gender expectations, the emergence of World Wars, the digital age, and the increasing acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community, among other contexts. Through this exploration, I suggest that Playbill rarely takes risks, by either maintaining the status quo or by venturing into arenas that are relatively “safe” from potential backlash (from audiences, as well as theatre owners, producers, and other industry professionals). I also attest that Playbill sits at the intersections of print culture, American culture, and theatre history, and is therefore reflective of these interrelated elements of American life, demonstrating important cultural shifts within a single document. By presenting a history of Playbill within these interrelated contexts, I argue that depending upon the sociopolitical moment, Playbill shifted its reputation either closer to or away from its associations with New York City and Broadway culture, ultimately utilizing this cultural cachet when it suited their business needs. In doing so, Playbill crafted a brand that is embedded in and important to both NYC and American culture. Furthermore, Playbill CEOs have relied on the company’s longevity, legacy, and ubiquity—the elements that contribute to its status as a monopoly—while also deemphasizing this reputation in order to endear audiences to Playbill.

1.1 Literature Review

Playbills are part theatre program and part theatre magazine. They provide necessary credit to theatre workers as well as production details, but they also include editorials on a wide range of topics, such as fashion and entertainment. Playbill cultivated these editorials in order to appeal to a theatregoing demographic of potential consumers; as such, both the ads and the editorials contained within the *Playbill* act as advertising. Additionally, playbills are themselves company advertising, with the logo acting as a vital aspect of perpetuating Playbill's brand and relative ubiquity in the American theatre. Necessarily, my project is in conversation with studies on theatre programs, American theatre, and Broadway commercialism and consumerism.

My project adds to a small, but necessary discussion about theatre programs and playbills. Carlson's "The development of the American theatre program" examines how American programs emerged and diverged from the British iteration. He articulates the progression from the long, single sheet that is posted on walls outside of the theatre space to the multi-page booklets distributed inside the theatre that most American theatres (including Broadway) utilize today. Carlson's examination justifies the study of playbills beyond production information (names, dates, places, etc.), and his work lays the crucial foundation for my project. Carlson's work focuses on the turn of the century through the 1920s, and my project builds from his chronology. As the most ubiquitous of theatre programs, *Playbill* offers an excellent case study of how theatrical programs have changed and responded to modern American life beyond Carlson's work.

Similarly, Balme's "Playbills and the Theatrical Public Sphere" argues that playbills are important cultural documents that are highly communicative, conveying institutional practices and ideologies. Balme theorizes that "Theatres communicate with their publics both before and after and not just during performances;" one aspect of this communication, he asserts, is in the playbill,

which provides not only information but also “aesthetic stimuli” to the publics that interact with them.¹³ Rather than examining theatres specifically, I look to Playbill as my institution and the general theatregoing audience as its public. When analyzing Playbill’s various decisions, I consider both the sociopolitical contexts within each specific moment and the theatregoing demographic for that period, which allows me to theorize why Playbill made changes to printing, business model, or branding.

James Harbeck’s “A Case study in the pragmatics of American theatrical programs” presents a comparative study of four programs published by Playbill and the American Repertory Theatre (ART) in Boston between 1993 and 1994 and focuses on the “informational” aspects of each: namely, the cast biographies and director notes. He argues that these playbills are instrumental in conveying important information to audiences; it is, as he describes, “the multivalent defining tool deluxe, shaping a variety of disparate conceptions, serving multiple ends for multiple persons.”¹⁴ Although Harbeck asserts that playbills shape audience opinion and experience, he also claims that editorials and other featured content is “light ‘filler’ material.”¹⁵ As such, my project departs from his by arguing that these editorials are, in fact, instrumental to the ways in which audiences may have received these playbills. Taken as a whole, playbill content is not only indicative of a specific sociopolitical time and its audience, but also, the image Playbill tries to sell to that audience.

Furthermore, my project builds on scholarship that examines theatrical marketing and commercialism. As the theatre capital of the nation, Broadway serves as the site of most of these scholarly interventions. Jessica Sternfeld’s aptly titled *The Megamusical*, for example, theorizes and presents a new subgenre of musical theatre called the “megamusical,” British imported musicals that became popular on the Broadway stage. Through both narrative and musicological

analyses, Sternfeld delineates specific conventions typical of this subgenre. Some of these elements include larger than life spectacles, massive cast sizes, and epic narratives. Megamusicals, as Sternfeld argues, are also massively produced for international productions, resulting in significant branding decisions and logo designs that become crucial in marketing these shows to global audiences. Sternfeld specifically credits Cameron Mackintosh for changing the way producers market Broadway musicals as products “complete with logos, theme songs, and advertisements saturating newspapers, radio, and television.”¹⁶ My project adds to these same provocations about marketing and brand identity, as Playbill’s logo, which has remained the same since 1975, allows the company to be instantly recognizable across the United States and increasingly more so in global areas. Yet, Playbill’s logo functions as both marketing for the company, as well as a symbol for Broadway, and increasingly, the American theatre. As such, my project demonstrates how logos can move beyond their role as marketing tools to become cultural symbols.

Similarly, Steven Adler’s *On Broadway: Art and Commerce on the Great White Way* presents a history of commercial theatre and marketing through analyses of Broadway producers. Adler examines producing strategies of the early twentieth to twenty-first century and argues that corporate giants, such as Disney Theatricals, have now replaced the individual producer or producer partnership model.¹⁷ Adler’s work is an important record that presents both the “artistic and economic forces” at play within Broadway’s long history.¹⁸ Throughout my project, I account for moments in which Playbill made friends or enemies in Broadway producers, ultimately concluding that Playbill maintains positive relationships with producers in order to keep their business, and therefore, their program monopoly. As such, my project builds from Adler’s by

suggesting that the mutually beneficial relationship of producer/Playbill is an integral part of the transformation of Broadway commercialism

1.2 Methods of Inquiry

My methodology is inspired by recent studies that analyze the connections between American culture, print culture, consumer culture, and the development of Broadway and city life. Both Julia Guarneri's *Newsprint Metropolis: City Papers and the Making of Modern Americans* and Marlis Schweitzer's *When Broadway Was the Runway: Theater, Fashion, and American Culture* serve as foundational texts from which I base my project. Guarneri's work "tells the linked histories of newspapers and the cities they served between 1880 and 1930. It tracks two simultaneous processes: how cities made newspapers, and how newspapers made cities. It therefore treats newspapers not just as historical records but also as historical actors, not just as repositories of information but also as instruments of change."¹⁹ Of particular interest to Guarneri is not the headlining news, but rather, the less featured pieces, such as women's interest pages, advice columns, cartoons, etc., and she analyzes how these pieces shaped consumer identities during the period. Likewise, my project asserts the importance of playbills beyond their usage as informational booklets, and I explore how Playbill aimed specific editorials at a largely female demographic. Guarneri's work examines the "critical changes" happening in the news industry, which shifted the ways in which newspapers functioned as well as readers' relationships to them. Inspired by Guarneri's methods, I track Playbill's shifts in business model, brand identity, and logo in conjunction with the interrelated cultures of New York, Broadway, and the theatre.

Ultimately, I argue that playbills are similarly reflective of American, New York, and theatre cultures, capable of acting as “instruments of change.”

Schweitzer’s book takes a similar approach to urban life, as she argues that the commercial Broadway theatre helped to construct modern American consumer culture, specifically by appealing to the modern female consumer. She notes:

Beginning in the 1890s and continuing through the first two decades of the twentieth century, theater managers aggressively pursued the imagination and presence of female theatergoers by transforming the stage into a glorious site of consumer spectacle. Acutely aware that their financial solvency hinged on their ability to attract and retain the interest of socially advantaged women, these predominantly male impresarios presented actresses, the dresses they wore, and the objects they used onstage as fantastic commodities, readily available in photographs and magazines...²⁰

Schweitzer’s project articulates the intersection of theatres, audiences, and consumerism, drawing connections between “economic, social, and cultural developments” that “made collaborations between Broadway theaters, department stores, mass-circulation newspapers and magazines, fashion designers, and consumer goods manufacturers both desirable and necessary.”²¹ Her study focuses on the actresses that were essentially walking advertisements for fashion and beauty products within increasingly consumerist theatrical spaces. Likewise, my project examines the intersections of audiences, theatre, and Playbill, and I ultimately argue that playbills are part of this emerging consumerist New York culture, appealing to the ideal female consumer through targeted ads and editorials.

My project also contends that playbills are an integral aspect of the theatergoing experience. I am therefore influenced by the theories set forth by Marvin Carlson in his book, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life*, in which he argues that meaning is not only constructed by and through the performance event happening onstage, but also through “the semiotics of the entire theatre experience.”²² Those elements that are responsible for the totality of experience include

“[t]he physical appearance of the auditorium, the displays in the lobby, the information in the program, and countless other parts of the event as a whole.”²³ Although I do not analyze the semiotics of the theatrical space, I build upon Carlson’s assertion that meaning is conveyed through playbills. By analyzing not only the institutional aspects of Playbill, but also, the material conveyed inside its pages, I examine how playbills—and Playbill—have both responded to and created shifts in theatre and American culture.

In researching this project, I discovered that women were integral to Playbill’s history—both as editors and audiences—despite a clear lack of archival evidence highlighting women’s participation. Influenced by these discoveries as well as my own feminism, I have attempted to feature women’s roles in Playbill’s history whenever possible. Highlighting these histories is particularly cogent considering that much of my project relies on sources written by white cisgender men. In order to push against the perpetuation of only white male histories, I read these sources critically, while acknowledging women’s absence in these narratives, thereby making visible what might otherwise be invisible. Although much of my project details the choices of white men in positions of power—namely those acting as CEO/President and sometimes Publisher—I showcase the hitherto unexamined stories of women’s involvement within Playbill’s history whenever possible. I also acknowledge that there were likely many more female employees, as well as employees of color, who are not privileged by inclusion into historical archives. As such, I am inspired by Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner’s call to “concretise the notion of a continuum in women’s involvement in theatre, to demonstrate that absence from the histories is not an indication of an absence from history.”²⁴

Throughout my project, I reconstruct women’s histories by analyzing historical evidence when it is available and questioning when there are gaps. I also draw on Tracy C. Davis’s

provocation that the “feminist theatre historian’s task is not simply to recreate and document hitherto ‘lost’ women, texts, or performances, but ‘to address the censoring impulse, to validate the experience, and to connect the woman with the work and the work with the world at large.’”²⁵ My focus on Playbill’s female employees is not an attempt at recovering “lost” women. Instead, I demonstrate that these women were instrumental in building Playbill’s history and brand, while also acknowledging that the archive has essentially erased their presence.

In addition to reconstructing the histories of female employees, much of my project examines the role that gender plays in the writing of *Playbill* editorials and how this connects to the shifting demographics and overt feminization of theatrical spaces. Most of these editorials rely on gendered expectations for the subject’s fashion, hair, makeup, and other visual cues, as well as women’s supposed fascination with famous female figures, such as the Gibson Girl and film celebrities. For these discussions, I look to scholars such as Kathy Peiss, Rebecca Arnold, and Sarah Berry, among others, who examine American fashion, beauty, and leisure expectations for women and men during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and apply their theories to Playbill’s editorial content. It is also worth noting that Playbill’s editorials are written along exclusionary, gender binary lines. As such, I refer to “male” and “female” readership concomitantly with editorials aimed at these specific demographics.

This dissertation is a result of more than two years of archival research. The historiographical nature of the project necessitated several trips to archives so that I could analyze and compare playbills from the 1850s to the present. Most of my archival research was completed at the University of Pittsburgh’s Curtis Theatre Collection, wherein I examined thousands of playbills for editorial content, format, size, and publishing information. Additional archival research into the lives of Playbill’s owners was completed at the New York Public Library’s Billy

Rose Division and the Shubert Archive in New York. Beyond my archival research, I visited the Playbill offices in New York—both the corporate location in Manhattan, where primarily digital content is created, and the printing plant in Queens, in which the print version is written, printed, and assembled.

During my visits to the Playbill locations, I interviewed staff and current CEO Phil Birsh, and I was provided a copy of Playbill’s “bible.” The “bible” is an unpublished manuscript written by Louis Botto, mentioned earlier, who both worked for and was a fan of Playbill. For the company’s celebrated centennial in 1984, Botto was either asked or volunteered to write the “bible,” which would serve as a kind of company unofficial history. As he had been collecting playbills ever since he was a child, Botto relied on these documents as well as his own memory for much of the manuscript. He also reviewed playbills that were kept at the Playbill corporate office and interviewed staff. The manuscript was never published, although Playbill staff told me Botto wanted to do so before he died. Now, Botto’s “bible” is Playbill’s only archive, providing historical information—presented as facts—for editorials written today. What was initially meant to be a document used only by Playbill staff now serves as the company’s official archive and history.

I was also able to read an unpublished memoir by former CEO Arthur Birsh completed in 2006. As Birsh has had the longest tenure of anyone at Playbill, his manuscript proved an excellent source for nearly thirty years of Playbill’s history, especially in regard to otherwise undocumented business decisions and Playbill’s finances. Birsh’s memoir is a complex document that is an informally written, firsthand account of what was happening at Playbill from roughly 1965 through the 1990s. Much of what Birsh wrote is unverifiable—funny anecdotes, jokes, and what he was thinking over the years—but I consider that the ways in which Birsh wrote the book, as well as the

information it contains, is useful to understanding Playbill's work environment as well as Birsh's decision-making during these important years. Unlike Botto's manuscript, Birsh's memoir is not utilized as part of Playbill's official archive, compiled instead for his friends and family without any intent to publish. The manuscript, and therefore, much of the information it contains, is fundamentally unavailable to researchers. I was fortunate to be provided a copy for this project.

Much of my research into Playbill began with the "bible" and Birsh's account, although I have discovered many contradictions between these two sources and other archival documents. As I worked through these documents, I analyzed for bias and "spin." I pushed back against narratives that read too hyperbolic, complimentary, and exclusionary. I looked for and analyzed the gaps in these historical narratives. I contend that both manuscripts have provided valuable details that are missing from other archives, while also acknowledging that these documents are flawed and plausibly biased. At different times throughout this dissertation, I verify, question, and dismantle these manuscripts in conjunction with other primary materials as a way of understanding the narratives that add to Playbill's "brand story," and I present these discrepancies as part of a larger historiographical call to action for other scholars navigating similar archival limitations.

1.3 Chapter Organization

This dissertation follows a chronological organization, with each of its four chapters exploring major shifts in the ways Playbill and its owners have adjusted the company's business model and editorial content in order to address the changing American socio-historical landscape. Chapter One, "Frank Strauss and the Emergence of the Contemporary Program," focuses on Playbill founder Strauss, and the development of the modern American theatre program within

early newspaper and magazine publishing in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. This chapter scrutinizes Strauss's founding of Playbill and reveals aspects of that history that have been obscured by Playbill today. Over the last forty years, Playbill has created and perpetuated a narrative about Strauss that is not supported by archival evidence. This chapter intends to rectify some of that misinformation. Secondly, I argue that Strauss created a theatre program, whose purpose was to appeal to an emerging majority female audience through fashion editorials and a portrait series called "The Program Girl," who was meant to represent the targeted white, middle-class, female theatregoer. I also contend that rather than the pioneering innovator that Playbill suggests, Strauss lucked into a program monopoly through an early and beneficial association with the Theatrical Syndicate.

Strauss's nephew and company heir, Richard Huber, is the subject of Chapter Two, "Playbill After Strauss: Celebrity, Excess, and WWII." Under Huber, Playbill created editorials that spoke to audiences' potential interest in celebrity culture and New York life. By highlighting the lives of actors and the theatre industry, Huber re-focused Playbill as a theatre magazine, rather than a theatre program. Chapter Two also explores how Huber built upon Strauss's gendered editorials by both increasing the number of fashion features, and by furthering a gendered divide along fashion lines with content aimed specifically for men and women. I also acknowledge the labor of longtime Editor Barbara Blake and argue that her work suggests tensions between these cultures of excess and the frugality and minimalism of the Depression, which continued after the U.S. joined World War II.

Chapter Three, "Playbill from the 1950s through the 1970s: Establishing a National Brand," examines the business models of CEOs Roger Stevens, Gilman Kraft, and Metromedia, Inc.'s President, John Kluge, as well as introduces Arthur Birsh's history with the company from

outsourced printer to Publisher. Each shaped Playbill's brand in significant ways during a period that experienced a substantial decline in New York theatre audiences due to the rising popularity of television, the deterioration of the area around Times Square, and the emerging regional theatre movement. Stevens rebranded Playbill's image by changing both its name and logo, while also pushing a narrative that Playbill was both "new" in design but "old" in legacy and reliability. By wielding the company's long-standing reputation and suggesting that its content and "look" were new, Stevens hoped to boost audience readership of advertising. Stevens, like Huber, also capitalized on audience interest in celebrity and luxury, and he continued to create new immersive ways for audiences to experience playbill content, including the Playbill Restaurant and merchandise. Following Stevens, Gilman Kraft was forced to rebrand Playbill and New York after a precipitous drop in Broadway audience numbers spurred on by Times Square's increasingly negative reputation. By reframing New York and Broadway, I argue, Kraft was able to rebrand Playbill as a company for all American theatres. Finally, Metromedia, Inc.'s purchase of Playbill and subsequent assigning of John Kluge as CEO was responsible for many ill-informed decisions, including a staff that was largely unprepared for running a theatre-focused print publication. However, Arthur Birsh, Playbill's Publisher under Kluge, frequently relied on his powerful network in order to keep Playbill from going under, leading ultimately to his purchase of the company. These years firmly established Playbill as a recognizable and reputable brand, connected to Broadway excellence and American theatre.

Chapter Four begins at the start of Arthur Birsh's ownership of the company and continues into Phil Birsh's—Arthur's son—tenure as CEO. Titled, "Playbill: A Small Family Company?," this chapter examines the company's continued expansion into regional markets as well as their emergence into digital publishing, which allowed Playbill to engage with audiences across the

nation, thereby establishing the company as an accessible American brand. The digital elements also allowed fans to engage with Playbill in new ways, including what has now become a ritualized *Playbill* photo shoot. I also interrogate how the Birshes cultivated a narrative of Playbill as a “good” company as well as a “small, family company” in order to de-emphasize its monopolistic reality, a narrative that has resulted in fan loyalty.

Botto lovingly describes Playbill as “one of America’s oldest and most treasured publications,” and it is, in fact, this longevity and legacy that remains one of the company’s most significant linchpins.²⁶ Playbill sells an image of being an old company that has been tested and survived because this impresses a sense of company stability and reliability. For 135 years, Playbill says, they have printed and delivered playbills to the theatres on time, every time. They convey a reputation that audiences can count on Playbill to provide the type of theatrical content they want, as well as lasting memories of an inherently ephemeral event. Over time, Playbill has crafted an image of being a “small,” reliable company, while its monopoly continues to squash any and all competition—a monopoly that began with an advertising man from Ohio.

2.0 Frank Strauss and the Emergence of the Contemporary Program

2.1 Playbill's "Unique Brand Story"

In 1884, David Belasco opened a new comedy called *May Blossom* at the Madison Square Garden Theatre. When audiences entered, they were handed a multi-page booklet that contained information about the play. The booklet was only a few pages long; its cover showed the theatre's interior; the back had diagrams of the theatre with exits clearly marked; and inside its pages were scene descriptions, cast names and production information. This booklet is the ancestor to the modern American theatrical playbill. Although the booklet was not particularly unique compared to other late nineteenth century programs, this was still a pivotal moment in theatre and print culture history because Frank V. Strauss had published this program. Strauss, an advertising agent who previously worked with the Madison Square Garden Theatre, had decided to try his hand at program publishing and *May Blossom* was his first attempt. Following *May Blossom*, Strauss started the New York Theatre Program Corporation, which, decades later, would be called Playbill, the New York-based publishing company that currently acts as the sole provider of theatre programs for the Broadway theatre.

This story, in which Strauss published the *May Blossom* program in 1884, is Playbill's official "origin story." I heard this story countless times when I visited Playbill's printing press in Queens. Employees explained that Strauss came to New York with the idea of revolutionizing the program industry by altering the format in two distinct ways. The first was to design the program as a booklet rather than a single sheet "handbill," the style English theatres had used; and the second was to include advertising within the program's pages in order to capitalize on profit.

According to them, with the 1884 *May Blossom* program, Strauss accomplished these goals and cemented himself as an innovator within the theatre program world.

The problem with this story is that most of it is not true. Frank Strauss did establish a program publishing empire, which later became Playbill, but he was not the first to design a multi-page program booklet or “theatre magazine;” he was not the first to use advertising in programs for profit, and he very likely did not even publish the *May Blossom* program. This imperfect and inflated narrative is touted as Playbill’s “unique brand story,” and it is not only conveyed anecdotally by employees; it is also the story that longtime former employee Louis Botto wrote in his manuscript for the company’s centennial—an unpublished document that, as previously mentioned, Playbill now uses as its official history and only archive. Overall, Strauss was important to the changing paradigms in program publishing, but these “urban legends” overstate his importance while also negating the ways in which Strauss was innovative.

There is a t-shirt sold on Playbill’s official merchandise store that states “Playbill: Serving the Theatre Since 1884,” but Strauss may not have started the company until 1885.²⁷ Although *May Blossom* opened in 1884, there is no record of Strauss’s connection to the production beyond Playbill’s anecdotal evidence. In his essay, “The development of the American theatre program,” Marvin Carlson writes that he tried—and failed—to find evidence to substantiate Playbill’s story.²⁸ This origin story is presumably so important to Playbill’s identity that, during its centennial, then-CEO Arthur Birsh tasked his staff with locating physical proof to support the *May Blossom* narrative. Playbill employees contacted the New York Public Library, former employees, and contacts who may have known Strauss’s family, attempting to obtain the elusive *May Blossom* playbill bearing Strauss’s name.²⁹ They even placed advertisements in newspapers and their own playbills offering a \$10,000 monetary award, but their efforts only confirmed that a little play

called *Anselma*, and not *May Blossom*, was the earliest program bearing Strauss's name.³⁰ Below the play's scene breakdown was the simply stated, "Address all communications pertaining to advertisements in this programme to F.V. STRAUSS Madison Square Theatre."³¹

Anselma, a piece with a complicated history, was adapted from French dramatist Victorien Sardou's plays *Andrea* and *Agnes*. Mme. Janish, an Austrian actress, produced *Anselma* for the Madison Square Theatre in 1885; however, Agnes Ethel, a competing theatre producer, complained that she had sole stage rights to Sardou's play. Ethel had commissioned her own adaptation, producing the now titled *In Spite of All* at the Lyceum Theatre simultaneously with *Anselma*'s run at the Madison Square. *In Spite of All* starred the celebrated actress, Minnie Madden Fiske, and was generally well-received, while *Anselma*, directed by Frank L. Gardner, was considered "a rather stupid specimen of dramatic decanting."³² Resulting litigation and negative press likely closed *Anselma* after a short run.³³ After countless attempts to verify the *May Blossom* narrative, Playbill was faced with *Anselma* as the earliest evidence of what would become Strauss's program empire. Neither *May Blossom* nor *Anselma* are well known plays today, but *May Blossom* was a hit in 1884. It played for nearly five months, and according to one of his first biographies, the play "mark[ed] the beginning of Belasco's lasting achievement as a dramatist."³⁴ Although not his first play, *May Blossom* was Belasco's first success, and by linking the Playbill name with Belasco and his first major impact upon New York theatre, Playbill cemented its connection to Broadway royalty from its beginning. Considering *Anselma* is essentially a blip in theatre history with a rocky past, it is perhaps understandable why Playbill would want to be a part of Belasco's Broadway beginnings and eventual legacy. Whether Strauss began printing playbills in 1884 or 1885 is only the beginning of a slew of other questions concerning Strauss and Playbill's origins.

Strauss, who was born in Columbus, Ohio in 1863, moved to New York during his teenage years with an interest in advertising. One of his first jobs was working for the Madison Square Garden as an “ad solicitor.”³⁵ It is likely that, rather than publishing and printing the *May Blossom* program, Strauss secured advertising. Undoubtedly, Strauss’s background in advertising and his early work with theatres helped him transition to program printing. Although Strauss faced heavy competition for publishing contracts at the beginning of his business, eventually, he took over the program printing for several New York theatres, and within a few decades, had established a near-monopoly.³⁶ The false *May Blossom* narrative that Playbill continues to sell—both figuratively and literally (much of their merchandise says “since 1884”)—not only links Strauss with Belasco, it also paints Strauss as a pioneering innovator within the publishing world.³⁷ Strauss’s legacy is that he created a company that still exists to this day, and its monopolization of the form was cemented in its nascency. With few attempts to curtail this publishing monolith, Playbill remains the sole provider of theatre programs and a significant player in the American theatrical landscape.

This chapter examines the contexts surrounding Playbill’s beginnings while also debunking much of what the company claims in their official history. Rather than a pioneer in the publishing world, I argue that Strauss was successful due to his ability to assemble his program model from the successes of his peers and the conventions of nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines, his close association with the monopolizing Theatrical Syndicate, and his savvy in navigating the trends in print culture and the changing demographics of his increasingly female theatrical audience.

2.2 Print Culture and the Theatrical Program



Figure 1 Wooster Street, One of Playbill's Early Locales

2.2.1 The Beginning: English Programs and American Ideals

Strauss worked in an area of New York that would one day be called Broadway, “when a concentrated swath of New York City was not yet synonymous with most commercial theater in the United States.”³⁸ During this “pre-Broadway” time, there were no unions or economic monopolies that tied theatrical production to New York; even so, the city was still “America’s uncontested theater capital,” and Strauss quickly ingratiated himself within this community after only a few years.³⁹ Strauss founded his company at 120 Walker Street in New York before expanding and moving to 108-114 Wooster Street, where the company remained until Roger Stevens moved Playbill to Madison Avenue in 1957.⁴⁰ There, at Wooster Street, Strauss would capitalize on the developing print culture as well as consumer culture, and the changing demographics of the theatergoing audience of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Strauss was a business savvy individual who observed how newspapers and magazines were taking over modern urban life. As Julia Guarneri notes in her book *Newsprint Metropolis*, an exciting newspaper business model emerged at the turn-of-the-century in urban American cities. She states, “[f]aster presses suddenly made it possible to print Bible-sized papers, and revenue from advertising kept those papers affordable. For the first time, publishers could sell their product for next to nothing yet still reap healthy profits.”⁴¹ With printing costs lowered, publishers were able to expand both their content and number of subscribers. This turned newspapers “into true mass media whose influence reached across thousands or even millions of readers’ lives,” and this, in turn, made newspapers “emblems of the modern era.”⁴² Despite the smaller circulation numbers, playbills functioned in a similar way, and were, perhaps, even more specified to their audience. Whereas a newspaper had an entire urban region for which to write, the NYC playbill only had to appeal to the mainstream NYC theatregoer.

Playbill suggests that Strauss was successful because he was the first to create the “program magazine” design, which added advertisements; yet, this kind of design had already taken shape long before Strauss started printing. As Carlson states, the period between 1850 and 1900 demonstrated a move away from the British program model of a single handbill either posted on the theatre’s walls or placed in newspapers to the American multi-page booklet format that has become synonymous with contemporary playbills. Carlson says, “about the middle of the nineteenth century the traditional ‘playbill’ format, in use in England and America for more than a century, began to be replaced by a variety of alternative forms, the ancestors of the modern ‘program.’”⁴³ The first of these “modern programs” appeared in 1856. It utilized the single sheet handbill as its first page, followed by two pages of articles, and a final page detailing transportation tips and cab fares. These early programs listed pertinent information, such as the names of the

playwright, director, and cast, and included a rendering of the theatre's interior and a diagram of theatre exits in case of fire. The first of these American playbills was *The Programme*, and though it used the English spelling, this publication distanced itself from English versions by more closely resembling an American newspaper. It was four pages with the play's information (title, name of theatre, playwright, cast list, scene breakdown, and musical numbers) on the first page, followed by two pages of editorial content, including columns on "Theatrical Gossip," "Musical Gossip," and "Music and Drama on the Continent."⁴⁴ Advertisements appeared on the final page. Similar programs followed in the 1860s and 1870s, such as *The Brooklyn Daily Program*, *The Theatre*, *The Stage*, and incidentally the ironically named *The Play Bill*.⁴⁵ The latter included more gossip articles in the hopes of attracting audiences to take the program home.

Although English programs regularly included advertising, this was not the norm in early American theatrical programs. Some early publications, such as *The Programme* (as stated above), did include them. Programs that did not include official ads listed the names of businesses that donated items for productions as a kind of "free" or "good faith" advertising instead.⁴⁶ Regardless, theatre programs have always incorporated some kind of advertising, and certainly, by the 1880s, American programs had fully embraced traditional advertisements. In fact, both the *May Blossom* (1884) and *Anselma* (1885) programs include advertisements.⁴⁷ Strauss was not an innovator who introduced ads—he worked within the publishing conventions of his time—but he may have done so with some ability, given his advertising connections.

Playbill also suggests that Strauss was the first to add editorials into his "magazine program"—a label they suggest was unique to Strauss—but both the name "magazine program" and the use of editorials were common practices by many of Strauss's competitors before 1884. Even in England, where the single sheet was most common, audiences could read through

“magazine programs” that included articles. In as early as 1869, the St. James Theatre in England included editorials in their “*The Bill of the Play*,” a booklet-style program that was an identical model to Strauss’s early programs.⁴⁸ And in the U.S., Strauss’s chief competitors, including A.S. Seer, J.T. Cowdery, and Leo von Raven all published programs with editorial content. Cowdery filled his program pages with short stories and jokes, Seer created an impressive sixteen-page program, and von Raven incorporated short stories, literary humor, and a section titled “useful hints,” which included such advice as how to dress a wound using cabbage leaves.⁴⁹ All of this was standard practice in newspaper publishing; the jokes, short stories, and advice columns were part of the emerging print culture in the nineteenth century. For his part, Strauss did not include editorial content until 1905, long after the practice had been normalized by his competitors. When he started including editorials, he used previously established ideas such as short stories, jokes, trivia, and advice columns. Rather than a pioneer of the program form, Strauss was a business savvy individual who took bits and pieces of what was working from others and combined them into what would become a successful playbill.

Early American programs were varied in structure and format for several years until Strauss monopolized the industry and normalized their look. Not only did the number and size of ads fluctuate greatly (frequently within the same show’s run or theatrical season), but also, the size, paper type, font, and layout would often vary—even within a single publisher’s offerings. In 1884, when Strauss began working at the Madison Square Theatre, programs were much larger (roughly 14.5” by 11”) than the conventional size theatregoers expect today and were frequently printed on newspaper. From 1885 until 1905, Strauss’s playbills were sometimes smaller than the modern equivalent at 5” by 6”, while others were comparatively large at 14” by 10.5”. Still other programs were printed in the single sheet handbill style, while others were multi-page booklets. Strauss had

some programs printed on newspaper quality paper, while other programs were printed on a thicker paper that resembled cardstock. Many of these variations were likely due to either a theatre owner's request, but these choices may have also been dictated by what was less expensive that week. Perhaps Strauss presented himself and his business as malleable. He was presumably willing to print the program format that was requested of him. Only after he established his monopoly was Strauss able to homogenize the theatrical program, thereby negating the ability for individual theatre owners to dictate how he should print.

Strauss's programs, as well as his competitors', relied on newspaper conventions, regularly utilizing a newspaper layout, paper, and editorializing style until the turn-of-the-century. For much of this time, these "editorials" were, in fact, ads in disguise; or rather, they were ads written to mimic the style of an editorial. In a Fourteenth Street Theatre program dated March 18, 1884, several ads were written in an editorial style (i.e. "The manufacturers of the new Straight Mesh Cigarettes, 'Cloth of Gold,' claim that nothing finer can be produced."⁵⁰ Ads for the theatre itself appeared alongside these ads for products and services. Every theatre program listed their upcoming shows, and some also included short editorials about specific actors or popular show titles that were coming soon. For example, this same program contains a blurb about what-would-become Edwin Booth's historical turn in *Hamlet*.⁵¹ As Guarneri states, newspapers were not only inexpensive to print during this time, but also, they were becoming more integral to modern urban life. She writes, "[r]eaders isolated in their offices, homes, or neighborhoods explained that their newspapers connected them to the greater workings of the city and the world."⁵² Early American programs' form, then, was a negotiation between the English style program, the American newspaper, and eventually, the special interest magazine.

What distanced American programs from newspapers was that they were disseminated to a specific demographic—theatregoers—within the walls of the theatre. Distributing programs to audiences was nothing new; as Carlson notes, even “the old style ‘playbills’ were not simply posted but were often distributed and sold by the orange girls in theatres.”⁵³ Of course, the booklet form increased the number of ads that could be included in the program, and depending on the publisher, the program resembled a magazine or newspaper. Getting these theatrical programs into the hands of the audience member (and potential consumer) became paramount as a waiting audience member has little to do before curtain but to peruse what has been proffered to them.

2.2.2 Strauss and the Competition

Strauss’s program venture was not immediately successful. By the end of the 1870s and beginning of the 1880s, the leading theatre program publishers in New York were A.S. Seer and J.T. Cowdery. The former established relationships with several advertisers, but the latter created an impressive sixteen-page program that was almost entirely advertisements. Notably, Cowdery was the first publisher to include diagrams of the theatre with fire exits clearly marked in 1882, a model that was adopted by every program publisher afterward.⁵⁴ Cowdery, who also began the periodical *The Casino Bulletin* in 1882, had a penchant for poetry and included short poems within the pages of his programs.⁵⁵ Commenting on Cowdery’s love of bad poetry, *The New York Times* said, “Cowdery doted on poetry. And he had an uncanny ability to select the worst specimens from the American press and other sources.”⁵⁶ Strauss replaced Cowdery as the main program publisher for New York theatre by the 1890s, but Cowdery managed to hold onto his opera customers. Cowdery served as the only program publisher for Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Opera until 1892; afterward, Alfred Irving Scott published for Carnegie Hall, and the Metropolitan Opera

likely self-published.⁵⁷ Carlson notes that Cowdery's programs included the note, "The patrons of the foregoing places of amusement are the cultural and refined portion of the city's population. Business houses desiring to reach this class through an advertisement will readily see the advantages these programmes offer them."⁵⁸ Cowdery therefore sold his program as "high class," printing, "a medium worthy of patronage."⁵⁹ His insistence on the quality of his publication and his advertisers likely gained him clientele. He was printing programs before Strauss, and possibly benefited from good timing, but as programs became more aligned with newspaper conventions, Cowdery's popularity seemed to wane. His name disappears from playbills after 1904, with Strauss and his newest competitor, von Raven, publishing for the New York area.

Strauss and von Raven had very different styles. Von Raven, who advertised that he was "The Programme King," included short stories and "useful hints" in his programs, including this advice for tending to wounds: "Cabbage leaves deprived of their coarse nerves (ribs) make an excellent dressing for wounds of various kinds and obstinate ulcers. Apply at night and morning with a bandage over them."⁶⁰ An 1895 full page ad for his publishing services features an illustration of von Raven's head atop a raven's body with the following caption:

Von Raven's name doth oft appear
On most the programmes published here
He prints a paper, FIGARO,
Controls programmes in Chicago.
With Business East and West galore,
Like Oliver Twist he's ready for more.⁶¹

Like Cowdery, von Raven's programs were far more literary inspired than Strauss's, which relied excessively on advertising. Cartoons were undoubtedly popular additions to newspapers and were often satirical or critical of modern urban life.⁶² Von Raven's "raven" was certainly more tongue-in-cheek than the oft-satirical cartoons that inspired the concept. However, what is perhaps more intriguing is von Raven's need to align his publication with literary references—a practice that

was common among magazine publishers during this time. As Guarneri suggests, “In the late 1880s and early 1890s, a handful of entrepreneurs launched magazines, such as that targeted a large and growing national middle class. These magazines offered high-brow literary fare...but wove in more personal, practical features such as household advice and etiquette columns and more fanciful material such as travel stories and romantic fiction”⁶³ Any ads in these magazines often “highlighted middle-class values of studying the literary canon and of respecting experts’ authority.”⁶⁴ Undoubtedly, von Raven was inspired to include similar strategies within the pages of his theatrical program.

Strauss found in von Raven a worthy opponent for several years until the latter’s publishing empire fell apart. In addition to securing contracts with some of the major New York theatres, such as The Garden, Bijou, The Casino, and the Gaiety, von Raven printed programs for Amberg’s German Theatre, a theatre for German language plays which would later be known as Irving Place and then the Yiddish Art Theatre. Von Raven serviced all theatres, regardless of the types of shows they produced. The Amberg, for example, was located in the Union Square, a section of the city that Sabine Haenni describes as “the site around which German theatrical activities revolved in the 1890s and 1900s.”⁶⁵ Musicals and operettas featured heavily at the Casino Theatre, which is famous for not only being the first New York theatre to be lit entirely by electricity, but also, for introducing white audiences to black musical comedy.⁶⁶ Known for his success as a German American, von Raven also co-owned the Germania Theatre and published the German language theatre magazines, *New York Figaro* and *New York Phonograph*.⁶⁷ Von Raven’s partner during this time was Max Mansfield, who edited these magazines from 1889 to 1892. Of these publications, Koegel states, “The long-lived *New York Figaro*, published weekly from 1879 to 1900, presented New York theatrical news in [sic] a straightforward manner and included notices

of theatrical activities on German stages throughout the country and abroad. Its witty supplement, the *New York Phonograph* . . . presented chatty and satirical commentary and gossip about the German American theater.”⁶⁸ When Strauss started publishing programs, he outsourced the printing to the Hunter and Beach press, as did many of his competitors, but by 1888, business was booming, and Strauss opened his own printing press at the Walker Street location, which allowed him to save money on printing. This may have given him an edge against his competition.

At the same time, Strauss continued offering advertising services to his competitors, which likely gained him further connections and profits.⁶⁹ Prior to securing sustained business, Strauss took on a partner in 1890, most likely due to the business’s size and demands. Strauss and his partner, Sigmund Klee, who was also an advertising agent, moved the company to Wooster Street and began calling the business “The Largest Programme Advertising and Publishing House in Existence.”⁷⁰ This partnership lasted for eight years, but by 1898, Strauss’s name appeared alone on playbills. It is unclear why the partnership ended or what happened to Klee following the dissolution of their business relationship, but by that time, Strauss, as the sole business owner, had amassed contracts with forty-two theatres in the New York area alone.

By 1895, Strauss and von Raven were publishing for the same number of theatres, although Strauss’s customers were “larger and better-known houses, such as the Empire, the Lyceum, Herald Square and Union Square,” thereby gaining Strauss more notoriety.⁷¹ Like von Raven, Strauss also published a magazine. Titled *The New York Dramatic Chronicle*, the one-page flyer was sold at newspaper stands and in hotel lobbies. The *Chronicle* included the cast lists for every play seen during that week, as well as advertisements. Strauss’s involvement with the *Chronicle* lasted for about two years (1894-1895), but by then, Strauss had secured many of von Raven’s previous customers. Finally, in 1903, Strauss had amassed a theatre program network of “250

theatres, including forty in New York, four in Brooklyn, and eleven in Chicago.”⁷² What ended von Raven’s publishing empire is unclear, but his business partner, Mansfield, died by suicide in 1909 due to, according to Koegel, “bad health, poverty, and professional setbacks.”⁷³ It is possible that von Raven experienced similar financial setbacks.

Von Raven’s connection to the German American community and his patronage of German-American establishments may have created financial burdens that allowed Strauss to outpace him. Haenni recounts how most German American theatres failed in New York during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

German American theater practitioners’ aspirations to produce serious drama frequently left the theater without an audience; and since German American theaters were not subsidized, the audience’s lack of enthusiasm usually led to the theaters’ financial failure. . . . the theater was an outdated European bourgeois culture doomed to disappear because of its incompatibility with American mass culture; at best, German American theater is seen as torn between a commitment to produce highbrow German drama and the temptation to give in to U.S. market demands and produce German versions of popular American theater.⁷⁴

Interestingly, Strauss, like von Raven, was German American, but he did not engage in similar nationalistic activities; in fact, Strauss would later change his surname in 1917, in part, to appear less German. Undoubtedly, Strauss and von Raven knew each other, as they were both attempting to gain the same clients, and they also moved within the same New York elite social circles. Their business rivalry lasted only until the end of the century; by then, Strauss had “a virtual monopoly on the production of theatre programs in New York” and von Raven’s name no longer appeared on programs.⁷⁵ Strauss eventually obtained contracts with the Irving Place Theatre, previously Amberg’s German Theatre, and he printed programs in German and English. Strauss had succeeded in obtaining all of von Raven’s business.

2.3 Strauss and an Emerging Monopoly

2.3.1 Strauss, the Theatrical Syndicate, and the Shubert Rivalry

Strauss's business model, in which advertising paid for the distribution of programs, was no different from von Raven's, but Strauss succeeded where von Raven failed because he managed to gain friends within the Theatrical Syndicate. A group of six men—Marc Klaw, A.L. Erlanger, Charles Frohman, Al Hayman, Samuel Nixon, and J. Fred Zimmerman—who controlled theatrical bookings from 1896 to 1916, the Syndicate had immense power in dictating details, such as which shows and actors could play at a certain theatre. They controlled most first-class entertainments in New York as well as along the best touring routes throughout the country. On "The Effect of the Theatrical Syndicate on Theatrical Art in America," Monroe Lippman states:

[The Syndicate] soon managed to acquire a virtual monopoly, by the simple expedient of insisting that any company which appeared in any of the Syndicate's theatres must appear in its theatres only, and by insisting further that any local theatre manager who booked one of its companies must book its companies exclusively. So firm was their grip on the American theatre that it was almost impossible for an actor to play in a first class house, or for a local theatre manager to present a first class attraction, without first coming to terms with the Syndicate.⁷⁶

Fortunately for Strauss, the Syndicate chose him as the sole supplier of theatre programs for Syndicate-controlled shows, thereby shifting Strauss's business from a local to national one.⁷⁷ The Syndicate's monopoly became Strauss's monopoly, as only his programs were placed in Syndicate theatre houses—places of performance that held "legitimate" first class entertainments. The Syndicate legitimized Strauss, and in turn, his programs lent credibility to the theatres and performances.

Playbills became money makers for everyone involved. Not only did Strauss sell advertising and make profits from those businesses who would later benefit from the ads, he also

paid a nominal fee to the theatre owners for the “privilege” of distributing the programs.⁷⁸ This fee varied greatly by theatre and was likely connected to both the size of the house and its relative popularity; for example, the larger the audience who would see his playbill, the higher the fee to the theatre owners. Strauss paid these fees per season, rather than per production, often writing checks upwards of \$500, \$1,000, and \$1,500 to each theatre owner. This business structure allowed both the theatre owners and Strauss to profit from the playbills.

Theatre owners were essentially stuck using Strauss’s business, since the Syndicate championed Strauss’s services over his competitors. As such, the Syndicate, and not Strauss per se, put the competition out of business, although the monopoly the Syndicate afforded him gave him a lot of power. When theatre owners tried to change Strauss’s mind about a clause in their contract, for example, Strauss threatened to cease service. This, in turn, put theatre owners in a precarious situation, in which they could be left without any theatrical program. This was an effective strategy, as Strauss retained the business of the theatres he threatened. Since Strauss had the Syndicate’s business, theatres booked by them had no other choice but to agree to Strauss’s demands. Although non-Syndicate theatres had a choice of what theatre program to use, as Strauss increased his program monopoly and his competition folded, this freedom, too, slipped away.

Even the largest theatre ownership companies lost to Strauss. By the late nineteenth century, for example, Shubert brothers, Sam, Lee, and J.J. operated theatres in upstate New York. By the early twentieth century, they had established themselves as one of “America’s largest producing and theatre-owning operation[s],” owning and managing approximately 1,000 theatre houses across the U.S.⁷⁹ Despite being a significant player in the emerging New York theatre scene, the Shuberts had little power over the way Strauss operated his business. They were forced to comply with the Syndicate, and were, in fact, an outspoken rival against their monopolizing

demands. Eventually, the Shuberts would be instrumental in stopping the Syndicate's hold on the American theatre, but until then, they fought with Strauss and attempted to cease services with him to no avail.

Strauss's company was a dominant presence within most American theatres during this time, as he was printing programs for both the Syndicate theatres and most of the legitimate theatres in New York.⁸⁰ His own tumultuous relationship with the Shuberts reveals much about the way Strauss conducted his business. Over the years that Strauss provided playbills to the Shubert-owned theatres, he continuously missed his payment deadlines, underpaid, and underdelivered programs. It is unclear whether the Shubert interactions were more of an exception, or if this was indicative of how Strauss typically conducted business. Regardless, there is a wealth of correspondence between the Shuberts and Strauss, as well as several receipts and contracts, which lay a solid foundation for how Strauss operated the company during the Syndicate years. As such, the Shubert contract serves as an excellent case study for examining Strauss's business model in these years.

Strauss's issues lay primarily with youngest Shubert brother, J.J., who disputed contracts and fees on several occasions. Strauss frequently broke his own contracts by admitting to J.J. that he could not pay the fees that allowed him to distribute his programs within their theatres. In the years that Strauss negotiated with the Shuberts, this fee varied from \$500 to \$1500 per theatre.⁸¹ Strauss was notoriously late in paying fees and aggressively defensive when asked to pay them, stating that he could not pay his debts because advertisers owed him money. One letter addressed to the Shuberts' General Manager Charles A. Bird stated, "If you think it is a case of all going out and nothing coming in, you should be in this office. We cannot press the people who owe us money, at the present time, otherwise would be very flush indeed, but as it is, we are not."⁸² Despite

being late with these fees, Strauss continued to disperse his programs at the Shuberts' reluctant request.

Further correspondence between Strauss and J.J. reveals a relationship that can be described as “cool” at best and “antagonistic” at worst. Negotiations were complicated, with neither Strauss nor J.J. wanting to compromise. In one letter, Strauss countered J.J.’s insistence that he improve the bid by saying “you will have to look for another publisher.”⁸³ Strauss frequently threatened to pull services—a threat that seems to have worked most of the time. He would threaten theatre owners when they disagreed on the bid, as mentioned above, when their shows did not sell enough tickets—this is, incidentally, a business model that current CEO Phil Birsh continues today—and when Strauss felt a theatre was giving away “free advertising.”⁸⁴ In one instance, Strauss learned that some reprints of Louis Bustanoby’s photographs were circulating in the Winter Garden without his permission, and he demanded that they either be removed or an ad be added to the program, allowing him to profit.⁸⁵

As cultural objects, playbills provided important information to audiences, while also acting as potential souvenirs. Botto claims that audiences loved playbills at this time, and certainly their interest in saving them supports that statement. By 1911, Strauss, who had renamed the company the Strauss Magazine Theatre Program, capitalized on the rich history of scrapbooking in the U.S. by creating the “Playbill Binder.” Theatregoers were already saving their playbills or cutting pieces for their scrapbooks, along with other theatrical pieces like their tickets and performance reviews. In “The Theatrical Scrapbook,” Sharon Marcus details the long history of scrapbooking. She states:

Compilations of theatrical news items and reviews pasted into blank books date back to the eighteenth century. Until the 1880s most theatrical albums consisted primarily or even exclusively of text, because for much of the nineteenth century playbills and posters consisted almost entirely of words. In the 1860s, *cartes-de-visite*, the precursors of today’s

postcards, offered affordable and widely available images of actors, but their thickness made them difficult to insert in albums that were not equipped with specially designed slots. The immediate impetus for the increase in theatrical scrapbooks most likely came from the revolutionary integration of printed text and image that had begun earlier in the nineteenth century but by the 1880s had increased exponentially. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, newspapers, magazines, posters, playbills, and programs had all become heavily visual.⁸⁶

Strauss capitalized on this interest, and he created the Playbill Binder for his newly standardized playbills, which were now all the same size—an economical move that also made the binder possible. The binders initially cost one dollar to purchase, and according to Botto, became immensely popular. Strauss marketed the Playbill Binder to the savvy theatregoer. If you were a theatre patron in the twentieth century, and you were perusing your playbill, you would have seen an ad that looked much like this:

SAVE YOUR PLAYBILLS: Whether you collect them as a hobby, or for the settlement of future arguments about who played what, and when, or merely because you're incurably sentimental about the theatre, you'll find they will assume a more and more important place in your library and your private life—particularly if bound in our capacious Playbill binder, sent to you postpaid for \$2.⁸⁷

Playbill continues to sell Playbill Binders today, and they remain among the company's biggest sellers.⁸⁸ The existence of the playbill binder suggests that audiences must have wanted to save and memorialize their playbills.

However, for theatre producers, the playbill was more than a souvenir; the playbill lent credibility. In one letter addressed to the Shuberts, a representative for the Maxine Elliott stated that the program they were given “would give affront to an old-time ‘honky-tonk’ in the West.”⁸⁹

The letter writer was most offended by how short their playbill was, writing:

The Strauss people will most likely tell you that they used all our copy: but just because we were modest in sounding our own praises and turned in little copy is no reason why the program should have been crowded into the smallest possible space. We would respectfully ask you to issue instructions to Strauss to publish for us a program which shall at least consist of the regular Front Cover page of the theatre; then the usual information sheet

about the theatre and its rules can be given; then an entire page devoted to our announcement, and on the back page the fire exits.⁹⁰

Therefore, size, formatting, and length of the playbill mattered. The more detailed a playbill was, the more legitimate a production appeared. Unlike contemporary playbills, which have the same editorial content across all productions, Strauss changed the playbill's content for every production. Playbill length was determined by the expectations of how popular a show would be; for example, a highly anticipated show or a production that was running at high capacity would garner longer playbills because advertisers would want their ads included. By comparison, a struggling show or a production with little expectations would receive only a few requests for advertising, leading to a shorter playbill. As such, playbill length was initially a visual determinant for a show's popularity or assumed success. Appearing all within the 1908 theatrical season, the playbill for the New Amsterdam Theatre's production of *The Merry Widow* contained sixty-seven pages; the Belasco Theatre's production of *The Warrens of Virginia* had thirty-six, and the Astor Theatre's production of *Irene Wycherley* had twenty-nine.⁹¹ Allowing advertisers to determine where their ads were featured continued well into the 1930s with Cole Porter's incredibly popular musical, *Anything Goes*, which had 48 pages compared to its 1934 contemporary and relatively meager hit, *Post Road*, whose program only contained 12 pages.⁹² Shortly thereafter, Playbill adjusted their publishing model so that all programs had the same editorial content, which had the fortunate byproduct of disallowing advertisers to jump onto the presupposed success of a particular production.

Not only did Strauss control which theatres received his playbills (he often declined a new contract if he thought the audience numbers would be too low), but also, he decided how many playbills a theatre received. Strauss was careful in supplying theatres with just enough playbills to satisfy their audience numbers without overprinting, thereby, keeping costs as low as possible. The

man trusted to decide this playbill quantity was employee William Callahan, who first reported to Strauss and later his nephew Richard Huber. Callahan's job was to go to each theatre every night on foot to inquire about how many playbills were distributed at that performance. Based on Callahan's report, the printers would adjust the distribution numbers accordingly. For example, if Playbill gave a theatre 1,000 playbills and only 500 were handed to patrons that evening, that theatre would only receive 500 playbills for the next performance. This practice was not full-proof, as it was common for theatres to have varying house sizes for the same production, which often left theatres with a playbill deficit. On several occasions, the Shuberts discussed hiding playbills in the theatre so that when Strauss's "man"—namely Callahan—came to review the numbers, he would think they had a greater need and give them more playbills the next day.⁹³

This practice became useful to the Shuberts when Strauss's business experienced delivery issues. By 1917, theatre managers and owners repeatedly complained that Strauss did not deliver playbills for that day's performance. One letter stated, "The Strauss people are getting very derelict of late, and should be juggled up."⁹⁴ Several letters between the Shuberts and their business manager suggest that this was a regular occurrence across many of their productions and theatres. When confronted about the issue, Strauss denied the claims, stating that there were no delivery problems. Playbill's archives discuss the importance of Callahan's—and later Herman Pepper's—job to the success of playbill deliveries, but they neglect to mention any of these other issues.⁹⁵ Were the Shuberts exaggerating their needs? They may, in fact, have been inflating their numbers so that they could receive a larger "privilege fee" from Strauss for the following season. Hiding playbills from Callahan and telling Strauss that they needed an even larger quantity would have been the only methods available to the Shuberts that would have allowed them some control over the program monopoly Strauss established.

Strauss's control over the theatre community went beyond the ubiquity of his programs; he also stipulated in his contracts which entertainments were of a high enough class to warrant the use and distribution of his playbills. According to David Savran's *Highbrow/Lowdown*, the term "legitimate" has since the nineteenth century been the principal term used to discriminate among theatrical practices. It represents not an unprejudiced descriptive but a value-laden metaphorical concept."⁹⁶ As a category, "legitimate theatre" distinguishes serious, literary works of art from supposedly bawdy, less literary-driven low-class entertainments at correspondingly "low prices."⁹⁷ Such "low class" entertainments were called "Variety—that is, vaudeville, burlesque, animal shows, minstrelsy, and the like—" which was "first and foremost a commercial enterprise that caters to 'the popular taste' (or 'low audiences'), unlike the legitimate stage which is supposedly unconcerned with making money because it is a sanctuary for a sacred art."⁹⁸ Strauss championed the legitimate theatre by stipulating in his program contracts that the theatres in which his playbills would appear must be "conducted as a first class place of amusement," and be "high class."⁹⁹ In other words, if a theatre owner wanted to sign with Strauss as his program publisher, he would have to agree to produce only first class legitimate theatre.

Strauss was not alone in pushing an agenda that favored legitimate theatre; in fact, he was one of many theatrical print media sources that perpetuated these ideas. An 1895 issue of the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, for example, added a weekly editorial called "The Vaudeville Stage" because "vaudeville was 'steadily coming into nearer relations with the regular stage;'" yet, the *Mirror's* editorial policy, led by Harrison Grey Fiske, "was known for its anti-commercial stance, and, over the next decade, the paper would become the nation's leading theatrical publication by staunchly criticizing the expansion of mass culture its back pages helped coordinate."¹⁰⁰ As an emerging middle class vocalized their interest "to move freely between a variety of entertainment"

forms, including legitimate theatre, vaudeville and variety, and more recently film, theatrical print media (including Strauss's) that supported "serious drama" utilized their publishing resources to sway readers.¹⁰¹ Hodin argues that turn-of-the-century theatrical criticism was frequently a result of "market pressure [that] compelled legitimate theatre's advocates like the *Dramatic Mirror* to articulate the value of literary practice," by which they would "promis[e] to restore for the dominant classes a threatened social order by confirming the dominion of 'white' authority in an 'ethnic' commercial landscape."¹⁰² Strauss therefore perpetuated this same hierarchical, classist and racist ideology through what became known as the "Seventh" clause of his contract, which banned theatre owners from expanding their offerings into popular entertainments. It noted that, should the theatre owner "decide to produce or have produced in the theatre moving pictures or attractions of a similar nature or any other attraction of an inferior character," Strauss reserved the right to "terminate [the] contract, or resume its service after the Theatre shall have been restored to such first class status."¹⁰³

Theatre owners, including the Shuberts, wanted to show films in their spaces because they were an audience draw and could be shown on days the theatres were dark. In *Cheap Amusements*, Kathy Peiss writes that working-class families typically did not spend much (if anything) on entertainments, preferring free leisure activities such as "walks, visiting friends, and reading the penny press" instead.¹⁰⁴ However, "[w]hen these families did spend money on recreation, typically they attended moving picture shows or rode the trolleys for a nickel or, more infrequently, went to a dance or theater."¹⁰⁵ Therefore, film was a more affordable option for both working- and middle-class people, while theatre was enjoyed by the upper- and upper-middle classes. Yet, due to its accessibility to the lower classes, film was frequently seen as a lowbrow entertainment. In *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908-1934*, author Laura

Horak notes that beginning in “1908, the American film industry worked to ‘uplift’ moving picture culture in order to . . . attract middle-class audiences, and establish the movies as a *legitimate* art form” (emphasis added).¹⁰⁶ Film and theatre were essentially battling for legitimacy, and the middle class was left hanging somewhere between these artistic forms. Appealing to women’s interests was especially important, as Horak notes, namely because “Middle-class women were deemed particularly central to this project: their presence was imagined to endow theaters with a sense of respectability, and they were likely to bring their husbands and children with them. Exhibitors courted middle-class women through matinee screenings, prize giveaways, and ‘ladies’ nights.”¹⁰⁷ The argument over whether film or theatre was legitimate and therefore respectable played out in stipulations like Strauss’s Seventh clause and served to elevate the latter while diminishing the former.

The Seventh clause was no empty threat; on more than one occasion, Strauss canceled program publishing for the Shuberts when they showed moving pictures in their theatre houses. In one letter, Strauss stated that such practices “destroyed the value of this medium”—namely, that film ruins legitimate theatre, and thereby tarnishes the entirety of the theatre house.¹⁰⁸ Several letters penned by Strauss demonstrate his ire for the form. In one 1909 letter, he wrote, “our advertisers will not stand for this class of an entertainment.”¹⁰⁹ Another letter refers to a “Moving Picture house” as a “more or less cheap grade house.”¹¹⁰ Strauss’s opinion on the movie industry is perhaps even more intriguing since he came to co-own several movie theatres later in his life.¹¹¹ It is likely that his opinions adjusted with film’s increasing popularity; for example, in a letter dated in 1916, Strauss’s main issue with film was no longer that it was “low class,” but that the house remained too dark for patrons to read their programs, which he felt would make businesses less interested in purchasing advertising.¹¹²

2.4 Playbill Advertising and Editorials for a Female Audience

2.4.1 Advertising and the Consumer

By the 1910s, New York theatres had become, as Marlis Schweitzer describes, “fully commercialized urban spaces, comparable to any amusement park,” and “[a]dvertisements were everywhere: in the programs, on the curtains, on the scenery, and in the embodied performances of trade-character showgirls.”¹¹³ This overt commercialism reflected the emerging consumer culture, a mass market of goods, which included everything from fashion and household items to cars and cigarettes. Ads also commented on daily life. Schweitzer notes that advertisers utilized newspaper space in order “to embed their products into middle class life, often while capitalizing on readers’ ambitions and their insecurities;” for example, an ad for a clothier suggested, “If you ask a well dressed man where he gets his clothes you’ll always find he deals with a good Tailor.”¹¹⁴ Other ads published in Strauss’s playbills included those for products such as “Pyramides,” the “Genuine Turkish Cigarettes,” clothing and accessories like those offered by the “Watchspring” corset company and the “Cantrell” shoe company, and services such as “Turkish baths.” Ads such as these emphasized the “exoticism” of faraway places and utilized gendered language and imagery to tempt male and female audience members/readers. For example, the “Watchspring” corset ad featured an illustration of a corset providing the desirable hourglass waist-to-hip ratio, while stating proudly that the corset’s lines “would not break!” The Turkish baths ad, on the other hand, hoped to attract male visitors, as noted by the ad’s insistence that they were open for four additional hours for male customers.¹¹⁵ Ads sometimes contradicted one another, with one championing the “classy” effects of cigarette smoking, while another ad lampooned cigarettes as “the nerve-killing tobacco habit.”¹¹⁶

Strauss advertised his own services in the playbill alongside these other ads. Many of these were witty one- or two-liners, such as “A good advertiser recognizes the value of a good medium. Theatres are the attractions—Programmes the medium. Try them” and “This space is for sale. Try it. You will be benefited, and want more. Apply to Frank V. Strauss & Co., 108-114 Wooster Str., New York, and get a pointer or two.”¹¹⁷ Other ads referred to Strauss as the “Sole Proprietor” for “Advertisements inserted in any Theatrical Programme in the United States or Canada,” which was certainly not true, as not every theatre was using Strauss, but the suggestion may have compelled many advertisers to purchase space.¹¹⁸ Strauss also placed large half- or full-page advertisements, such as one that read:

Three Reasons Why Theatre Programme Advertising is the Best
They are absolutely before the patrons of every theatre every night.
They reach the superior class of the buying public.
Besides the representative citizen, they reach the hundreds of thousands of transients
who visit the theatre nightly.¹¹⁹

Strauss sold his advertisers on the concept of a high-class theatergoing audience, which included those attendees who were from New York (“representative citizens”) as well as those who were visiting from out of town (“transients”). Advertisers’ core consumers were upper- and middle-class white people, and therefore, they were Strauss’s key demographic as well. With these ads for Playbill’s services, Strauss spoke to the potential advertiser with a promise that he would deliver that chief demographic. Strauss’s continued perpetuation that he would only service the “legitimate theatre” and theatres of “high status,” (i.e. everything covered by the “Seventh clause” of his contracts) was connected not only by his insistence in a high caliber of theatre audiences, but also, to this potential consumer.

The large number of Strauss ads appearing in these early programs suggests that he needed more advertisers to purchase space. Indeed, large sections of the playbill were left blank except

for a simple note that said “Reserved.” These sections were undoubtedly unsold advertising space, but Strauss would not have wanted to leave them blank, preferring “reserved” as a visual indication of ad space demand. In *Modern Advertising and the Market: The US Advertising Industry from the 19th Century to the Present*, Zoe Sherman notes how advertising frequently functions as all-important “background” noise, working subliminally on readers through visibility and repetition. Sherman notes, “If we investigate how advertisements reach our awareness, what we find is that the advertisements reach us because our eyes and ears are on the auction block.”¹²⁰ By purchasing ad space “in that audience’s field of vision . . . [a]dvertisers then gain access to their desired audiences by buying their way in.”¹²¹ These “reserved” spaces could have functioned in a similar way for potential advertisers, suggesting to them that Playbill ad space was in-demand. As Michael Diamond describes, “Printing letters of appreciation from a manager was, of course, an effective way of persuading other managers to book the company.”¹²² By suggesting that other ad firms had “reserved” space in the playbill, Strauss tapped into this same persuasive marketing, thereby hoping to influence ad sales. It is unclear whether this strategy worked, but certainly, these “reserved” areas were likely visual improvements to empty spaces, and within a few years, Strauss eliminated these “reserved” spots entirely. In their place were more ads as well as editorials that spoke to a specific desirable purchasing demographic.

2.4.2 It’s a Woman’s (Purchasing) World

Perhaps no demographic was more important to theatre owners, publishers, and advertisers than the female consumer. As Richard Butsch states, theatres after 1850 began actively recruiting women to attend in order to better their reputations as respectable—and *legitimate*—places of entertainment. Prior to this, theatres had been a male-dominated space, and in fact, the women who

attended were seen as “public women” or prostitutes; however, from midcentury on, theatres appealed to women’s interests in hopes that they would become their “primary audience.”¹²³ Butsch argues that the “[r]e-gendering of theater was part of fundamental cultural shifts, first to a middle-class culture founded on respectability, and then to a culture of consumption conceived around the female shopper.”¹²⁴ Part of this feminizing began in the 1830s and 1840s, during which theatre managers domesticated the theatrical space for women by crafting a culture that connected the theatre experience with shopping. “By the 1890s,” as Butsch states, “legitimate theater was a women’s entertainment;” by 1910, critics suggested that women made up three-fourths of the total American theatre audience.¹²⁵

Theatre utilized print media as part of this effort towards appealing to women. In 1870, for example, *The Ladies’ Theatrical Bouquet* was “distributed to Ladies” at such theatres as the Grand Opera, the Olympic, and Booth’s.¹²⁶ Theatrical criticism frequently commented on the women in attendance at a play, describing their fashions and whether they seemed to enjoy the performances. One critic, Willard Holcomb of the *Washington Post*, commented in his review of the aptly-named “Make Way for the Ladies,” that all he had been seeing in New York of late were “feminine ‘jag[s].’”¹²⁷ Furthermore, ads in theatrical programs were aimed towards appealing to the female consumer. An 1895 playbill for *The Shop Girl* included an ad from shop owner B. Altman titled, “Fancy Collarettes and Capes for Opera and Promenade,” which described, “[m]ore beautiful than ever are the new varieties of fancy collarettes and capes, made for the most part of textiles light as air, in combination with laces and embroideries.”¹²⁸ Altman’s ad was a full column written in the style of fashion editorials, and indeed, it resembles the “What the Woman Will Wear” editorial that Strauss would begin publishing in later years.

Not only did female audience members appeal to theatres because they brought respectability to their public spaces, female audience members were also potential consumers and could spend a great deal of money on various goods. However, attracting the female consumer was a relatively new idea for newspaper and magazine ads. Previously, newspapers and magazines “catered to specific classes, spoke to specific political persuasions, and ignored the poor and minority audiences that they did not care to reach.”¹²⁹ Once advertisers realized that women held purchasing power and were therefore a highly desirable demographic, they pressured newspapers to make media more exciting for women. With an emergence of female-specific media came ads that could appeal to the female consumer. Magazines such as *Peterson’s Magazine*, *The Ladies Home Journal*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and *Good Housekeeping* spoke to a specific subset of women—white, middle- to upper-class, and presumably heterosexual. These magazines began profiting from the increase in advertising; for example, by 1903, *The Ladies Home Journal* was taking in an unprecedented one million dollars each year in advertising revenue. Although not marketed as a “women’s magazine,” playbills were uniquely situated to capitalize on this emerging consumer culture by aiming editorial content and ads to the wealthy and middle-class female consumer.

Browsing Strauss’s pre-World War I playbills suggests the myriad ways female consumers were courted by various businesses. Advertisers initially realized that women did most of the shopping, so ads were written with female shoppers in mind. Newspapers and magazines followed suit, since the advertising in their pages was aimed towards women. Guarneri notes:

In the mid- nineteenth century, newspapers had made their first bids for women’s attention by printing small columns of fashion notes. These notes often read as straightforwardly as the rest of the paper, but they contained some real daily-life advice (for example, “In combination one rule must be observed— if there is a difference in color, then the drapery and bodice must be alike.”).¹³⁰

Women-specific magazines discussed beauty, fashion, and domestic life, but some also “encourage[d] civic involvement and urged readers to take pride in women’s roles as paid workers.”¹³¹ Ultimately, though, the writers of women’s magazines “spoke as if women’s emotional lives revolved around consumer goods.”¹³² Advertisers and publishers were not the only people courting female consumers, though. As Schweitzer notes:

Beginning in the 1890s and continuing through the first two decades of the twentieth century, theater managers aggressively pursued the imagination and presence of female theatergoers by transforming the stage into a glorious site of consumer spectacle. Acutely aware that their financial solvency hinged on their ability to attract and retain the interest of socially advantaged women, these predominantly male impresarios presented actresses, the dresses they wore, and the objects they used onstage as fantastic commodities, readily available in photographs and magazines, in nearby department stores.¹³³

Female audience members were potential customers, and the theatre was a welcoming place for them. With this knowledge, Strauss created specialty features meant to speak to women’s interests, thereby encouraging them to read and re-read their playbills. This repetitive engagement with their playbills would therefore increase their interactions with ads aimed specifically to them.

2.4.3 Strauss’s “Program Girl”

Popularized in the 1890s, the Gibson Girl was an illustration of the so-called “New Woman,” who was, as Martha H. Patterson describes, “either what her detractors called an unattractive, browbeating usurper of traditionally masculine roles, or she was what her champions proclaimed an independent, college-educated, American girl devoted to suffrage, progressive reform, and sexual freedom.”¹³⁴ This New Woman, and subsequently the Gibson Girl, “both promised and threatened to effect sociopolitical change as a consumer, as an instigator of evolutionary and economic development, as a harbinger of modern technologies, as an icon of successful assimilation into dominant Anglo-American culture.”¹³⁵

Likely inspired by these popular illustrations, Strauss created his own version of a “Gibson Girl.” A full-page illustration appearing in the playbill’s first two pages, she was called the “Program Girl,” and she was, as Strauss intended, meant to replicate a “typical, female theatregoer.”¹³⁶ Appearing in every playbill from 1908-1912, the Program Girl was a beautiful woman who displayed, to varying degrees, elegance, sophistication, playfulness, and sexuality. Yet, these attributes were only achievable for some women. Strauss’s “typical, female theatregoer” was, of course, a white, presumably heterosexual woman of middle- to upper-class standing, and the Program Girl both reflected and prescribed these converging identities. The Program Girl’s job was to bring these same white women to the theatre and incite them to interact with the playbill, thereby potentially increasing advertising revenue should advertisers see results of their ads in the Program Girl-specific playbills.

Just as the Gibson Girl represented a kind of “New Woman” for a turn of the century white female demographic, Strauss’s Program Girl was meant to present a fantasy to which a white female audience member might aspire. In the Program Girl’s first season, 1908-1909, each sketch was titled with a description of whatever activity the Program Girl was doing, such as “Bathing” or “Feeding the Squirrels.” Although each artist that Strauss commissioned designed her with their own unique perspective of this ideal femininity, all Program Girls were demure, wholesome, and alluring. Bert Knight, a popular illustrator for novels, created Program Girls for the initial season.

Knight’s version of the Program Girl was modest and sophisticated, an ideal fantasy of middle- to upper-class white womanhood. Knight’s girls wore elaborate hairstyles, beautiful gowns, and participated in recreational activities, such as “Skating,” in which the Program Girl is pictured adjusting her ice skates, while coyly looking at the reader.¹³⁷ In another image, “Departing,” the Program Girl, wearing a gown and holding a fan, descends a staircase, smiling at

whoever is waiting for her below.¹³⁸ Knight's Program Girl was coy, yet pure, an alluring girl but not overtly sexual. Knight's "raciest" image, according to Botto, was titled "In Her Boudoir." The image showed a woman fixing her elaborate up-do hairstyle, while looking into a hand mirror. The woman was modestly covered with a single dress strap falling to her shoulder—a relatively conservative version of female sexuality.¹³⁹

Strauss then commissioned Program Girl art from popular painter F. Earl Christy in December of 1908 in order to capitalize on the emerging "College Girl" trend. Christy, who was famous for painting and illustrating "beautiful women," started painting women for advertisements for such companies as the Boardwalk Atlantic City Picture Company and Old Gold Cigarettes.¹⁴⁰ He then designed the popular "College Girl" postcards—a series of postcards depicting women at college, typically wearing their school colors, and cheering on their sports teams. Although Christy eventually moved on to illustrating magazine covers, such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *American Magazine*, the *Sunday Magazine of the New York Times*, *Collier's*, and *Photoplay Magazine*, it was his postcards that likely gained Strauss's interest, as Christy's Program Girls resembled the work he did with the College Girl series. Some of his Program Girls included "Good Resolutions," which showcased a woman sitting and writing at her desk, while another "Throwing the Medicine Ball," depicted the Program Girl playing sports.¹⁴¹ It is also likely that Strauss wanted to capitalize on the popularity of the American collectible postcard and chose Christy as the artist due to his success with the series. As Martin Willoughby states in *A History of Postcards*, "It can be difficult to comprehend how powerful the picture postcard was in its heyday or golden age, ie, between the years 1900 and 1914."¹⁴² Capable of shifting people's opinions as either propaganda or publicity, postcards were powerful tools that shifted "the way people thought about current affairs."¹⁴³

Perhaps Strauss thought he could utilize Christy's popularity as a postcard artist in appealing to his female theatregoers.

Fame came not only to real people recreated on postcards, but also to so-called "artist-drawn glamour girl[s]" who were born from the artist's imagination and were often an "idealized form of reality," typically wearing a "coy smile" and "always fair of face and shapely of form."¹⁴⁴ Although these postcard girls were frequently nude or scantily clad in Europe, the American versions were far more conservative; the "girls could still be flirtatious, but in a different way," being, at times, enchanting and sophisticated or demure and the "girl-next-door type."¹⁴⁵ Strauss's Program Girl was born from this same artistic imagination—beautiful but not necessarily sexy; sophisticated and upper class; frequently dressed in expensive clothes, and always white.

There is no mistaking that the Program Girl was meant to be "read" as white. Artists sketched in black and white, with the Program Girl's skin color the same shade as the playbill's paper, suggesting her whiteness, which has historically (and mistakenly) been seen as color "neutral." Both the clothes she wears and the types of activities in which she participates circumscribe her as a particularly restrictive type of modern womanhood, which was white and middle- to upper-class. In the early twentieth century, Black women were more likely to have to work outside of the home than their white counterparts and "were severely constrained by the economic situations of their families and by limited employment options."¹⁴⁶ In contrast, staying in the home was often "seen as a sign of higher class status" because these women did not need to work and could therefore engage in "women's expected pursuits."¹⁴⁷ Strauss's Program Girl is certainly a woman of means; she wears elaborate, expensive-looking gowns and accessories, and she participates in activities that primarily take place at the home (i.e. "At Work On Her Trousseau" and "Departing"). When she ventures outside into public spaces, she participates in

light, recreational activity, such as “Skating,” “Feeding the Squirrels,” or “On the Boardwalk.” These activities are light leisure and obviously voluntary; certainly, none of the Program Girl’s hobbies can be misconstrued as labor.

Yet, Strauss’s Program Girl was not illustration alone. Little remarks, quotes, and flirtations attributed to the Program Girl appeared throughout the playbill. Some of these included the following, which appeared during the Christmas season, “The true sort of Christmas gift, because unexpected, to come upon Our Program Girl under the mistletoe.”¹⁴⁸ The accompanying Program Girl image depicted a Program Girl dressed for a Christmas party and standing underneath a mistletoe. She looks wistfully off to the side and her lips are slightly parted in a modest, yet beguiling appearance. Another, appearing in a New Year’s Eve-themed issue, stated, “‘Resolved, That I will delight the theatre-going public for the next 365 nights.’ – Our Program Girl.”¹⁴⁹ Other issues read, “Resolved, That Since the Public Wants Me, I Have Come to Stay.”¹⁵⁰ Some of these dialogue pieces were written in first-person and signed as “Our Program Girl,” while others commented on her as if by an outsider, such as this piece, which read, “Dancing is Dangerous – with girls as pretty as Our Program Girl.”¹⁵¹ Strauss assumed that audiences perused their playbills before, during, and after curtain—as evidenced by him suggesting that film houses were too dark for readers to look through their playbills. These dialogue pieces were almost coquettish, encouraging audiences to peruse the entire playbill in order to gain the full story, thereby increasing the opportunity for potential consumers to see targeted ads.

Although intended to appeal to theatregoing women, the Program Girl may have also been objectified by heterosexual white men. She was a benign version of a “New Woman,” independent and leisure-seeking, but she was not overtly political. Although anyone could take the Program Girl “home” with them by keeping their playbills, some may have wanted a larger version to hang

on their walls. Strauss, in fact, made 6" x 9" "Artist's Proofs" of the illustrations available for only thirty cents. Although women could have chosen to order these prints, it seems more likely that men would have been interested in "pinning up" images of the Program Girl. Interestingly, at no other time did Strauss instigate a similar merchandising practice. In fact, the playbill binder was the only merchandise Strauss offered until the Program Girl prints. Botto claims that the Program Girl was popular, but there is no evidence to corroborate that statement. In fact, Playbill would eliminate the Program Girl following the 1911-1912 theatrical season.

Strauss next commissioned R. Ford Harper and John M. Burke, both of whom illustrated the Program Girl series for the 1909-1910 theatrical season. Harper's Program Girls diverged greatly from previous series. In a full-page note to his readership, Strauss promised that the 1909-1910 theatrical season would be different, with the Program Girl "more fascinating than ever before."¹⁵² Strauss accomplished this by "present[ing] her in a series representing the minor types" including "some of the nationalities of the world."¹⁵³ These pieces were titled with "The Program Girl As," rather than connecting the Program Girl to a specific activity. These Program Girls presented the white, Anglo-Saxon Program Girl in the visage and costuming of ethnic "others," or as symbols of white femininity, offering the former as curiosities, while touting so-called American ideals such as freedom and liberty in the latter. As Patterson notes, the New Woman was defined, in part, by her "increasing anxiety about the 'other': the Jew, Negro, Chinese, Bohemian, and Mexican" as well as "'new' immigrants."¹⁵⁴ Rather than presenting these "ethnic" Program Girls as terrifying, Strauss constructed docile versions of otherwise threatening "others" in order to appease white, Anglo-Saxon women's anxiety and fascination.

Among these Girls was "The Program Girl As A Colleen," a symbol of Irish femininity and national identity. As Gail Baylis notes in "Exchanging looks: Gap girls and colleens in early

Irish tourist photography,” the “Colleen is a key figure of idealized Irish femininity. She serves as a generic term for youth and femininity, and denotes both as emblematically Irish qualities. Her defining characteristics are chastity coupled with an earthy sexuality; feistiness, yet sweetness; beauty and purity; youth and intuition; and above all, an association with the rural.”¹⁵⁵ In the playbill image, this Colleen holds an “Erin go bragh” flag, the English bastardization of the Irish saying, “Éirinn go Brách,” which is frequently translated as “Ireland forever.” As Baylis notes, a “genre of colleen painting became fashionable [in Ireland] from the 1860s” because she offered an idealized version of Ireland itself “through the representation of a comely maid” whose connections to the countryside reflected an idolized pre-famine past.¹⁵⁶ This is a white, Anglo-Saxon Program Girl “trying on” the role of Irish Colleen. As the Colleen’s skin is white, this is an easier transition for the Program Girl, and her overall demeanor is non-threatening and potentially positive. She is “different,” but is closer to the white, Anglo-Saxon woman than the other “ethnic types” Strauss provided in this series. The image allows the female reader to observe that which is different without experiencing the anxiety that comes with interacting with an actual Irish immigrant. In this manner, white American women are allowed to observe from a safe distance. Whereas the previous Program Girls were meant to be a kind of visual synecdoche of the types of womanhood to which the white female audience member should aspire, the “Program Girl As A Colleen” functions as a symbol of difference and curiosity.

More distressing than the “Colleen” was the racist image of a Romani woman. Titled under the derogatory term “The Program Girl As A Gypsy,” this Program Girl is seen wearing traditional Romani garb embellished with gold coins along the edges of her vest and head scarf. She holds a knife low to her side, pointed upwards as if ready to strike. Yet, she does so while looking to the side, seemingly disinterested in the onlooker—insinuating that she is more docile than the knife

suggests. Notably, the Romani woman has darker skin than the previous Program Girls, including the Colleen, suggesting she is either meant to be “read” as a “real” Romani girl or as the white American Program Girl in brownface. Presented as the “sneaky gypsy” racist stereotype, this Program Girl preys on existing fascination and fear of Romani immigrants. A *New York Times* article dated 1887 highlighted the “allure” of a Romani camp:

Anybody who is interested in gypsy girls, pretty gypsy girls, with waving tresses and sparkling eyes and peachy cheeks, dressed in all the colors of the rainbow and all the coins of all the realms, should go out to the Romany encampment . . . As you enter the camp the first object of interest is a group of 25 young ladies, partly seated and partly standing on the sward under the bright-hued maples. They are dressed in costumes of red, blue, yellow, green, crushed cantaloupe, pickled olives, fried shrimp, and every other color that the mind can conceive. They wear short sacques and bright skirts and natty caps of Roman plaid. They are bangled and spangled profusely, wear large gold earrings tied to their ears and in the shape of coins and bright metal ornaments are heavily weighted.¹⁵⁷

In this article, Romani women are far more exoticized than their male counterparts, and much of the fascination lies in the clothing the women would wear. Harper’s illustration of the “Gypsy” follows this interest in “costuming” by highlighting the woman’s layers of fabrics, her head covering, and the golden coins that are a touchstone of the stereotypical look. Yet, this Program Girl is not overtly sexualized. In fact, both the “Gypsy” and “Colleen” Girls are far more covered than some of the previous Program Girl iterations, their necklines high and bodies obscured by fabric, or in the case of the “Colleen,” her Irish flag. This suggests that these “ethnic” Program Girls were not meant to be sexually appealing like the previous versions. In this sense, these “others” are benign—both in regard to violence and as a potential sexual threat to white women’s hold over their partners.

All the Girls in this special “exotic” series share the title, “The Program Girl As” aside from one—the illustration of a Native American girl. In his featurette, Strauss referred to this Girl as a “Squaw Girl;” yet, the final published image was titled, “The Program Girl In Indian

Costume.” All of Harper’s Program Girls were, in some way, meant to represent a character—they were, essentially, playing the part of “A Colleen” or “A Gypsy”—but they still utilized the established “Program Girl As” pattern. The existence of “The Program Girl In Indian Costume” verbiage suggests that the Program Girl is too connected to white American conceptualizations of womanhood to be associated with native imagery in the same fashion as the other Girls in the series.

Like the Romani woman, the Native American woman has darker skin than the “Colleen,” and she is non-threatening. Strauss proposed that she would have “all the form and color and action of the mysterious fiery nature of the Indian maid,” and yet, she remains passive in the final image.¹⁵⁸ The Girl is kneeling, holding her bow and arrow, but without any interest in aiming (much like the “Gypsy”), and she looks at the reader as if forlorn. She appears as arguably the saddest of the Program Girls. Is she sad because she is in “Indian Costume?” Undoubtedly, this series suggests a racist continuum of femininity from white, Anglo-Saxon womanhood on one side to Native American womanhood on the other. Next to white Anglo-Saxon femininity is the “Colleen,” whose paler skin suggests an adjacency to white American womanhood. Following the “Colleen” is the “Gypsy,” whose darker skin links her to the Native American woman. Notably, there are no images of Black women, which would arguably be seen as the furthest distant from white womanhood.

Although the “Colleen” and “Gypsy” capitalized on American fascination with and derision of immigrants and “exotic” types, respectively, additional Program Girls in Harper’s series demonstrated all-American ideals. One of these was “the Program Girl as Miss Liberty,” a humanized version of the Statue of Liberty depicting a stars-and-stripes bedecked girl, smiling directly at the viewer with her hands clasped under her chin—the very picture of coyness. This

Program Girl may have been capitalizing on New York's recent acquisition of the Statue of Liberty—a gift from France, which President Grover Cleveland had dedicated in 1886. Between 1892 and 1954, more than twelve million immigrants passed through Ellis Island, where they would have a view of the Statue as they arrived to the country. Furthermore, in 1907 alone, more than one million immigrants arrived through Ellis Island—only two years before the “Miss Liberty” Program Girl. The Statue of Liberty represents a sense of freedom for many, and “Miss Liberty” was likely furthering this reputation, but was she a symbol for immigrants? Since Strauss's primary audience was likely composed of white Americans who were not recent immigrants, this image would have held the most appeal for those who already believed in American exceptionalism and freedom, despite the realities that many immigrants actually faced.

In addition to “Miss Liberty,” the Program Girl played as Civil War figure Barbara Frietchie. Mythologized by poet John Greenleaf Whittier, Frietchie allegedly stood against the Confederate army.¹⁵⁹ According to the poem, “there were forty American flags flying in the town, but the Confederate sympathizers pulled them down as Lee's army entered. Then an old woman named Barbara Frietchie took one of the flags and fastened it to a staff outside her attic window.”¹⁶⁰ Seeing the woman, Stonewall Jackson gave an order to fire, and as Whittier wrote, Frietchie exclaimed, “Shoot, if you must, this old gray head, / But spare your country's flag.”¹⁶¹ Notably, Frietchie was both an older woman (Whittier writes that she was “fourscore years and ten”) and defiant.¹⁶² Yet, Harper's image depicts Frietchie as a young woman, her head bowed and looking away from the viewer. Harper's Frietchie is dressed in ornate fabric—copious ruffles, bows, gloves, jewelry, and a hat—and she clutches something unidentifiable in her hands. She is a far cry from other illustrations of the Unionist, which represent an older woman dressed simply—an impoverished and austere look about her. She is typically shown hanging out of a second-story

window, brandishing an American flag and shouting at Confederate soldiers who look at her from below.¹⁶³ In Harper's imagining, Frietchie becomes passive, ornate, and beautiful. She is yet another beautiful, idealized woman for a largely female theatergoing audience, but she lacks both the age and power of her alleged historical (or literary) counterpart. As such, "Miss Liberty" and Frietchie convey youthful, beautiful versions of American symbols of femininity. Both suggest purported American values, such as freedom and liberty, while the other "ethnic" Program Girls denigrate immigrants and women of color.

Strauss hoped this Program Girl would be particularly appealing to his readers, writing, "[t]he originality and unusualness of this series, will, we feel sure, have an especial appeal. It is something that has not been attempted before and different than the usual haphazard illustrations intended to entertain for the moment and then forgot."¹⁶⁴ Strauss's feelings on his Program Girl concept are intriguing. He simultaneously dismissed the previous series of Program Girls as "haphazard," while imagining the ways in which this newly conceived Girl would be "educational." It seems, though, that the "exotic" series did not have the kind of appeal that Strauss imagined. Following Harper's series, John M. Burke's illustrations returned to the previous aesthetic of earlier Program Girls; although, the subtitles were less standardized.

The Program Girl made her final appearance during the 1911-1912 theatrical season with art commissioned by Malcolm Strauss. M. Strauss, who seems to be of no relation to Frank Strauss, was a New York artist who specialized in drawings of early automobiles. He was responsible for creating posters for The Automobile Club of America and pieces for magazines showcasing so-called "adventurous Americans" driving these new motorized carriages. Notably, some of his work earned him interest because they depicted women behind the wheel. M. Strauss interpreted the Program Girl series differently. Rather than being the sole subject of the art, the Girl was placed

in scenes with additional characters. A piece titled, “On the Sands at Palm Beach” showed the Program Girl in the foreground while in the background five men shoved at one another to get a better look at her.¹⁶⁵ Another piece, “At the Art Museum,” showed a Bert Knight-esque sophisticated woman reading a book while men and another woman looked on.¹⁶⁶ These pieces depicted an independent woman—sophisticated and alluring, just as previous Program Girls were—but this time, the Girl was in on the ogling. Rather than a passive object, M. Strauss’s Girl welcomed the onlookers, presenting perhaps, a more active, independent woman.

This new Program Girl did not last. Following the 1912 season, Strauss programs included photographs of the leading actors and actresses of the production instead of the earlier Program Girl art. Such photographs showed lead performers in formal wear, typically out of character, and likely were meant to capitalize on or confirm a performer’s celebrity status. The 1913-1914 season, however, veered further from the Program Girl art and celebrity photographs by including illustrations by artist Billy Brinkley. Instead of the Program Girl’s realism, these images were highly stylized and cartoonish. Although a young woman was the typical focus of these illustrations, she was not the Program Girl. Brinkley’s art was accompanied by a literary quote rather than a title, and the page no longer called her the “Program Girl.” Brinkley’s series only lasted one season. Strauss’s foray into art ended, and photographs took over once more.

2.4.4 “What the (Wo)man Will Wear” and other Editorials

The Program Girl was not the only way that Strauss attempted to appeal to supposedly women’s interests. Browsing through the pages of turn-of-the-century playbills demonstrates the multiple ways women were courted by every business—first through ads aimed at them, and second, through editorials meant to encourage them to read. Strauss pulled ideas from his previous

competitors' theatrical programs as well as the common (and presumably popular) editorials in newspapers and specialty magazines. It was not only important that audiences peruse their playbills in the theatre, but also, they should want to keep them. Editorials that purportedly spoke to women may have encouraged white female audience members to re-visit these playbills long after they saw the show. Through the act of re-reading playbills, these potential consumers would have, more frequently, encountered the ads inside, thereby increasing the potential for more ad-generated revenue. Entwined in this appeal to women readers were editorial byline differences along gender lines. The articles both written by and for men demonstrated a level of mystique by creating secretive pennames, while those written for women erased likely female authorship by excluding a byline entirely. While Strauss targeted white female audiences, he also eliminated their names from the playbill's pages until 1910, when female authorship also relied on pseudonyms.

Perhaps the most important of these "women-focused" editorials was a column called "What the Woman Will Wear," which began as a faux editorial, sometimes referred to as an "advertorial," in which an advertisement mimics the look of an editorial.¹⁶⁷ When the ad was first printed in 1905, it was written by Bonwit, Teller & Company, a luxury department store, and it discussed theatre fashion by copying editorial language in popular women's magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar*.¹⁶⁸ Eventually, Strauss replaced the ad version and hired a columnist to write "What the Woman Will Wear." Yet, during the first several seasons, the "Woman" column went unsigned.

Strauss also had a version of a gentlemen's fashion column called "What the Man Will Wear," but since the "Woman" column was published far more often, it was likely seen a larger editorial draw. As stated earlier, playbills varied in length greatly based on a production's

perceived or potential success. Shows that were determined to sell out, for example, would have longer playbills, which translated to more ads and more editorials. As such, what editorials were included in each playbill varied, too. Although the “Man” column was sometimes excluded from these shorter playbills, the “Woman” column was always included. This suggests that the “Woman” column was deemed among the most important—if not *the* most significant of Playbill’s columns. Botto, in fact, suggested in his manuscript that the “Woman” column was the most popular of Playbill’s editorials.¹⁶⁹

Although this is possible, without audience reactions through which to gauge such a response, it seems more probable that the “Woman” column was yet another literary lure for female audience members. Notably, though, the “Woman” column began as an advertisement, but the “Man” column began as an editorial. Detailing such trends as the correct style of necktie or derisively commenting that “Latterly there has been a fad in the younger set, of dancing with the glove-wrists flipped down for coolness’ sake, but this looks unpleasantly ‘mussy,’” the “Man” column was less explicit about marketing to an audience.¹⁷⁰ The “Man” column felt little need to comment on specific designers or stores from where to purchase items; instead, the column focused on overall fashion aesthetics. Additionally, the “Man” column was not too different from the men’s fashion columns seen in the theatrical programs of Strauss’s early competitors, suggesting yet another way that Strauss was heavily influenced by his competition and the standards of program publishing.¹⁷¹ Early theatrical programs lacked women’s fashion editorials—likely because the pre-1850s New York theatre scene was viewed as less “respectable”—but once the female audience became the primary demographic, theatrical programs included content aimed towards “women’s interests.”

Although the “Woman” column started without a byline before Cora Moore took over in 1910, the “Man” article utilized a penname. The articles were always signed “Beaunash,” and the author’s identity is either a closely guarded secret or completely unknown at Playbill today. In his manuscript, Botto stated that no one knew Beaunash’s identity, but that he was most certainly a male writer who merely wanted his privacy.¹⁷² Managing Editor Robert Viagas stated that he had no idea who Beaunash was and he did not think anyone currently working at the company did.¹⁷³ Interestingly, Playbill says the writer using the penname “Beaunash” left the company in 1948, only to be replaced by an equally anonymous “Petronious”—presumably to continue the secrecy that had been previously established by “Beaunash.”¹⁷⁴ Regardless of this confusion or denial, a writer for the *New York Times*, Bosley Crowther, had already spoiled the identity of this secretive male fashion columnist years earlier. In 1937, Crowther revealed that “Beaunash” was actually Alfred Stephen Bryan, who based the pseudonym on Richard Nash, a leader of fashion in the eighteenth-century Britain whose nickname was “Beau Nash.”¹⁷⁵

Bryan, an “advertising man” who, at the time of Crowther’s writing, had been “Beaunash” for the previous twenty-five years, had been writing men’s fashion editorials for years. Prior to working at Playbill, he wrote for *Promenade Magazine*, *The New York Herald*, and *The Haberdasher*.¹⁷⁶ Bryan, whose tag line stated he was the “Foremost International Authority on Men’s Dress,” also wrote a long-standing column titled, “The Well-Dressed Man: What to Wear and When to Wear It,” which appeared in several publications, including the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* as early as 1921.¹⁷⁷ Bryan apparently joined Playbill as early as 1914 and wrote with flair; according to an article written upon his death at age seventy, he “believed that writing on men’s clothes entailed furnishing 75 per cent entertainment and 25 per cent information.”¹⁷⁸ Articles

noted that “[i]n 1938 Mr. Bryan was credited with having helped to bring back a trend toward single-breasted dinner coats.”¹⁷⁹ From all accounts, Bryan was a famous men’s fashion columnist.

Despite Bryan receiving what appears to be a relative amount of fame, Playbill perpetuates the mystery surrounding “Beaunash.” Perhaps no one knew about Bryan until Crowther’s article in 1937. The article is not an exposé of Bryan, however; rather, Crowther wrote a full feature on Playbill, including how the publication is made and what editorials are popular. Of “What the Man Will Wear,” Crowther writes:

a weekly morsel of chat to which the name of “Beaunash” is affixed, but which actually flows from the pen of Alfred Stephen Bryan. Mr. Bryan, who makes his living as an advertising man, is what might be called a “contributing editor” to The Playbill, having been its “Beaunash” for the past twenty-five years. The fact that he takes his department with a grain of informal salt is appreciated and generously encouraged by the folk down on Wooster Street (where, incidentally, his face hasn’t been seen in years) . . .¹⁸⁰

Freelance writing is not particularly unusual, but what is intriguing is the secrecy and mystery surrounding Bryan. Even Crowther said that Bryan had not been seen at Playbill for years. Additionally, Bryan did not “leave the company” in 1948—he died. The timeline of what appears to be an obfuscation of Bryan’s identity is unclear. From all accounts, it seems like Bryan hid his Playbill connection from the beginning of the “Man” column (roughly 1914), and it was only revealed in Crowther’s article in 1937. Aside from a short paragraph in the article, though, Crowther makes little of this “secret,” which begs the question: *was* “Beaunash” a big secret? Beyond Botto’s claim of secrecy, the archival evidence does not suggest that people were clamoring to know the identity of this spirited writer. It seems far more likely that Bryan kept his identity secret, but it was not as significant a move as Playbill now states. Botto’s writing of the “Beaunash” mystery turned it into an urban legend, and since his account is Playbill’s only “archive,” it has, since its writing in 1984, continued to be seen as a kind of odd mythology. Furthermore, it is very likely that so much time has passed that current Playbill staff genuinely

have no idea the importance of who Alfred Stephen Bryan was to Playbill. As for Bryan's initial reasons to hide his identity under a penname: it is possible that he wanted to distance himself from Playbill; still possible is that his other contracts kept him from using his name in outside writing projects. Regardless, Playbill's easy acceptance of urban legends and reliance upon Botto's narrative reveals yet another aspect of the company's process: their lack of historicity or any true archive.

The use of a penname was not unusual in turn-of-the-century journalism. Male writers often utilized feminine pseudonyms when writing for women's interests; female writers frequently employed masculine sounding names in order to be taken seriously. The journalistic penname offered writers not only the ability to conceal their gender, but also, the chance to create and perform the gendered persona that would best appeal to the target reading demographic. As Meaghan Clarke notes:

In their writing women critics similarly performed disparate gender configurations. As we can see from female journalists' use of male pen-names, gender identity was tenuously constituted in nineteenth-century journalism. Many professional women created the illusion of a feminine identity, while appropriating the benefits of a masculine pen-name. The texts of women art critics reveal a complexity of masculine and feminine performances, concealing and revealing named identities, a tactic which enabled women to claim discursive authority in a variety of contexts. Readership, editorship, familial and economic conditions all added to the influences on women art critics' choice of a masked or unmasked voice.¹⁸¹

In many ways, anonymity (either through the lack of a byline or by utilizing a pseudonym) allowed female writers to overcome the power dynamics that kept them from excelling professionally. It is possible that whoever wrote the "Woman" column—whether Cora Moore or another writer—chose to be anonymous. The successes of female writers in specialty women's magazines, such as *Harper's Bazaar* and the *Ladies' Home Journal*, likely led to a normalization of female journalists writing for female audiences. In the case of "Woman," Moore's gender would have been seen as

a positive, as she was writing women's fashion columns. A 1913 article titled "Woman in Journalism" discussed Moore's expertise as such:

Along comes the woman who writes special feature articles for the woman's page, or the editorial department. This woman has gained her place through the dialogue, the monologue, the essay. And so long as the fresh idea is presented by this petticoat on pen pertinence predisposed her place will be undisputed. But, aye, there's the rub. . . . The household departments, the beauty departments, the fashion departments should be discussed. . . . The third [connects with] Cora Moore, whose work appears at the present time on the Chronicle-Telegraph home page. . . ¹⁸²

Although the article credits Moore and her *expertise*, she is still limited by her gender with what she can credibly write. Female journalists in the early twentieth centuries were relegated to writing supposedly women's interests, and even when they were legitimized by "real" journalists writing for New York City newspapers, as this author does, their credibility was always in question—"aye, there's the rub," indeed. Moore left Playbill between 1913 and 1914, but it is unclear whether that was by choice. As the article cited above notes, Moore was writing for the *Chronicle-Telegraph* by 1913, which may have been a better gig than Playbill's. Regardless, Richard Huber, Strauss's nephew and replacement CEO, seemingly eliminated the "Woman" column and replaced it with two separate fashion editorials.

In lieu of "Woman," Playbill included two women's fashions pieces titled "Fashion" and "Audience on Parade." The former was written by "B.H.," and the latter "Nell Gwynn."¹⁸³ Both articles were secretive about authorship: vague initials in the former, and in the latter, a penname referencing the famous seventeenth century actress. Each article was written with a different focus, but interestingly, they were both likely written by longtime Playbill Editor Barbara Blake, who had an extensive list of journalistic credits. Prior to starting her career at Playbill, Blake wrote for *The New Yorker*, and after she left, she was the Shopping Director for *Promenade Magazine* (1963).¹⁸⁴ In his *New York Times* piece, Crowther states that Blake is an expert who is responsible

for writing the “Parade” column.¹⁸⁵ There is no such confirmation for “Fashion;” however, Blake was briefly married to Joseph F. Higgins before their divorce in 1944.¹⁸⁶ It is entirely probable that Blake utilized her married initials for “Fashion,” while embracing a pseudonym for “Parade” in order to differentiate the columns and make it appear that two separate writers were responsible. As Clarke notes, many female journalists utilized a penname along with their legal name in order to distinguish their professional and domestic lives.¹⁸⁷ This may have been the appeal of pseudonyms for Blake.

The biggest question is whether these writers controlled their billing, or if Strauss pulled the proverbial strings. Indeed, Strauss’s previous competitors, Cowdery and von Raven, had provided the authors’ names for any short stories they included in their programs, and authors’ names (or pennames) were listed in newspapers and magazines. If Strauss were looking to women’s magazines for inspiration, he would have seen that editorials always included an author’s name; therefore, the anonymity feels like, at best, a slight, and at worst, sexism. However, as Ford Risley writes in “Birth of the Byline,” it was common during the Civil War for journalists to report anonymously:

Following the journalistic practice of the day, correspondents wrote anonymously during the war, most using a pen name or no name at all. Newsmen liked the custom, believing the secrecy allowed them do their work better. As one reporter wrote, “The anonymous greatly favors freedom and boldness in newspaper correspondence Besides the responsibility it fastens on a correspondent, the signature inevitably detracts from the powerful impersonality of a journal.”¹⁸⁸

Over concerns that reporters could give out important war information to the enemy, an order was issued that all reporters needed to publish under their own name. Thus, as Risley notes, “The byline . . . was born.”¹⁸⁹ Eventually, the army lifted the mandate, and reporters could return to anonymity, but by that point, the byline had mixed reviews, and so some reporters wrote publicly while others anonymously. Perhaps Strauss, then, was stubbornly attached to the absent byline newspaper

model, creating instead, a unified publication with a single voice and essentially suggesting to the audience that Playbill was Strauss's alone.

Although "What the Woman Will Wear" was the most frequently included column in the playbill, other editorials occasionally appeared and were primarily aimed at appealing to Strauss's female audience. Some of these included "Beauty Hints," a column with makeup and hair advice, "Paris Letter," which detailed the latest Paris fashions, and "The Hostess," which provided advice for entertaining at home. Many of these editorials detailed fashions and other products that the typical female audience member might not be able to purchase realistically; instead, these were items about which a woman could ogle and fantasize. Soon, however, additional columns that focused on practicality began appearing. Some of these were "For Book Lovers," a list of popular books audiences might want to read, and short romantic stories aimed at women's interest in the genre.

Still other editorials attempted to sell items while also providing advice. One of these such articles was "Chafing Dish Suggestions," a piece that provided multiple recipes for use in a hostess's chafing dish. Accompanying such recipes, such as those for Aspic Jelly and Golden Buck, was the advice that "The secret of success with the chafing dish depends largely upon careful attention to details and preparation. Ingredients should be measured and mixed and all supplies placed in attractive readiness about the tray, as the rapidity of cooking has much to do with the subsequent perfection of the dish."¹⁹⁰ These cooking advice columns and recipes drew from popular magazine, including *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. Yet, accompanying "Chafing Dish Suggestions" were short stories in which a dish or ingredient was a central component. Such stories were essentially ads, and they included information about where to purchase the imperative item at the end of the story. One of these stories was titled, "A Poor French

Lady,” and it told the sad tale of how the French King (or “Mr. King”) banished this “charming French lady” to Germany, “which was about the same to her as though you, dear reader, were sent to Hoboken to live.”¹⁹¹ Sent to Germany to suffer “for want of palatable food,” this French Lady’s servant, who had accompanied her, thought to make her a wonderful supper in a chafing dish she had packed away. The only problem, the story describes, is that sometimes the chafing dish gets a bad reputation because “its dishes are difficult to digest, or, in other words, are so good one usually eats too much.”¹⁹² Fortunately for the reader, as the column describes, “this may be overcome by the use of a small quantity of Armour’s Extract of Beef. It improves the flavor of all savories, and insures their quick and easy digestion.”¹⁹³ This story is an excellent example of the ways in which Playbill attempted to appeal to the female reader. The protagonist draws on the American woman’s fascination with European, and especially French, culture, while the story suggests New York’s presumed superiority over Hoboken. The fiction also reveals details about cooking and entertaining. These three elements work together to appeal to a middle- to upper-class New York City woman.

2.4.5 The War Effort and Passing the Baton

Strauss was gifted a monopoly when the Theatrical Syndicate chose him as the only program publisher to service their theatres, but within the first decade of the twentieth century, Strauss lost this connection. In 1908, the Shuberts, who had been amassing financial capital and theatre properties in order to challenge the Syndicate’s power, finally owned more theatres than the Syndicate. They also began acquiring other assets, such as actors and playwrights previously booked through the Syndicate. Popular managers changed loyalties and signed with the Shuberts, and by early 1910, “the circuit of theatres covering New England had declared their independence

of the Syndicate.”¹⁹⁴ The Northwest followed shortly thereafter, and before long, “[t]he defection of the various circuits began to reach landslide proportions.”¹⁹⁵ By May of 1910, “1200 small town theatre owners throughout the country united to form the National Theatre Owners Association, and declared their right to book whatever attractions they wished through the booking agency of their choice. This action constituted the death blow for the Syndicate, and its hold on the American theatre was now completely broken.”¹⁹⁶ Strauss’s connection to the Syndicate no longer helped his business, but Playbill did not suffer any major setbacks because he had already obliterated the competition in previous years. By the time theatres had a choice in program publisher, they seemed mostly content to continue with Strauss’s programs—likely because he was essentially the only business in town. The Shuberts, however, notably switched to a new publisher for some of their theatres, so that they could include vaudeville, variety, and movie showings in their spaces. Strauss and the Shuberts had never gotten along, so this change may have been in everyone’s best interests. Even with the Shubert losses, though, Playbill’s business was booming. Strauss and his wife, Amanda, were living among the New York elite.

During World War I, Playbill adjusted their editorials to reflect wartime frugality and minimalism, while the company itself maintained its monopoly with few financial setbacks. In fact, there were no visible changes to the playbill until 1918—about one year into American participation. During the paper conservation effort, Strauss reduced playbill size to 7 ½ inches by 5 ½ inches in an effort to save on materials and printing, but otherwise, the playbill remained the same from an outward perspective. Inside, however, Playbill’s editorials adapted to wartime conservancy.

Playbills published in 1918 held new, special editorials encouraging Americans to do their part to win the war. A short article titled, “The Still, Small Voice” appeared in the *Head Over*

Heels program. The article discussed the sacrifices that citizens must make in order to help the war effort; for example, a woman who “goes about her work cheerfully and uncomplainingly, [and] who has a son at the front whom she idolizes,” or the “neighbor on the left [who] has given up all her afternoon pleasure jaunts to get time to make bandages and bed socks at the armory.”¹⁹⁷ The article ends by petitioning readers to sign a pledge to buy War Savings stamps and Thrift stamps. Additional columns, such as one written by The National Committee of Patriotic Societies, cautioned Americans against believing “war rumors” and “un-American propaganda.”¹⁹⁸ The statement did not focus on literature or visual propaganda, but rather, the “seditious . . . utterances” and “insidious influence which finds its outlet through private conversation.”¹⁹⁹ The statement additionally suggests that American citizens must get their war news from official channels instead of believing “war rumors.” Suggesting, for example, that it is “a rich man’s war” or “The Wall Street War,” the Committee argues, is tantamount to disrespecting “World Democracy.”²⁰⁰ The article ends with the Committee’s call to action: any Americans who hear such propaganda must contact their Washington office to describe not only the rumors in detail, but also to name those who may be “disloyal individuals.”²⁰¹ The statement concludes by saying, “All these things merit your most earnest efforts. If you do them you will have done something for a Great World Victory; if you neglect them the Government of the United States may be crippled.”²⁰²

Other playbills encouraged American patriotism. Playbill regularly printed the lyrics to “The Star Spangled Banner,” care of the Mayor’s Committee on National Defense. The statement, “LEARN YOUR NATIONAL ANTHEM” prefaced the lyrics.²⁰³ Another column, titled, “Here’s To Your Further Fun,” with a subtitle of “Written exclusively for New York Theatre Program Corporation,” advertised the country’s new Fourth Liberty Loan project, which was part of the larger effort by the U.S. government to sell war bonds (also known as Liberty Bonds) during World

War I to defray war expenses. Congress passed the Fourth Liberty Bond Act on July 9, 1918, and the U.S. Treasury began issuing them in September of 1918. The column stated, “A fabulous sum, estimated at \$6,000,000,000 must be raised in three weeks, beginning September 28,” and suggested, “There is a limit to the amount of bonds that you can buy during the coming Liberty Loan campaign. That limit is set by your conscience. Buy until your conscience says stop!”²⁰⁴ These patriotic additions served as their own type of pro-American war propaganda. It is possible that Strauss (and later Huber) included these federal- and state-sanctioned “ads” free of charge. Although nothing in the Playbill archives addresses this, it seems likely that the company might have included those pieces as part of a sense of civic duty. Regardless, the 1918 programs were overtly political, opinionated, and patriotic—a definite change from Strauss’s earlier apolitical, fluff fare.

The program also added new editorials during the war, such as “Serve by Saving,” which detailed ways Americans could conserve food products. The article, written by Vassar students working in the Food Conservation effort, offered “suggestions,” which “may prove useful to the many women who are helping win the war by the careful and intelligent use of food.”²⁰⁵ Such suggestions included recycling your extra cornmeal “mush” from breakfast for a dinner meal by topping it with cheese, salt, and pepper, and, “if possible a little finely minced parsley.”²⁰⁶ Another provided a recipe for an onion soup and stated, “You might as well eat onions and enjoy yourself. Even if you are going to one of those rare war-time parties, and if people do detect a slight—well—aroma, someone is sure to acclaim you as a patriot; for the onion has at last come into vogue.”²⁰⁷ The headlines of these suggestions connoted the war; for example, the cornmeal suggestion above was called “Fool Enemy Lack With This Disguise,” and the onion recipe, “The Onion Forever!” With the conservation effort came the removal of the “The Hostess” and “Chafing Dish

Suggestions” articles. With the addition of this feature, the company aligned itself with the food conservation movement and the war effort.

Beyond these editorial changes, the programs changed minimally, even after Strauss stepped away from the company and placed his nephew Huber in charge. Personally, Strauss, who was of German Jewish descent, changed his name to Frank Vance Storrs in 1917 in order to sustain his financial relationships to overseas banks. On the subject he said, “I have been connected for years with the Stock Exchanges of London and Paris, but the war completely shut off my revenue from these sources. I could not hope to revive my business relations with British and French bankers as long as my name was Strauss.”²⁰⁸ He likely faced similar prejudices due to his name in the U.S.; longtime Playbill employees, Vincent and Skippy Caracciolo, who started working at Playbill in 1930 and 1938, respectively, stated that Strauss changed his name “to avoid being branded a German.”²⁰⁹ Although he used “Storrs” in his personal and professional lives, the company continued to operate under “Strauss.” Following the war, Strauss also became an Episcopalian Christian and rejected the Judaism of his youth. This became a point of contention for Strauss’s remaining family in Columbus, and according to a family friend, “[a]s Frank and Amanda Storrs became more wealthy and part of New York Society the rift only widened.”²¹⁰

Shortly after changing his name, Strauss resigned as President of Frank V. Strauss & Co., and Huber took over some time in 1918. Strauss continued to be a major shareholder, and likely an advisor to his nephew on the business, until his death.²¹¹ Huber’s programs looked identical to Strauss’s; although, some of the advertisements for the company were markedly different. Strauss had always kept his ads short and snappy—one- or two-liners cheekily telling readers they should call him—but Huber’s ads were lengthy and polite. The 1918 production of *Saving Grace*, for example, included an ad for the company—now called the New York Theatre Program

Corporation—that asked the reader to carefully parse through the pages of their playbill during intermission:

Aside from information about the play, the leading shops of the city and the greatest manufacturers of the country have something of interest to say to you during these leisure moments. If you do not have time to look it over as fully as you would like, take it home with you. If you will make a practice of examining your theatre programs carefully, you will find yourself possessed of up-to-date and authoritative information about what real advertisers are doing.²¹²

Huber's comments above demonstrate what Strauss always thought—that the audience member needs to peruse the program before, during, and after curtain, and that they should also take it home. Huber was more explicit and certainly wordier than Strauss, but his insistence that the company showcases only “*real* advertisers” is not too removed from Strauss's earlier proclamations that “Theatre Programme Advertising is the Best.”²¹³

Strauss may not have been the innovator that Playbill suggests, but his legacy is that he began a company that lucked into a monopoly and managed to stay afloat while all other competitors failed. When Strauss/Storrs died in 1939, he left behind a fortune, which was given to his wife Amanda and his daughter Carolyn Sickles.²¹⁴ Although it was well known that Storrs was wealthy, the public did not know how much he was worth. Upon his death, newspapers reported a surprising reality concerning his fortune. Although a court hearing in 1930 had set his wealth at \$40 million, his final will listed it at \$2.7 million. Playbill frames Strauss as a pioneer of the theatre world and an innovator to the printing world; yet, his work, as successful as it was, was built on the foundations of his previous program printing competitors. His success is largely due to an early connection to the powerful Theatrical Syndicate and his ability to secure advertising contracts. He certainly made significant strides in defining the modern American theatre program, but he was no pioneer. Most of his life—and death—remains shrouded in some mystery, including the disinheritance of his daughter, Anne Schuster. Of this, his obituary read that Storrs had bequeathed

his daughter a mere fifty dollars “because of her disrespectful conduct” to both Storrs and his wife, and “other reasons of which [Storrs] alone [was] apprised.”²¹⁵ Such is the real story—or at least a fragment—of Frank V. Strauss, Advertising Man, who created a company that would continue on long after his death.

3.0 Playbill After Strauss: Celebrity, Excess, and WWII

*“How many patrons of the Broadway theatre, thumbing casually through the pages of their programs before the curtain goes up, ever ponder upon the cryptic manner in which this copious, attractive and invariably diverting volume of pertinent information happens to have reached their hands? Why, in other words, are they made the recipients, at absolutely no cost to themselves, of a virtual magazine, filled with assorted reading matter and a generous display of ads, instead of being given a two-sheet printed page bearing a directory to the cast and no more? Who is the munificent donor of all this paper and ink? In brief and to the point—how come?”*²¹⁶

Bosley Crowther, *New York Times* journalist, wrote the above description of The Playbill (renamed from The New York Magazine Program in 1934) in 1937—a moment in which a celebratory Playbill was distributed to every “legitimate playhouse in the city,” including the newly acquired Metropolitan Opera House.²¹⁷ This was a significant accomplishment for Playbill, which had been previously shut-out of “higher class” venues such as opera and symphony houses.²¹⁸ Although Strauss, and later his nephew, Richard Huber, had previously fought with program competitors, by 1930, Playbill was confidently sitting as “the only firm in the city devoted solely to the publication of theatre programs.”²¹⁹ The final “legitimate” theatre to join Playbill was the Theatre Guild, who had previously printed their programs independently. After the Syndicate’s fall in 1910, theatre owners were able to choose whether to continue with Strauss (and later Huber) or to self-publish, as there were simply no other program publishers remaining in New York.

Once Strauss left the company, his nephew, Richard Huber, was left in charge. As Huber struggled to gain business outside of commercial New York theatre, he appealed to those who attended Broadway. By increasing the number of editorials that discussed theatre and by focusing on actors, Huber shaped *The Playbill* as a specialty magazine that capitalized on the emerging interest in celebrity and New York theatre. Over the years in which Huber was at the proverbial

“helm,” Playbill became further connected to conceptualizations of celebrity, NYC, theatre, and excess, which served the company well during the initial years. Huber and his staff, including Fashion editor Barbara Blake, continued to highlight celebrity and luxury culture, even after the start of World War II and the subsequent efforts to save money and materials. Playbill’s programs during the war offer a unique perspective on a company that seemingly struggled with representing the war. When every U.S. magazine was utilizing print propaganda to convey Americans’ prescribed roles during the war, Playbill offered escapist fare in a likely attempt to both provide fantasy for their audiences as well as shape the company’s identity as a “Broadway” publication.

3.1 Celebrity, Excess, and Playbill’s Connection to “Legitimate”

Following the war and a post-war recession, Playbill was financially successful. By 1922, businesses in general excelled in the United States, and “entrepreneurship flourished, the stock market roared and the United States government discovered many new sources for garnering revenues such as taxing personal income and theatre admissions.”²²⁰ The Strauss Theatre Magazine Program boasted a monthly circulation of more than 1.35 million, with an annual circulation of 12 million magazines, and by 1924, that annual circulation had increased to 16 million.²²¹ In 1926, the publication’s name changed again—this time to The New York Theatre Advertising Medium—undoubtedly to remove Strauss’s name, since he was no longer involved in the business, as well as an appeal to potential advertisers, but by 1929, the name had changed to *The New York Magazine Program*, signaling a return to the publication’s roots as a “magazine program.” Yet, by 1930, the company had changed names again: this time to the New York Theatre Program Corporation, a name that would remain for the entirety of Huber’s tenure. With Strauss

out of the picture, Huber was freer to make creative decisions, and this uncertainty over characterizing Playbill as a company for either “advertising” or “magazine” content or for “theatre” points to the ways in which Huber was trying to decipher who his audience was and to whom he should appeal. Was Playbill going to be a company that put advertisers first, or should it present as a “magazine,” which audiences could enjoy? Was Playbill a company that showcased theatre? This linguistic trajectory demonstrates Huber’s thought process, and indeed, his Playbill is typified by its connections to all three. Ultimately, Huber created a *theatre* magazine, and he also streamlined much of the advertising process.

Highlighting actors became a significant aspect of connecting Huber’s Playbill to its identity as a theatre magazine. Certainly, Americans had been fascinated by actors since the nineteenth century, but by the early twentieth century, the excitement over stars evolved into a rich celebrity culture in which Huber and Playbill participated. Sketches of actors appeared on playbill covers as a way of engaging with audiences who were interested in the stars of the day. Prior to the 1930s, playbill covers were brightly colored sketches of scenes from various productions. The musical comedy *Poppy*, playing at the Apollo Theatre in 1924, for example, had a playbill whose background was a rich blue with a white clown figure in the foreground. The clown held a massive feather whose plumage was bright orange, and more of this orange popped from the clown’s nose and cheeks.²²² Since Playbill outsourced the printing for the covers, they were incredibly expensive and became cost prohibitive after the Stock Market Crash. Huber made two key decisions for playbill covers in the 1930s. The first was to stop printing in color and instead implement sepia printing, which saved money. Secondly, Huber added sketches of celebrities to the playbill covers. Although many covers still showcased scenes from a production (as did the covers of the 1920s), the new 1930s playbill covers included sketches of popular celebrities, a show’s big star, or even

a celebrity that had recently passed. As Robert van Krieken notes in the *Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies*, “the realm of visual culture and the creators of images also played an increasingly important role in the celebrity production process, because of improvements and a lowering of costs in the mass reproduction of visual material such as portraits.”²²³ Arguably, photographs were a more significant way of disseminating celebrity culture, as photographs included an “aura of ‘reality,’” but with Playbill’s financial cuts, sketches were more affordable.²²⁴ The celebrity sketches ultimately allowed Playbill to capitalize on celebrity culture despite not having photographs, which would eventually change in the 1940s.

Huber added more theatrical editorials than ever and eliminated many of Strauss’s original content, which had previously sought to appeal to the “general theatregoer.” Some of the new theatrical editorials included a quiz titled, “Do You Know,” which tested the reader on their theatre knowledge, as well as other features written by theatre professionals, such as producer Daniel Frohman’s column, “On the New Theatre,” which profiled leading performers and theatre families. Additionally, John A. Thomas’s aptly titled piece, “After the Theatre,” discussed what one might do “after” watching the show. Specific performers were mentioned along with what they were seen doing that night. For example, “Paul Draper is doing the most exciting dancing of his life in the Persian Room; the long-lost De Marcos are back in town, flashing brilliantly about the Sert Room; across the Waldorf foyer, the Hartmans are indulging in their hilarious burlesques; and Ramon & Renita are the featured dance team at La Martinique.”²²⁵ Playbill also introduced “At this Theatre” in the late 1930s; the column discussed other famous/popular productions that had occurred at that theatre. This feature, perhaps more than others, only appeared in certain programs. It is unclear how Huber made that decision, but it seems likely that Playbill included this feature when it wanted to advertise the theatre in question. If so, perhaps Playbill used this feature as a negotiating tactic

with a particularly stubborn theatre owner, or potentially Playbill wanted to strengthen a rocky relationship with a theatre.²²⁶ Playbill also added a new feature, titled, “What’s What,” which was essentially a “Letters to the Editor,” in which readers could ask Playbill questions. The column specifically asked for those interested to write to Playbill, and that the inquiries must be limited to “professional, not personal, information about plays and players.”²²⁷ Most of these questions were clarifications about casts, song titles, and other trivia about productions.

These theatre-specific editorials were important to Playbill’s overall message that they were a theatre magazine. In fact, several ads published in *The Playbill* noted how audiences should save their programs because of the editorials included. One ad read, “The Playbill, the magazine of the theatre, is published to further your evening’s enjoyment. Take it home with you to add to your collection of mementos of other pleasant evenings.”²²⁸ The image printed above the description showed a stack of *The Playbill*, with headers of the most popular editorials surrounding it. These included the popular fashion editorials, What the Man Will Wear, Fashion, and Audience on Parade, as well as the theatre-specific editorials Who’s Who in the Cast and After the Theatre. Under Huber’s control, Playbill built a reputation of being a theatre magazine focusing on celebrities and theatre trivia.

By including more theatre-related content, Playbill further cemented its role as a theatre *specialty* magazine, but Huber also relied on audience interest in actors. He started a new feature titled, “From Our Stageland Scrapbook,” which included the biographies of the production’s cast.²²⁹ A significant departure from previous programs that included cast names only, this new feature would become one of Playbill’s most important when, in 1929, it was renamed “Who’s Who in the Cast.” Playbill is, to this day, printing cast biographies under the “Who’s Who” header; in fact, since Huber’s introduction of it, the publication has never gone without this feature.

Although the actors' union, Actor's Equity Association (AEA), now requires cast biographies to appear in all theatrical programs, Huber initially began this feature as a way of highlighting actors and celebrities to pique audience engagement.

Although Playbill relied on actors' biographies to engage their readers, they frequently decided which cast members warranted inclusion in "Who's Who." Producers would provide the cast biographies to Playbill, but while Huber was owner in the 1930s and 1940s, Playbill would often cut biographies or shorten the length. This, in turn, meant that some actors did not receive biographies at all, while others were given less space in the playbill. Associate Editor John Dow was tasked with ultimately vetting and changing the copy. Crowther notes, "the editors of The Playbill are not always satisfied with the 'copy' which the scribes turn in and more often than not rewrite it."²³⁰ Thus began the practice of allowing more page space to "stars," while the presence of other, unknown actors was either severely diminished or erased entirely from the production's playbill.

Following the presumed success of "Who's Who," Playbill increased the number of celebrity-focused editorials in 1940. For every production that had a "big name"—whether in the cast or creative team—there would be a multi-page editorial about them. For 1940 *Key Largo*, this included a piece titled, "A Talent Comes Home." Opening with the statement, "'Paul Muni returns to the stage,'" the article celebrates Muni—then film actor—and his decision to star in Maxwell Anderson's new play. The piece presents criticism against the popular film genre, stating that Muni had been all but taken away from the footlights for the bright lights of Hollywood. The unnamed author explains, "It has been estimated that during those West Coast years, upwards of one hundred brightly bound play scripts winged westward to Muni like persistent birds of plumage, as hopeful impresarios sought to entice him to the footlights again. But inevitably they fluttered back, with

tactful regrets.”²³¹ Performers’ photographs also began appearing with more regularity in the 1940s, with nearly every program showcasing a popular actor’s face on its cover. Gertrude Lawrence appeared on the cover of *Lady in the Dark*, Mabel Paige on *Out of the Frying Pan* (1941), and Danny Kaye on the musical revue *Let’s Face It!* (1941).²³² As the years progressed, the increasing focus on the theatre industry and actors, specifically, reinvented Playbill as more of a *theatre* magazine than a *magazine* for the theatre.

Although male celebrities were often featured, Playbill relied primarily on female celebrities in order to engage with audiences. During the 1930s and 1940s, film and “images of stars,” Anne Jerslev and Mette Mortensen argue, were used to “refashion the ways in which feminine identity was currently constructed by” American culture.²³³ Women knew that the proliferation of celebrity imagery was meant to pressure them into conforming to impossible beauty standards. Yet, they would watch “a film featuring a favourite star,” which “enabled the possibility of escaping more everyday forms of reality.”²³⁴ Films in the 1930s and 1940s, in particular, then, “offered a form of cultural magic enabling the women to dream of a world beyond scarcity and ‘making do’ for a more luxurious world.”²³⁵ Female celebrities provided a necessary fantasy for female audience members during the Great Depression. Some of these female-focused playbill features included *The Corn is Green* (1941) piece titled, “She’s All There Is...,” which discussed Ethel Barrymore’s performance history and a piece on Ethel Merman (“She’s Got Rhythm”) that appeared in the program for *Panama Hattie* (1941).²³⁶ “The Saga of Gertrude,” an article about Gertrude Lawrence, appeared in several playbills from 1941-1942. The column portrays Lawrence in a “rags to riches” manner, stating that “After graduation from the dramatic academy, Miss Lawrence set out on an extended tour of the variety halls in various blood-thirsty, one-act skits designed to satisfy the male appetite for mystery and manslaughter;” she is quoted as

saying, ““In those days . . . I played anything that came along. I was not stagestruck, but I was impressed with the necessity of eating.””²³⁷ According to the column, Lawrence began touring, but without enough money for a hotel room, she worked as a “barmaid” to get by while performing on the road. Eventually, the column describes, Lawrence became “an all-out success” and “smashed attendance records in nearly every city she played. For her performance she was awarded the keys to twenty-four cities.”²³⁸ This story, in which the plucky young actress becomes a “star” after putting in a lot of hard work is the kind of tale Americans love—a proverbial “bootstraps” narrative, in which the person succeeds in their career because of hard work and dedication.

Playbill had, for decades, billed itself as a purveyor of programs for high-class entertainment, but this was limited to Broadway legitimate theatre. Huber’s use of theatre culture, actors, and celebrities in his playbills seemingly did not appeal to off-Broadway houses. Responsible for self-printing, off-Broadway houses kept their programs simple. The Provincetown Playhouse on MacDougal Street and the Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village, for example, self-published single-sheet handbills that only included cast names, biographies, and scene descriptions.²³⁹ As much as advertising and editorials had become a significant aspect of Playbill’s business model, these off-Broadway houses turned away from a lengthy playbill. Arguably, they did not want advertisements taking up space in their programs.

Playbill presented itself as a theatre magazine, highlighting actors and theatre secrets, but this did not appeal to other high-class entertainments, such as opera, symphony, and ballet. Current CEO Phil Birsh says that these performance forms have traditionally gone elsewhere for their program needs—either by self-printing or choosing another program publisher—which is why Playbill celebrates every time they secure a contract with a non-Broadway, high-class entertainment venue.²⁴⁰ These venues have arguably been unavailable due to Playbill’s close

association with legitimate theatre (primarily plays) and later, Broadway theatre (plays and musicals). A Playbill client for decades, Radio City Music Hall did not initially utilize Huber's services, preferring instead, to publish with M.M. Geffen. Dubbed "Showplace," these programs included advertisements and editorials, sharing similar features to Huber's program, such as a Fashion column by Willa Van and a theatrical piece titled "Curtain Calls" by S.J. Brody.²⁴¹ Geffen printed Showplace to specifically serve the needs of Radio City, and the editorials inside featured those performers, rather than the generic editorials included in Playbill. Although both *Showplace* and *The Playbill* utilized sepia printing, the former had photographs on its covers, while, Playbill had sketches. Photographs were probably a significant reason for why Radio City chose *Showplace* over *The Playbill*, as they were able to showcase the famous Radio City kick line on the covers.

Huber may not have obtained the Radio City contract, but he did secure the Metropolitan Opera (hereafter "the Met"), and by making changes to Playbill's typical program format, he created a publication specific to the Met's needs. This new program showed no association to Playbill on the outside, but inside, it shared many of the same editorial concepts, albeit written differently for the Met. The cover read "The Metropolitan Opera House," followed by the names of the opera's general managers, in script lettering. The Met covers did not have photographs or sketches of stars; instead, these covers placed the name of the opera house in the most prominent position on the cover. Although these covers also frequently had sketches of flourishes, such as a *fleur de lis* or other ornate designs, Playbill's Met programs highlighted the importance of the opera house. The cover's script lettering was also distinct from Playbill's more blocked lettering, and its showcase of the opera house was different from Playbill's reliance on celebrities. The words "Playbill" never appeared on the Met program; in fact, the only indication of a Playbill connection was a small advertisement within its pages that stated that the program was published by the New

York Theatre Program Corporation, the name of Playbill's publishing company.²⁴² Eliminating the visual connection to Playbill therefore further distanced the Met programs from the company that was, even as early as the 1930s, clearly linked to the Broadway theatre.

Although the covers were quite distinct, inside, the Met playbill contains many of Playbill's features but with an opera "twist." Instead of "What the Woman Will Wear," this program contained "Fashions for the Opera," a column that, although similar to the fashion articles in Playbill, dictated fashion trends that were far more formal and expensive. For example, one column read:

To glitter and glamour, two current opera-going essentials, this sleeved and hooded gown from B. Altman adds a provocative touch of mystery, shrouding head and shoulders in sequin-starred chiffon above a torso encased in Chinese red silk jersey . . . It's not Everywoman's gown, of course, for it makes demands of both figure and carriage . . . The whole effect is one of great distinction and, despite the covered head and arms, definite formality.²⁴³

The unnamed writer seeks to appeal to an upper-class female reader, describing the formal nature of the gown with its sequins and expensive imported silk. In this way, the Met programs were speaking to a presumed upper-class audience. The writer also states that the gown "demands" something special of the wearer, suggesting that it is fit only for the "right" woman—meaning, arguably, the "right" figure, but also, presumably belonging to a white, upper-class, heterosexual woman. The article presupposes that this "right" type of woman is the reader. This hypothetical woman attending the opera is assuredly dressed formally, perhaps in a gown like the one suggested in the column. As such, the Met playbill was crafted to appeal to a specific demographic, namely, the white, upper-class clientele of the opera.

Through their editorials, the Met version of Playbill both advertised upcoming operas and attempted to deconstruct the notion that supposedly "lighter fare" was less important than "serious

art.” One such column, titled, “Comedy in Opera,” focused on convincing audiences that comedic operas were just as artistically engaging as tragic operas. It read:

We assume thus, before we begin to reason, that a great tragedy like *Hamlet* is conceived on a higher plane than a magnificent fantasy such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or a massive canvas by Rembrandt must of necessity be a finer work of art than a lighthearted conception of Hals. . . . And if we pursue this line of thought in music we must consider that the symphonies of Beethoven tower over those of Mozart and Haydn because they are conceived on a grander scale and because their composer put into them so much of his personal thought and feeling . . . In the opera house this kind of comparison is particularly rife . . .²⁴⁴

The writer reasons that tragedies are respected above comedies because there are simply more tragedies within the canon, but then they suggest that comedic operas are difficult to write well, therefore leading someone to think they are less valuable, since many comic operas are poorly written. However, the writer then concludes that a well-written comedy should be equal to a tragedy. This specific article appears in the program for the tragic opera *Aida*; however, the writer notes that Mozart’s comedic opera, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, will be appearing later in the Met’s season. Playbill had been highlighting actors, plays, and other theatrical news in their traditional version for the New York/Broadway theatre; with this version for the Met, Playbill utilized a similar functional tactic. The program was a way of engaging with the audience, but also, was meant to get them to return later in the season. The playbill’s job, then, was to get the audience to come back for upcoming productions, but even more specifically, playbills were used as a way of subtly changing an audience’s opinion. If the audience attending a tragic opera did not like comic operas, then the editorial would convince them to give the genre another chance. In this manner, Huber’s Playbill was one that attempted to influence the audience—specifically with theatre, or in this case, opera.

3.2 Huber and the Audience: How to Read *The Playbill*

Huber increased the popularity and pervasiveness of *The Playbill*. Theatregoers seemed to like theatre programs, and according to Botto, Huber hired Daniel Starch to conduct research on theatergoers' interest in *The Playbill* in 1935. Over 5,000 interviews were conducted, and the result was nearly 92% of those surveyed liked what *The Playbill* offered, while only 4% did not.²⁴⁵ As this was an internal survey, and the results were kept private, it is near impossible to verify these statistics or check the details of how theatregoers were polled. It is possible that the study was biased; yet, the results were not released for marketing purposes, so it is possible that Huber merely wanted to see how theatregoers were responding to *The Playbill*. If respondents did not enjoy the magazine, then he could potentially make changes accordingly. During this same year, Playbill sold approximately 1,000 program binders to collectors—a significant increase from when Strauss was in charge—suggesting that Huber's version was by and large successful. Additionally, Huber began capitalizing on the company's longevity. Advertisements within the pages of the playbill read: "Since 1884, the publishers have progressively developed The Playbill to serve the discriminating interests of the New York theatre market. In editorial content, size, arrangement, and printing quality The Playbill appeals to its audiences."²⁴⁶ Huber began branding Playbill as a company that was constantly being revised ("progressively developed"), while also being appropriate for the discerning New York audience. Although Strauss had chosen editorials to suit his audience, his ads always privileged advertisers; with Huber, the focus was on the theatergoing audience.

Over the years, Huber made additional changes to the company's business model that were not only cost-effective, they were also better for the New York theatre as a whole. Huber inherited Strauss's advertising payment schedule and business model, which allowed advertisers to purchase

ad space in the programs of their choice. This meant that playbills had varying lengths, as advertisers understandably chose the most popular shows in order to get their products out to the largest number of consumers. For example, there were 48 pages of advertisements in Cole Porter's incredibly popular 1934 musical, *Anything Goes*, whereas the comparatively meager hit, *Post Road* only contained 12 pages.²⁴⁷ As productions became successful and drew in larger numbers, advertisers could purchase more ad space, and in this manner, programs that grew in size over the course of their run dictated—in a very visual and tangible way—which shows were doing well. Playbill was already printing new programs every week to account for changes in editorial content and casts, but the variations in ads meant that even within a single week, every playbill would be different. More ads appearing in a playbill dictated more editorial content, and the sizes and quantity of ads per playbill required staff to constantly re-format the entire playbill.²⁴⁸ Sometime between 1934 and 1937, Huber changed this advertising structure by selling ad space on a weekly schedule; for example, “the advertiser pays to have his ad displayed in ten, fifteen or more programs a week, but he has not the privilege of designating which particular programs it is to appear in—unless, of course, his schedule calls for appearance in all programs.”²⁴⁹ This change not only helped Playbill's bottom line, it also ceased the odd hierarchization that was happening with advertisers essentially “rewarding” only the most popular shows. If advertisers could no longer select the shows for their ads, thereby creating a visual representation of show popularity via the playbill, then all productions would be viewed as equal—at least through the playbill.

By the time Crowther's *New York Times* piece about Playbill was published in 1937, Huber had standardized the editorials appearing in the magazine. Crowther's article, itself an advertisement for Playbill as much as a loving opinion piece, states that Playbill goes beyond the bare minimum of providing the typical information provided by other theatre programs. By 1937,

however, there were few alternatives to Playbill's services: Geffen, who published the Radio City programs, and self-publishing off-Broadway theatres were the only non-Playbill theatre programs in New York. Crowther painted an image of Playbill as set apart from its competitors; yet, there were really no other significant program publishers. Crowther, then, was part of the marketing schema for Playbill, suggesting to audiences that they would receive a unique experience by looking through their programs. He wrote, "and you who browse through your programs during or after the show will have discovered the variety of material more or less associated with the theatre—or, at least, of reasonable interest to the average theatre-goer—which it contains."²⁵⁰

Crowther's assessment is interesting in a few ways. The first is that there is such a thing as "the average theatre-goer," who will, in all likelihood, be interested in all the editorial pieces contained in the playbill. The second is that the features in the program are merely "more or less associated with the theatre"—suggesting that the program's content may or may not be directly associated with the theatre. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Crowther suggests that this theatregoer will browse through the playbill either during or after the show. In Playbill's Met program, one fashion column specifically mentions this as well. The article describes a diamond and ruby-encrusted lorgnette pin that has a "tail which pulls out completely to make itself useful for program consulting," further suggesting that audiences are encouraged to peruse their playbills during a show.²⁵¹ This aligns with the ways Strauss, and even current CEO Phil Birsh, imagine playbill perusal.²⁵² Audiences engage with their playbills before, during, and after a show; yet, Crowther does not mention that readers are likely to look through their playbills before curtain even though they certainly do. Crowther's phrasing, then, is less an elision of how audiences interact with programs before a show, and more of a suggestion that they can—and should—revisit their programs to re-read multiple times during and after the show. Both the *when* of the playbill

reading as well as the *order* in which someone reads the material contextualizes the editorials and sheds light on how the content may have been received.

Playbills have always been distributed to audiences before the show begins, but *Native Son* (1941) forced audiences to wait, creating a different audience/playbill experience. Instead of receiving the full playbill pre-show, audiences for *Native Son* were given a single sheet that included the play's title, and underneath, the information "The Play will be presented in ten scenes without intermission. / The ushers will hand you The Playbill after the performance."²⁵³ This was an unusual choice, and certainly a kind of "call back" to previous single sheet handbills, but primarily, the choice of delaying playbill distribution was probably done to avoid spoiling the show, as the *Native Son* program included full scenes from the play with a preface written by Richard Wright, the author of the novel from which the play was adapted. Contextualizing the play's themes, he writes:

Standing ideologically to the Left and Right of Bigger Thomas, the protagonist whose struggles you have just witnessed, are two symbolic ways of life in America: The liberal way and the status quo. In the end, having caught a vision of humanity that might have enabled him to express his life in socially valuable terms, Bigger, the victim of a snarl of fear and hate and guilt, is not in a position to accept either. There is no special pleading here; the play is merely an attempt to depict the social forces at work in our country in terms of warm human values. Bigger's point of view is presented to the fullest because his is the least known and understood.²⁵⁴

The play tells the story of a black twenty-year-old, Bigger Thomas, who lives in the poor area of Chicago's South Side in the 1930s. As Wright describes in his note to the audience above, the play is meant to show both "sides" of the argument; it does not apologize for Bigger's crimes, but rather, portrays the inevitability behind his choices due to the systemic racism and classism of which he is a victim. The adaptation was credited to both Richard Wright and Paul Green, but according to the latter, Wright had little to do with crafting the play, and Green's version of *Native Son* was arguably more objective. According to Jerry W. Ward, Jr., "the thrust of [the novel] *Native Son* is

toward a critique of the right-wing politics that sustained racism, economic exploitation, and social injustice in the United States in the 1930s. . . . As the novel is moved from the page to the stage, however, the fire is abated.”²⁵⁵ Ward argues that this change happens because “interpretation has a priority in stage versions of works; that interpretation is often a form of delayed reaction in the process of reading as opposed to the witnessing that occurs in a theatre.”²⁵⁶

Just like the play, the *Native Son* playbill takes no sides—either left or right—but attempts to present material the audience can interpret in whatever way they want. Excerpts from the play are included in the playbill, such as an opening scene with Prosecutor Buckley who argues, “The law of this land is strong and gracious enough to allow all of us to exist in peace and not tremble for fear that, at this very moment, some half-human, black ape may be climbing through the windows of our homes to rape and murder our daughters. We are waiting to hear that jungle law does not prevail in this city.”²⁵⁷ In a subsequent page, the playbill excerpts Bigger and defense attorney Max’s conversation towards the end of the play:

BIGGER. Uh, but why the folks who sent me here hate me so? Long before I ever did anything, they hated me. . . . How come they hate me so?—‘Cause I’m black?

MAX. No, that’s not it, Bigger. Your being black just makes it easier to be singled out in a white man’s world.²⁵⁸

Both the play and the playbill give equal time to those who might side with Bigger and those who will fear Bigger. In effect, the playbill attempts to remain objective—just as the play does—but it cannot achieve true objectivity when it clearly presents racism without criticism. This playbill, with its scene excerpts, note from Wright, and indeed, a full-page photograph of Wright preceding his note and acting like a proverbial stamp of approval, was delivered to audiences after the show. How were audiences meant to interact with this material? It seems likely that the act of reading the play after seeing it was important to the production. Perhaps, as Ward argues, interpretation

changes from the *seeing* to the *reading* of it. In this instance, it appears that the *Native Son* producers, Orson Welles and John Houseman, wanted audiences to reflect on the show long after curtain, but in providing so-called objective views in the playbill, audiences could read into the play (and its playbill) according to their politics. Although Welles and Houseman as producers would have provided this information to Huber for printing, Playbill has always had final control over content. The *Native Son* playbill serves as a potent reminder that Playbill has rarely, if ever, taken political sides.

3.3 Fashion, Gender, and Barbara Blake

Just as Strauss feminized playbill editorials in order to engage with an emerging female majority audience, Huber furthered the perceived divide between editorials aimed towards male and female audience members. According to Guarneri, this gendering of print culture was typical for the 1930s, as “discussions of modern manhood and womanhood” consisted of “a series of individual and exciting decisions rather than as constricting societal norms or shared struggles.”²⁵⁹ This included features and ads that “communicated that men and women had very distinct roles to play in urban life,” with individual features communicating these gender expectations for men and women.²⁶⁰ In Playbill, this distinction was exemplified by the separate features for male and female readers. For men, this was the “What the Man Will Wear” column, and for women, “Fashion” and “Audience on Parade” had replaced “What the Woman Will Wear.” Each represented the goals of 1930s and 1940s masculinity and femininity. This section demonstrates how Playbill presented separate gender ideals for its audience, which was primarily white, middle- to upper-class, middle-aged individuals. With Blake writing for female readers, Playbill connected femininity with both

celebrity culture and ready-made wear, a fantasy of excess and luxury amidst the minimalist context of the interwar period. In writing for “What the Man Will Wear,” Bryan connected American masculinity with English suit wear and an aversion to casual attire. These editorials present, at various times, the tensions between expensive and affordable, celebrity and the “regular” person, and luxury and minimalism.

As stated in the previous chapter, I contend that Editor and journalist Barbara Blake likely wrote both the “Fashion” and “Audience on Parade” articles. She divorced her first husband, Joseph F. Higgins in 1944 and then married fellow Playbill employee, Associate Editor John Dow in 1945, acting as his supervisor until he left the company in 1957.²⁶¹ In 1939, Blake’s name appeared alongside Dow’s on a list of Playbill staff that was included in the playbills. Additional personnel included Ralph Trier (President), Gilbert Lucas (Vice President), Albert O. Ryerson (Vice President), and Ellis W. Meyers (Secretary). By September of 1940, Huber’s name was added to the list as “President” and Trier as Chairman of the Board.²⁶² Not only was Blake a significant member of The Playbill staff, she was the only top-ranking female employee. Although Crowther acknowledged her as an expert in her field, Playbill’s archives rarely mention her. Botto’s manuscript mentions her in relation to how popular the women’s fashion columns were, but he focuses most of his attention instead on the mystery of “Beaunash.” That Blake was in a position of some authority, writing for Playbill for twenty-five years, and yet, the company rarely mentions her, does her a disservice. In writing this chapter, I hope to bring some attention to Blake’s contributions and highlight the ways in which she was likely encouraged to write within the confines of 1930s-1940s gender expectations. As the country recovered from the restrictions of the Depression, American fashion culture juggled frugality with a desire for wealth and excess.

With Blake as Editor and responsible for two out of three of these columns, she likely had some control over the writing, and she would have been responsible for editing all three fashion columns—including “What the Man Will Wear.” Although these are notable achievements for a woman working at a male-dominated publication in 1940, Blake would have also had very little control over which editorials appeared in *The Playbill*. Generally, only one of Blake’s articles would appear in each program; although, before Huber made the change to the “theatre-by-theatre” advertising model, both columns could appear in a single longer program. The columns were different in scope and tone, so while including both did not duplicate content, the columns’ dissimilar perspectives would work as a whole. Blake’s “Audience on Parade” focused on what theatregoers were wearing to the theatre, with a special interest in “First Nighters,” or the fashions worn during a show’s premiere. “Fashion,” however, abandoned the formal attire focus of “Parade,” choosing instead to highlight casual clothes of every season—including summer columns that focused on swimwear—a far cry from the clothes one might wear to the theatre.²⁶³ Each column served different needs: “Parade” highlighted cultures of excess and tapped into a potential reader’s love of dressing up, while “Fashion” revealed trends that the audience member might want to wear on a daily basis.

Blake worked within the conventions of women’s fashion magazines in the 1930s and early 1940s, highlighting both American designers and ready-made clothing. It was common for women’s fashion magazines to emphasize the role and labor of the fashion designer, primarily to encourage American women to purchase American, rather than European, designs. Fashion magazines also depicted designers as hard working, creative geniuses in order to downplay, as Sheryl Ann Farnan notes, “[t]he stereotype of poor immigrant laborers toiling in sweatshop working conditions.”²⁶⁴ Fashion editorials focused on representing American designers as “well-

educated and refined women,” with their designs being “simultaneously American, feminine, original, practical, managerial and wealthy.”²⁶⁵ Most importantly, however, fashion journalists were careful to not provide too much detail about a garment or provide photographs for fear that someone would copy the designs:

With design pirates looming, promoting designer’s fashions was risky. This was especially evident in the visual depictions of designers and their garments. A few articles about American designs included illustrated images of the clothing, with not more than an interpretation of the garment, certainly not enough detail for a copyist to use . . . publications consistently highlighted the designer, providing name and face recognition to the reader along with biographies and anecdotes on style and design philosophy. Often, clothing was described in terms of a designer’s creative use of materials or color, but the particulars were hardly ever disclosed.²⁶⁶

Magazines provided non-realistic illustrations and subtle hints as to a garment’s construction to prohibit the rampant design plagiarism that designers feared.

Blake’s commentary in “Parade” followed these same conventions. She provided few details about the construction and fit of the clothing, but rather, focused instead on the colors and overall feeling the garments inspired:

First-night fashion leaders in these pre-holiday weeks are adding their considerable bit to the theatre scene with clothes betraying brilliant style-sense and a new daring in the use of color. The most pastel blonde beauties are attempting bold reds, and with notable success; there’s a marked leaning toward yellow in all its varying tones and blends, and more than a few trail-blazing spirits have appeared in costumes combining bright green and smoky blue; slate gray and bright magenta; baby pink and deep rich crimson.²⁶⁷

Unlike other fashion editorials that highlighted the work of designers, Blake rarely mentioned them by name. Instead, as described above, she would discuss how clothing made the audience appear and feel. This choice would have appealed to readers who could imagine themselves in their place. By not mentioning designers, readers would not be able to dismiss the column simply because they could not obtain or afford the designs. Additionally, if Blake were noticing European fashion

trends in the audience, keeping those names out of the column allowed audiences to imagine the neutrality of the designer's and clothing origin.

In the 1920s and 1930s, ready-made clothing arguably became a class equalizer. In *Screen Style: Fashion and Femininity in 1930s Hollywood*, Sarah Berry argues that ready-made fashion allowed working class women to clothe themselves in nice gowns and stockings just like any upper-class "lady." She writes, "worries that popular fashion might disrupt social class distinctions" as well as "snobbish anxiety about mistaking shop girls for ladies," were later replaced with notions that ready-made clothing could allow for personal "self-articulation, improvement, and upward mobility."²⁶⁸ Ready-made wear provided opportunities for fashion creativity that had otherwise been unavailable to women of lower socioeconomic status. This was especially significant, given women's interests in female celebrities. Working-class and middle-class women could now obtain affordable versions of their favorite celebrities' fashions. Blake's columns provided both the expensive celebrity-focused fashions that audiences could ogle, as well as ready-made items that they might find in their local department store.

Across the hundreds of playbills examined for this chapter, there were only a handful of times that Blake mentioned a designer by name, and these were in service of selling ready-made wear available at department stores. In one playbill, Blake showcases swim and beach wear, "a glamorous business for midnight swimming parties," by Texas-born, New York designer Tom Brigance made available through department store Lord & Taylor. Brigance was especially popular in the 1930s for designing mid-priced sportswear that could be manufactured easily and cheaply.²⁶⁹ Blake describes the appeal of Brigance's designs, writing, "Our own windowshopping [*sic*] produced the loot seen pictured in these pages. Here are swim and play suits; one perfect costume for a day ashore; and an example of 1940's pet whimsey in resort fashions . . . Lord &

Taylor's play suit by Brigance, offering halter top and full skirt of red-dotted white piqué, plus a wonderful red Botany flannel jacket. . . . a princesse swim suit [*sic*] in heavy white processed rubber, garlanded with green leaves."²⁷⁰ Blake wrote about a range of items at varying price points—some of which were affordable to the theatregoing public—while luxury items offered patrons a sense of escapism.

It is no coincidence that "Parade" only showcased opening night fashions; as such, "Parade" reflected the fashions of the famous and wealthy. Sometimes these columns were self-referential, describing fashions worn for earlier performances of the very show the reader was seeing. For example, "Parade" appeared in the playbill for the popular Irving Berlin revue, *Louisiana Purchase* (1940), while also commenting upon the show. Blake writes, "'Louisiana Purchase' opened at the Imperial Theatre to the accompaniment of an audience fashion display which rivalled the summer showings now going on in specialty shops all over town. First Nighters turned out in gala array for this major event of the early summer season, wearing their new sheers and cottons."²⁷¹ *Louisiana Purchase* was incredibly popular, running for over a year and 444 performances, while also averaging "\$34,000 a week;" in fact, "the show quickly established a new house record and became Main Stern's top-grossing attraction."²⁷² This "Parade" column would also be repeated in subsequent playbills for *Louisiana Purchase* as well as other productions. In this manner, "Parade" was utilized for cross-promotion: audiences were interested in both clothing and the shows celebrities (or the wealthy, social elites) were attending. Playbill re-published "Parade" columns of shows still running, so that audiences would have the opportunity to see a show that Blake had highlighted.

The few references to ready-made wear aside, Blake's "Parade" provided a surplus of information on what celebrities were wearing to the theatre. The early 1940s programs, now

somewhat removed from the frugality of the Depression era, highlighted the stars in theatre, attending theatre, and film stars that could appear in theatre one day. Programs published in the 1940-1941 theatrical season referenced Broadway musical theatre dancer and film actress Vilma Ebsen's clothing ("[her] waffle piqué skirt and jacket, both edged with crochet . . . were covered by a square-shouldered red wool cape of military aspect") and Hollywood actress Lili Damita ("a white bolero over the eyelet-embroidered piqué suit").²⁷³ Other celebrities Blake mentioned in the column included Marcy Westcott, Mary Pickford, and Vivienne Segal.²⁷⁴ For the 1941-42 season, Blake wrote about the new George Abbott production, *Best Foot Forward*, stating that audiences were "studded with famous names and faces, and garbed like a full-dress evening version of a New York Easter Parade."²⁷⁵ The 1940s focus on female celebrities—especially actresses and singers—was pervasive. As van Krieken notes, "A key feature of the role of theatre in the history of celebrity is the centrality of women to the shifting relationship between public and private life. . . . Public attention, especially male attention, was increasingly focused, not just on male philosophers, poets, writers and actors, but also on actresses, female dancers, opera singers, popular songstresses and mistresses of aristocrats."²⁷⁶ The celebrities Blake wrote about, however, were not meant to be objects of male desire; rather, they acted as advertising for a female audience. As Schweitzer argues, "More than selling a single product, actresses' endorsements of clothing items seem to have been part of a much larger attempt to convince female consumers, particularly middle-class women, of the benefits of manufactured clothing."²⁷⁷

Despite Blake's omission of designer names in the majority of the "Parade" columns, her writing still acted as advertising. In her discussion of women shoppers in the 1930s, Cheryl Roberts describes that "Women would spend a lot of time, when making their clothing choices, just looking. Looking in magazines, watching movies and cine-magazines at the cinema, viewing the

forever changing department store window. All sites of both exchange and observation.”²⁷⁸ Blake’s columns essentially acted as “window-shopping” for Playbill’s female theatregoers. Audiences reading the column might not know the exact design that Blake describes, but they might go to their department store and purchase something with a similar silhouette, color, or feel. Blake’s “Parade” utilized celebrity culture to engage its audience, while “Fashion” highlighted ready-made wear, but both were invested in advertising American-made manufactured clothing.

Although Blake wrote about garments that could be enjoyed and even obtained by women of varying social classes, she described a relatively restricted version of femininity. The figures in the fashion illustrations were tall, slender, conventionally beautiful, and appearing to be in their twenties. Although Blake wrote about slim-fitting clothing, she maintained a sense of female modesty; for example, when discussing two-piece swimwear, Blake noted that each designer offered a modest skirt or wrap for the bottom piece of the suit.²⁷⁹ Furthermore, her female subjects were not only glamorous, they were also described as “fresh and sweet,” “innocent,” and “charm[ing].”²⁸⁰ Finally, Blake never mentioned the emergence of the trouser despite the way in which they dominated female fashion culture and progress. As Berry notes, the trouser grew in popularity over the 1930s, becoming truly “mainstream” by 1940, with women wearing both pants and jeans.²⁸¹ Yet, Blake never commented on this new fashion craze, preferring instead to showcase dresses and blouse/skirt combinations. It is unclear whether these decisions were ultimately Blake’s or Huber’s, but as Editor, it seems probable that Blake had some power over what she included. Even as Blake described the new trend of women’s military-inspired suits, she did so only within the confines of the suit and skirt combination, never mentioning the trouser. Perhaps she thought they were too “masculine” for women to wear, but for many women, the

trouser provided a sense of independence and empowerment. As Elizabeth Wilson argued, “It is possible that the advance of the trouser for women is the most significant fashion change of the twentieth century.”²⁸² Blake’s exclusion of a single garment, which had become popular and ubiquitous, demonstrates a specific type of hyper-femininity that Playbill so frequently characterized—namely, one that focused on middle-class conservative gender expectations.

While women’s fashion editorials encouraged women to purchase ready-made clothing, “What the Man Will Wear” utilized English fashion trends in order to sell an idealized version of masculinity to American men. Danielle Wetmore notes that ads aimed towards men during the Great Depression created an image of a white, presumably heterosexual man who was employed. These ads “specifically introduced the businessman as an idealized version of the male consumer. These advertisements reflect and reinforce anxieties and idealizations of masculinity through both the copy and images framed in the ads.”²⁸³ These ads, Westmore argues, connect employment to men’s business suits and masculinity with job stability. She writes, “As a result, during this period, advertisers created idealized caricatures to highlight and privilege specific traits, values, and expressions and the image of the businessman in advertising explicitly linked maleness, whiteness, and success.”²⁸⁴ Alfred Stephen Bryan, writing under the “Beaunash” pseudonym, perpetuated these same masculine ideals by connecting English wealth and fashion with American suit and formal wear.

Bryan, who started in journalism working for *The New York Herald* and then *Haberdasher*, rarely wrote about casual attire, preferring instead, to focus on tuxedos, dinner jackets, and sportscoats. Like women’s fashions, men’s fashions of the 1930s offered a mix of items across different price levels. Irene Brin describes the “shapeless jackets, aged flannels, sweaters . . . signs of comfort, indifference, age-old splendor, temporary and exquisite poverty” in addition to the

proliferation of the smoking jacket—now called a “Tuxedo,” as well as the “dinner jacket,” now in the more affordable linen or piqué fabric.²⁸⁵ Although casual attire was available, Bryan regularly focused instead on “evening dress assumed by Londoners,” which included “the wing collar, not the fold-over shape, and the starched-bosom shirt, not the pleated front, with the dinner jacket and the single-breasted peak-point waistcoat, not the double-breasted square-cut style, both *en Tux* and with tails.”²⁸⁶ He also noted specific accessories, such as watches, bracelets, cufflinks, and braided belts that would suggest a man’s wealthier status.

Bryan preferred the fashions coming out of London, regularly commenting on English design’s superiority to American fashion. He wrote, “Too often, we Americans look as though we had been poured into our clothes and had forgotten to say ‘When.’ Contrariwise, the Englishman always has set hang above fit and preferred facile, fluent drape to womanish curves.”²⁸⁷ According to Bryan, English fashion offered a masculinity not seen in feminized American clothing. This interest in London fashion distinguishes his work from Blake’s, who frequently highlighted the work of American designers during this period. Bryan’s fashion sense, while noting more affordable fabrics from time to time, is inherently situated in more expensive styles than Blake’s columns denote. His writing points to a specific “type” of man; indeed, he wrote, “many men who go to the right places and belong to the right clubs are, without flourish or fanfare, adopting the present over-seas custom of turning themselves out with calculated plainness.”²⁸⁸ This minimalism may have been brought on by Depression-era frugality; yet, Bryan connects this “plainness” to being “right.” For Bryan, the “right” kind of man is assuredly one who is well-dressed; yet, this man must be one who can afford such niceties. Bryan admitted that he was writing for a demographic that was “in the discreet thirties and the, sometimes, indiscreet forties and fifties,

[and] not by youngsters in their salad-green years.”²⁸⁹ As such, Bryan’s columns could have presented for the male theatregoer the ideal representation of an upper-class white American man.

Playbill published the fashion editorials in every program, but other columns went in and out of circulation. Strauss had previously focused on the domestic sphere, with editorials providing recipes and hostessing tips, among others, but Huber eliminated these. In their stead were columns discussing the theatre, nightlife, and celebrity gossip. Perhaps the most short-lived of the 1940s-era Playbills’ columns was “How Good is Your Bridge?” (later re-named “Table For Four”) by the penname pun “The Four Aces.” The column discussed different bridge strategies, such as, “if your partner rebids two spades, you won’t know whether to bid three spades or pass. A response of two diamonds on four to the King would be unsound, and a response of two hearts would also be unsound, especially in view of the fact that partner might raise with three-card trump support.”²⁹⁰ Along with the bridge column, Playbill included a weekly bridge “problem” with the answer provided the following week. This weekly “problem-and-answer” format is similar to contemporary crossword puzzles and Sudoku problems seen in newspapers today. Bridge was incredibly popular in the U.S. in the 1930s and 1940s—a time often referred to as its “Golden Age.” In 1938, three bridge books, including *Complete Contract Bridge*, *Culbertson's Own New Contract Bridge*, and *Five Suit Bridge* were listed on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Many magazines featured bridge in some way; *Time Magazine* featured expert bridge player Charles Goren on its cover, and *Sports Illustrated* used to regularly print bridge columns. According to the American Contract Bridge League, forty-four percent of Americans played bridge in the 1940s. Those who played were typically white, older, and affluent: a demographic that matches the usual Broadway audience.²⁹¹ Like many of Playbill’s other editorials, the Bridge columns were eliminated after the start of World War II.

3.4 Playbill and World War II

Once the U.S. was involved in the war following the events at Pearl Harbor in 1941, specialty magazines were encouraged to include war-focused columns and other features. After December 7, 1941, “patriotism became a central focus of American culture. Men and women were rallied to do their part, to help the war effort. The country was united behind a common enemy. After Pearl Harbor, the cultural and societal expectation was that every American supported this war.”²⁹² The War Advertising Council (WAC) worked with the Magazine Bureau to create advertisements and features that would encourage patriotism as well as dictate people’s roles in the war. As men went to war, women were either left behind in domestic spaces or encouraged to join public spaces, frequently taking on jobs and responsibilities of the men who had gone to war. Tensions between women’s “traditional” feminine cultural roles and their increasingly “masculine” responsibilities created an odd juxtaposition of what was expected of them. Women were, at once, meant to take on the roles vacated by men, while also continuing to be a good wife, girlfriend, mother—all while looking beautiful. Wartime magazines aimed at female readers acted as a kind of propaganda for the way women were expected to function in society. As Marilyn Hegarty notes, “During the war years, print media functioned as a site of mobilization and control where the tangled themes of sexualized morale maintenance and transgressive sexuality played out in all their complexities and ambiguities.”²⁹³ Women’s specialty magazines were especially efficient at prescribing roles for their readers; yet, these expectations were often conflicting. She should be a good wife and mother, set a nice table, and know how to work with meager rations, but she should also go to work and fulfill the jobs left behind by servicemen. She should be sexy and appealing to male soldiers, but she must not have sex with them.

Playbill's editorial content in light of this wartime print media context serves as an interesting case study, as it frequently ignored, dismissed, or pushed against what was being published in other specialty magazines. For years, Playbill had linked its content with that of the magazine industry, and women's magazines, in particular; yet, with the advent of World War II, Playbill continued to highlight theatre news, celebrity features, and luxury. Playbill likely included wartime propaganda/patriotism when it was necessitated by the government or when producers created war-related content. In essentially remaining silent on the war, Playbill stayed politically neutral, providing escapism to their audiences.

Women's magazines, likely encouraged by the WAC and Magazine Bureau, published hundreds of articles in 1942 about the expected or encouraged roles that women were meant to fulfill during the war. Articles appeared in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Vogue*, among others, and discussed rationing and cooking strategies for the war-savvy housewife. This 1942 issue of *Vogue*, for example, explains how a woman might represent meal traditions at holidays while also being mindful of resources:

Now I would like to make a suggestion for us in America. By all means, let us keep as many of the more colourful habits and customs of the Old World as we can, but let us go our own way in adapting them to the needs of a country that has been so blessed among the nations that it has been able to elevate eating to a civilized daily habit, and is no longer under the obligation to indulge in occasional gorgings²⁹⁴

These columns not only dictated to women how they were meant to adhere by the new restrictions imposed by the government, but also, the ways in which they could still fulfill their roles as wives and mothers. *Harper's Bazaar*, for example, had its own "holiday" issue, in which writers explained the various ways women could still put on a lovely dinner while also respecting wartime rationing policies ("This Year's Toast" and "Hang the Goose High," among other columns).²⁹⁵

Additional columns in the *Ladies' Home Journal* included "For Mothers in Wartime," which explained the important role their sons were fulfilling in the war effort.²⁹⁶

Women's magazines not only told women how to cook and set a table while under wartime constraints, they also explained how a romantic partner should behave. "This is the Army, Miss Jones," written by Corporal Marion Hargrove for *Vogue*, chided the female partners of male soldiers who make "surprise visits" to camp, saying that this ultimately distracts soldiers from doing their important work. Rather than surprising your soldier boyfriend or husband, it says, women can schedule short visits where they stay at a "guest house" at camp. During these pre-approved visits, women will be shown off not only to their partner but also to the other soldiers at base. Hargrove writes, "It should be fairly apparent that almost as much as your soldier wants to see you, he wants to show you off to his military comrades. It is inconceivable to the smitten soldier that anyone else in his organization has a girl half so beautiful or so charming as his, so he wants to impress his fellows mightily with you."²⁹⁷ Women visiting military bases were seen as objects that could lift the spirits of the soldiers and whose femininity was seen as a reprieve to the masculinity at the base. Hargrove tells the potential visitor, "For the lucky soldier and for his impressionable companions, therefore, the visitor's dresses should be Feminine—and should be dresses. It is a highly unusual soldier who wants to see his true-love traipsing around the reservation in a pair of slacks, no matter how much you think that slacks flatter you."²⁹⁸ Although women's magazines had always prescribed gender ideals and the ways women might attract men, during the war, gender expectations were even more pronounced:

. . . official wartime discourse included plans to use female sexuality in support of the war effort. Stereotypical images of wartime women and men, full of assumptions about male and female sexuality, were commonplace in official discussions. The wartime state's interpretation of sexuality . . . valorized a militarized type of masculine sexuality, reinforcing a persistent notion that 'manly' soldiers would regularly seek out women for sex.²⁹⁹

These popular women's magazines, then, acted as propaganda, convincing women to willingly portray objects of sexual desire for not only their male partners, but also, the other soldiers around them. Yet, despite the fact that women were encouraged to act as objects of sexual desire, they were also cautioned to not act on any sexual interest. A column in *Vogue* reprimanded any woman who might feel "sex confusion" and a "patriotic duty to be more than friendly" with male soldiers, while a *Ladies' Home Journal* short story featured a young woman who rejected the advances of a soldier she meets after he asks, "Why don't you be patriotic and let me take you out to dinner?"³⁰⁰ Magazines asked women to be sexually desirable but to not actually have sex. Magazines worked "to call upon women to meet their national obligations as wartime citizens, it simultaneously maintained and enlarged an ideology of traditional femininity," which was pure and virginal.³⁰¹

Although women's magazines were including wartime advice for their readership, *Playbill* all but erased the war's presence from its pages. Most of the *Playbill*'s columns continued with previously established trends, including the theatre-focused editorials "At this Theatre" and "After the Theatre," both of which focused heavily on entertainment, theatre, and nightlife. Content included everything from the newest nightclubs and other shows theatregoers might want to see. These columns continued the practice of previous years in which *The Playbill* wielded theatre culture, New York life, and high-class to great success with a readership who had money and for whom these columns would appeal. A recent addition during the war was another theatre-focused article called, "Behind the Scenes," which was included in longer programs, and listed production trivia, such as how many breakfasts the cast of *Life With Father* had consumed during their 1100 performances and how many costume changes the lead actress had to do during the course of a run.³⁰² All of these entertainment-focused columns never mentioned the war, nation, or patriotism; rather, these columns acted as escapism.

Playbill's fashion editorials followed a similar practice of effectively erasing mentions of the war. Blake continued to write about designers, fashion trends, and celebrities in "Parade," with a focus on evening gowns, formal attire, and accessories. One mention in the *Star and Garter* playbill described film actress Mary Brian, who wore an "ostrich feather headdress seen alongside as an accompaniment for her simple black crepe dress and marten jacket" for a night out at *Strip for Action* (1942).³⁰³ A sketch of the headdress accompanied Blake's column, as was the custom. Blake describes the dress as "simple," which may have been a subtle nod to the fabric restrictions imposed by the American War Production Board. The dress was made of crepe, which was a common replacement fabric for those that were rationed (namely wool and silk).³⁰⁴ It is possible that Brian's outfit was reflective of the wartime restrictions imposed upon American women. The ostrich accessory, however, suggested luxury. In total, the outfit combined both luxury elements and the requested minimalism of wartime constraints. Yet, Blake did not reference the outfit as proof of Brian's ability to work within her constraints. Likewise, she did not suggest that other women follow her lead. Rather, the column utilized celebrity to appeal to female theatregoers without dictating their behavior.

Blake's columns frequently presented the intersection of luxury and frugality, reflecting what many of her readership might have been wondering: namely, how they might still look "good" working within and around material cutbacks. Blake frequently discussed designers who were working as if there were no fabric rationing policies in place:

Any possible future evidences of wartime skimping in the design and manufacture of women's clothes (although certainly it must be admitted there has been little indication so far that curtailments are going to be visible to the naked eye), should be more than balanced by the luxury and opulence of the seasons' furs. This richness, which is the outstanding characteristic of new fur collections everywhere in town, is readily detected in budget furs as in the true luxury groups³⁰⁵

Blake's focus on how women might still look great while using budget-friendly materials likely appealed to a demographic that was used to high-end materials, but for whom these same luxury items were no longer accessible.

Although Blake gave credit to designers who could create new work while under fabric restrictions, she hated one fashion trend that was important during the 1940s: the woman's suit. Blake only wrote about women's suits once, stating that women's fashion magazines have essentially talked the subject to death and that her reluctant addition to the proverbial pile might "challenge the patience of women who have been reading their fashion news faithfully."³⁰⁶ Blake was not incorrect, though. Suits were included in several women's magazines, including *Harper's Bazaar*, which featured the suit under the header "Suit Salute," and *Vogue*, which referred to the woman's suit as an "American look."³⁰⁷ Blake's distaste for the suit during a time in which everyone seemed to be advertising them is especially interesting. Although Blake did not refer to them as "victory suits," assuredly, they must have been. This was the "most iconic look of war-time [which] was patriotically called the victory suit."³⁰⁸ Suits were not only patriotic, in that they were frequently military-inspired, but they also repurposed abandoned fabrics from men's suits—since men would not need their suits if they were at war. Wearing the "victory suit," then, was a visual representation that a woman was supporting the war effort. Of course, as the suit has historically been a masculine piece, the women's suit, by association, is a combination of both masculine and feminine. However, Blake always wrote about dresses and skirts, formal gowns, and sometimes, sportswear—all fashion trends that were popular prior to the 1940s, in which women's fashions "reflected the American culture and this ideology of femininity. The silhouette for women's fashion during this period was a slim, more body-conscious silhouette . . . and sensual eveningwear inspired by Hollywood film actresses, all which further expressed a traditional face

of femininity.”³⁰⁹ Blake’s condemnation of the suit suggests that she was not only holding on to fashions of the past but perpetuating how clothing communicates femininity. Blake’s ideas, then, are not so different than the “This is the Army, Miss Jones” column, in which women were asked to dress “Feminine”—with dresses and dresses only. Blake’s dislike of the suit represents the contradictions of women’s roles during the war. They were meant to join the workforce, taking on more masculine-coded roles and responsibilities; yet, they were meant to stay feminine.

Although Playbill’s editorials erased most mentions of the war, government-sponsored ads began appearing in the Playbill, thereby contradicting the other “fluff” pieces. After the events of Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt created the Office of War Information (OWI), whose purpose it was to provide war-related information to the public.³¹⁰ Much of this was distributed in the form of print media, and so the OWI was likely responsible for the war-related content published as part of The Playbill. One of these additions was a warning placed in the December 22, 1941 *Watch on the Rhine* playbill. The full-page warning provided information to patrons should an attack occur, stating that New York City would be a difficult target for air attack; yet, “as the nerve center of the nation [it] presents a tempting target.”³¹¹ Similar to other government-issued warnings, the page tells the reader that, in the event of an attack, they should “Put out the lights—they may guide enemy planes. Pull down shades. If bombs are falling in your immediate vicinity, shut off the control cock on the inlet to the gas meter. Stay away from windows and outside walls...”³¹² The bottom of the page reads, “Plans have been made for the entire theatre district. The staff of this theatre has been trained to insure your safety. Should there be an air raid warning during the time that you are in the theatre, stay in your seats. That is most important. Information and instructions will be given you [*sic*].”³¹³ These theatre-specific instructions appear in a different font than the rest of the page, suggesting that someone else wrote them. Although it is possible that Playbill

created this content, it seems more likely that someone acting from the League of New York Theatres did, since they wrote other wartime content appearing in other playbills (i.e. the Stage Door Canteen). These pieces created a wartime presence even without Playbill including anything in their editorials. These juxtapositions between jarring, wartime ads and warnings as opposed to the war-neutral editorials likely created a cognitive dissonance in which audiences experienced both reality and fantasy all while flipping through their playbills.

Along with wartime advertisements, actors and other industry leaders began discussing the war in the programs, while Playbill's editorials remained silent. In a 1942 playbill, musical theatre actor Alfred Drake's biography stated, "Alfred Drake (Robert) had an earlier stage venture this season shortened by the Pacific crisis. He was rehearsing a leading role in 'The admiral Takes a Wife' when along came December 7th and the play had to be cancelled because—of all things—it dealt with social life in Pearl Harbor."³¹⁴ Additionally, repeated in several programs, was a full-page statement from Rachel Crothers, President of the American Theatre Wing, titled, "Curtain Up For Victory!," in which she described the opening of the "Stage Door Canteen" in the 44th Street Theatre Building. The canteen was provided "rent free" by Lee Shubert as a refuge for servicemen to enjoy free entertainment as well as "a warm human welcome from the heart of the theatre."³¹⁵ These war references were few, but those that managed to make it into the playbill refuted the "business as usual" mentality exhibited by the company's editorial content.

Playbill began acknowledging the war explicitly in 1942 with a full-page advertisement. The ad depicted a silhouette of the Empire State Building in a dark, shadowy gradient, with the text "Don't Blackout Your Name!" splayed across it in large letters. The ad argues the importance of additional advertising during these difficult times and cites language from the U.S. Department of Commerce:

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce bulletin, DOMESTIC COMMERCE, “Manufacturers in Great Britain are safe-guarding their investment in brand names by continued advertising,” and “brand names can and should be kept alive in the minds of those to whom the manufacturer must look for business in the post-war period.”

Today, as never before, the primary idea in the selection of media must be economy. THE PLAYBILL with its large concentration of circulation among influential people, presents the efficient method for content advertising at a reasonable cost.³¹⁶

It is evident that The Playbill was struggling financially during the war. Playbill seemed to have been having trouble gaining and keeping advertisers. It is also notable that Playbill’s first significant foray into the war conversation was one in which they were asking potential advertisers to purchase space in the program. In the 1943-1944 theatrical season, Playbill started adding war bond program covers, which depicted an enlarged image of U.S. war bonds with the phrase, “Buy one of these bonds today” across the top of the page.³¹⁷ It seems likely that these covers were government-mandated, but their usage was inconsistent; for example, these covers did not appear for every program within a single production. Therefore, one production might have the “war bond” cover one week, while another production would have it the following week. This process was likely rotational, so that Playbill could appease the governmental policy without eliminating playbill covers entirely. By the 1940s, actors’ photographs were appearing on playbill covers. Actor contracts, and sometimes deals with producers, dictated which photographs were used on playbill covers. As such, they had a significant role to play in compensating actors (via disseminating their image to more people), but they also appealed to audiences, who enjoyed receiving celebrity photographs. Sometimes these photographs would showcase an actor out-of-character; other times, photographs would depict production scenes. These photographs allowed audiences to immerse themselves in the world of theatre and celebrity, and perhaps, they even forgot for a moment about the war. “War bonds” covers, however, brought reality back to audiences. Since these covers appeared at all productions, but cyclically, an audience member

would never know what program they would receive, thereby greatly altering their experience of the show via the playbill.

3.4.1 This is the Army Playbill

Only one playbill included editorials about the war, and that was the propaganda-heavy playbill for *This is the Army* (1942). A musical revue by James McColl and Irving Berlin, *Army* was a sequel to Berlin's previous World War I revue, *Yip Yip Yaphank* (1919) and starred an all-soldier cast. General George Marshall gave Berlin permission to stage the production as a fundraiser for the Army Relief Fund, and the show has been called "one of the greatest morale boosters of the war."³¹⁸ The show sold out its twelve-week run and then toured for an additional three years.³¹⁹ *Army* was performed for millions of GIs in the United States, Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific as well as for President Roosevelt and the British royal family. Of the show, *New York Times*' Lewis Nichols wrote, "On a hot night of last July, 'This Is the Army' marched into town, capturing it with no delay whatsoever and stirring up a general jubilation which has not ceased, even though the show long since has gone."³²⁰ *Army* was "met with virtually unanimous praise on both patriotic and aesthetic grounds and generated numerous articles detailing both its inception and reception. The show was hailed as an artistic success."³²¹ Theatre scholar Laurie Schmeling argues that *Army* was a huge success because of its nationalism—by being "the most overtly American musical" of the period.³²² Every page of *Army*'s playbill functioned as propaganda. Unlike other playbills, every *Army* playbill utilized the war bonds cover, with an added American flag image and additional text saying, "United We Stand."³²³ Inside the playbill, patriotic editorials and military cartoons replaced the typical editorial content. Playbill also included a short statement written by Major General Irving J. Phillipson explaining the Army

Relief Fund and the ways audiences could contribute, and there was also a full-page “Thank You” to those who volunteered for or donated to the production. These included the major theatrical unions, including the Theatrical Costume Workers Union, Actor’s Equity Association, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, and the United Scenic Artists Union, among others. It is unclear how much Playbill was involved with the program or whether they still had to pay a privilege fee to The Broadway Theatre to have the programs distributed there. Playbill’s name was not listed among the theatrical institutions responsible for the production, so *Army* may have functioned like any other show.

Several cartoons appeared in the *Army* playbill, utilizing satire to express gender expectations during the war. These cartoons, contributed for free by several different *New Yorker* artists, including Constantin Alajalov, P. Soglow, Whitney Darrow, Jr., and Carl Rose, among others, represented women as objects of desire. One cartoon, created by Alajalov, showed an army soldier with his arms around a woman on either side of him, while two sailors looked on in envy, suggesting that Army men “get” all the beautiful women while sailors do not. Garrett Price’s cartoon, as another example, acknowledged that women could serve in the military, while also sexualizing them. The cartoon depicted four women standing around a chair, on which a female officer’s uniform was laying. One of the women is seen wearing a strapless brassiere, pantie girdle, and stockings, as she speaks with a fully clothed woman, who appears to be a U.S. Army nurse (it is difficult to tell as the artist drew minimal clothing features). The two women drink from a wine bottle that is also shown in the cartoon, while the other two women are in civilian clothing and appear to be discussing the woman who is wearing only undergarments. The caption reads, “Oh, the captain never takes a drink in uniform.”³²⁴ Although the cartoon provided the undressed woman with an authoritative rank, it also removed from her body the very elements that

communicate that authority to others. It is possible that Price designed the cartoon as a knee-jerk reaction to the Army's founding of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in May 1942—only two months prior to *Army*'s premiere.

Although Blake had consistently excluded wartime fashion in her columns, the overt theming of the *This is the Army* playbill likely forced her to write patriotically. She writes, “Designers in all fields of fashion are making common cause this summer, adapting the patriotic motif to every possible use and expressing it in every possible sort of material.”³²⁵ She continues to discuss handkerchiefs made from parachute material, bags perfect for concealing the picture of your overseas loved one, and a golden and diamond-encrusted pin that any woman who had a “soldier in the family might want to sport.”³²⁶ All other playbills published in the same week as *This is the Army* erased any reference to the war. Blake's “Fashion” column, for example, provided advice to schoolgirls returning to campuses and the college appropriate clothing they might sport.³²⁷ In later playbills, Blake continued her typical writing practice to comment on actresses' clothing choices. Following *Army*, Playbill added a new editorial that focused on make-up, which described how the general female theatregoer might mimic celebrities' “looks.”³²⁸ Rather than continuing the successes brought on by *This is the Army* with additional military-inspired, pro-war print material, Playbill chose to highlight cultures of celebrity, luxury, fashion, and beauty. Playbill made these decisions because they wanted to create a reputation as a Broadway, celebrity, and actor-focused company.

By January of 1943, Playbill allowed war references in Bryan's “What the Man Will Wear,” which frequently referred to both “disoriented times” and an overall “gloom” of the day.³²⁹ He noted, for example, that “Today, fashion has had to re-focus its binoculars, so to speak, and look at dress with more reason and realism. We are in an era when flourish and fanfare belong to

the fighting forces doing their Hercules job to cleanse the Augean stables of globe-grabbers.”³³⁰ He also commented about the “Curtailments wisely imposed by the times” dictating fashion options, and he suggested that “this is a military man’s world.”³³¹ Notably, Bryan’s column stands alone as the only war content in the playbill, suggesting that the male readers of Bryan’s column were viewed as wanting to know the reality of the situation, whereas, the female demographic would enjoy the fantasy of celebrity and fashion. However, were a theatregoer to read both Blake’s and Bryan’s columns, they would have experienced a bizarre cognitive dissonance in which the tones of each article conflicted. However, if only reading one article, the reader would have quite a different experience. It seems evident that Playbill intended these two articles to remain deeply gendered, and perhaps in doing so, they intended them to be deeply segregated. Assuming that female audiences read Blake’s article, while male audiences read Bryan’s, the distinct differences between the two styles would have caused the latter to be, in many ways, more in touch with the social contexts of the time, while female audiences were left reading more escapist fare. This suggests a kind of tip-toeing around female audiences, despite the reality that women were a huge part of the war effort.

3.4.2 (Advertising) Women and the War Effort

In many ways, The Playbill’s continued exclusion of propaganda contradicted the advertisements contained within its pages. One full-page ad by cosmetics line Germaine Monteil depicted a single, bright star in the center of a darkened page. It read, “A plan for a post-war world.”³³² Another Germaine Monteil ad suggested that their face powder would not “build morale or help preserve our way of life,” but it would “make you look prettier.”³³³ Camel cigarettes initially depicted servicemen smoking their cigarettes; later, these would be replaced by ads that

showed both male and female military selling Camel cigarettes.³³⁴ Although ads featuring male soldiers were common, an increasing number of ads featuring female military began appearing in 1942. By 1943, women participated in every branch of the military, and in total, “about 350,000 women served in the military branch during the war.”³³⁵ It was also common for magazines to essentially ask women “if they were ‘doing their part.’”³³⁶ The *Ladies’ Home Journal*, for example, informed women that if they failed to take jobs in ammunition factories or other essential industries, their “menfolk fighting on distant atolls are likely to get slaughtered.”³³⁷ These editorials and ads acted as propaganda for war participation and patriotism as well as an idealized form of wartime femininity. Military women were expected to remain feminine, as “Recruitment posters for the female military branches depicted women who were beautiful and chic in their tailored uniforms. Military propaganda used the attractiveness of the uniforms as inducement for recruitment . . . Although these women would be taking on what was perceived as a masculine role, they should still look feminine.”³³⁸

Playbill ads reflected this same concept. For example, an ad for Cutex nail polish read, “Patriotic Women! Wear Cutex,” while a female soldier saluted.”³³⁹ A female soldier in uniform and a dark lip appeared in one notable Elizabeth Arden ad for lipstick: “She had a certain elusive charm that defied description . . . The young woman wears a Burnt Sugar Lipstick—most effective with khaki...many of her friends complement their uniforms of blue with the youthful vigor of Redwood . . . Every woman should have at least four essential shades to harmonize with a wide range of . . . Service uniforms.”³⁴⁰ Yet another ad depicted a female soldier in uniform with an inset below showing the undergarments that were most suitable for a female soldier. As if to say *this is what she is wearing underneath*, the ad also noted, “Hard training may entitle you to wear a uniform—but only the right foundation can make a uniform look its best. Look younger, feel more

fit.”³⁴¹ These examples point to the ways in which wartime advertising created prescriptive roles for women; indeed, “The portrayals of women in the media during this period were the direct result of an intense cooperation between the advertising industry, business leaders, and the federal government which redefined women’s roles in reaction to war time economic and political requirements.”³⁴² Women were meant to look beautiful and seductive, while also frequently working in the military.

Ads did more than depict female military enjoying cigarettes, cosmetics, and underwear; they also, in Camel’s case, provided insight into women’s work in the war. Between 1943-1944, Camel purchased two-page advertisements and titled them “Women in the War.” The first of the series featured Adeline Gray, who performed the first “live test” of a new Army parachute. The ad was written in an editorial style, acknowledging Gray’s accomplishment and featuring a photograph of her holding a lit (presumably Camel) cigarette. A section of the ad reads, “No wonder the first thing Adeline Gray did when she reached the ground was to light up a Camel.”³⁴³ Although the ad recognizes Gray’s accomplishment, it also reminds the reader that she is feminine, stating, “Now a girl’s life can’t be all ‘chutes and ships, can it? There must be moments now and then for soft lights...sweet music...a table for two...and two cigarettes on one match.”³⁴⁴ Another Camel ad titled, “Co-ed leaves Campus to fill a Man’s job,” singles out Patricia Garner, who worked as a marshaler for the Pan American Airways. The ad says that Garner took the job so that a man would be free to join the war effort. The ad both acknowledges her labor while also infantilizing her, stating, “The . . . captain eases his big Clipper down. Through the cockpit window he sees a little girl behind the big flags guiding him to the ramp. She’s Patricia Garner, and . . . Behind those flags in her hands there’s a flag in her heart...the Stars and Stripes she’s servicing by working at a war job. A *man’s* job!”³⁴⁵ These ads perfectly reflected the context in which

women were a necessary part of the war effort—made to perform “men’s work”—while also remaining feminine and able to dutifully step aside when needed.

3.4.3 Patriotism in the Program

Following *This is the Army*, there was only one production for which Playbill published a pro-war article. This production was *Something for the Boys* (1943), a Cole Porter musical revue starring Ethel Merman, in which a family converts a ranch house into a boarding house for soldiers’ wives. Intended as a patriotic revue, the show’s program featured a unique article, titled, “Playwrights and the War,” written by playwright and librettist Russel Crouse. In it, Crouse states that “Playwrights have a selfish reason for desiring victory for the United Nations in the World War—a democratically selfish reason.”³⁴⁶ This selfish reason, he continues, is that a potential fascist takeover in the U.S. would lead to theatre censorship, and therefore, playwrights would certainly be affected:

. . . if the Nazis were to capture New York tomorrow morning not more than two or three of the plays now running on Broadway would be open tomorrow night. The others would be closed either because they contain some expression of democratic philosophy to which Herr Schickelgruber would object or because they have been written, produced or acted by persons of whom he would not approve.³⁴⁷

Crouse further argues against this presumed Nazi-induced censorship, and he likens greatness to freedom of expression, suggesting that no good plays have come out of Germany, Italy, or Japan since Fascism began. He also compares Nazism with U.S. slavery, and suggests that it was the American theatre that helped to overturn people’s opinions about slavery (namely through *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*). Finally, Crouse states that playwrights believe in the “freedom of the theatre,” that “you theatregoers want us to say what we believe in our plays.”³⁴⁸ The article is a letter to the reader and an argument for what he refers to as an American “way of life.” Yet, he argues that

these plays (and presumably his letter as well) are not “propaganda;” rather, the plays detail the elements of life that Americans hold dear.

Crouse’s article was one of a series of columns arranged by the Writers’ War Board, a private organization established by mystery writer Rex Stout, who had begun the organization two days following the attack on Pearl Harbor at the request of the U.S. Treasury Department. Among the organizations that assisted with the Writers’ War Board was the American Red Cross, the Army Emergency Relief, and most notably for these purposes, the American Theatre Wing.³⁴⁹ The Writers’ War Board purported to disseminate information that was essentially propaganda, despite their great interest in eschewing the label. A second contribution by the Writers’ War Board titled, “Case History of a Non-Combatant,” written by Richard Rodgers—of Rodgers and Hammerstein fame—discussed his guilt over not being able to join the war effort. He writes, “Received a letter from Washington saying sorry, they had enough composers flying bombers. . . . I developed a handsome sense of frustration and couldn’t look a man in uniform in the lapel.”³⁵⁰ Rodgers’s contribution came after the incredibly popular *Oklahoma!* (1943); as such, his endorsement of the Writers’ Board would have likely been very effective to the general theatregoer. Another of these series was written by George S. Kaufman. Titled “Words Without Music,” the column was a bulleted list of opinions, including “Mr. Hitler’s recent speeches continue to blame the Russian situation on the weather...Jewish weather, obviously” and “Mr. Roosevelt and Congress, at this writing, seem to be in the position of a husband and wife who are not speaking. Sooner or later one of them will have to apologize.”³⁵¹ He also criticizes the “American diehards” who only want to withdraw from the war, and according to Kaufman, there are many Americans who would not mind if those dissenters died.

A final contribution appeared in a November 1943 program. Written by Clifton Faidman and titled, “Nasty System, I Hate You!,” the column criticized the argument that individuals have nothing to do with war. Faidman writes, “I have been listening attentively to my fellow-citizens who tell me that we are not fighting individual Germans and Japanese, but only a System; and hence . . . we should hate the System, not the people.”³⁵² He goes on to say, “For example, recently the System (disguised as German men, women, and children) lynched two American prisoners of war. The other day that same System (in the completely irrelevant form of Japanese soldiers) operated without anesthesia on an American prisoner of war, and then, as very slowly he screamed his life away, stood and watched.”³⁵³ The column continues, describing terrible events and sarcastically explaining it all away as merely a part of some “System.” This column, perhaps more than the others in the series, is performative propaganda within the pages of a previously apolitical playbill. Without knowing the specifics of how these entries came to be included in *The Playbill*, though, it remains unclear whether the company chose to support this outward display of anti-Axis sentiment. It is possible that, given the government’s support of the Writers’ War Board, Huber was left with little choice. Perhaps Huber reflected on the apolitical rhetoric Playbill had been publishing over the last two years and decided that circumstances dictated that the old way of relying on entertainment and “fluff” content was not enough. It is possible that Huber thought that it was time to send a more overt message—one that was supported by Playbill. These columns were propaganda, expressing American ideals of freedom and creativity and condemning fascism, but they were also all written by theatre professionals. With these editorials, Huber discovered a way to communicate a patriotic, nation-based sentiment all while remaining a theatre magazine—with theatre-focused editorials—which is what he aimed for all along.

3.5 Final Thoughts about the Archive

Prior to the war, Huber made connections with the New York Public Library, the Museum of the City of New York, and the libraries at Harvard and Princeton University, for which he supplied free theatre programs for archival purposes. As Crowther wrote, “every year the Harvard trustees acknowledge this generosity with a formal and dignified card. This always pleases the boys down on Wooster Street. Sort of makes it unanimous, as it were.”³⁵⁴ Giving away free theatre programs is a far cry from Strauss’s need to only print the number of playbills required by each theatre every week. That Huber was willingly providing additional programs probably meant that printing had become more affordable, and the publicity gained from giving away playbills was likely positive. Regardless, Huber’s decision to begin giving playbills to various American theatre archives is a significant step for theatre history and scholarship. This is a tradition that Playbill continues today, stemming from the processes put in place by Huber in the 1930s. It is not an overstatement to say that Huber’s decision to donate playbills is directly responsible for the existence of this dissertation.

Huber often gets eclipsed by his uncle, but he was the first of many Playbill CEOs that wanted the publication to be *about* theatre and *for* theatre. Huber utilized entertainment content in his version of *The Playbill* as a way of constructing a company identity, but also, he wielded this content as escapist fare during a difficult time in the nation. In his manuscript, Botto claims that Playbill eliminated these entertainment-focused features once the war began, despite the fact that the company continued publishing columns based on theatre, nightlife, and celebrities well into the war.³⁵⁵ Botto and his manuscript, acting as historian and archive, respectively, presented a revisionist history that would ideally make Playbill appear more concerned about the war. Botto also claimed that Playbill happily participated in the government mandated paper rationing and

recycling, his statement eliding the fact that this would have been a requirement, as the government asked all magazines and newspapers to reduce paper usage so that more paper could be converted into boxes for National Defense. Botto's assertion that Playbill willingly participated in paper rationing and eliminated superfluous editorials points to the ways in which Playbill has crafted a narrative *about* Playbill. The company has always remained as politically neutral as possible, so their choice to exclude the war is unsurprising, but Botto's revisionist approach to this history reveals how important it was for Botto, and for Playbill at large, that the company be seen as morally "good."

4.0 Playbill from the 1950s through the 1970s: Establishing a National Brand

At theatre's height of popularity in the 1920s and 1930s, Playbill was circulating 16 million playbills annually, but the number dropped to 8.4 million in 1950.³⁵⁶ Both the increased popularity of television and the financial and aesthetic deterioration of the area around Times Square during the midcentury period led to the explicit decline of the Broadway theatre. Audiences could get entertainment from the presumed safety and comfort of their own homes without having to pay Broadway prices, and the rise and expansion of the regional theatre movement meant that those who wanted to see live theatre could do so without going to so-called "seedy" Broadway. As Broadway audience numbers dropped, Playbill was forced to find alternative avenues of keeping the business afloat. The CEOs working within this period, roughly the 1950s through the 1970s, navigated the presumed divide between New York/Broadway and the broader national theatrical landscape. Huber relied on Playbill's connections to print culture, and specifically, specialty magazines. Stevens rebranded Playbill's image by changing both its name and logo, while also pushing Playbill's legacy and reliability as an older company. Gilman Kraft expanded Playbill's reach into regional theatre markets, thereby establishing the brand as one that serves *all* American theatres. Finally, Publisher Arthur Birsh, working under Metromedia, Inc., navigated the New York theatre community so deftly as to further inscribe Playbill's reputation and importance as a valuable New York institution. These years firmly established Playbill's recognizable and reputable brand as one that is connected to Broadway's excellence as well as the ideals of a broader American theatrical culture.

4.1 Television and a Changing Broadway

During the transitional years between the war and the 1950s, television became a chief competitor to attending live theatre, which affected Playbill's business. Initially, television programming was similar to radio programming, consisting of primarily "'live' programs" such as "sporting events . . . second-rate motion pictures . . . some newscasts, and demonstrations and discussion programs."³⁵⁷ During the U.S.'s involvement in WWII, television programming was mostly relegated to news reports. Following the end of the war, however, several television stations returned to broadcasting in the U.S. and more creative shows appeared.³⁵⁸ Over the course of the decade, television sets became more affordable, and audiences had a convenient and accessible method of entertainment. In fact, "audiences . . . [were] able to choose, freely, from a range of entertainment and informational programming that ha[d] never before been available to them in such profusion anywhere, any time, [*sic*] by any means, at any cost."³⁵⁹ The newness of television, its accessibility, and the diversification of programming within the postwar period brought a kind of "golden age" of television.³⁶⁰ Just as film had once been theatre's primary competition, television was here to offer viewers something they could not get from theatre. Steven Adler notes in *On Broadway*, "in a matter of a relatively few years after World War II, Cold War conservatism and the advent of television occasioned a change in the theatrical scene, first in New York City and then around the nation. Broadway, like the rest of the country, grew more cautious in its cultural diet. Television siphoned off a sizable portion of both talent and audience alike in a way that radio and film had not."³⁶¹ Audiences grew more discerning about the theatre they would attend, which meant that fewer producers wanted to take risks, leading to an increasingly conservative commercial Broadway theatre.

Television was not the only reason for the decline in audience numbers. Times Square was dealing with an image problem. The area was falling into disrepair, gaining a reputation for being a haven of prostitutes and hustlers. By 1960, the *New York Times* published an article titled “Life on W. 42nd St. A Study in Decay” in which Times Square was referred to as “the ‘worst’ in town.”³⁶² By the 1960s, “the spirit of artistic plenty had completely withered. Occasioned by the sad confluence of urban deterioration and economic blight, the areas had given way to tarnished and depressing parade of petty criminals, drug dealers and users, prostitutes of every stripe, and street hustlers.”³⁶³ Although audiences still attended Broadway shows, there was a significant decrease in the numbers of theatregoers. With increasing budgetary concerns, Broadway producers were less inclined to take risks, which meant that the commercial theatre became safe and conservative. As Elizabeth Wollman states:

Economically speaking, this decade was profoundly unpleasant for commercial theater in New York City. An Equity strike in 1960 resulted in a sharp increase in the cost of production. Tickets for Broadway shows subsequently skyrocketed, and, at the same time, producers often drastically reduced the size of choruses and cut corners on scenery and props, thereby offering much less for much more. Financially strapped producers grew wary of anything but the most conservative “escapist fare aimed at middle-aged businessmen and theatre parties from the suburbs”; this, in turn, resulted in season after season of derivative, disappointing and forgettable shows. This vicious cycle continued to alienate young people and to perpetuate Broadway’s reputation as increasingly irrelevant and out of touch.³⁶⁴

Martin Halliwell echoes Wollman’s statement that financial pressures furthered Broadway’s descent into conservative productions. Halliwell notes that “Broadway became the victim of its own conservatism in the 1950s with its impulse for entertainment smothering much of its creativity. This drive was fueled by the fear that theatre-goers might be lost to television, particularly with white middle-class couples moving out of inner cities to nearby suburbs to raise families.”³⁶⁵ Indeed, as the city’s reputation worsened, “the urban middle class” fled “from the dangerous city to the safer and more salubrious suburbs,” which meant that Broadway producers

could no longer depend upon their typical demographic.³⁶⁶ Furthermore, as rising costs of Broadway pushed many theatre producers out of Broadway and into film and television, fewer producers were able and willing to take financial risks. An article published in 1960 stated:

A musical that would have cost about \$80,000 to produce twenty years ago and could have run for about \$20,000 a week (including theatre rental) would cost about \$400,000 to produce today, and could not run for less than \$40,000 a week. . . . Over the same span of years theatre ticket prices have doubled and . . . as a consequence of the high price of theatre tickets 500,000 fewer people went to the theatre in 1959 than in 1958.³⁶⁷

As a result of this negative reputation, Broadway attendance decreased, and producers were left wondering how to appeal to their disappearing demographic.

Although the works produced on Broadway during the 1950s and 1960s were largely conservative, those that were successful are now touted as a part of the “Golden Age” of musical theatre, in which famous duo Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rodgers pioneered new aspects of musical storytelling and created some of the most successful and long-running works on Broadway. Although many current theatre fans see the Golden Age as an era in which the greatest musicals were created, the period is also marked by a kind of homogenization brought on by producers unwilling to take creative risks for fear of financial failure. Following the success of *Oklahoma!* in 1943, many producers wanted to reproduce the storytelling and structural conventions established by the popular show. Most musicals during this time, for example, incorporated a lead couple, which was played as a serious romance, and a secondary, more comedic couple. In addition to these romantic plots, these musicals would follow Rodgers and Hammerstein II’s lead and include thematic elements and so-called integrated plots, dance numbers, and songs. Not only were the works homogenized to a certain degree, there were simply fewer works. Only 320 musicals premiered between 1942 and 1965, in comparison to the 426 that premiered in just

half the time between 1930 and 1942.³⁶⁸ With Broadway producing fewer shows overall, Playbill's circulation decreased.

Younger theatregoers were disinterested in the homogenization and risk-aversity of the Broadway theatre—a demographic loss of which Broadway seemed not to care. Wollman argues that the 1950s and 1960s were riddled with “several disappointing seasons dominated by unexceptional musicals” that did nothing to move the genre forward.³⁶⁹ The Cold War period was a dangerous time for a dramatist, and conservatism was the way to stay afloat. As John S. Bak states, writing anything counter-conservative was “dangerous,” considering it was a time in which “Congressional witch-hunts of artists were daily fare.”³⁷⁰ The overt conservatism happening on the Broadway stage created a distinct, revolutionary theatrical counterculture. This “identifiable, alternative theater movement” arose from the so-called “bottom rung of the New York theater world’s notional ladder of cultural and economic significance” and included notable theatres such as Caffe Cino, the Judson Poets’ Theater, La Mama, and Theatre Genesis, and performance groups including the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, and the Performance Group.³⁷¹ Off- and Off-Off-Broadway owe their start to this overt pushback to mainstream Broadway culture.³⁷² As Arnold Aronson notes, “there were two cultural impulses against mainstream theatre in the 1950s that did not find full expression until the end of the decade: the emergence of Off Broadway ‘as a response to the economic restrictions and increasingly narrow repertoire of Broadway’ and a series of avant-garde experiments that brought together ‘trends in the visual and plastic arts.’”³⁷³ This theatrical pushback to conservative Broadway would end up hurting Playbill’s circulation.

4.2 Establishing the Brand

The midcentury period dictated some subtle changes to the playbill's exterior—and one significant rebranding. Following the paper rationing during the war, Playbill chose a new ivory paper to replace a sepia that was no longer available. According to Botto's manuscript, this paper was universally disliked by patrons, but there is no feedback or evidence to support this claim. Botto was a lifelong playbill fan and collector, so perhaps he disliked the new paper; he seemed content again once Playbill changed to a stark white paper in the mid-1950s.³⁷⁴ The paper change was a relatively minor difference; however, Playbill, which had already cultivated a specialized readership, added a subtitle to demonstrate the publication's focus. Now subtitled, "The Magazine of the Theatre," *The Playbill* attempted to visibly construct its identity as the only publication for theatre fans (although that was not technically true—a fact that would make Playbill's hold on its monopoly somewhat tenuous). For years, Huber had constructed Playbill as a theatre magazine through its editorials. The addition of the subtitle, however, further cemented this connection. It was the first time that Playbill attempted to outwardly, and explicitly on the program, brand itself as a magazine for *theatre*. Although theatregoers may have looked to Playbill for theatrical information in the past, this was the company's first overt branding of the publication as a magazine. This section examines the end of Huber's tenure, in which he made constant changes to editorials, suggesting the company's uncertainty in handling the contemporary financial difficulties. In response, Huber's successor, Richard Stevens, looked for ways to bounce back from the financial crisis by constructing a new look and brand that included merchandising and immersive audience experiences.

Already in business for over sixty years, Playbill sustained the same business models that Strauss developed in the early twentieth century, but editorials were more likely to come and go

based on presumed success with audiences. The editorial variety within Playbill's pages suggested a structural chaos of a company that was trying to determine its journalistic identity during a time in which NYC theatre was struggling. Although specialty magazines had been cropping up in previous decades, by the late 1950s, consumers had lost all interest in the "general-interest magazine;" in response, more "special-interest" magazines arose.³⁷⁵ In turn, Playbill struggled to identify as a theatre magazine or a general interest magazine. Despite the change to its subtitle, Playbill still clung to the broad scope of editorials that had served it well in the past. There were the fashion editorials, a travel column titled "Traveler's Choice," and a few theatre-specific columns called "At This Theatre" and "The Theatre." Adding the theatre-specific columns was Playbill's attempt at narrowing its focus, but it still highlighted its fashion editorials above all others. When columnist Bryan—the aforementioned "Beaunash"—died in 1948, a new writer using the penname "Petronious" continued "What the Man Will Wear" starting in 1955.³⁷⁶ Initially, Petronious's column was similar to Bryan's, but soon after, Playbill changed the title to "As for the Men..." and later, "Gentlemen Prefer."³⁷⁷ The columns still showcased men's fashions in much the same way as previous "Man" editorials, but the new titles were likely a visual cue that distanced Petronious's writing from Bryan's. The new title also connected to the new iteration of the women's fashion column in much the same way as "What the Woman/Man Will Wear" had done before.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, Barbara Blake (writing under "B.B.") replaced "Fashion" and "Audience on Parade" with a column titled, "To The Ladies," which focused on lingerie. Her column, as well as a new feature introduced during 1956 titled, "Shape of Things to Come," which focused entirely on intimate apparel, point to the ways in which advertising and the conversation surrounding women's lingerie became normalized. As Amber J. Keyser states in *Underneath it*

All: A History of Women's Underwear, "Marilyn Monroe and other bombshells of the 1950s influenced a radical shift in lingerie advertising and marketing to average women."³⁷⁸ In previous years, underwear advertisements frequently appeared in the back of women's specialty magazines and were typically "discreet pen-and-ink drawings with a two-dimensional depiction of the garment—the female form was not shown."³⁷⁹ By the 1950s, however, glossy photographs of Hollywood celebrities sold underwear. These photographs replaced the "[t]ransparent and invisible women" previously depicted in loose-form drawings.³⁸⁰ Although Playbill incorporated lingerie for the first time, they did not utilize photographs or other realistic depictions. Instead, the lingerie articles were accompanied by sketches of women whose faces the reader could not see. Using illustrations rather than photographs was popular during the 1930s and 1940s, as mentioned in the previous chapter, in order to conceal design properties that could otherwise be plagiarized. Perhaps Blake continued this same mindset in the 1950s despite photography's dominance in advertising.

When illustrations of women wearing lingerie appeared in Blake's column, they were notably seen only in profile and typically only in pajama sets (or other clothing that covered the body), while the "Shape" column presented drawings of corsets and girdles that had shape, as if worn on a body, but without a body.³⁸¹ These types of drawings "regularly appeared in twentieth-century images in which undergarments seem to be worn, though by a female body that is not visible. The thrust of absent hips, the curve of hollow backsides, and the fullness of missing breasts infuse the empty garment with an erotic corporeality."³⁸² Yet, by the time Playbill added lingerie to their pages, advertisers and fashion magazines had moved "away from discreet functionality and toward glamour, youth, and sex appeal."³⁸³ In this manner, Playbill demonstrated itself as a traditional and conservative company that was not yet ready to embrace contemporary magazine

trends in regards to lingerie and sexuality. Playbill was likely reticent to show anything too “revealing” because they were trying to appeal to their primarily conservative audience, which was typically “white, middle-class, middle-aged adults.”³⁸⁴

As Broadway attempted to appeal to its ever-shrinking demographic, Playbill went through a significant change when Huber sold *The Playbill* in 1956, ending the Strauss family’s seventy-two-year ownership and ushering in several modern changes to the company. At the time of sale, the company had an estimated worth of \$225,000. *The Playbill*’s new owner was Broadway producer Roger L. Stevens, who, as part of the Producers Theatre, acquired the company.³⁸⁵ With this purchase, Stevens made the biggest contribution to its brand by changing the name from *The Playbill* to *Playbill*. Stevens was a real estate magnate, chair of the finance committee for the Democratic Party, and an immensely prolific theatrical producer. Once called “Mr. Legitimate Theatre,” Stevens was elected the president of the Playwrights’ Company in 1958, one of the most important producing groups in the U.S.³⁸⁶ Stevens was co-partner of the Producers Theatre, the organization that helped purchase Playbill, and a large stockholder in the City Investing Company, which owned twenty-eight Broadway houses. As a partial owner in the following Broadway theatres: Coronet, Helen Hayes, Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, and Morosco, Stevens also served on the boards of the American National Theater and Academy and the New Dramatists Committee. He was additionally responsible for building the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and ran it for twenty years.³⁸⁷ Outside of the U.S., Stevens was a shareholder of the Watergate Theatre Club in England, which produced plays privately in order to circumvent censorship.³⁸⁸ Beyond theatre, Stevens owned hotels, apartment buildings, office buildings, factories, and acreage across the U.S. He even headed the \$51 million dollar purchase of the Empire State Building in 1951.³⁸⁹ Theatre

biographer Maurice Zolotow called Stevens “the guiding genius” of the American Theatre for his contributions.³⁹⁰

Given his connections to nearly every Broadway house, Stevens was in a unique position to use Playbill for his own interests, controlling the kind of content that would pass through his theatres. Stevens made significant aesthetic changes to the magazine and wanted to distinguish his version from previous iterations. Playbills that were distributed immediately after Stevens purchased the company included the following note, titled, “the new playbill,” on the inside cover:

This issue of PLAYBILL is a first edition. After nearly seventy-five years of service to New York theatre-goers, PLAYBILL has undergone major face-lifting. Beginning with this issue you will find an entirely redesigned format and new features which are to become a regular and permanent part of your theatre-going. In addition to its long-standing use as a program and as a souvenir of a valued occasion, PLAYBILL now takes on the additional function of serving you as a weekly *magazine* of the theatre. An exciting season is ahead: the new PLAYBILL would like to add its own special measure to that excitement.³⁹¹

The verbiage in the advertisement above suggests the various ways that Stevens hoped to distinguish his Playbill from the versions that had preceded it. Notably, the ad states that playbill is a “weekly *magazine*,” the emphasis odd, since the program has been linked to magazines ever since Strauss founded the company. It is likely that Stevens wanted to make visible how frequent *Playbill* was circulating to audience members and connect the publication with specialty magazines, which were growing popular in the 1950s and 1960s.³⁹² Finally, in calling the playbill a “first edition,” he notes the collectability and rarity of the program.

Through these Playbill ads, Stevens made a concerted effort to both capitalize upon the elements of the magazine that people liked, as well as suggest the ways his version would be different and noteworthy. Since playbills are only provided to people who have already entered the theatre and have therefore committed to seeing a show, the language is arguably not meant to incite people into attending the theatre. Instead, the new wording might engage audiences who

perhaps had grown tired of the old Playbill. Phil Birsh admits that he frequently watches audiences when he attends the theatre to see how they interact with their playbills.³⁹³ Just as Birsh “spies” on audiences, it is also very likely that Playbill has—both in the past and today—employed staff to do likewise. Even if it is impossible to have a “spy” at every performance of every Broadway house, Playbill staff may have been able to draw conclusions about audience disinterest in the playbill. Stevens’s new direction for Playbill was to utilize what made the company stand out while also altering the less successful image.

Ironically, Playbill’s age was the answer to both. The description above foregrounds the company’s age in connection to how long it has served the NYC theatre community, while also negating any subsequent correlation to stodginess (i.e. “first,” “face-lifting,” “beginning,” and “entirely redesigned”). The description also lightly criticizes the instability of what came before by suggesting that the editorials published under Stevens would be both “regular” and “permanent.” Stevens acknowledged that people love to keep the playbill as a souvenir, but merely saving a program does not equate to business for Playbill’s advertisers, so Stevens maintained that *this* new Playbill would provide a new “function” of providing valuable information for the audience member. This new image for Playbill was, in fact, nothing new; however, Stevens highlighted these aspects in an overt branding of the company in order to engage audiences in new ways. Had the audience member become bored of Playbill? Perhaps, as Stevens’s description suggests, Playbill had become an object of nostalgia and memory and no longer *functional* for its original purpose—namely selling to audiences through its ads.

Stevens reframed Playbill as something “new,” and part of that was changing the cover design. Rather than having distinct covers for each theatre (as was the practice in the early Strauss days), or the more recent practice of having photographs of performers or scenes from the

production, the Stevens playbills utilized a single cover design for every theatre Playbill serviced. This was undoubtedly a financial decision because it would have been less expensive to only have to print a single cover design for all theatres. These designs were sketches of high society life and did not reflect, content-wise, specific productions or theatres. A new sketch premiered each month, saving Playbill on the additional costs of printing expensive covers weekly as was the previous practice. Popular children's book author and novelist Russell Hoban sketched one design that was utilized for all the shows in September of 1957, including *Bells Are Ringing* and *Auntie Mame*. The sketch was of a Rolls Royce outside of a theatre as a doorman opened the door for its passengers. Producers criticized this change because they had promised their stars that their photographs would grace the covers.³⁹⁴ Undoubtedly, Stevens sought to reduce the cost of printing separate covers for every show and when cast changes occurred. By creating covers that would function for any theatre and any production, Stevens certainly saved Playbill money.

Stevens's idea to homogenize the covers was financially astute, but he misunderstood the draw of playbill covers, which is to provide visual interest by selling a production or celebrity through photographs. They also provide variety for a program collector—likely a significant draw, as enough people save their playbills as to warrant the sale of playbill binders. Along with these homogenized covers, Stevens added a second, specialty playbill cover for opening night performances. These playbills had gold covers and the words “Premiere Performance” in script typeface. Stevens likely wanted to encourage an increase in the collecting of playbills, since theoretically, a collector would want both the “Premiere” and the regular show run versions. This idea backfired, however, because collectors missed having specific playbill covers for each production, and so the collecting of playbills decreased—both subscription sales and playbill binder sales dropped during the homogenized covers period.³⁹⁵ Stevens knew that audiences

wanted to collect playbills as souvenirs, but he greatly misread the reasons why—namely, an engaging cover that represents something about the audience’s experience with the theatre or production. Stevens does not come across well in Playbill’s—and Botto’s—retelling of him. In fact, Botto suggested that his homogenizing of playbill covers was a “major mistake.”³⁹⁶

The issue with homogenized covers created enough of a stir between Playbill and the League of New York Theatres (hereafter “League”) to create significant change in playbill cover design. Following numerous celebrity complaints to producers, the League and Playbill fought over the future of the cover designs, which ultimately resulted in a compromise that benefited both organizations. Playbill agreed to allow photographs on covers again, but they had significant stipulations. Of the compromise, *Variety* reported:

Under a new agreement with the League of N.Y. Theatres . . . The Playbill will publish individual covers for the programs for the various Broadway shows, but in a revised format and retaining authority over the selection of cover art. . . The revised cover will have a larger photo, extending to the edge of the paper on three sides, with room at the top for the title of the respective show. There will be no other printing on the cover. Photos may be of the show’s star or stars, or scene shots, but will not be drawings, designs, or other art work.³⁹⁷

Despite losing the covers Stevens intended, it appears that Playbill retained a lot of power in this compromise. Not only did Playbill get to control what images were allowed on the cover, but there were specific stipulations to the text, formatting, and quality of the cover. *Variety* also reported that “The Playbill will favor special photos for the cover spot,” but that “the publication reserves the right to assign its own photographer to make acceptable ones.”³⁹⁸ With this compromise, Playbill was able to maintain a level of quality control over the cover designs. In addition to being financially prudent, the sketches created a unifying look for all covers—something Stevens apparently wanted—and by hiring vetted and famous artists to design the sketches, Stevens was hoping to ensure a level of quality in the cover design.

With the “sketch” and “premiere” covers abandoned, the new covers debuted at the beginning of the 1958 theatrical season, marking a significant adjustment to the Playbill logo. It was during this period that Playbill began utilizing a colorful banner—a logo that would later become synonymous with Broadway. On the top of the cover was a colored banner and the words “PLAYBILL: a magazine for theatregoers” bifurcated with a smaller grey box to its right that listed the theatre name. The colored banner drew attention to the “Playbill” name rather than the grey box that had the theatre’s name. This new look was not yet standardized across all theatres; instead, the color used in the banner was theatre-specific, with each theatre having a designated “color;” for example, The Winter Garden Theatre was a bright orange, while the Martin Beck Theatre was fuchsia.³⁹⁹

In the months that followed these new covers’ debut, Stevens eliminated the color variety and cemented for Playbill a logo that has not changed much since: the bright yellow banner with “Playbill” in black Egyptian Wide Typeface. The new logo was striking—the bright yellow eye-catching and jovial—and the Egyptian typeface, with its strong serifs creating a link to the past. Of typeface design, Philip B. Meggs states that the Egyptian typeface was first designed in the nineteenth century; however, the typeface quickly fell out of favor.⁴⁰⁰ The *Practical handbook on display typefaces for publication layout* states, “its low legibility, however, restricted its success, and now that the novelty has diminished, it is being utilized only sparingly. If, by the way, you were among those who accepted this as a new typeface design, disillusion awaits you in the pages of most 19th century type catalogues.”⁴⁰¹ That Playbill began using this typeface in the 1950s, and that its use continues today, is in stark opposition to norms established by the printing industry. However, the typeface’s antiquity may elicit a sense of history and age, which are elements Playbill’s owners have consistently utilized in their marketing. In discussing the logo with

Managing Editor Viagas, he states that the yellow ink and Egyptian typeface were the least expensive respective choices, and so perhaps that is why Playbill's logo has persisted.⁴⁰²

While Stevens was making significant changes to Playbill's logo and branding, he also dealt with notable staff changeovers. Longtime Editor and fashion columnist Barbara Blake, who had been with the company for twenty-five years, was demoted to Contributing Editor for fashion and Elinor Green took over as Managing Editor.⁴⁰³ At the same time, Blake's husband, John Dow, relinquished his post at Playbill in 1957.⁴⁰⁴ Other new staff members in 1958 included Elizabeth Pollock as Art Director, Clara Port in Illustration, and Elizabeth Lapham for Beauty, adding to the total number of women writers working at Playbill.⁴⁰⁵ It is unclear why Blake's position changed, but it is possible that there were some lingering issues surrounding Dow's departure the year before. Unfortunately, it is not clear when Blake finally left Playbill, but in the year following Stevens's takeover, she wrote for the fashion column without any issues arising in the news. Editorially, Stevens continued to push fashion columns, so Blake's demotion and subsequent resignation at Playbill was not due to a lack of focus on fashion and beauty. Stevens certainly wanted to shake things up at Playbill—from the branding to the covers to the editorials inside. Perhaps Stevens merely wanted to put his proverbial "stamp" on the publication by changing everything Strauss and Huber had done before.

Additionally, Stevens created merchandise and events as a way of broadening the company's perception as one that was pervasive across all areas of theatrical culture—beyond the theatre program. He, of course, continued to promote the practice of selling Playbill binders (now sold for \$2 each), but he also introduced a playbill charm for bracelets, which could be engraved with the name and date of any show. According to Botto, the 14 karat version of the charm sold for \$14.95 and a sterling silver charm was \$7.00.⁴⁰⁶ Accounting for inflation, those charms would

retail today for approximately \$133 and \$62, respectively.⁴⁰⁷ In comparison, *Hamilton*'s "jewelry collection" retails for \$50 to \$60, so presumably Stevens hoped to appeal and sell to a higher socioeconomic class.⁴⁰⁸ Arguably, Stevens wanted his upper- to upper-middle-class audience to feel that the Playbill brand was supporting them in all their needs—whether it was in the form of the theatre program, a jewelry piece, or even, in fact, a restaurant.

In 1958, "Playbill Restaurant" opened. It was located in "the heart of the theatrical district in the Hotel Manhattan" and managed by Erwin O. Schel.⁴⁰⁹ The restaurant was conceived as a place in which celebrities (both Broadway as well as Hollywood) would come and dine.⁴¹⁰ Tourists, hoping for a celebrity connection, could dine alongside famous people in the restaurant. Diners would not only be able to convene at a restaurant that catered to celebrities, they would also receive reproduced "playbill" menus from the waitstaff. Of the restaurant experience, executive vice president and general manager of the Manhattan Hotel Frank W. Kridel stated, "I usually arrive at a play about two seconds before the curtain goes up and never get a chance to read the program in the dark. Now our customers will be able to study the program at their leisure."⁴¹¹ In fact, to a certain degree, the restaurant recreated the experience an audience member has when entering a theatre. Waitstaff dressed as ushers would walk the diner to their seat (table) and proffer them the playbill (menu)—thereby commodifying the entire playbill exchange by creating an immersive, tourist experience around the act of receiving the playbill.⁴¹² This entire exchange further suggests how important the playbill had become to theatregoers.

The restaurant also sported a twenty-four foot mural designed by the famed Al Hirschfeld. The design included Hirschfeld's signature caricature style, and its subjects were Lynn Fontane, Helen Hayes, Mary Martin, Katharine Cornell, Judy Holliday, and Judith Anderson.⁴¹³ It seems a significant choice to have the mural center leading actresses. This was all likely part of a plan to

engage the female audience member/diner, but also, to utilize women's celebrity (and bodies) to appeal and excite. The restaurant was all part of what Kridel called "not a luxury, but a top-rated commercial hotel," and it cost roughly \$300,000 to develop.⁴¹⁴ It is unclear what Playbill received from this cross-promotion, but even if they received little to no income on the use of the name and logo, the resulting permeation of their brand would have helped further the company's reputation. The Playbill Restaurant lasted until 1966, after which there are no mentions of it in any periodical. However, the fact that a "Playbill Restaurant" lasted for eight years is further evidence that Playbill had grown beyond its theatrical import to become codified as part of New York culture generally.

Stevens wanted audiences to interact with the brand in various ways—whether it was in the form of a gold charm or restaurant—and, as for the playbill, Stevens began a new feature titled "Your Intermission Interview." The "Interview" asked audience members to check the boxes next to any productions they had seen. According to Playbill, "If your score is 12 or more you are a star; 11, you are featured; 10, you're a bit player; less than 10, you need more rehearsals at the box office."⁴¹⁵ In doing so, Playbill connected itself to the theatre, while in this case, encouraging audiences to see more shows. Of course, the more shows a theatregoer sees, the more frequently they come in contact with the advertising in the playbill. The feature also indicates that Stevens either assumed that audiences wanted to engage with their playbills during intermission or that he was encouraging this behavior. Regardless, in making the playbill interactive, and indeed, a game, Stevens transported the playbill beyond a passive readership to a more active experience.

Despite how Stevens attempted to engage with his audiences, he also expressed frustration over what audiences wanted. He said audiences often only want to see shows that critics say "everyone" must see. Audiences, according to Stevens, were not interested in taking chances on unvetted art; however, he also said audiences were only excited by whatever was flashy. "It's a

whole national craving for sensationalism,” he said, “If it isn’t sensational, they’ll watch television.”⁴¹⁶ What critics recommended and what was considered “sensational” were often not the same, but Stevens’s reactions to perceived audience preferences is notable. With these statements, it seems clear that Stevens did not understand entirely what his audiences wanted in their playbills. Although Stevens understood how to run a business—he was a multi-millionaire by the mid-1950s—he did not seem to understand the theatre audience. His efforts to expand and reframe the Playbill brand created mixed results. Following Stevens’s tenure at the company, Playbill ditched the golden charms, but the Playbill Restaurant lasted for years, presumably excelling financially. Producers initially attacked the homogenized covers, but that dispute led to an explicit rebranding of the company that has almost stayed the same sixty-two years later. Although he only owned the company for four years, Stevens did usher in several significant changes that prepared Playbill for its future. Notable among these was the hiring of Gilman Kraft as Publisher, who would eventually purchase the company from Stevens. Stevens also purchased the interleave technology from Arthur Birsh (who would also become instrumental to Playbill’s business trajectory) that would allow Playbill to print color advertisements and covers.⁴¹⁷ Prior to Birsh’s technology, Playbill printed black ink on white paper for the interior pages and covers in color would have been shipped from an outside printer. In 1958, Birsh brought the technology that allowed Playbill to print “4-color” in-house.⁴¹⁸ The new interleave technology escorted Playbill into a new modernist era in which their magazine could be on par with other popular publications.

4.3 Regional Theatres, NYC Reputations

The criticisms that Broadway had become too commercial, homogenized, and “safe” furthered a divide between the so-called mainstream Broadway and those theatres outside of Broadway. In Julius Novick’s opinion, Broadway had fully become “light entertainment,” leaving those who wanted more “serious” fare looking for alternatives, including Off- and Off-Off-Broadway.⁴¹⁹ These theatres, Adler states, “had become a force with which to be reckoned,” offering younger, often politically-minded audiences with what was essentially a counter-Broadway, anti-establishment theatergoing experience.⁴²⁰ Manhattanites were also moving out of the city and choosing to spend their money elsewhere. An article examining Broadway audience numbers published in 1966 stated that Broadway attendance in 1963 had increased only twenty percent from the attendance in 1933. Why had the audience grown so slowly, author Thomas Gale Moore asks, when “over the same period, spending on the performing arts more than tripled, ticket sales for spectator sports more than doubled.”⁴²¹ The author suggests a correlation of factors, such as audiences with higher incomes were more likely to purchase only “slightly better seats,” and a key segment of the theatergoing audience had moved into the suburbs, where it takes time and money to commute into Manhattan for a night out. This, along with additional costs for dinner and babysitting, Moore comments, might be why so many New Yorkers were choosing to stay home or patronizing a different leisure activity.⁴²² Broadway’s primary audience, namely the white, middle- to upper-class demographic, was choosing “the regional route rather than the ‘bright lights’ of Broadway. These theatre people are settling down in regional cities, buying houses, raising families, joining the PTA, becoming politically active, and in general taking responsible places as citizens of their communities.”⁴²³ By the time Gilman Kraft purchased Playbill from Roger Stevens for \$180,000 in 1960, Broadway’s primary demographic was in the suburbs, and

those outside of this demographic—those who were younger, racially diverse, and of varying classes—were going elsewhere for their entertainment.

Faced with a dwindling Broadway audience and a plethora of alternative theatrical venues, Kraft attempted to broaden the publication's reach by appealing to non-Broadway theatres. Those regional theatres that had once been forced to use Strauss's services under the Theatrical Syndicate had since moved on from Playbill, choosing either local printers for their program needs or printing programs in-house. While Stevens had been CEO, Playbill had branched out to summer stock locations, such as the Connecticut Westport Country Playhouse, but ultimately, they experienced problems in gaining clients outside of the tristate area.⁴²⁴ In fact, Arthur Birsh commented that Playbill was "locked out" of any potential regional business.⁴²⁵ If Playbill were intrinsically linked to Broadway, then Kraft needed to remake the Broadway image, and in doing so, Kraft also rebranded Playbill as a company not only for Broadway but also for the American theatre at large. Going as far as to change the name of the publishing corporation from the New York Theatre Program Corporation to the American Theatre Press, Kraft tried to rebrand the company as *American* rather than strictly *New York* in order to obtain key regional theatre business.⁴²⁶ Beginning with Los Angeles—what Kraft called "the second theatre market in the United States," and later adding additional "target" cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, and San Francisco—Kraft was able to expand the company's reach, attempt to reshape cultural opinions of Broadway, and connect Broadway to larger representations of American culture.⁴²⁷

In the 1960s, U.S. regional theatres were creating an alternative to Broadway with art, rather than commerce, as the goal. These theatres offered what Broadway would not—namely the "permanence" of a theatre venue, as opposed to the rental of a few limited Broadway houses, as well as a company or troupe of actors who would work and collaborate together to create works

of artistic merit rather than the increasingly commercial offerings on Broadway.⁴²⁸ As regional theatres began to gain prominence, Minnesota Theatre Company (now the Guthrie Theatre) Managing Director Peter Zeisler established the League of Resident Theatres (LORT) in 1966. LORT offered the regional, not-for-profit theatres “a collective bargaining voice that would lead to the creation of the flagship contract between the theatres and most of the leading theatrical unions and guilds.”⁴²⁹ Initially, there were twenty-six member theatres, and through their bargaining, they secured a three-year contract that provided “for yearly salary increases in each of four categories of company, based on box-office receipts.”⁴³⁰ The contract also allowed for an established salary range, sick leave benefits, vacation benefits, and salaries starting from the first rehearsal.⁴³¹ Prior to LORT’s founding, individual regional theatres would negotiate individual contracts with Actor’s Equity Association (AEA)—frequently suffering under what some called the “one production” type of contract used on Broadway.⁴³² With the emergence of theatre outside of Broadway, and an increasing visibility that came with these new contracts, came Playbill’s interest in expanding to these newly developing markets. However, Playbill historically and traditionally aligned itself with Broadway and the legitimate theatre; as such, this connection separated the company from the emerging artistic culture of the regional theatre movement and fully immersed Playbill with the so-called “banality” of commercial theatre.

In Los Angeles as early as the 1930s and into the 1960s, *The Playgoer Theatre Magazine* was the dominant program publication, but it was clearly inspired by *Playbill*. Resembling *Playbill*’s format, *Playgoer* followed the established multi-page booklet structure with editorial content. *Playgoer* was the exact same size as the 1958-1961 *Playbill*, and the covers were identical. Without “*Playgoer*” on the cover, these programs would certainly be mistaken for *Playbill*, which suggests that Playbill had become the standard in program publishing. Even *Playgoer*’s articles

were similar to Playbill's, containing the following columns (here with the corresponding Playbill analog in parentheses): "The Playgoer Looks Back" ("At this Theatre"), "Shopwindows" ("Shop Talk"), "The Playgoer Suggests" ("After the Theatre"), and the identically titled, "Who's Who in the Cast."

Playgoer also had their own version of the fashion/beauty editorial. One of these was "Your Mirror and You." Written by film make-up artist and cosmetics creator Anatole Robbins, "Mirror" described women's vanity:

Perhaps there is not a male alive who will say that his wife or girl friend [*sic*] needs any practice in the art of gandering [*sic*] herself in the looking glass. In this less inhibited age, escorts the world around are quite broken-in to the various feminine techniques in catching a glimpse of her reflection. We know them well. There is the "is-my-slip-showing look," accompanied by an over-the-shoulder expression of anxiety. Similar to this is the quizzical "are-my-seams-straight perusal," accompanied by an awkward stance that is excellent for the abdominal muscles whether it does much for the stockings or not.⁴³³

Robbins's article suggests that "mirror gazers" often do a poor job of completing their look because they do not take makeup into account. The column was a new take on the fashion editorials of Playbill's past, focusing on how makeup works in tandem with clothing and accessories, but the overall tone of the piece is demeaning and sexist in a way that Playbill's features never were. It makes some sense that the L.A.-based *Playgoer* would choose an author who was involved with the film industry, whereas Playbill had always employed writers associated with New York publications. Readers may have been interested in what Robbins had to say, but there is certainly a marked difference in how he wrote about women in comparison to Blake's columns. In this manner, Playbill's history of hiring female authors to write the female-aimed editorials distinguished the company from their L.A. counterpart.

Another column, "Fashions," discussed women's clothing trends, while "Male Call" was *Playgoer*'s answer to "What the Man Will Wear." *Playgoer* also included specialty columns that

described local theatrical events and attractions, such as “Front Row Center,” “13th Light Opera Season Lucky for Los Angeles,” and “The Players’ Ring: Los Angeles’ Newest Playhouse.” Each of these focused on what was happening in Los Angeles theatre. The similarities between *Playgoer* and Playbill demonstrate that the former must have been inspired by the latter, but *Playgoer* carefully crafted editorials that presumably spoke to the Southern California audience. Just as Playbill highlighted NYC restaurants and theatre, *Playgoer* described local events and attractions in order to appeal to its demographic.

Playbill coveted the L.A. program market, but *Playgoer* had already conquered the region. However, according to an article in *Variety*, Kraft and President of *Playgoer*, John F. Huber (no relation to Richard Huber as far as the archive demonstrates), negotiated a deal for “mutual representation for advertising sales.”⁴³⁴ It is unclear what this deal was exactly, but Playbill stopped trying to obtain the L.A. market while *Playgoer* was successful. Perhaps the two company presidents had come to some kind of “gentleman’s agreement.” Fortunately for Playbill, *The Playgoer* disappeared between 1969 and 1970 and was replaced by Playbill’s California version. It is unclear why the magazine folded, but with *The Playgoer* out of circulation, Kraft’s efforts to monetize the Los Angeles program market were mostly successful.⁴³⁵ Obtaining the crucial California program market was instrumental in Kraft’s overall plan to expand Playbill’s reach beyond the financially unstable Broadway theatre scene.

Kraft obtained Philadelphia’s business in the mid-1960s by downplaying theatre content. Before gaining their business, however, Philadelphia ushers handed audiences *The Playgoer*. This program was nothing like Playbill; it lacked editorials and color printing, and at only ten pages in length, it included few advertisements. There seems to be no connection between the L.A. *Playgoer* and this Philadelphia version, as the latter was published by the Philadelphia General

Advertising Co. and was “distributed exclusively to theatre patrons of Philadelphia’s leading legitimate theatres” as early as 1939 and as late as 1954/1955.⁴³⁶ Most of these theatres were owned by the Shuberts, who, as previously mentioned, had a tumultuous relationship with Playbill and Strauss and who had changed program publishers when the Syndicate lost control over U.S. regional theatres.

In this way, *Playgoer* was almost an anti-*Playbill*, reflective of the Shuberts’ antipathy of Strauss, and later, Huber. As stated in Chapter One, *Playbill* acted as a site in which advertising, commercialization, and the Broadway theatre scene met. *Playgoer* had no advertisements, and was, therefore, less commercialized and less *Broadway* than *Playbill*. Playbill actively tried to gain Philadelphia theatres once Kraft took over, though there is no indication that they attempted anything prior to the ownership change. This is likely because the Shuberts were anti-Strauss and anti-Huber. By the 1960s, however, the Philadelphia area Shubert theatres were contracting with Playbill.⁴³⁷ These Philadelphia playbills contained local advertisements and columns that were different from the NYC playbills. These programs did not have any of the typical Playbill editorials, but they did include short articles that focused on theatre. One issue discussed how actors get “top billing” for Broadway shows; another, the theatre scene in San Francisco.⁴³⁸ Additional columns in the Philadelphia playbill focused on travel and global issues. One example was a column that described the top vacation spots in Yugoslavia.⁴³⁹ Through the use of similar editorials, Kraft created a regional program for Philadelphia that was based on similar content ideas to the New York version while also still being unique.

A significant departure from the “Philadelphia model,” Boston Playbill published Broadway content with the hope of reforming Broadway’s reputation. Yet, prior to utilizing Playbill, Boston theatres relied on programs published by The Jerome Press, titled, “On Stage.”

These were short, 15-24 page, no-color programs that had advertisements but no editorials. Eventually, “On Stage” was replaced by “The Playbill for Boston,” which was a truncated version of the typical New York *Playbill*. Containing local advertisements and a few editorials written by local authors, the Boston Playbill was a major regional win for the company. Boston Playbill’s editorials relayed Broadway history, choosing to engage audiences in a nostalgia for Broadway’s past hits. Jay Russell’s “Curtain Going Up!” detailed stories like the cast of *Ah, Wilderness!* “putting away a lobster dinner eight times a week” while another story mentioned how Helen Hayes ate “imported caviar” on stage every night in *The Good Fairy*.⁴⁴⁰ In creating editorial content that discussed Broadway history, Kraft connected the Boston theatre scene with New York theatre culture. In doing so, he extended the Broadway presence, legacy, and rich history to other regional markets.

Part of this Broadway “rebranding” was a significant focus on the role of the Broadway producer. In one column, journalist Irving Drutman described the process that Broadway producers undergo in order to entice stars to their shows.⁴⁴¹ This column demonstrated the “hard work” that Broadway producers do and connected that labor to the enticing and developing celebrity culture in the U.S. In a series of particularly interesting columns, theatre investor Gerald M. Loeb described how much money Broadway productions cost and the reality that most Broadway producers almost always lose money on investment. These producers, Loeb decries, wonder how they will finance their productions and states:

Back in the 1930s, there were shows that paid as much as \$25 to \$30 for every \$1 invested. That is not true today. Usually now experts have estimated that . . . for every \$2 invested only \$1 comes back today. The real facts of the profitability of the theatre get very little airing. Most feature articles play up the fabulous profits of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* and the like. . . . The truth about the theatre is that overall backers can expect to lose about \$5 million, more or less, in a typical year. . . . But there is something exciting about show business and show people. Even though angels know how hazardous it is, they do rush in to put their money down on shows . . .⁴⁴²

Loeb attempts to change the reader's mind about what producers are like. He, in fact, refers to them as "angels" of the theatre, willing to put forth their own money with no prospect of a return on investment—for pure love of the art form. His writing is an appeal to those interested in regional theatre because of a dislike of Broadway and everything commercial. If producers are not actually the money-grabbing people that audiences think they are, then perhaps they will return to attending Broadway theatre. So, Loeb asks, why do Broadway producers put themselves in a position to lose so much money? He argues that producers do so because they are "giving our finest playwrights a hearing."⁴⁴³ Indeed, he describes, "if it were not for American capitalists, American culture as represented by Eugene O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, S.N. Behrman and Thornton Wilder would never have had a chance and would be unknown in Europe."⁴⁴⁴ Loeb therefore suggests that capitalism, and the Broadway producer, helps cultivate and disseminate American cultural products and ideals to other countries. These Broadway-, and specifically producer-focused columns appearing in Boston Playbill argue that, contrary to the anti-Broadway, anti-commercial sentiment, Broadway is a place of artistry and hard work and is ultimately lacking in finances. These columns were likely a part of a larger conversation to re-inform or reshape Broadway's image in the typical American theatregoer's imagination.

Playbill relied on keeping its New York audience as well as expanding nationally, and by the end of the decade, they had conquered an impressive regional client list that included Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Milwaukee, Atlanta, Cleveland, Dallas, and Chicago.⁴⁴⁵ With the addition of the Chicago Playbill, circulation of the magazine rose to roughly 1,470,000 per month in 1965. Yet, the business model for regional playbills was complicated, as it required Playbill to employ local printers as well as a local advertising salesperson to take care of the local ads. Although expanding regionally increased Playbill's

overall visibility, Arthur Birsh recalls that these additional markets were not initially profitable. In fact, Birsh says, it took about three years for any of the cities to begin turning a profit. However, the regional expansion increased *Playbill*'s circulation numbers to "1.6 million—not a small feat" by the end of the decade.⁴⁴⁶

At the same time as Kraft downplayed Broadway in most regional programs, he increased theatrical content in the New York version to engage in an audience's excitement for the theatre. Kraft, and later Birsh, who took over as Publisher when the former moved to Los Angeles in 1965, focused *Playbill*'s editorial content on more in-depth theatre columns, including a new feature titled, "Theatre Round-Up," in which *Playbill* correspondents compiled the latest theatrical news. Other articles included behind-the-scenes features that described the roles and responsibilities of production work, such as "The Company Manager" and "What Does the Director Do?" as well as a column titled, "Curtain Going Up," in which a former Broadway producer described the magic of the moment when the lights dim right before a show begins.⁴⁴⁷ All of these columns suggested the hard work and, indeed, "magic" of the commercial theatre. In 1964, *Playbill* devoted an entire issue to articles discussing the economics of theatrical production, producers, and audience interest. Titled, "Broadway and its problems," this issue was similar to other articles seen in the regional playbills that focused on the rising costs of Broadway productions.⁴⁴⁸

In New York, *Playbill* crafted an image of the area as safe, family-friendly, and artistically exciting in an effort to engage with those former New Yorkers-turned-suburbanites. Some of these columns focused heavily on New York life, such as the "City Silhouette" column added in 1956, which focused on real estate trends and anecdotes. One article conveyed humorous stories about odd real estate requests in New York, such as "One apartment hunter, male, has asked for any three-room suite containing two full kitchens, with the explanation that he and his wife suffer

‘cuisine incompatibility,’” while another “makes a plaintive request for an apartment with one sound-proof room to be entered via a door ‘with a handle beyond the reach of my three-year-old.’”⁴⁴⁹ This article constructs an image of Manhattan as family-friendly: Manhattanites have children! They have marital spats over what to eat for dinner! The column also relies on humor rather than numbers, which might make the NYC real estate scene seem more relatable and potentially more affordable. This column might have appealed to the white, middle-aged, upper-class theatregoer who had moved to the suburbs in hopes of finding a family-friendly home. Another edition of “City Silhouette” described new architecture appearing in Manhattan and linked the modernist designs to NYC landmarks: “Speaking of silhouettes—is there a more famous one than the Statue of Liberty?”⁴⁵⁰ The column attempted to sell out-of-town New Yorkers on the appeal of NYC life. Playbill under Kraft’s direction wanted to rebuild NYC’s reputation, and in turn, Playbill, wrapped up as it was in NYC culture and image, rebuilt its own brand.

Kraft was establishing Playbill as an American brand, but he also attempted to utilize the recognition of the Broadway playbill to his advantage in international markets. In 1964, Playbill brought on their first international client with business from the United Kingdom. American Stanley Flink, novelist and former *Time/Life* correspondent was the managing director for the London-based Playbill office, which was responsible for the “development in the British Isles.”⁴⁵¹ The U.K. playbills were touted as “the glossy and colourful magazine-type programmes long familiar to their New York counterparts.”⁴⁵² When newspapers were covering the story, they pointed to the importance of the playbill’s 40-page format and the fact that many of the pages would be in color, calling it a “lavish presentation,” while also noting the editorial contributions of such big hitters as Sir John Gielgud, Robert Morley, and Edna O’Brien.⁴⁵³ The British version of playbill was both praised and criticized, as British theatregoers had apparently suffered “a good

deal of public dissatisfaction” with their pre-Playbill programmes; however, American playbills were not universally liked by the British public, either.⁴⁵⁴ British newspapers referred to Playbill as an innovator that would increase interest for theatregoers, while also suggesting Playbill’s very presence as an “American invasion.”⁴⁵⁵

Several British theatres switched to Playbill, including those in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Newcastle, and Liverpool, but the transition was not smooth.⁴⁵⁶ One audience member commented:

When ‘Playbill’ invaded so many of our theatres three years ago, we were promised a magazine on the lines of the American publication of the same name, which is provided free of charge in New York theatres. Despite the fact that the British version cost a shilling, and one resented buying the same material over and over again if one visited theatres several times in a month, the first issues were not bad value for money, running to 36 pages, of which 7 consisted of programme material and 15 of editorial matter. The latest edition has shrunk to only 20 pages, of which 7 still consist of programme material and only 1 ½ of editorial matter. May we now return to the old system of an individually produced programme for each theatre, which is greatly to be preferred?⁴⁵⁷

British theatres were handing out Playbill-branded programs, but they were completely different from the New York version. Although it is unclear why the U.K. version was so different, it seems likely that it was too expensive to produce. According to Arthur Birsh, printing regional playbills within the U.S. was far more expensive than printing them in New York because the company needed to hire local writers, editors, and advertising staff. It seems probable that this business model was even more expensive to operate across the Atlantic. In examining these U.K. playbills, Flink’s is the only name attributed to the publication. Although it seems unlikely that Flink worked alone, the lack of information about London Playbill staff is revealing. Kraft tried to expand internationally, but it seems likely that the company was not suited to take on this kind of business at this point.

While many regional playbills were using Playbill, off-Broadway remained staunchly anti-Broadway, and correspondingly, anti-Playbill. None of the Off- and Off-Off-Broadway theatre houses used Playbill's services despite Kraft's efforts to obtain the Nederlander-owned Palace Theatre, which wished to have a smaller program with fewer ads than Playbill. Enter "Showcard," colloquially referred to as "off-Playbill," which was published by Jay Rosenblatt and Jordan Hott. They started printing programs for the Off-Broadway market, with the theatres paying a "small service charge [of] about 50 per cent [*sic*] of the commercial printing rate."⁴⁵⁸ *Showcard* dominated the Off- and Off-Off-Broadway market with a promise to credit production and acting staff, all while eliminating editorials and including only a few advertisements to keep business afloat. *Showcard* was roughly eight pages long; it did not attempt to educate or proselytize with lengthy editorials and it did not burden audiences with pages of ads. In many ways, *Showcard* was the anti-Playbill theatre program.⁴⁵⁹

Although Off- and Off-Off-Broadway remained elusive to Playbill, Kraft implemented a new business model to advertising that would increase regional as well as New York business. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Huber ended the often hierarchical "theatre-by-theatre advertising," in which advertisers could select which productions they wanted their ads to appear. However, Huber's business model allowed advertisers to purchase ads in a certain number of theatres each week, which created excess work for those who had to format and print thirty-forty playbill "books" every week. Around 1960, Kraft eliminated this practice by requiring advertisers to purchase ad space in all playbills per week.⁴⁶⁰ Kraft's decision to change the individualized theatre advertising policy built upon what Huber started, but in going this additional step, Kraft ended the selective process by which advertisers essentially rewarded the most popular theatres. Notably, Playbill's revenues initially dropped following the process change, but shortly thereafter, revenues

returned and, according to Birsh, increased.⁴⁶¹ Even though Playbill homogenized playbills across theatres, they were still printing new versions every week, but eventually, Kraft changed this process, too, making Playbill a monthly publication akin to other competitive magazines.

In 1968, Kraft started a subscription service, in which theatre fans from anywhere in the U.S. could subscribe and receive all the opening night playbills—a service that Playbill continues today.⁴⁶² The subscription service drastically altered the Playbill/reader relationship. Prior to gaining subscribers, theatregoers attended productions for which they received their playbill for free. With a subscription, however, readers paid to receive playbills. With this added service, Playbill could make revenue from the advertisers as well as consumers. Previously, they were only able to make profit from consumers when they sold Program Binders, the sales of which greatly increased following the start of the subscription service. One 1960s-era survey indicated that over 5,000 playbill binders were sold annually; that, along with the 89% of New York theatre patrons who reported keeping their playbills, demonstrated an overall positive reaction to Kraft's direction for Playbill.⁴⁶³ By 1964, advertising revenue was up by thirty-five percent from the previous year.⁴⁶⁴ In changing how advertisers purchased space, Kraft created a magazine that could easily be shipped to anyone across the country, and in doing so, he furthered Playbill's national recognition as well as financial outlook. With these successes behind him, Kraft attempted to expand Playbill into a new domain.

4.4 Kraft's Decisions, Playbill's Challenges

Between 1960 and 1965, Kraft experienced significant personal and professional challenges that would affect Playbill's financial outlook. His pursuit of Playbill's expansion, which

had worked so well in the past, now led him to purchase an ill-fated arts magazine, thereby placing Playbill at immense financial risk. At the same time, Kraft was dealing with serious legal issues. Carol Howard, a former employee and ex-girlfriend of Kraft's, levied serious allegations against him—a fact neither Botto nor Birsh discuss. Howard's allegations and subsequent court case happened concurrently with some of Kraft's worst business strategies, which suggests that his decision-making was affected. This section examines not only the bad financial decision that was *Show* magazine, but also, brings to the fore a part of Playbill's uglier past that is never voiced.

Birsh says that Kraft had a “planned metamorphosis of PLAYBILL,” which undoubtedly included the expansions into regional theatre and subscriptions, but he also referred to broadening Playbill's reach in arts publishing beyond the theatrical program.⁴⁶⁵ As Birsh recalls, Kraft was “[s]ometimes blinded by his certainty,” as evidenced by his mistaken foray into the failed *Show* magazine.⁴⁶⁶ A short-lived magazine, *Show* was “[t]he brainchild of Huntington Hartford, heir to the A & P grocery chain fortune.”⁴⁶⁷ *Show* was a “magazine for the performing arts,” and it included editorials on television, theatre, film, and visual art. *Show* began at a time when “The magazine industry [was] not flourishing” and “[i]mportant magazines [were going] out of business.”⁴⁶⁸ Hartford noted that he started *Show* because “there has been no all-embracing publication of culture and the arts, and particularly of the performing arts.”⁴⁶⁹ *Show*'s stated purpose was to embrace and combine all the arts into one magazine—something that had never been done before. Although theatre was included in the magazine, *Show* capitalized on the increasing popularity of television, while also noting film's continued importance. Hartford noted, “[w]e cannot . . . ignore the alarming fact that the present form of the professional theater is close to facing extinction.”⁴⁷⁰ He stated that the national interest in theatre could be revived with the numerous community theatres cropping up in the U.S. Although Hartford included theatre in this

magazine of the performing arts, he acknowledged that television had outpaced theatre (and film). Yet, Hartford also argued that theatre was important to American culture and to consider television its “grandchild.”⁴⁷¹

Kraft was likely drawn to *Show* because it was utilizing entertainment that was arguably pulling attendance away from Broadway—namely, regional theatre, film, and television—as a means of inciting audience interest in all forms of entertainment. Readers might enjoy reading about their favorite films and television shows, but they might also read about what is happening at a local theatre or learn about Broadway. Although *Playbill* focused solely on Broadway, as well as New York life and culture, *Show* was diverse in its coverage. As a large format magazine (10 ½” x 13”) and roughly 126 pages, the magazine was dense and resembled other popular magazines of the period, such as *Life*. Articles were lengthy and included contemporary political commentary—more akin to serious journalism than the typical light fare contained in *Playbill*’s pages. The first issue commented on the 1961 context of a divided East and West Berlin, suggesting the difficulties one might encounter as a theatregoer attempting to see performances on the other side.⁴⁷² *Show* also contained short segments highlighting what was new in television, film, and theatre. These columns summarized the plots without providing any commentary and included a few quotes from a producer, writer, or performer involved in the project. These short columns were nothing like the celebrity features seen in earlier playbills. Reading more like a *TV Guide*—which, incidentally, began in 1953—these short columns foregrounded plot over celebrity and were written objectively with little to no criticism. In this way, *Show* pulled from various magazine formats and styles; yet, it shared little similarities to *Playbill*.

Unlike *Playbill*, which always focused on NYC theatre and life, *Show*’s editorials often appeared to dismantle the importance of Broadway theatre. One of the longer articles, “How to

Save Broadway,” described how every Broadway production, no matter the genre or subject, was sure to lose money. In the article, Robert Bendiner, previous writer and editor for *The Nation*, argued that the commercial Broadway theatre was doomed to fail unless it started making massive budgetary changes. One of these changes, he argued, was to reduce theatre owners’ pay, which he noted was currently “a staggering thirty per cent of a play’s gross receipts.”⁴⁷³ He also suggested that theatre owners should make the theatre work for them when not in use by a production—by letting outside groups utilize the space. In doing so, he noted, theatre owners could make rental costs more affordable. Bendiner also suggested that sets should be made more cheaply, and advertising costs slashed. Additionally, he outlined how productions should save money—namely by reducing the compensation for playwrights, actors, and other workers. He diminished the work of stagehands, in particular, including the “head electrician, who may do no more than throw a switch.”⁴⁷⁴ Bendiner’s article is, essentially, a chastisement of the way Broadway theatre comports business. According to Bendiner, theatre owners, designers, actors, playwrights, and others were making too much money. Fundamentally, the article presented a strategy that Playbill would never publish. Playbill has written about commercial theatre before but has never (and would never) advocate against theatre owners—the very people whose business Playbill requires to stay afloat. Bendiner’s article can also be thought of as anti-union during a time in which theatrical unions were frequently on strike to gain *more* benefits.⁴⁷⁵ Historically, Playbill has always supported union efforts. During Kraft’s tenure, for example, Playbill’s fifty print employees represented six different unions.⁴⁷⁶ Playbill ultimately benefits from a positive relationship with unions, as their contracts dictate program biographies and credits.⁴⁷⁷ What set *Show* apart from Playbill was its overt criticism of the industry.

Prior to Kraft's purchase of the magazine, *Show* had been consistently losing money on every issue. According to Birsh, who sees Kraft's foray into the magazine as a "rare stumble," says that Hartford's accountants sought a buyer for the failing publication in order to offset the loss:

"SHOW" could easily have been just shut down but Hartford was too proud and stubborn to end it in any fashion that made him look like a failure. And, because there were over a quarter of a million unfulfilled subscriptions, subscribers that had paid for future editions they were entitled to receive, shutting down could mean repaying these readers. In an effort to coat the pill, Hartford's keepers made the sale to Kraft in such a convoluted fashion that Kraft received a substantial check and owed Hartford nothing. Kraft thought he had made a coup.⁴⁷⁸

It is unclear what "convoluted" means here, or what exactly occurred during the negotiations for *Show*, but the magazine never gained any footing. Birsh, who had been acting as Publisher for Playbill shortly after he sold his interleave technology to the company, briefly became head of *Show*, a decision of Kraft's Birsh vehemently protested. When *Show*'s editor quit before the first issue was completed, Kraft edited the first issue. The publication only lasted three issues, its losses seriously jeopardizing Playbill's finances, since Kraft made *Show* part of the Playbill brand. Although Kraft never changed the magazine's name or added "Playbill" on the copy, he utilized Playbill's profits to pay for *Show*'s operating costs. Kraft likely saw *Show* as an affordable venture, which could have catapulted Playbill into becoming a larger conglomerate in media and entertainment. If *Show* had been successful, Playbill would have continued its national expansion, been connected to a professional-looking full magazine, and joined conversations surrounding other forms of media. In a time where Broadway was declining, any success outside of Broadway would have been a huge win for the company. Perhaps there was simply no readership for *Show*—no consumers interested in a magazine about the performing arts. Theatregoers seemed to enjoy Playbill, but notably, programs are provided for free directly to a waiting readership, whereas readers would have to choose to purchase *Show* from among many other magazine choices. Were

the issues with *Show* the editorials, the format, or the fact that it was yet another magazine option in a sea of other specialty publications? Possibly all three; *Show*'s failure resulted in a significant setback for Playbill. *Show* had already promised its subscribers an upcoming issue, but there was no money to follow through on printing, and they could not pay back what their readers purchased. As a result, Playbill was forced to reimburse *Show*'s subscribers, compensate their employees, and pay all outstanding bills. It is unclear how many subscribers *Show* had or how much debt Playbill accrued because of it, but according to Birsh, it was a significant loss, which affected Playbill's financial outlook for months.

While Kraft was attempting to make something of *Show*, he was also dealing with a legal battle and a public relations controversy. In 1965, Carol Howard, a thirty-three-year old black woman, filed a \$250,000 defamation lawsuit against Kraft and his mother, Sophie Kraft.⁴⁷⁹ Howard alleged that "she had first met Kraft in 1954 and became an employee of his. She began to go out with him the following year and in July, 1962, they 'lived, resided and cohabitated together as man and wife' for a seven year period."⁴⁸⁰ She also alleged that Kraft had proposed marriage to her, but Kraft's mother had not approved of an interracial relationship for her son. Howard claimed that Kraft had given her money regularly, opened credit cards for her, paid her rent, and sent her on trips. Howard reported that Kraft had broken off their relationship because his mother had called her "a black prostitute and worthless adventuress."⁴⁸¹ Howard also alleged that Kraft had "violently struck her and threatened to have her arrested if she ever spoke to him again."⁴⁸² The alleged abuse happened in 1962, the same year in which Kraft married Ruth Kraft, a white woman, and Howard attempted suicide.⁴⁸³ Kraft denied these charges, only stating that he had hired her as a "clerk-typist," that they had dated, and that he gave her money occasionally.⁴⁸⁴ Prominent legal firm Paul, Weiss, Rifkind and Garrison defended Kraft, arguing that the case was

“basically a heart balm litigation,” but the courts did not throw out the case.⁴⁸⁵ The *Chicago Daily Defender* acknowledged the racial disparities at play, stating, “He is a white man—wealthy publisher of a national theatrical magazine. He is white. She is Negro.”⁴⁸⁶ Kraft was a rich, white man with power, so there was little doubt that he would win the case, but in the end, Kraft settled the case quietly by paying Howard \$5,000. The payout was small in comparison to the \$250,000 she had asked for, but with little recourse available to a lower-class, black woman in 1965, Howard was left with little else to do but accept the settlement.

The story made national news, and interestingly, some newspapers acknowledged Kraft as owning Playbill, while others were vague, only stating that he was a publisher. It seems likely that this was a huge controversy for Playbill, but their archives make no mention of this having ever happened. The news never reported where Howard had worked for Kraft, but it was probably not Playbill.⁴⁸⁷ Even if Howard worked for a different company, this kind of controversy would have reflected negatively on both Kraft and Playbill. It also seems possible that this situation could have influenced Kraft to make radical decisions both in his life and with Playbill.

4.5 Kraft’s Exit, Arthur Birsh Takes Over

Kraft’s legal battles, as well as *Show*’s failure, were destructive to Kraft’s relationship with Playbill. After *Show* threatened Playbill’s survival, Birsh was terrified, and told Kraft he was quitting Playbill because he did not want to be a part of a company that would go bankrupt.⁴⁸⁸ Instead, Kraft asked Birsh to take over running the company while he relocated permanently to California.⁴⁸⁹ Birsh became CEO of Playbill in everything but title. He was permitted to make decisions without Kraft’s approval, and he was given a raise and a large allotment of Playbill stock.

As Birsh figures, he had “all the trappings of my own company.”⁴⁹⁰ Birsh credits Playbill’s survival amidst *Show*’s failure to his good relationships with suppliers. When *Show* went under and Playbill could not pay its bills because it was forced to bail out *Show*, Birsh promised they would pay their bills if the suppliers would be patient and not demand payment immediately. They agreed, and Playbill paid off its debts in six months.⁴⁹¹ In the subsequent years, Birsh wielded his expansive network in order to gain notoriety for both himself and Playbill; however, over time, these reputations became conflated, suggesting the intertwined nature of both the company and the man.

Birsh was responsible for much of Playbill’s technological advances during this period. He developed the interleave technology that made color ads possible—something advertisers desperately wanted. Birsh had previously worked for Western Printing and Publishing as a “printing salesman” for two years prior to attempting his own printing company.⁴⁹² He was moderately successful on his own before purchasing a friend’s print shop in Hyde Park.⁴⁹³ Initially, Birsh printed the color pages at his printing press in Poughkeepsie before shipping them to Playbill’s printer—a press Birsh refers to as “antiquated”—for assembly.⁴⁹⁴ Birsh gave up his company, “Cross Road Press,” when Kraft offered him the job as Publisher, promising him a percentage of the profits should Birsh expand the customer base. Later, when he was looking to purchase a new printer for Playbill, he negotiated with a local group of Paulist Fathers, a Roman Catholic society created by Isaac Hecker in 1858, to print all of the booklets used in their missionary and conversion efforts.⁴⁹⁵ Before Birsh came to them, the Paulists had been self-printing in a building adjacent to their church and rectory. Not only did Birsh negotiate a deal to print the Paulists’ materials, but he also purchased some of the group’s printing machines and hired many of their employees to work for Playbill.⁴⁹⁶ In doing so, Birsh obtained a new printer, a

capable staff, and he saved Playbill money. The color ads were incredibly lucrative for Playbill; for example, in 1966, Playbill gifted producer David Merrick with “a four-color, two-page, centerfold spread on ‘Hello Dolly.’”⁴⁹⁷ According to *Variety*, Merrick received the advertisement free of charge due to the “boxoffice [*sic*] draw” which was “the legit story of the year . . . represent[ing] to Playbill’s editors a news story, rather than grist for a paid ad.”⁴⁹⁸ Producer Alexander H. Cohen’s 1965 musical, *Baker Street*, utilized a similar ad, which had cost \$16,000.⁴⁹⁹ Birsh credits Kraft with changing Playbill’s business model into one that could “sell advertising in competition with magazines;” yet, it was Birsh who created the technology that made it possible.⁵⁰⁰

Kraft, who apparently had not learned from the negative experience with *Show*, decided to begin the *Performing Arts Magazine* in California between 1966 and 1967. Kraft had previously moved to Los Angeles in 1965, and his interest in the Los Angeles theatre scene (as evidenced by his drive to gain L.A. regional theatres as Playbill clients) likely made him consider publishing a new magazine for the creatively prolific area. *Performing Arts* was a full-size magazine, rather than a program, but, unlike *Show*, it was distributed for free, which made it a far costlier venture than Playbill. Kraft’s aim with *Performing Arts* was to address the concerns and questions of the L.A. theatre community. The magazine was distributed in Southern California theatres, including the L.A. Music Center’s Dorothy Candler Pavilion, the Mark Taper Forum, the Ahmanson Theatre, the Hollywood Bowl, Pasadena Playhouse, Orange County Center for the Performing Arts, and Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts.⁵⁰¹ Just like *Show*, *Performing Arts* was a part of Playbill, rather than a new individual company. Birsh expressed concerns over the financial strain that another publication might add to Playbill’s revenue, so Kraft purchased his company shares, leaving Birsh a Playbill employee only. One year after starting *Performing Arts*, Kraft held a

company meeting in which he explained that a multimedia corporation wanted to purchase the company, but Kraft had no interest in selling.⁵⁰² Three weeks later, Kraft sold Playbill to Metromedia, Inc., who had apparently raised their offer. Birsh was puzzled by the apparent “about face” that Kraft had over selling Playbill, but seemed to think the decision was because his health was failing.⁵⁰³ Kraft sold Playbill to Metromedia after owning the company for only eight years; at the time of Metromedia’s purchase, Playbill’s circulation was reported to be 1,600,000.⁵⁰⁴

The only thing Kraft took from his time at playbill was *Performing Arts*, which he continued to publish until his death in 1999. Afterwards, his wife, Ruth, headed the publication until 2001 when Playbill’s longtime NY program competitor, *Stagebill*, purchased the magazine. Ironically, the following year, Playbill would purchase both *Stagebill* and *Performing Arts Magazine*, earning a reputation from the *Los Angeles Times* as an “East Coast publishing coup.”⁵⁰⁵ Throughout Kraft’s time with Playbill, he attempted to expand the brand’s reach into regional markets and broaden the publishing repertoire to include longer, for-sale magazines. Playbill is a national brand today, in part, because of what Kraft started in the 1960s. By expanding into regional theatres and beginning the subscription service, Playbill became a nationally recognized theatre magazine.

4.5.1 Metromedia and the Decline of Playbill

Playbill’s new owner was multimedia giant Metromedia, whose billionaire chief, John Kluge, was once named by *Forbes* as the richest person in the United States.⁵⁰⁶ Metromedia joined Playbill to their other media ventures, which included the Ice Capades, Wolper Pictures, radio and television stations, advertising, and the recently acquired Liberty Records and TransAmerica merger. Metromedia was in the business of acquiring properties, which is likely what initially drew

them to Playbill. Despite the “limited profits” that could be expected from Playbill, the acquisition was likely deemed a positive business move, since acquisitions in general were seen as “positive,” or “bullish.”⁵⁰⁷ Playbill was an affordable purchase for such a large corporation—the sales price was not disclosed, but Metromedia paid in cash—and, according to Birsh, the transaction seemed a good business deal in 1968. Kluge, who knew nothing about theatre, wanted to add a printing venture into the media conglomerate; yet, no one at Metromedia had prior experience in print media.⁵⁰⁸ Playbill had a reported “5,000,000 gross” the year prior to the sale, which would have made the company appear to be a good investment.⁵⁰⁹ Birsh comments that these high numbers were essentially a fluke, stating, “the PLAYBILL high profit of 1967, truthfully represented by the Boy Scout we had for an accountant, was just a moment in time. Print media was strong and advertising budgets were large.”⁵¹⁰ Birsh contends that there was very little opportunity for the company to grow:

Playbill was a classically poor acquisition. It should never have been bought. . . . The future growth of PLAYBILL was, at that time, either imaginary or nil. In that pre-digital age, expanding to other cities was not possible. There were few cities with significant theatre activity and PLAYBILL was effectively locked out of them. And the printing cost for the cities with just a little theatre activity would have been ruinous.⁵¹¹

Under Kraft, Playbill expanded as far regionally as possible. No other major theatrical cities were available and branching out to cities with only a little theatrical activity was cost prohibitive. With expansion off the table and Broadway continuing to decline, there was little Metromedia could do to grow Playbill’s business. Faced with a dwindling bottom line, Kluge made ill-advised changes to Playbill’s brand and staff, which ultimately hurt the company’s financial outlook. Yet, Birsh attempted to keep Metromedia’s interest in Playbill, going so far as to utilize his extensive network to secure Kluge’s investment.

Metromedia and Playbill were a bad combination from the beginning. Although Kluge commented to newspapers that there would be no staff changeovers, he brought in his own Metromedia personnel to run Playbill—a company about which they knew very little.⁵¹² Birsh was the only person who knew about publishing and printing retained to the main staff. According to Birsh, most of Kluge’s personnel “were a bunch of blowhards, fakers, and dummies.”⁵¹³ Insults aside, Kluge’s staff were competent in running a television and film conglomerate, but they knew nothing about print or theatre. As a solution, Kluge promoted Birsh after he fired his executive vice president, which made Birsh second in command only to Kluge.⁵¹⁴

Kluge relied on Birsh to make Playbill run smoothly despite the rest of the staff’s relative inexperience. Metromedia’s struggles with Playbill were three-fold: first, the continued disreputable state of New York City caused overhead to increase while profits decreased; second, Kluge treated Playbill as a corporation, making odd staff and business model choices, which ultimately, contradicted the small business mentality that had previously served it well; and third, despite seemingly liking Birsh, Kluge underestimated his reputation within the theatre community, a mistake that eventually caused him to sell Playbill.

Throughout the 1970s, the area around Times Square continued to decline as part of a “slow and inexorable spiral into a grotesque American version of a Felliniesque inferno.”⁵¹⁵ Porn shops were plentiful, and prostitutes regularly solicited outside Playbill’s printing location. Birsh recalls one occasion in which a prostitute walked on to the shop floor wearing nothing but her earrings and shoes.⁵¹⁶ Times Square’s reputation was driving away Broadway’s key demographic, furthering a decline in theatre interest. Producers also continued to raise ticket prices due to escalating production costs; the result of which was fewer people attending the theatre. With audience numbers down, fewer playbills were being distributed, which affected advertising

revenue. A lack of advertising revenue and rising production costs (due to the new color printing technologies) meant that Playbill was expensive to create with very little return.⁵¹⁷ Additionally, Playbill struggled to keep their profits up during the “Nixon shock,” a period in which then-President Nixon suspended the convertibility of the dollar into gold, froze wages and prices for ninety days, and imposed a sizeable ten percent surcharge to all imports. Although the hope was to stabilize the economy and decrease inflation rates, “Nixon shock” caused Playbill’s overheads to skyrocket, while simultaneously, they were not allowed to raise advertising prices. By the end of Metromedia’s ownership, Playbill was losing far too much money.⁵¹⁸

Shortly after purchasing the company, Kluge hired a new President to oversee Playbill, John Van Buren Sullivan (or “Jack Sullivan” as he was known). Sullivan was “part showman, part raconteur and all salesman” and had little pre-existing knowledge about printing or publishing.⁵¹⁹ Sullivan, a broadcast industry executive whose work with NYC radio station WNEW-AM made it one of the most profitable stations during the 1960s.⁵²⁰ His work with WNEW-AM garnered him a position as President of Metromedia Radio before he was moved to President of Metromedia Publishing.⁵²¹ Sullivan was seemingly enamored with Playbill, as an early interview notes, “But the most frequent piece of business was his reaching for Playbill from his desk and illustrating some point with what he calls, ‘This little beauty of a product.,’” but he was also a “numbers guy.”⁵²² He acknowledged the difficulties that Playbill’s business model brought, saying, “It’s not easy to [succeed] with a magazine that has no subscribers and no renewals and is merely passed out to 900,000 persons in New York and 875,000 in 10 other cities each month.”⁵²³ Sullivan’s comments belied how little he understood of Playbill’s business practices. By the time Metromedia took over, Playbill already had a subscription service, presumably with loyal readers, and five-year contracts with theatre owners, which at minimum, provided a sense of continued business.⁵²⁴

In addition to some odd staffing decisions, upon purchasing Playbill, Kluge made a significant change to the logo, which worsened the company's brand identity. Namely, he replaced the established yellow banner with black typeface, which had become standardized over the past decade, with a multicolored—raspberry, orange, and yellow—banner that had been designed by former Art Director of *Look* magazine Allen Hurlburt. Kluge thought this was a positive step, as it was important that all of Metromedia's assets share a similar branding aesthetic. Birsh thinks the change came from one of Kluge's vice presidents, a graphic designer, who "sold John the concept that all divisions should have corporate logos that were similar yet distinctive and when seen as a group would contribute mightily to the corporate image. The logos were all forced into round-cornered squares and were white on solid backgrounds of various special colors."⁵²⁵ Although there are no letters to the editor stating such, Botto argues that the public did not like the change in aesthetic.⁵²⁶ Whether the public liked the changed logo or not, Playbill staff post-Metromedia all agree it was a terrible business move. Undoubtedly, it would have been difficult for longtime staff to accept a changed logo after so many years of it staying the same. Of course, Botto, Birsh, and other staff members have the benefit of knowing the logo eventually changed back to the familiar yellow and has remained as such ever since. It therefore makes sense that they would want to support the yellow banner logo. The logo change, however, did function as Kluge intended. It visually linked Playbill to Metromedia, a corporate entity with little connection to the theatre, but it also eliminated brand recognition of which the logo is a significant aspect.

In addition to changing the logo, Kluge transferred the only person who knew about publishing—namely Arthur Birsh—from his position as Publisher at Playbill to the Metromedia headquarters where he oversaw various aspects of the business as Group President. In his stead, Metromedia hired Stanley R. Greenfield as Publisher and President of Playbill. Greenfield had no

prior publishing experience, and after serving only one year, Greenfield left Metromedia, and Kluge asked Birsh to be Publisher for Playbill again. Once Birsh took over, he altered the model for Playbill distribution. Under Greenfield, Playbill was still distributing to every NYC theatre daily. Birsh noted, “we print 30 publications a month, and 45,000 copies of *Playbill* must be assembled and delivered to theatres every day. It’s a monumental and monumentally costly task.”⁵²⁷ Playbill’s printing model was both time-consuming and costly; first, the company outsourced the color printing for the program covers and color advertisements, while printing the black and white interior pages in-house. Second, Playbill printed the entire program anew whenever productions made cast changes, so essentially, Playbill printed separate publications for each theatre on a weekly basis as if each one was a unique publication. Birsh therefore implemented changes to this production model, which reduced cost and made the magazine more efficient. The first of these was reducing the daily assemblage to two elements rather than the six or ten that had been needed under Greenfield. This change alone effectively cut costs by forty percent in labor costs. In an effort to reduce costs, Birsh also suggested a new 24-page format that would cut costs considerably. Prior to some of these changes, Metromedia was losing \$400,000 per year on Playbill alone.⁵²⁸

Birsh’s tumultuous relationship with Kluge, in many ways, echoed the one between Playbill and Metromedia. While Birsh was working under Kluge, he held a lot of contempt for those employees who worked for him. In his unpublished autobiography, Birsh writes, “[Kluge] made me the overseer of mostly losers.”⁵²⁹ As for his feelings on Kluge, Birsh said he had “flashes of the brilliant and not so brilliant.”⁵³⁰ Metromedia employees referred to Birsh as “Art ‘fireman’ Birsh,” suggesting that his main reputation was one of “putting out fires” as well as his notoriety for firing people. Birsh tells one story in which he mistakenly got off the elevator at the wrong

floor, and later, the division head called him saying “to please try and avoid that in the future as [he] had frightened his staff.”⁵³¹ Although there are no specifics on how many people were fired during this transition, it is evident that there was a considerable amount of changeover, which caused tensions among the staff.

Despite the staff issues, Birsh attempted to increase profits. The first of these ideas was a suggestion to add a ten-cent surcharge to all ticket prices to assist in covering costs of the playbill, but this idea was immediately rejected by the League of New York Theatres.⁵³² Another of Birsh’s ideas was to purchase Playbill’s only competitor in the New York market, *Stagebill*, which had not been doing well financially. *Stagebill* owner Joe Barbieri, who was friendly with Birsh, was open to negotiations with Playbill, but Kluge would not allow Birsh to go forward with obtaining *Stagebill*.⁵³³ A third option was for Playbill to charge theatres for the playbills instead of paying a distribution fee to the theatres—the latter being the very same model that Strauss began at the company’s beginning. Birsh thought that Metromedia’s size could assist if Playbill started losing money and assumed Playbill would start getting paid for their services by these theatres. Kluge disagreed. Birsh considered Kluge’s opinion, saying, “He felt that not paying would not significantly change the PLAYBILL bottom line but would change the theatre owners’ attitude toward us. And asking to be paid would open the door to every printer in New York since the enterprise would no longer depend on advertising sales. ‘Forget it’ was his instruction ‘it’s your edge.’”⁵³⁴ Strauss started this business model in the nineteenth century, and this same structure continues today. It has consistently been the “edge” that Playbill needed to maintain their virtual monopoly.

Regardless of Birsh’s actual and proposed changes, the publication continued to decline. Kluge decided to move Playbill’s printing press to Queens, which made delivering playbills to

theatres within the city more complicated and expensive, as the company moved over to van service rather than deliveries on foot via the subway.⁵³⁵ Birsh noted that “[t]here was a turn-down in theatrical activity, in advertising budgets, and in morale and enthusiasm—a natural by-product of being acquired by a large company.”⁵³⁶ Consequently, Metromedia sold many of the divisions it had acquired in the late 1960s, of which Playbill was a part. Metromedia and Kluge were starting to lose interest in Playbill.

In 1973, Arthur Birsh attempted to increase Kluge’s excitement over Playbill by allowing him to accept a Tony award on the company’s behalf. Unfortunately, Metromedia ended up in the middle of a petty controversy surrounding the award. An article titled, “Rift Develops Over the Tony Awards” described how American Theater Wing President Isabelle Stevenson disputed the winners of certain awards, suggesting that the “quality of the Tony” was becoming “tarnished” by sub-par honorees.⁵³⁷ Among these sub-par honorees, Stevenson said, was Playbill, who had won a special award that year for service to the theatre. Among her complaints were the following comments: “The Wing does not doubt that such persons have done service to the theater . . . but some other award should be given to them and the Tony should be reserved for persons directly engaged in theatrical production.”⁵³⁸ Stevenson further stated that the Theatre Wing should hold a “veto” power to any special Tony awards to which they objected. In a letter to Richard Barr, residing President of The League of New York Theatres, Arthur Birsh combated the affront by saying that Stevenson had “tarnished ‘our’ Tony” and that she was “a cad.”⁵³⁹ Although Barr said he did not make the letter public, *Variety* obtained a copy of Birsh’s letter and then published the full text, making their fight far more visible.⁵⁴⁰

Later, Birsh wrote in his unpublished manuscript that the “petty but ugly controversy” and “nasty bruhaha” had been between the producer of the Tony awards, Alex Cohen, who had been

televising the awards since 1967—twenty years after the awards began—and what he referred to as “the Lilliputians at the American Theatre Wing,” essentially dismissing Stevenson.⁵⁴¹ What is most striking about this controversy is not that two major theatrical institutions were fighting over the merits of an award, but Birsh’s nasty handling of the argument. At the time of the controversy, Birsh insulted and blamed Stevenson, while dismissing her as merely one of the “Lilliputians” of the Theatre Wing nearly thirty-three years later in his memoir. Had Birsh changed his mind over the years, or was his reticence to reference Stevenson in 2006 because she had died three years prior and was a highly respected figure in the American theatre? In that same letter, Birsh wrote that Playbill needed to become a company comprised of “tough businessmen,” after having been naively proud of “nearly a century of uninterrupted service.”⁵⁴² It is difficult to see beyond the surface that this issue represents the “boy’s club”—Birsh, Cohen, and Kluge—against a single high-ranking woman.

Birsh used this controversy to argue that Playbill was financially unsuccessful. He stated that the company consistently lost money over the decades and specifically noted that they had lost nearly \$400,000 the year before, with Metromedia reluctantly supporting the brand because “of a commitment to the people and institutions that have long been a part of what we call ‘Broadway.’”⁵⁴³ Birsh also admitted that he asked CEO John Kluge to accept the Tony in his stead because he had hoped receiving the award would make Kluge more supportive of Playbill:

I hoped that this tangible representation of the “Theatre’s” regard might shore up his sagging commitment to pour dollars into PLAYBILL’s service. Mrs. Stevenson has torn out that prop. Mrs. Stevenson has started a bonfire. I have stated that PLAYBILL’s in deep financial trouble. It requires subsidy. That subsidy comes from METROMEDIA’s successful endeavors. That subsidy does not come willingly. Mrs. Stevenson has destroyed the belief that we enjoyed the “Theatre’s” regard and thanks. . . . This will most likely be the end of PLAYBILL as we know it. Mrs. Stevenson, obviously, will not miss it.⁵⁴⁴

This petty fight between two powerful names in the theatre illuminates several intersecting narratives. First, Birsh insulted Stevenson to diminish her authority. Although Stevenson's initial comment about "sub-par honorees" was certainly insulting, she was not personally attacking any one individual. Rather, she was criticizing the way in which honorees were selected. Although her comments lacked tact, they certainly did not require Birsh's blame. He could have stated that Playbill deserved the special Tony award without relentlessly attacking Stevenson's character. Secondly, Birsh discussed Playbill as a company that is deeply entrenched in the history of Broadway, an institution that, he says, services the artistic goals and needs of the "Theatre." Playbill has continually perpetuated this narrative. Further, Birsh blamed Stevenson for the impending end of the company. By using this scapegoat tactic, Birsh distanced the company from any potential wrongdoing or bad financial decision that could bankrupt them.

The Stevenson/Playbill controversy reverberated among the NYC theatrical community. Once public, several Theatre Wing members resigned their posts, and others called for Stevenson's removal. As *Variety* reported:

Although several members of the Wing board had already been discussing the possibility of putting up an opposition slate of officers and board members at the forthcoming nominating committee meeting . . . word of the threatened discontinuation of Playbill appeared to crystalize the move against Mrs. Stevenson. In fact, one Wing board member informed VARIETY that he intends to ask her to resign. Several other members have indicated support for such a move, it's understood.⁵⁴⁵

Birsh weaponized Playbill by threatening to alter, cease, or otherwise change the way the company functions in New York theatre. Many Theatre Wing members would have been connected to theatre, either as producers or practitioners, and it seems very plausible that this threat alone was enough to raise the proverbial stakes on this fight. *Variety* acknowledged that "The possibility of discontinuation or major modification of Playbill" was a primary reason why Wing members were threatening to quit and calling for Stevenson's resignation.⁵⁴⁶ *Variety* reported that at least four

people had resigned as of publication. These included Edward F. Kook, producer, Henry Hewes, president of the New York Drama Critics Circle, Gerard Mandelbaum, prominent NYC Ballet donor, and Robert Carr. Birsh was well-connected and well-liked in the theatre community, and he undoubtedly used his network to his advantage.

Birsh's mudslinging worked. In the end, however, Stevenson did not resign; in fact, she remained with the League for another twenty-five years before stepping down to become Chairman in 1998. A Tony award was named in her honor after her death in 2003 and was first presented in 2009. Ironically, the award is given to honorees that pursue humanitarian or service-related efforts, even if those efforts are not directly related to the theatre. In a way, the award named for Stevenson recognizes the type of work that earned Playbill their special Tony in 1973. Although Stevenson's reputation did not suffer after Birsh's attempt at defaming her character, he succeeded in presenting a counter-narrative that not only defended Playbill's place within the Broadway community, but also, his strategy demonstrated how crucial Playbill was to the community at large. That the mere threat of changing how playbills functioned in Broadway theatres was enough to cause this level of unrest reveals how integrated into Broadway and theatre culture Playbill had become. Although Birsh's reaction to Stevenson was excessive, he may have been correct about one thing. In January of 1974, Metromedia decided to part with Playbill, only one year after the Birsh/Stevenson fiasco. Birsh described Kluge as Playbill's reluctant supporter, and presumably, his great plan to allow him to receive a Tony award did not improve Metromedia's investment in Playbill.

Kluge's relationship to Birsh became more contentious over the years. When Kluge wanted to sell Playbill but keep Birsh on at Metromedia, Birsh asked to purchase Playbill instead. Then, Kluge decided to hold on to Playbill in order to "keep" Birsh.⁵⁴⁷ Birsh recalls, "It was on Friday that Kluge told me I was indispensable and on Monday I was called to his office and he advised

that he had thought about it and perhaps he would sell me PLAYBILL.”⁵⁴⁸ He continues, “Kluge now wanted to get rid of me as I had evidenced disloyalty by even contemplating leaving and in his mind, I had therefore quickly become ‘never any good anyway.’”⁵⁴⁹ Frustrated with Kluge’s operation of Playbill, Birsh threatened to quit.

Kluge never understood theatre or Playbill, but Birsh did. Having worked with Playbill for several years before acting as its Publisher, Birsh had made significant connections among those in NYC and the theatre industry. Birsh recalls one contentious article in the weekly newsletter, *The Gallagher Report: A Confidential Letter to Advertising, Marketing, and Media Executives* (hereafter the Gallagher Report), titled, “Major Metromedia Shakeup: Chairman and president John Kluge begins with dismissal of Art ‘The Fireman’ Birsh. Makes seal with Art to take unprofitable Playbill with him.”⁵⁵⁰ The Gallagher Report, compiled by Bernard P. Gallagher, was a newsletter that reported on the happenings in the communications industry. It was “[a] mixture of gossip, speculation and fact, [and] the newsletter served as a vehicle for Mr. Gallagher’s opinions.”⁵⁵¹ That the article calls Birsh’s leaving a “dismissal” is a significant twist on what was happening, which was that Birsh wanted to leave with Playbill, but certainly, the article demonstrates that Birsh was a big enough “name” that the drama surrounding his leaving was gossip-worthy. According to advertising executives, “the newsletter’s greatest influence had been in the 1950s and 1960s,” which means that people in the advertising industry paid attention to what was written there. According to Birsh, Gallagher’s article was enough of a controversy to force him to stay with Metromedia until his contract was up in four years.⁵⁵² “Then,” as Birsh writes, “things turned ugly.”⁵⁵³ After the Gallagher Report, Kluge and Birsh argued over the terms of his departure, finally settling on a highly attractive offer to Birsh, including one year’s salary as a lump sum, as well as other incentives. In the meantime, Kluge shopped Playbill around with the

intention of not selling to Birsh; certainly, Kluge had not counted on Birsh's reputation in the theatre world.

According to Birsh, the Shubert Organization, which at the time owned seventeen of the thirty Broadway theatre houses, refused to continue their contracts with Playbill if anyone other than Birsh purchased the company. Birsh states, "Unasked by me and unknown to me, the Shubert Organization . . . told Kluge that they would not agree to the assignment of their contract with Metromedia to anyone other than Arthur Birsh."⁵⁵⁴ Over the years, the Shubert Organization has proven itself a major player in the American theatre, its contracts consistently important for Playbill's continued success. In the 1970s, it was indeed the "most important contract" for Playbill.⁵⁵⁵ Kluge purportedly spoke to Chairman of the Shubert Organization Gerry Schoenfeld, who felt that Birsh was the only person who could take over running Playbill. Birsh comments that he knew the Shubert Organization liked him; in fact, they "knew [he] had saved it from big trouble after 'SHOW' and felt [he] was a 'good citizen' of the theatre community, a community that they prudently dominated."⁵⁵⁶ This was, in effect, two major names in the theatre community—Shubert and Birsh—working together to expel the businessman (namely Kluge). Furthermore, when Kraft had sold to Metromedia, he had written into the purchase a "first refusal to buy Playbill," should Metromedia decide to sell.⁵⁵⁷ This meant that Kraft had "first grabs" at purchasing Playbill back now that Metromedia wanted to sell.⁵⁵⁸ Kraft considered, but ultimately decided to assign his first refusal rights to Birsh, which further angered Kluge.⁵⁵⁹ The Shubert situation, along with Kraft's re-assigning of his refusal rights compounded with the potential tax benefits that the "write-off" could bring aligned to make Metromedia's selling of Playbill to Arthur Birsh their only real option.⁵⁶⁰ Later, after Birsh had taken control of Playbill, Kluge joined the board of the Shubert Foundation. According to Birsh, once Kluge was on the Shubert board, he attempted to malign his

reputation; Birsh states his “informants” told him about the potential defamation, but since Birsh managed to keep the Shubert contracts, apparently little came of it.⁵⁶¹

Birsh was able to purchase a company he could not afford on the basis of his reputation (through the Shubert and Kraft connections), as well as by negotiating with Kluge. Metromedia would be able to write-off the sale of the company as “goodwill,” while Birsh kept the price low by underselling the value of the company’s assets, stating that Playbill lacked any real estate, its printing press was archaic—the “equivalent of scrap iron,”—and the company had little recourse to grow the business, as it merely “served at the pleasure of the theatre owners.”⁵⁶² Birsh negotiated an offer to pay Kluge if it ever made money, but “He didn’t think it would.”⁵⁶³ Birsh may have purchased a “bag of bolts” in 1974, but everything would change in the next year.⁵⁶⁴

5.0 Playbill: A Small Family Company?

*“Whenever there’s less competition I think things suffer regardless of what field you’re in. It will just narrow things down again, in terms of putting all the power and responsibility in the hands of one outfit.”*⁵⁶⁵

Although competitors have challenged Playbill over the years, the company has maintained a consistent monopoly. Chapter One discussed how the Theatrical Syndicate helped Strauss to establish an early monopoly over program publishing, while Chapter Two described the ways that Playbill cultivated a reputation as a theatre magazine. Chapter Three discussed Playbill’s hold over the Broadway market, while the company also expanded into key regional areas. In recent years, Playbill has obtained perhaps its strongest foothold in the theatrical program market, hitting its highest circulation numbers and establishing itself as intrinsically linked with American (and increasingly global) theatre. With the addition of digital tools, websites, and social media, Playbill further cemented itself as *the* theatre program brand. Despite current CEO Phil Birsh’s statement that the company is but a “small, family company,” Playbill continues to demonstrate its prowess within the broader commercial theatrical landscape.⁵⁶⁶

Playbill remains the sole provider of theatrical programs for Broadway theatres. William Manus, former Southern California correspondent for Playbill, wrote the above quote for a Playbill Online article discussing the new Los Angeles-specific content that Playbill was going to include now that they had secured the all-important Los Angeles theatre contracts. Written as a response to Playbill’s acquisition of the L.A.-based *Performing Arts Magazine*, Manus acknowledged Angelenos’ concerns over Playbill’s increasing national range. Despite one of its own employees

conceding that quality suffers when there is less competition, Playbill continues to grow and expand and squash its competitors. Through changes to the company's printing model, its expansion into previously un-held markets, including regional areas and the digital arena, and by championing itself as a "family company," Playbill constructed a brand reputation that downplays its capitalistic intent, while continuing to dominate a chief aspect of the American theatrical experience. What was once a single-sheet handbill that provided brief production information has now evolved into an institution: a theatrical ritual in which consumers not only read and save their playbills, but also, take photographs with and create art around their interactions with the playbill. Playbills have, in many ways, become a mandatory aspect of the theatergoing experience, with audiences complaining when they are missing or when they feel Playbill has been wronged. Over the years, various CEOs have taken turns branding Playbill as a long-standing and trustworthy company, but it was the Birshes—Arthur and Phil—that began branding the company as a "family." This chapter explores how the Birshes created a national commodity in Playbill, while also perpetuating a narrative that diminishes its perceived power by suggesting that it is merely a "small, family company."

5.1 Arthur Birsh and the Art of the Network

Arthur Birsh arguably had the biggest impact on Playbill, having made significant changes to its business structure and reputation over his nearly thirty years with the company. Arthur Birsh (hereafter "A. Birsh") worked for Playbill from 1965 to 1993, when his son, Philip (Phil) Birsh (hereafter "P. Birsh") took over as CEO. During this time, A. Birsh cemented Playbill's importance in the American theatre through financial, branding, and legal means. This section explores how

A. Birsh's business savvy was put to good use through his successful negotiations of contracts and debts, which benefited Playbill's brand visibility and overall financial bottom line. This section further argues that A. Birsh's successful networking managed to legally and financially secure Playbill's status as both a trademark and a New York icon.

A. Birsh began working at Playbill at twenty-five years old, having finished two years of military service before marrying and having two sons.⁵⁶⁷ Many of his decisions were made because he knew he had a family to provide for, and his self-assessed tough, assertive demeanor when dealing with employees was likely a byproduct of his military training. By twenty-eight, Birsh ran the Playbill printing press with over one hundred employees, and at thirty-one, he was second-in-command only to the CEO who he says was essentially "an absentee owner in California"—namely, Kraft who left New York for Los Angeles to start *Performing Arts*, as described in the previous chapter.⁵⁶⁸ Birsh defended Playbill's reputation and legitimacy against others, including Isabelle Stevenson; he had finally negotiated the "right" deal for the company's purchase from Metromedia. Having done all that, Birsh was still faced with a financially sagging company.

A. Birsh's extensive network, which he established while Kraft and Kluge oversaw the company, allowed him to "float" company debts with only his name as collateral. Birsh negotiated ninety-day grace periods for anyone to whom Playbill owed money. According to Birsh, everyone was happy to oblige, trusting that Playbill would settle their debts accordingly. Judd & Detweiler, Playbill's outside printer, for example, gave Birsh and Playbill an extra three months on top of the requested grace period. When Birsh asked why they were being so generous to Playbill, Judd & Detweiler President "Jim [Shields] advised that he did not question that I would succeed and remain a loyal customer."⁵⁶⁹ As discussed in the previous chapter with the Tony Awards

controversy and the purchase of Playbill itself, Birsh was well liked in the theatre and publishing communities, and he utilized his network to his advantage.

Birsh was ultimately able to leverage his name and reputation in order to save Playbill from likely bankruptcy following its purchase from Metromedia. This marks an important connection to as well as a shift from Strauss's Playbill. As described in Chapter One, Strauss lucked into a fortunate relationship with the Theatrical Syndicate, which afforded him the opportunity for a monopoly; yet, Strauss was not well-liked—at least by the Shuberts—and he was frequently late in paying his privilege fee to the theatres. In many ways, Birsh's success is similar to Strauss's. Birsh was able to make friends among the New York elite and theatre community, which he used for Playbill's advantage. Unlike Strauss, however, Birsh seemed to be nearly universally liked. Certainly, this is merely a small sample of potential interactions that both men had with a large number of companies and people; yet, they suggest the importance of cultivating a positive relationship with these communities. In some ways, how "successful" Playbill is can be reduced to how well a CEO navigated the interactions between theatre owners, unions, and printers, among others.

Following the purchase of Playbill, Birsh negotiated additional deals with outside printers and with Metromedia in order to sustain the company's business as well as finesse the brand. Previously, Playbill had been printing all content, and since it was an older press, it was an expensive and lengthy process. Birsh had made the decision to utilize outside printing for the editorial content that was common to all playbills, while Playbill's printing plant continued to print the production-specific insert.⁵⁷⁰ He also negotiated with Metromedia to take the printing equipment with him after the sale of Playbill. This same process is still utilized today.

Perhaps the most important decision for Playbill's long-term branding was Birsh's replacement of the multicolored banner that was in use in favor of reverting to what is now the familiar yellow and black logo. This decision was both financially prudent and potentially nostalgic for Birsh, who had been affiliated with Playbill since the 1950s as an outsourced printer when the logo was first utilized. Printing in only two colors was arguably more affordable than the multiple inks the previous banner required, and the change marked the transition from the shared Metromedia logo as well as a return to the familiar. According to Playbill, however, Birsh made the change because audiences disapproved of the multicolored banner.⁵⁷¹ Although that may be true, it is also notable that the yellow and black inks used in the banner (those still used today) are the least expensive inks in which to print.⁵⁷² The company "spin," in which a notable logo change occurred because of the supposed wants of its readership, is one that makes the company look accommodating and furthers the notion that Playbill is a "small, family company" that is willing to do what theatregoers want.

In addition to changing the company logo, A. Birsh negotiated one of the most significant aspects of Playbill's current business model—namely, the stipulation that the playbill must be "proffered" to the theatregoer. This language asserts that the program must not be left in a stack for the audience member to find; rather, someone from the theatre must hand the program to the audience member. This not only ensures that every audience member will receive a playbill, thereby increasing visibility for the company as well as its ads, but it also lends credibility to Playbill. As ushers essentially act as representatives of the theatre, their dissemination of the playbill to the audience legitimizes the experience to some extent.

The playbill "proffering" appears in two important institutional contracts. First, A. Birsh negotiated this proffering detail into Playbill's contracts with its theatre owners, thereby ensuring

increased audience engagement with the playbill before a show, which boosts ad visibility and furthers theatregoers' connection to the brand.⁵⁷³ Secondly, Actors Equity Association (AEA) added this proffering language into their own Broadway theatre contracts.⁵⁷⁴ This move intimates Playbill's importance to the American theatre at large by suggesting that playbills are essential to the theatregoing experience, in part, because of how they function for union workers. Current CEO P. Birsh comments that it is Playbill's job to provide a service for theatre patrons ("to provide the audience with the appropriate amount of information that will allow them to maximize their experience for that particular show"), but also to fulfill their contractual obligations to producers, actors, designers, musicians, stagehands, and others represented by unions ("playbills acknowledge all these people . . . who work in our world and create this art").⁵⁷⁵ Playbill does not share their contracts, but AEA did provide sample contracts, which included the playbill/theatre program stipulations. AEA's contract states: "Playbill or program. A free Playbill or program shall be proffered to every patron prior to patron's arrival at patron's seat. Such program shall contain a listing of all Actors employed in the production together with their named part(s) or function."⁵⁷⁶ Of note is the "proffering" language of the contract, by which audiences are asked to engage with their playbills pre-show. However, most notable is the reliance on the capitalized "Playbill" used not only in this section, but throughout the contract ("Playbill or program"), thereby acknowledging Playbill's ubiquity. This contractual link between Playbill and AEA serves the complementary goals of these two theatrical organizations, and the legal link essentially legitimizes Playbill.

According to Playbill staff, the company has always distributed their programs to each theatergoer via house ushers before the start of the show, but nothing in the Strauss- and Huber-era contracts confirm this policy.⁵⁷⁷ It is possible that this program distribution was a common

practice rather than a contractual obligation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Playbill's insistence that ushers have always "proffered" the program, however, is a significant branding move. As stated throughout this dissertation, Playbill relies on its history and longevity—its legacy. By suggesting that this practice is historical as well as legally mandated perpetuates Playbill's reputation as a mainstay of theatrical and New York culture. Additionally, the image of ushers delivering playbills into the waiting hands of eager audience members constructs an impression of a company that is devoted to and caring of the theatre community.

This "proffering" clause of AEA's contract has arguably become as significant to contemporary Playbill as the Seventh Clause was to Strauss/Huber. Just as Strauss and Huber previously threatened to cease services when theatres began showing non-"legitimate" theatre or film, contemporary Playbill will pull services in the event of any theatre going against the "pre-curtain" policy. The production that caused the most controversy concerning this clause was the 1998 revival of *Cabaret*. Director Sam Mendes wanted to distribute playbills following the end of the show, since his overall artistic vision was immersive—the theatre had been redesigned to emulate a 1930s-era pre-war Berlin cabaret, and Mendes felt offering playbills before the start of the show would take away from the audience's experience of settling into the cabaret atmosphere. Furthermore, since audiences would be left with playbills in their laps, they would be constantly drawn out of the immersive nature of the production. Mendes and the producers, The Roundabout Theatre Company (RTC), first asked Playbill if they could distribute the playbills following the show. A. Birsh refused, and the RTC agreed to distribute the playbills as usual. However, following these negotiations, the production began distributing playbills post-show a mere day later.

Playbill immediately ceased distribution after they heard *Cabaret* was doing so, charging that the theatre production had violated its contract with Playbill. A. Birsh claimed, "Our readers

and advertisers desire and need the information in the program. The cast and crew deserve to have their recognition not demoted to a brief glimpse on the audience's way home. What's more, they have desecrated our service and went back on their word and we are a company of people who honor our agreement."⁵⁷⁸ A. Birsh's statement demonstrates three important company strategies. The first is an argument that supplying playbills is done in service to the audience, and by pulling services, Playbill is advocating for the audience. Although this may be part of what Playbill is trying to do, it is undeniable that having audiences view the playbill pre-show increases their chances of being swayed by ads. Secondly, A. Birsh notes the cast and crew, whose work needs to be credited properly; this is a pro-union argument that he has made before. Union workers benefit by having their credit in the playbill, and Playbill profits from unions' insistence that they be included in the playbill. Given this mutually beneficial relationship, A. Birsh's pro-union stance makes sense. Finally, A. Birsh argues that the theatre has gone against "their word"—that of distributing the playbill pre-show—whereas, Playbill is "a company of people who honor" their word. In one statement, A. Birsh placed Playbill on the side of the audience and the union workers, while also disparaging the producers for being unethical.

The *Cabaret* controversy only intensified after Playbill pulled its business. With no official playbill to offer his audiences, Mendes decided to print single sheet programs showing only the names of cast and crew—the minimal information required to not break union rules. The theatre only distributed the abbreviated program for a single performance on March 5th before all parties were able to come to an agreement that arguably favored *Cabaret*'s needs. Mendes and the RTC resolved the issue by agreeing to distribute a special Playbill publication called *On Stage* at the end of the show. *On Stage*, which Playbill still offers today, is a significant shift in how Playbill operates. *On Stage*'s business model is distinct: it allows Playbill to offer program services to any

NYC theatre (Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway included) for a fee rather than the typical model in which Playbill pays a distribution fee to the theatre owner. In the case of *Cabaret*, the *On Stage* model allowed Mendes and RTC more creative control over the distribution of the publication. Ultimately, this decision allowed Mendes to keep the immersive feel he wanted for the show, while also providing Playbill with a weekly fee. It is unclear how much this fee would be, but theoretically, the amount would have to offset any projected revenue from ads sales. Since *On Stage* is handed out post-show, and advertisers would be less inclined to purchase space, Playbill prints *On Stage* without ads. The weekly fee—rumored to be around \$1300—would have to at least come close to compensating for the potential advertising loss.⁵⁷⁹ Although Playbill arguably gains that potentially lost income, the use of *On Stage* instead of *Playbill* takes away from the company's brand recognition, and may be an overall net loss for Playbill. In the case of *Cabaret*, however, remaining in good faith with Mendes and the RTC was very likely a strong goal for A. Birsh.

Notably, however, this controversy demonstrates both the importance of the *Playbill*, as well as the speed with which Playbill will act upon a contractual break. *Cabaret* distributed Playbill following the show for one performance only, and Mendes's informal single sheet program was only offered for one performance as well. It is possible that Playbill staff were keeping an eye on the production team, given Mendes's desire to go against the contract, but equally likely is the possibility of a well-meaning audience member informing Playbill of the transgression. P. Birsh explains that the company's fans have a history of reporting any misuse of the Playbill logo or any other suspected wrongdoing.⁵⁸⁰ Playbill has amassed a strong following of fans who love the company and who are seriously upset when they do not receive their playbill. During the *Cabaret* controversy, news sources reported the "fight" between two theatre giants (Mendes/RTC and

Playbill), preferring to stay objective by not taking specific sides. In contrast, a theatre fan published a piece discussing the issue, writing:

To me, it's a bit silly, this whole issue of the program. I, for one, want my Playbill when I enter the theater, night club or not. I know where I am when I go to the theater, and I love to sip my drink while perusing the cast list or burning my brain for three seconds. To have their complete environmental setting, Roundabout will have their way . . . I see Playbill's point of view and agree wholeheartedly with them even though my collecting habits are in disarray.⁵⁸¹

Notably, the fan sides with Playbill, in some regard, because they understand that they are in a theatre and see Mendes's immersive techniques as "silly." Yet, the most jarring aspect of this "fight" for the fan is that the subsequent compromise means that the fan's collection of "playbills" will be marred by the inclusion of "On Stage." This further suggests the power of the name and the hold that Playbill has over theatre fans.

The *Cabaret* controversy forced Playbill to envision a different way for their publication to function, with *On Stage* providing an increasingly necessary divergence from the typical "proffering" model. Playbill continues to offer *On Stage* for theatres who do not fit their typical business model, such as theatres who wish to disseminate playbills post-show, as in the *Cabaret* example, or for theatres with lower audience numbers for whom the advertising revenue would not balance the printing cost. When Playbill rejects a bid from an under-performing theatre, they offer *On Stage* at cost.⁵⁸² Interestingly, though, theatres that use *On Stage* are paying for a service and not the Playbill brand recognition, as most theatergoers are not aware that *On Stage* is curated by Playbill. A deep dive into Broadway and Off-Broadway message boards demonstrated a significant amount of confusion over *On Stage*, with many theatergoers commenting that it was its own publication, unaffiliated with Playbill. Still others commented that these theatres would be better served by using Playbill for their program needs.⁵⁸³

5.1.1 *Playbill*: A Magazine or a Theatre Program?

In every chapter of this dissertation, I have referred to *Playbill* (and all other names for the publication) as a theatre program, but every CEO has, to varying degrees, framed it as a “theatre magazine.” The question of whether *Playbill* is a “theatre program” or a “magazine” became a point of financial cruciality in 1982. As A. Birsh writes, “Is PLAYBILL a theatre program or a magazine? It was a question we didn’t spend much time pondering. We accepted as a matter of faith that we were a magazine for we perpetually fought for a share of magazine advertising budgets”⁵⁸⁴ Yet, in a letter from the New York Tax Commission dated in 1977, the state declared that *Playbill* was a theatre program and not a magazine, and the effects of this determination would have a huge financial impact on the company. In 1977, the question of whether *Playbill* offered a theatre program or magazine became the central argument in a legal battle, which did not initially end in *Playbill*’s favor. Yet, through A. Birsh’s careful negotiating, *Playbill* not only emerged from the legal skirmish essentially unscathed, their reputation skyrocketed, as the state assured the company’s status as a New York icon.

In New York, magazines and periodicals are tax exempt, but books, in contrast, are only tax exempt for the publisher because the consumer pays sales tax upon purchase of the book. Prior to 1977, *Playbill*’s status as either theatre program or magazine was unimportant because, as A. Birsh notes, the Tax Commission basically left the publication alone.⁵⁸⁵ An amendment to tax law created in 1977 specifically excluded “theatre programs” from sales tax exemptions, and as a complimentary item, *Playbill* had no consumer to tax, which signified that *Playbill* needed to start paying taxes on their purchases. Not only did *Playbill*’s status effectively change, the Tax Commission sought back taxes on previous years (1974-1977). Effectively, *Playbill* was going to owe “eight percent on a several million dollars times three, a great deal of money”⁵⁸⁶

The determination came down to whether *Playbill* could be defined as a periodical. In order to be tax exempt in New York, periodicals must fall under the following guidelines:

- (1) It must be published at stated intervals, at least as frequently as four times a year;
- (2) It must have the element of general availability to the public;
- (3) It must have continuity as to title and general nature of content from issue to issue;
- (4) It must not, either singly or, when successive issues are put together, constitute a book;
- (5) Each issue must contain a variety of articles by different authors devoted either to literature, the sciences or the arts.⁵⁸⁷

Four out of the five requirements listed above were met by *Playbill*. The question was whether *Playbill* was available to the general public. The Tax Commission argued that since *Playbill* was provided to theatregoers—a specific group of people and therefore not the general populace—the publication did not fulfill all requirements and was therefore not a periodical. *Playbill*'s strategy was to claim that since they had a subscription service, *Playbill* was indeed a periodical and therefore should remain tax exempt. Although Kraft did not intend for his subscription service idea to be utilized as a means of avoiding taxation, it helped *Playbill*'s case. However, A. Birsh had forgotten about the subscription service shortly after he took over the company, and the process had subsequently lapsed. This meant that *Playbill* still owed back taxes during the years in which the subscription was not functional. An initial court decision sided with the Tax Commission, and a subsequent appeal was split. A final appeal by the New York Supreme Court determined that *Playbill* was, in fact, a theatre program and not a magazine, thereby insisting that *Playbill* needed to begin paying sales tax and to pay the previously missed taxes.

By all accounts, *Playbill* functions as a theatre program, but for tax purposes, this definition was not in *Playbill*'s best interests. *Playbill*'s attorney relied on editorial content and circulation to

distance the publication from the definition as a “theatre program,” and when Playbill ultimately lost their second appeal, the dissenting opinion stated:

The exclusion of ‘theatre programs’ should not apply to a publication like *Playbill*. It is conceded that a small part of the publication is a program for the theatre in which it is distributed, but this does not transform the entire publication into a theatre program. . . . Although it does contain a “theatre program” in each copy, the essence of the publication is that of a monthly periodical of and concerning the theatre. Certainly, the plain and ordinary meaning . . . of the words “theatre program” would not encompass a publication that is distributed in almost every major theatre and results in a circulation that exceeds one million readers a month.⁵⁸⁸

The argument was that *Playbill* merely contained a theatre program inside of a magazine, which should not define the entire object as a theatre program. Certainly, this is not altogether different from theatre fans who suggest that Playbill is different from a theatre program. As for Playbill’s response, A. Birsh attempted to utilize the company’s longevity and reputation to appeal to the courts, saying that “we were a magazine filled with pithy editorial, a great and respected service that justified continued exemption, and a cherished tradition that would see the entire theatre community rise in our defense. Hoo-hah!”⁵⁸⁹ Yet, Playbill lost their case, owed a large sum of money to the state, and the theatre community did not come to Playbill’s rescue because the legal battle was never reported in the news outlets.

Of course, the question of whether *Playbill* was a magazine or theatre program did not matter in the end because Playbill was a New York icon. According to A. Birsh, Playbill was the recipient of some fortunate timing. Following the court decision, A. Birsh was trying to decide how to get the back-owed taxes and contemplating leaving the state when the state’s Commerce Department sent him a letter. Apparently, they were putting together a new advertising campaign to attract businesses, featuring “an array of the State’s most recognizable corporate logotypes and, the letter said, PLAYBILL just had to be a part of this effort.”⁵⁹⁰ A. Birsh declined, saying that he wanted to move the company to New Jersey since New York was taxing the company “afresh;”

“Forget using our famous logo,” he wrote, “New Jersey would gladly give theatre programs an exemption to sales tax to get us.”⁵⁹¹ This was a suitable threat to encourage the Commerce and Tax departments to derive a sufficient compromise—namely, Playbill would not owe any of the back taxes and would not be taxed from then on, as long as A. Birsh provided the subscription version at newsstands. Ultimately, Playbill’s reputation and appeal saved the company from taxation. Playbill’s status as an iconic New York institution could not have been made clearer. Ironically, throughout his manuscript, A. Birsh refers to *Playbill* as a “theatre program,” but ultimately, how *Playbill* was legally defined was irrelevant. The company was allowed to persist in much the same way as it had historically, with only one minor adjustment. New York had, at once, threatened Playbill and then welcomed it home.

Playbill had experienced one significant legal case prior to this tax exemption issue. A. Birsh recalls that, at some point during Metromedia’s ownership of the company, or perhaps during the transition to Birsh, Playbill’s trademark, which was “The Playbill” at that time, lapsed. No one had thought to renew the trademark or change it to reflect the dropped “the,” and therefore, Playbill was operating with no registered trademark. When A. Birsh set out to fix the problem, it turned into a five-year fight over whether “playbill,” as a generic term applying more broadly to all theatre programs, could be trademarked. “It was a fragile Trademark,” he writes, which “over the ensuing decades has become very strong indeed as it has been reinforced by our growth and expansion into the internet, book publishing, and merchandising.”⁵⁹² Now, the term “playbill” is defined in every dictionary as both a general theatre program and as a trademarked company. These threats to Playbill’s status—as either theatre program or magazine, as well as whether they can own their own name—tend to not last. Playbill has become a monolith of American theatre and a beloved, iconic brand.

5.2 A Family Company: Labor, Unions, and “Women’s Work”

Playbill is a New York and Broadway institution, but A. Birsh has also worked tirelessly to craft an image of it as “a family company.” In his unpublished manuscript, he writes about the multiple family lineages that have worked at Playbill over the decades, including print managers Skippy and Vincent who are brothers, and printing plant manager Dom who worked with his three sons.⁵⁹³ A. Birsh also welcomed his own son, Phil, to the company, and in turn, Phil brought his son, Alex Birsh, to work as Playbill’s Vice President. This focus on family lineage creates an image of a company that is, at its core, compassionate about people, and it de-emphasizes the company’s size and ubiquity. By suggesting Playbill is a “family company,” A. Birsh also implies that employees work there for loyalty and love of the brand, rather than a paycheck. An idealistic perspective, A. Birsh’s view perhaps fails to understand the real-world labor conditions his employees would have faced. His manuscript never mentions whether Playbill’s employees were paid fairly; although, he does state that he employed both union and non-union labor. This section examines how A. Birsh wrote about employees’ loyalty to the Playbill “family” and ultimately suggests that these anecdotes incite even more questions about the archive and Playbill history, as A. Birsh’s potentially biased manuscript remains the only place where these instances are recorded.

A. Birsh writes that Playbill inspires loyalty, suggesting that this is the reason why families and longtime workers stay for years. He implies that employees do not want to leave Playbill, writing, “Our company retirement policy was and is ‘you can die at your desk,’” suggesting that Playbill never forced an employee into retirement.⁵⁹⁴ He also notes that several employees stayed with the company far beyond the typical retirement age—he calls them “Old Timers”—and lists the names of those he can remember.⁵⁹⁵ He describes these longtime employees as “woven into

the fabric of the company.”⁵⁹⁶ According to A. Birsh, this is a company that values their employees, without whom the company could not exist.

Interestingly, some employees quite literally died on the job. Herman Pepper, who used to visit every theatre to see how many playbills they needed each night, “died at his desk” at the age of seventy-seven.⁵⁹⁷ The *New York Times* described Pepper as “perhaps the world’s greatest theatregoer,” who “made his rounds on foot each evening, stopping at each theater covered by the magazine, making a fast count of the audience and then moving on.”⁵⁹⁸ According to Botto, Pepper worked on foot until the day he died at his desk on 50th Street. Another employee, only referred to as “Al” in A. Birsh’s manuscript, was a non-union employee who was “maniacally concerned with getting PLAYBILL printed and into the theatres,” and who “dropped dead on the subway” while in his sixties.⁵⁹⁹ For A. Birsh and Botto, these stories are meant to charm—a narrative about company loyalty and dedication. Yet, the overtones that employees may have worked themselves “to death” is disconcerting.

As mentioned previously, A. Birsh was known for his assertive, strong managerial style, which raises questions about Playbill’s work environment. Both A. Birsh and Botto were writing from a biased perspective on behalf of Playbill, and without more information about these specific labor instances, it is difficult to ascertain whether employees were willingly staying and working at Playbill until old age—and even death—or if they were perhaps overworked. A. Birsh even acknowledges that there were times that his employees in supervisory positions “abused” those of lower rank, but there was not much he could do.⁶⁰⁰ What A. Birsh describes is not a belief that bosses should put their trust in their higher-ranking employees, but a choice to disregard his own responsibility for the safety and health of his employees as a whole.

In telling these stories, A. Birsh paints a picture of Playbill as a “good” company in which employees are treated so well as to engender massive loyalty to the brand. “Good,” in this sense, generally suggests ethical decision making, or as José Hernandez applies to business, companies that avoid scandals and those that make choices that do not adversely affect human life. In contrast, “good companies” that have “gone bad” do so when “their judgment [has] become clouded by the desire to protect the corporate reputation.”⁶⁰¹ A. Birsh frames Playbill as an ethically-sound or “good” company by suggesting it takes care of its employees. In fact, A. Birsh tells his “Al” story, in part, because he wants to convince the reader of his own moral code, thereby characterizing Playbill as a company that looks out for “the little guy.” He explains that, following “Al’s” death, he convinced Kraft, and later Kluge, to pay Marie, “Al’s” widow, half of what “Al’s” salary would be, in perpetuity. A. Birsh then continued these payments after he purchased the company, only halting the payments when Marie apparently “remarried and no longer felt it was fair to take the money.”⁶⁰²

These stories contribute to A. Birsh’s narrative that Playbill is a “good” company; yet, through Birsh’s own admission, he was sometimes an “assertive” boss, known for firing employees and having a temper, as well as one who was perhaps ignorant of what was happening at the business. As Hernandez notes, “Typically, business leaders involved in wrongdoing don’t set out to do wrong. Quite the opposite: they aspire to do the right thing and see themselves and their organizations as doing good. But they take small incremental steps that foster misconduct and fail to appreciate how far down the slippery slope they’ve gone until it’s too late.”⁶⁰³ Perhaps Playbill cultivated a “family” atmosphere, but it is just as possible that Playbill has, at times, been a “good company” that made mistakes. A. Birsh’s manuscript is the only record of many of these instances,

which are, at times, troubling. Ultimately, these labor issues are important to acknowledge despite, and perhaps because of, these historiographical concerns.

It makes sense that a CEO would want to depict his company as “good” and supportive of its employees, but it is also worth mentioning that, during his tenure with the company, A. Birsh expressed opinions that are now viewed as outdated and sexist. A. Birsh worked at Playbill during a time in which it was the norm for white male executives to discuss their female employees in derisive, objectifying ways, and unfortunately, A. Birsh’s manuscript conveys similar attitudes. This is not an excuse for sexist ideas and language, but it is important to acknowledge that A. Birsh’s manuscript is a reflection of an earlier time in which these sentiments went essentially unchecked. I present them here not to deride A. Birsh’s work with Playbill, which I have described throughout this dissertation with respect, but to suggest that the ways in which he describes his employees potentially contradicts his framing of Playbill as a positive and supportive work environment.

The way A. Birsh writes about his employees differs greatly based on gender. For example, he frequently portrays his former female employees as either maternal or objects of desire, while he depicts his former male employees as libidinous. Ann in Accounting had, as A. Birsh describes, “a heart as big as her very ample body,” and “Elaine,” initially a secretary who then asked for a promotion to sales, “came across as a Jewish mother with a heart of gold yet she had the focus and discipline of an assassin.”⁶⁰⁴ Elaine received the promotion and worked as a salesperson for Playbill for thirty years. Certainly, during A. Birsh’s time with the company, sales positions were traditionally viewed as “men’s work,” and part of this stereotyping was, as Nikala Lane and Andrew Crane describe in “Revisiting gender role stereotyping in the sales profession,” due to the fact that women were seen as too “soft” to be an assertive salesperson.⁶⁰⁵ Women supposedly

lacked “the key skills of ‘testosterone decision-making’ (skills such as toughness, assertiveness and the need to control and dominate).”⁶⁰⁶ Rather, female salespeople were thought to use their nurturing and caring side in order to secure sales. A. Birsh’s comments that Elaine is a “mother” figure with a “heart of gold” are situated along these lines. Even in his insistence that Elaine is shrewd in business (an “assassin”), he reveals his surprise that a caring woman could be good at sales.

In contrast, A. Birsh describes his former male salespeople as hypermasculine; for example, he writes, “It was the general sense of all who met Bob that if it weren’t for his dynamic libido, he would have been called to the cloth and have become at least a bishop.”⁶⁰⁷ After Bob retired, A. Birsh writes, he moved to a Florida retirement community where, as Birsh describes, “he became a blessing to the widows, driving them about and . . . extensively servicing all their needs.”⁶⁰⁸ Whereas a male salesperson is virile, a female salesperson is motherly. These comments are indicative of patriarchal thinking; that they come from the “top” suggests that Playbill, like many other companies of the period, may have perpetuated these same unbalanced systemic positions.

In addition to writing about his salesforce, A. Birsh describes other interactions with his employees that further imply how he viewed his female subordinates. When he took over from Kraft, A. Birsh fired the current editor and hired Joan Alleman (Rubin), who would later become his wife.⁶⁰⁹ According to A. Birsh, “When she walked into the office I thought she was a most beautiful woman, and when she crossed her net stockinged legs, I revised my estimate upwards. . . I didn’t care if she spoke English. I hired her on the spot.”⁶¹⁰ That Birsh later married Alleman in 1983 does not excuse the way he writes about her work potential. He later writes, “Every woman I have ever respected, my mother included, is a tiny percent hooker, using her natural charms to

her advantage. . . . But why should any woman not make use [*sic*] her femininity to attract a man. A man is willing to service his woman's nearly every wish in return for the right to regularly and joyfully service his woman. . . . Smart women know most men will find outside what they need and can't find at home."⁶¹¹ There is no evidence that suggests A. Birsh was inappropriate in the workplace with his female employees, but he does admit that he had an affair with Alleman shortly after he purchased Playbill, while both were married to other people.⁶¹² This does not unequivocally mean that A. Birsh abused his positionality as Alleman's supervisor, but it does point to questionable power dynamics that, given contemporary gender politics and the #MeToo movement, are disconcerting upon reflection. I offer these provocations to argue that perhaps A. Birsh's workplace was not as employee friendly as he suggests.

Alleman was presumably excellent at her job as Editor, however, writing content and overseeing editorial staff from 1966 through 1993.⁶¹³ She worked for years writing editorials for *Vogue*, overlapping with her duties at Playbill, and served on the Tony Awards Nominating Committee in the 1980s.⁶¹⁴ Alleman wrote behind-the-scenes columns and interviewed actors for pieces, such as her 1966 interview with Truman Capote.⁶¹⁵ A. Birsh acknowledges how much work she did for Playbill, writing that Alleman "would proofread and edit the first galley proofs of the PLAYBILL articles, which she assigned and sometimes wrote, and when the corrected proofs arrived, she would cut and rearrange the bits of type, pictures and captions until they satisfied her"—the work of perhaps three people.⁶¹⁶ He also gives Alleman credit for changing *Playbill's* editorials, suggesting that her work captured "some of the wonder, celebrity and excitement of Broadway. She invented a whole series of one and two page features, many that remain in PLAYBILL today. Some had very positive financial results."⁶¹⁷

The most significant of these was a column titled, “Celebrity Choice,” which was built from previous editorials that had highlighted specific NYC restaurants and nightclubs. According to A. Birsh, Playbill could no longer provide restaurant recommendations because it was important that the company stay objective. Rather, Alleman conceived of a feature in which actors could be interviewed about their favorite restaurants, which could then be included in the copy without accusations of bias. Of course, these “recommendations” were frequently the result of Playbill buttering up actors to get the results they wanted—namely a “plug” for the restaurant they wanted to promote.⁶¹⁸ In this manner, Playbill crafted editorials with bias, while also attempting to diminish that subjectivity. Playbill’s official stance that they do not “take sides” shifted when Phil took over the company.

5.3 Playbill Goes Digital and Furthers the Monopoly

Shortly after Phil Birsh became CEO in 1993, he instituted arguably one of the biggest changes to the business model when he modernized Playbill for the digital age. By embracing the digital sphere, P. Birsh was able to save the company money through the usage of digital type, as well as increase business due to a new ability to individualize playbills for specific venues. Over the last twenty-seven years, Playbill has switched their printing process, started a profitable website, and engaged audiences in new ways through social media accounts. As print media has increasingly become an outmoded form, P. Birsh asserts that *Playbill* will continue in its print version; yet, he also notes, “If it weren’t for the online operation, we would have closed already.”⁶¹⁹ By placing Playbill online, P. Birsh not only increased ad revenue, which could now come from digital spaces, but also, he instigated a business model that made the company both

more visible and accessible. Anyone with access to a computer and an internet connection would be able to engage with Playbill content, resulting in theatergoers' increased love of the brand.

As mentioned earlier, P. Birsh inherited a company that still used “hot type”—the same type of printing that Strauss had used in the late nineteenth century. Shortly after he came onboard, P. Birsh moved Playbill to “cold type” typesetting, which relies on computers rather than hot metal for the transfer of text—a move that was both financially sound, but also, one that aligned with P. Birsh's intentions to progress the company into a more modern era. As A. Birsh says of his son, “Philip sensibly managed, even in a union environment, to bring in computers and simplify, cut the costs, and improve the look of the cast pages.”⁶²⁰ In 2018, the *New York Times* published a feature on “The Future of Playbill,” which described how the company managed to provide both the venerated print version as well as create web-based content. Journalist Jonathan Wolfe notes, “When New York City icons change, people usually take notice,” acknowledging Playbill's status.⁶²¹ Calling Playbill both an “icon” and “New York institution,” Wolfe describes how Playbill's two offices—the corporate office and the printing location—can be whittled down to thinking of “one [as] digital and the other analogue . . . separated by about four miles and the East River, but at times can feel worlds apart.”⁶²² Wolfe describes these two distinct worlds as being so conceptually different, yet, these offices work “in tandem to distribute news to the laps of theatergoers.”⁶²³ Printing is expensive, even with digital type, but Playbill.com allows the company to churn out new articles while also profiting from advertisements

Notably, Playbill became one of the internet's early adopters in the early 1990s with their website, Playbill.com. Primarily a news outlet, Playbill.com allows the company the ability to write and publish multiple articles each day, thereby increasing the frequency with which theatre fans might engage with the brand. Articles about the theatre, entertainment at large, and pop culture

appear on the site. In 1995, Playbill.com was the first to webcast from the Tony Awards, and the company continues to have a presence on red carpet events.⁶²⁴ Playbill.com is also a repository for links—ticket policies, lists of productions, weekly schedule—as well as Broadway grosses, links to cast recordings, theatre quizzes, and more.

Since then, Playbill has continued to expand its web presence with six additional sites, including Playbill.edu, Playbill Vault, the Playbill mobile app, and the most recent addition, Playbill Universe, which launched in the summer of 2017 and features articles about Broadway stars. Playbill has embraced social media, and their accounts on Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter are active and popular. The digital sphere also allowed P. Birsh to further expand and mobilize the brand, offering a cruise-based Playbill Travel program and Playbill-branded merchandise, including apparel, mugs, drinkware, posters, and other items, in addition to the Playbill Binder that continues to be a big seller.

5.3.1 The Stagebill Rivalry, Individualization, and the Digital Connection

Playbill's emergence into the digital sphere is ultimately what allowed them to replace their only modern rival, Stagebill Media. Publishing under the names *Stagebill*, and following their 2001 acquisition of the publication, *Performing Arts*, Stagebill Media provided theatre programs for venues that had either decided to not utilize Playbill's services, or for those venues whose business had been rejected by Playbill. While A. Birsh was CEO, these small business losses proved trivial, but when Stagebill secured the largest and most prominent client in Disney Theatricals, P. Birsh finally made a move. This section examines the rivalry between Stagebill and Playbill in order to understand why certain venues were choosing the former rather than the latter. Although venues liked Stagebill's custom process, it proved financially unsustainable, leaving

Playbill open to commandeer their business. With Stagebill's demise, Playbill was able to swoop in at the right time, using digital type to appease these venues—including the all-important Disney contract.

Founded by Paul Fieberg in 1924, Stagebill initially focused on Chicago-area theatres and therefore, did not present as much of a threat to Playbill, who, at that time, was distributing primarily to New York theatres. As mentioned in Chapter Three, A. Birsh and Kraft had an agreement that Playbill would not try to gain any business in California, which meant that *Performing Arts* had a monopoly on the greater Los Angeles area as early as the 1960s.⁶²⁵ However, there was no such agreement between Playbill and Stagebill's newest owner: B&B Enterprises, which began stealing chief NYC business away from Playbill. Stagebill secured business from the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C. in 1972; two years later, they added the Lincoln Center to their list of clients. Over the next decade, Stagebill added Carnegie Hall, the New York City Opera, and the New York City Ballet, as well as other performing arts venues in Philadelphia, St. Louis, Houston, and Dallas, quickly crafting a reputation as the theatre program for classical arts venues. When Stagebill purchased *Performing Arts*, they also added key regional Southern California theatres, such as the Geffen Playhouse, La Jolla Playhouse, and the Laguna Playhouse.⁶²⁶ By 1994, they added the Public Theatre and were circulating publications for "66 separate arts organizations encompassing 25,000 performing arts events a year, producing 50,000 programs daily."⁶²⁷

Stagebill's success seemed to lie in the fact that they were able to individualize the programs for the theatre and production—something classical venues preferred. A 2001 *Variety* article noted that *Stagebill* was "America's largest *custom* publisher for performing arts venues," the emphasis added because individualization was the element that set Stagebill apart.⁶²⁸ *Stagebill*

publisher, Shira Kalish, said, "We're not just a Broadway puff-book like Playbill," suggesting that Playbill's Broadway-focused pieces are merely "fluff," in contrast to what *Stagebill* was publishing for the classical arts.⁶²⁹ Of the criticism, P. Birsh stated, "Shira doesn't know the first thing about publishing a program"—an obvious reproach of Stagebill's status as a much younger company and a likely dig at a subsequent lack of knowledge about the business.⁶³⁰

The rivalry between Playbill and Stagebill was so significant to the overall NYC community that news articles began appearing. In 1999, the *Wall Street Journal* wrote, "One of the better fight scenes on Broadway these days is occurring offstage. It's the battle of the playbills."⁶³¹ The *WSJ* stated that in recent years, "the two are in a heated competition for theaters and music halls across America, both vying for the attention of an elite crowd, and the producer of *RENT*, Kevin McCollum, referred to the competition as "a contest for one of the most prized demographics in America."⁶³² The classical arts were a key section of the entertainment business, and Playbill was losing. Although not a classical venue, a return to the *Cabaret* controversy is appropriate here. Following the usage of Playbill's *On Stage*, the production changed theatre programs in 2000 to Stagebill. Although *On Stage* had addressed the issues discussed by Mendes and the RTC, it seemed that Stagebill offered something that Playbill would not—individualization as well as a cost decrease from the \$1300 per week RTC had to pay Playbill. The *Cabaret* case is useful because it demonstrates the estimated cost of having a playbill individualized for a production. With Stagebill, venues were able to get custom programs for no additional fee.

Perhaps the most significant of Stagebill's wins was the Disney Theatricals contract. In previous years, Disney had contributed immensely to the significant revitalization of Broadway brought on by corporate building, state- and city-level funding, and the appearance of chain stores and restaurants. After Disney arrived, "chain stores like the Gap, Chevy's, and Old Navy Clothing

Company were signing leases on Forty-second Street. But Disney was the key.”⁶³³ Disney CEO Michael Eisner convinced city and state agencies to make improvements to the streets. The result was a corporate-shopping mall-theme park urban sprawl that invited tourists to come and play. Disney forced a reinvigoration of Times Square so that the area would prove more family- and tourist-friendly for their productions. In 1994, the Walt Disney Company opened their first production on Broadway, *Beauty and the Beast* at the Palace Theatre, and in 1995, they purchased the New Amsterdam Theatre, which later opened in 1997.⁶³⁴

Alan Levey, Disney general manager, said they chose Stagebill because it offered to print articles customized to the Disney production, such as profiles about cast, crew, and creative team members specific to the show. Unlike other Broadway theatre houses, Disney owns the New Amsterdam Theatre, and therefore, they are not required to utilize Playbill’s services. Previously, Disney had to contract with Playbill for the 1994 production of *Beauty and the Beast* at the Palace Theatre, which they do not own. With the purchase of the New Amsterdam, Disney was able to have more control over their program publisher and its content. Playbill lost its bid to Stagebill for *The Lion King* (1997). Not only was Stagebill able to accommodate Disney’s request for more control over editorials and behind-the-scenes images, they were also willing to adapt to another request: no liquor or tobacco advertisements in the program—a sensible stipulation for the family-friendly company that helped “clean up” Times Square. At the time, Playbill still allowed these types of advertisements, and as P. Birsh clarified, “My advertisers were not amused by that limitation.”⁶³⁵ P. Birsh counted Absolut Vodka and the Philip Morris Company among his advertisers at the time; the revenue from these ads may have outpaced the potential revenue that would have come from adding Disney to Playbill’s client list, but P. Birsh’s “friendships” with

these advertisers may have been a chief reason for why Playbill kept them.⁶³⁶ Another decade would pass before P. Birsh would decide to eliminate alcohol and tobacco advertising.⁶³⁷

Unlike Stagebill Media, Playbill created programs that were mostly homogenous. Since the 1990s, each *Playbill* is comprised of two elements: a “wrap,” which includes the pages that are used for all productions (monthly editorials, photographs, and other features), and the “book,” which includes the production-specific interior pages. The covers are single sheets that are added after assembly of the “wrap” and “book.” Playbill prints the “books” in-house at their printing press in Woodside, Queens, but the covers and “wrap” are printed by an outside printer. The covers are the most expensive aspect of the printing, as they are primarily done in color. Playbill’s printer is a behemoth of a machine called “The Beast,” which prints all of the “book.” Since production information can change nightly, Playbill requires the flexibility to print new copies quickly, which “The Beast” offers as it is on-site.



Figure 2 "The Beast" at Playbill's Printing Location in Queens, NY

Stagebill, however, secured key clients by having a very different, and in-demand, business model in which they individualized publishing for each venue—namely as many as eighty separate theatres. Because of Playbill’s print model, the editorials must remain generic enough to appeal to all audiences in all theatres. The result is content that focuses on celebrities (such as “Celebrity Choice”) or on notable past productions, whereas Stagebill included production-specific articles, thereby speaking to a specific audience. On the acquisition, Carol Fineman, chief publicist for the Public Theatre, stated, “We wanted to have control over our editorial product.”⁶³⁸ Playbill’s method is, of course, the more affordable option. In fact, Playbill had, in its earliest years, utilized a print model like Stagebill’s and had abandoned that in favor of a homogenous program for all theatres. Not only is it less expensive to have one “wrap” to print for multiple theatres, but also, having only one set of editorials is easier for quality control. P. Birsh understood that “[e]ditorial support is an important service to advertisers.”⁶³⁹ Implicit in this statement is advertisers’ potential concern over any content that might contradict or criticize their ads. Limiting how much content P. Birsh’s editor would have to review meant there was far less potentially questionable content for Playbill’s advertisers. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the classical arts venues have historically asked for theatre program content that is different from the Broadway- and theatre-focused pages seen in most Broadway playbills. Writing and printing specifically for the classical arts, therefore, brings new financial challenges. It is likely that, in the past, A. Birsh did not see this as a prudent risk. With the advent of digital or “cold” type, however, printing for individual needs would become far more cost effective, leading P. Birsh to seek out contracts with classical arts venues.⁶⁴⁰

Likely frustrated at constantly losing classical arts venues to Stagebill, and spurred on by the affordability of digital, rather than print, type, P. Birsh began a new division called Playbill Arts, whose purpose it was to serve the classical arts, including symphony, opera, ballet, and dance.

A significant branding decision, Playbill Arts arguably utilized the company's name as a connection to the its long-standing history of providing theatrical program service, while also branding the division for the "arts." The marriage of both "Playbill" and "Arts" is a strategic blending of both the Broadway and classical arts worlds, suggesting to potential new clients that this division can be trusted to deliver premier content for the classical arts. These playbills have different editorials specific to these venues and productions. As of 2019, Playbill distributes roughly 900,000 playbills to the "classical arts" division and services such venues as the Met and Carnegie Hall.

Without Stagebill's "edge" that they were the only program publisher servicing the classical arts, the company experienced a significant financial downturn. Of the Carnegie Hall loss, which it had serviced for 25 years, one Stagebill "insider" claimed, "That was probably the final blow."⁶⁴¹ After being Playbill's only significant competition for decades, Stagebill Media folded in 2002, presenting Playbill with another unique opportunity to expand their business and further cement their monopoly. Ultimately, Stagebill's business model to individualize each program was financially unsustainable, and when they went bankrupt, Playbill seized on the opportunity to absorb their name. P. Birsh, whose father had previously encouraged Kluge to purchase Stagebill back when Metromedia still felt positively about the company, was finally able to cement the deal his father wanted all those years ago. Of Playbill's need to acquire Stagebill, P. Birsh writes, Playbill absorbed "most of its tasty bits and pieces . . . business is a long game."⁶⁴² The "tasty bits" to which he refers is actually the company's name only. Playbill's purchase did not entitle them to Stagebill's client list—only the rights to use the name. In fact, Playbill did not want to service most of Stagebill's clients, but it did want one.

After Stagebill's folding, Playbill pitched Disney a new program model called *Showbill*, which would allow the kind of customization that Disney required. Through *Showbill*, Playbill agreed to Disney's demands over editorial content and advertising. *Showbill* adheres to Disney's "worldwide policy that prohibits the promotion of liquor and tobacco products on its property. Therefore, *Showbill* is similar to *Playbill*, but with the prohibited advertisements omitted."⁶⁴³ Of course, by the time that Playbill gained Disney as a client, they no longer accepted advertisements from tobacco or alcohol companies. It is far more likely that Disney wanted to ensure that Playbill would not publish ads from Disney's competitors; in fact, a perusal of *Showbills* over the last few years demonstrates that the majority of ads are for Disney products.

Although Disney was placated by *Showbill*, there was a significant backlash to Playbill's acquisition of Stagebill. Those theatres that did not have a large enough audience were not appealing to the program giant, which left several theatres without the means to furnish programs for their audiences. *The New York Times* noted that many theatre managers were considering publishing their own programs, and those smaller, regional clients were receiving a slimmer playbill than the NYC version.⁶⁴⁴ Playbill's disinterest in serving all of Stagebill's former clients "caused a publishing shake-up that left many arts groups scrambling at the last minute to find program publishers or alternative printing services in time for their September openings."⁶⁴⁵ In particular, those theatres hit the hardest were small- to mid-sized theatres, which Playbill was least likely to take on, considering the audience numbers would not offset the increased costs of publishing.⁶⁴⁶

Playbill's purchase of Stagebill did not grant them access to the latter's client list, but many of Stagebill's former clients reached out to Playbill to continue service. With Playbill turning away all but the most profitable clients, many of Stagebill's former venues were subsequently left with

no economically feasible way to offer programs to their audiences. As Gener states, “Many theatres didn't know how good they had it until they lost Stagebill and Performing Arts.”⁶⁴⁷ As one Stagebill client, Jeff Levine of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, stated, “It left us at a real crossroads, because the truth is that the program is a really valuable part of what we offer . . . A program isn't just a throwaway publication that you hand out to patrons and subscribers; it is one of the most valuable elements of the artistic experience.”⁶⁴⁸ Ultimately, critics panned the homogenized and slimmed down version of Playbill. Stagebill had been providing an individualized service in which theatres could have their own behind-the-scenes features, photographs, and interviews specific to their production.

In their own online blog platform, Playbill called the acquisition “a significant business development,” while touting Playbill’s reputation as “the nation’s leading purveyor of programs for theatrical and performing arts venues.”⁶⁴⁹ They relied on the company’s age, stating, “Playbill and Stagebill have been, for many years, the two major names in program services, with the *118-year-old Playbill* the leading publisher in Broadway and Off-Broadway houses and the *much younger Stagebill* concentrating on ballet, opera and symphony orchestras” (emphasis mine).⁶⁵⁰ The article makes pointed jabs at Stagebill by suggesting the inconsistency of the brand due to its “many ownerships,” in comparison to the steady leadership of Playbill.⁶⁵¹ Notably, Stagebill, while a younger company than Playbill, had at the time of Playbill’s acquisition, *fewer* owners than Playbill (namely Arthur Levitt, Primedia, Stagebill Media and then Playbill).⁶⁵² Stagebill CEO Gerry Byrne stated, “This is great news for the venues, for all performing arts enthusiasts and, indeed, for advertisers who will be able to buy national and regional programs more efficiently and effectively. We wish Phil Birsh and his team at Playbill much success.”⁶⁵³ P. Birsh also downplayed the criticisms that theatres had about Playbill’s acquisition of Stagebill Media,

describing phone calls with happy theatre producers and managers who reported that they were experiencing huge gains in their subscriber numbers, stating, “the audience felt—right or wrong—that because they were getting Playbills, the actual quality of the season had been improved and they were getting actual Broadway shows now.”⁶⁵⁴

5.3.2 Off-Broadway *Playbill*

In addition to rejecting many of Stagebill’s former clients, P. Birsh ceased services for several underperforming Off Broadway theatres, dropping Chicago City Limits, the Jewish Repertory at Playhouse 91, the Soho Playhouse, the Lambs, the American Place and the Players Theater, among others. P. Birsh said it had been a difficult decision, but the theatres did not generate the kind of audience numbers that would be appealing to potential advertisers. Without advertisers on-board, Playbill would apparently lose too much money on printing costs. These affected theatres were presented with the aforementioned lightweight *On Stage* deal, which lacks ads, with theatres balancing the potential lost revenue by purchasing the copies.⁶⁵⁵ Yet, *On Stage* places lower income theatres in a potential bind, or as Artistic Director of the Chicago City Limits Theater, Paul Zuckerman, said, “You operate on a razor-thin margin,” having to pay for playbills “is often the difference between being in business and not being in business . . . It breaks your heart.”⁶⁵⁶ In many ways, Playbill’s monopoly has afforded them the kind of power to affirm or reject businesses as they see fit. With Stagebill’s closure and the important gains in classical arts and Disney, Playbill truly became the American theatre program brand.

Although P. Birsh ceased business with many Off-Broadway theatres, Playbill does provide service to some notable Off-Broadway houses, such as Signature Theatre, the Public Theatre, Playwright’s Horizons, and Second Stage. Several of these Off-Broadway theatres

distribute playbills at the end of the show, a policy that is well within AEA's contractual compliance. However, these are *Playbill* and not *On Stage*, which means audiences are unable to peruse the playbill pre-show and are therefore less likely to interact with the ads. How, then, is Playbill making money from these playbills? P. Birsh says that some theatres still want the Playbill logo and brand recognition, even though they do not have the audience numbers or potential for ad revenue that Playbill needs to provide them for free. In these instances, theatres can pay Playbill for their services. It is unclear what the fee structure is for *Playbill* and *On Stage*, but it is very likely that the brand recognition that derives from utilizing the Playbill name comes with a higher price tag. This ultimately shifts the ways in which *Playbill* functions, but given that Playbill is still very likely making money on the deal, it appears like an overall positive arrangement for the company.

Off-Broadway theatres are not Playbill's typical business, and those that do distribute *Playbill* do so because they likely have the funds to pay to offset potential ad revenue loss. Both Arthur and Phil Birsh have stated a disinterest in courting Off-and Off-Off-Broadway theatre business. This is likely because these theatres tend to circulate playbills post-show, which reduces ad visibility. Secondly, as A. Birsh noted in his manuscript, Playbill's advertisers are in the business of courting the "wealthy." The Broadway League reports that the average annual household income of the Broadway theatregoer was \$261,000 during the 2018-2019 theatrical season. Approximately 35% of those attendees were local NYC residents, while 65% were tourists (46% domestic and 19% international).⁶⁵⁷ Although audience statistics are not readily available for Off-Broadway theatres, the Innovative Theatre Foundation estimates that the majority of the Off- and Off-Off-Broadway audience are residents of the New York City metro area and that their median annual income is significantly lower than the typical Broadway theatregoer.⁶⁵⁸ Simply put,

Broadway audiences have more money to spend, and it is this audience that Playbill's advertisers have courted. Not only do Off-Broadway audiences have less disposable income than Broadway audiences, Off-Broadway theatre houses are smaller. According to Playbill Online, the distinction is "9-499 seats generally denote Off-Broadway; and 500 and larger generally denote Broadway."⁶⁵⁹ As such, it is not in Playbill's best interests to seriously go after Off-Broadway contracts, which will bring fewer readers of a generally lower socioeconomic status.

Playbill's target advertising demographic is wealthy, but notably, Off-Broadway playbills get delivered to a far more diverse group of individuals that come from varying socioeconomic levels. Signature Theatre, for example, is known for their Signature Theatre Initiative, which offers "unrestricted access to super-cheap theater prices . . . no questions asked. No age restrictions. No lotteries. No rush lines;" these tickets, as of March 2020, were priced at \$35.⁶⁶⁰ As of May of 2019, one million tickets had been sold at the \$35 level, with Signature reporting that "60% of Signature's audience members had a two-person household that makes under \$100,000 a year. Contrast that to a typical Broadway-goer who comes from a two-person household that makes more than twice that, according to stats from the Broadway League."⁶⁶¹ Although \$100,000 is not a small sum, it is considerably lower than the typical Broadway theatregoer. Assuming very little crossover between Signature's and Broadway's audiences, it is significant that *Playbill* is being delivered to people who might not normally engage with the brand. Although Signature is likely paying for the privilege to disseminate *Playbill*, this process allows for cross-pollination of the brand, which may help Playbill's overall recognition and reputation. It is also notable that "almost a third of a Signature's audiences are under the age of 50, and 28% are people of color. And perhaps most impressively, 15% of ticket buyers last season were new to Signature, a sign that the initiative is helping at least some people discover the joy of live theater for the first time."⁶⁶²

Although Playbill's target demographic has always been white, and after midcentury, middle- to upper-class, having the publication in more diverse hands can only improve brand recognition and gain Playbill more diverse fans who may choose to engage with the company in more accessible ways, such as Playbill.com, the subscription service, and social media.

By obtaining the most desirable business in NYC, Playbill, as *Variety* stated, “corner[ed] [the] legit market,” giving the company “a virtual lock as program publisher.”⁶⁶³ Yet, P. Birsh maintains that “There is no monopoly in publishing . . . Monopoly is not a good term anyway . . . it implies abuse.”⁶⁶⁴ Playbill distributes more than 1.3 million playbills each month to Broadway theatres alone, and roughly another 1.3 million to regional markets outside of New York.⁶⁶⁵ As of 2019, Playbill circulates approximately 4 million playbills each month—a huge increase from the annual circulations of the past. They provide by far the majority of theatre programs across the United States. What is that if not a monopoly? P. Birsh's contentious feelings about the word aside, it does seem that “monopoly” is the best term for Playbill's hold on the industry. Of Playbill's increasingly long client list, P. Birsh stated, “We are thrilled to welcome these brands to the Playbill family.”⁶⁶⁶ By focusing on Playbill as a “family” rather than a “monopoly,” P. Birsh creates a version of the company that will garner loyalty and trust from both theatre owners/producers as well as audience members.

5.3.3 Playbill in Digital Spaces: Changes to Audience Engagement

Playbill's visibility through its national and digital expansions, as well as P. Birsh's assertion that they are “just a small, family company” has endeared Playbill to theatre fans. Over time, playbills have become an intrinsic part of the theatregoing experience, with *Playbill* acting as the brand American theatregoers want and respect the most. As many theatres consider a move

towards digital theatre programs, Playbill continues to print physical playbills, preferring them to the digital counterparts. In fact, theatre fans collect, display, and engage with their printed playbills in exciting, and increasingly digital, ways, demonstrating how *Playbill* has become a blend of digital and print media. This section explores theatre fans' fierce loyalty to and engagement with Playbill. For many theatre fans, Playbill has become the only theatre program—a result of the company's ubiquity and monopoly.

In 2019, Laura Collins-Hughes wrote an article for the *New York Times* on the significance of the physical playbill. Titled, "I Want My Playbill! Why Programs Are No Mere Extra," Collins-Hughes plainly states that the playbill is an expected aspect of the live theatergoing experience:

You can feel the bafflement percolating in the audience when ushers have nothing to give out before a performance in New York. We theatergoers have gotten used to the fact that some shows don't want us getting our paws on a playbill until afterward — they don't want us distracted, maybe, or a surprise spoiled — but the new twist is no program at all.⁶⁶⁷

The newest trend to hit Off- and Off-Off-Broadway is the digital program—a theatrical program accessed online. Collins-Hughes expresses the collective confusion and mistrust of the audience that lacks a theatre program. She writes that the digital playbill is "not just a wrongheaded tack, though. It's also counterintuitive, because it's contrary to the spirit of live performance" because "any information you access on a phone or tablet exists in a space that lets the whole restless world in, coming at you in a calm-shattering barrage of text messages, emails and news alerts."⁶⁶⁸ In this sense, the physical playbill has become innately linked to the experience of live theatre. As a document, the playbill enmeshes the reader in the theatrical experience, providing production information as well as theatrical editorials, and more recently, behind the scenes photographs and features. A digital playbill may provide similar content, but as Collins-Hughes notes, these programs will not hold the audience's attention in the same way, as phones provide different and additional distractions. Several theatergoers have apparently complained about this new e-playbill

trend, and theatres have responded in kind by proceeding to give out physical theatre programs mid-run, while other theatres have begun asking audiences for their preference—printed or digital.⁶⁶⁹ This all points to the ways in which the physical program has become embedded in how theatre fans engage in theatre.

For fans, playbills are not only an element of the theatergoing experience, though; they are also tangible souvenirs of an experience or memory. Theatergoers have seemingly always saved playbills, as evidenced by scrapbooks and playbill binders, and this culture of collecting playbills continues today. Collins-Hughes’s article asked theatre fans to leave comments explaining how they engage with their playbills. Over the following month, more than two hundred and eighty users wrote about their experience with and preference for a physical, rather than digital, theatre program. Notably, these fans supported Playbill—the company—and not merely the concept of the physical theatre program. One commenter wrote, “I save every single Playbill from every single show — in chronological order — meaning I’m currently filling up my third binder and getting ready for my fourth. In the same way that some folks have a hard time separating with t-shirts over the years, I suppose I see them as individual time capsules of sorts, a representation of how the actors and words and music made me feel at that particular moment in time. Long live the Playbill!”⁶⁷⁰ Commenters noted that they enjoy reading the playbill while sitting at the theatre and that they frequently re-read it after they go home. Most commenters said that they have saved every single playbill from every production they have ever seen—some dating back to the 1940s and 1950s, while others have collections from deceased relatives that have been passed down over the years. Many referred to the perusal of the playbill as a “ritual;” one user called the physical playbill a “powerful totem.”⁶⁷¹ Many commenters referred to the saving of their playbills as a way of honoring the performers who, especially for Off- and Off-Off-Broadway, are compensated with

lower wages than their Broadway counterparts. To them, having an actor's name in a physical playbill is appropriate billing, as opposed to a digital copy—namely because, as the article notes, audiences are less likely to want to look for this information on their phones.

Notably, all commenters used the capitalization for “Playbill” and did not use the broader term of “theatre program,” suggesting that Playbill is an all-inclusive term meaning not only the company, but also, theatre programs more generally. This conversation continued in a Reddit thread with similar results. One user wrote, “In a constantly-evolving world where consumers care about tangible things/experiences, it's complimentary proof that you saw the show and spent your time/money on something meaningful to you.”⁶⁷² User “usnavis” wrote, “I'm someone who collects Playbills (and I actively buy more Playbills to add to my collection), and I'd be really disappointed if they went fully digital.”⁶⁷³ User “tiktoktic” wrote, “I really like getting a physical Playbill as a souvenir. Makes for a great Instagram photo before or after the show.”⁶⁷⁴ All of these theatre fans engage with their playbills at the theatre as part of their overall theatergoing experience, but playbills also act as mementos. They are powerful material objects that carry meaning and provide nostalgia to those for whom they are important. Certainly, all theatre programs are capable of conveying memories and experiences, though—right? In fact, not only did users on message boards and in comment sections refer to theatre programs as “Playbill,” “Playbills,” and “playbills,” one user actually asked what the difference was between a “Playbill” and a “theatre program,” to which another user replied that the “Playbill” was the free item distributed at theatres, while the “American theatre program” was a souvenir booklet that you purchase.⁶⁷⁵ The conflation of “playbill,” “Playbill,” and “theatre program” is, of course, understandable, as *Playbill* is ubiquitous and the term “playbill” has both specific and generic definitions, but this serves as a reminder of Playbill's importance to the American theatregoer.

Examining multiple theatre and Broadway message boards reveals that this is a common collective understanding. Playbill is what you receive when you go to the theatre; a “theatre program” is something else entirely.

Arguably, Playbill’s most notable online achievement is one they had no hand in creating. Over the last few years, it has become a theatrical ritual for audiences to arrive at their seats and snap a photograph of their *Playbill* that they then post to various social media sites. In “How playbills became social media must-shares,” Ashley Lee refers to this phenomenon as “[t]he still-life Playbill photo shoot,” a pre-show routine in which the material playbill itself “has become a nearly universal way to digitally commemorate an occasion of theatergoing.”⁶⁷⁶ Not only does this playbill/audience interaction indicate a new, modern method for fans to engage with Playbill, the practice has also affected other theatrical processes and marketing. In many ways, the *Playbill* “photo shoot” makes sense—the image conveys the production the person is seeing, it is visually striking, and it does not interfere with theatre policies that outlaw photographs of the production’s set or those taken during the show. These photos also become, as Lee reports, “a bit of a status-symbol thing—it makes me seem cool and cultured, even if I’m not exactly rocking the boat and checking out the most adventurous or experimental theater.”⁶⁷⁷ People go to great lengths to get an Instagram-worthy selfie and theatre fans are trying to get the best *Playbill* photo. Guidelines posted online explain recommended angles, framing, and distance for the best *Playbill* shot. Some fans even consider the placement and look of their hand on the playbill; “Feel free to include your thumb holding the program . . . If my nails are done, I’ll include it — and sometimes, if I know I’m going to a show, I’ll get my nails done beforehand.”⁶⁷⁸ Although the overall photo should be balanced, this Playbill ritual is all about highlighting the material object of the playbill. It is the playbill that carries the significance of the night out, the theatrical event. The Playbill shoot acts

as a visual “check-in” to a fan’s location and activity, but it is also a subtle gloating practice. Depending upon the show the person is seeing, and even from which seat they are taking the photo, these photographs offer a window into a person’s economic station.

This practice has affected theatre producers, advertising agencies, and other theatre professionals. Marketing firms and producers are now creating their *Playbill* covers with the “photo shoot” in mind. As Lee notes, “social media promotion has become a top consideration when finalizing a production’s iconographic imagery and signature look.”⁶⁷⁹ One example is Anais Mitchell’s *Hadestown* (2019), in which NYC advertising company, SpotCo created several versions of the potential cover before landing on the visually striking red flower featured in the show. The company first considered images of trains, trees, and trumpets, but SpotCo kept returning to the image of the red flower featured on Mitchell’s 2010 concept album, which is incidentally also tattooed on the artist. “The Playbill now features gritty, industrial fog and a brave hand holding a bright red ranunculus (though ‘Hadestown’ fans call it a poppy),” Lee reports.⁶⁸⁰ Because of the “photo shoot,” advertising agencies are now creating marketing images with the *Playbill* in mind, suggesting the importance of the object and its ability to shape commercial theatrical and advertising conventions. Additionally, *Playbill* becomes “free” advertising for productions, as these photographs are shared via multiple social media sites; if a single production has enough of these interactions—including initial posts, comments, likes, etc.—the practice of sharing playbills can have a monumental impact on the financial success of a show.

In the case of *Hadestown*, the playbill cover image also “prompted director Rachel Chavkin to integrate the flower into the show more often and spurred the show to distribute them to the audience after performances.”⁶⁸¹ That advertisers are creating images with these “photo shoots” in mind is notable, but the connection to how a director then adjusts the production because of that

practice indicates that Playbill is inadvertently shifting theatre practices and inspiring artists. Additionally, cast members frequently follow the hashtags for their shows on Instagram and Twitter and look for these *Playbill* photos. *Tootsie* performer Sarah Stiles says, “I actually love it when you can see the Playbill and the stage in their picture, because when I’m up onstage that night, I totally clock it . . . I know exactly where that person is sitting, and how excited they are to be there. To feel the audience’s excitement so immediately — that’s what every performer wants.”⁶⁸² This example demonstrates how playbills are providing valuable audience reception to a cast member even before she goes onstage. Finally, during a recent trip to a few Broadway shows, this writer lost count of the number of times ushers told incoming audience members, “please no photos of the set, but you can take a picture of your *Playbill*!”⁶⁸³ This viral phenomenon has created accidental success for Playbill, but it is also an excellent case study for the impact the company has had upon American theatrical culture.

In an interesting way, these *Playbill* “photo shoots” become a digital archive of both an individual fan’s experience as well as a moment in a production’s history. They may serve as a digital memento of a theatregoer’s night out at the theatre. In many ways, the scrapbooks and playbill binders of old have given way to Instagram feeds—digital archives of playbills past. As such, the *Playbill* “photo shoot” created a new way for theatre fans to “collect” theatre ephemera, as a kind of audience-driven archive. Audiences may want that perfect Instagram picture, but they are also creating a record of their experience. Even though Playbill resists digital playbills, audiences are crafting a digital *Playbill* space every day.⁶⁸⁴ Ironically, as long as there is physical *Playbill*, there will likely be audiences snapping photos of it.

Theatre fans have also appropriated *Playbill* imagery for their individual businesses, which, in turn, service other fans. These fan artists utilize and transform the Playbill logo for personal

projects, essentially treating Playbill like any other creative property that can be reconceptualized by and for fans. For example, username “theplaybillproject,” who has 2,453 followers, creates elaborately staged photo shoots with *Playbill* and handmade stage properties that they then post to Instagram. One recent photo showcased the *Dear Evan Hansen Playbill*, whose cover shows an image of the title character wearing an arm brace. Surrounding the playbill are several self-made arm casts that read “Connor.” These prop casts recreate a well-known image from the show, namely, Evan’s arm cast bearing Connor’s name. The cast is an important plot point, providing evidence for Evan’s deception that he was best friends with Connor, who recently died by suicide. However, “theplaybillproject” went a step further and cut the prop casts laterally.⁶⁸⁵ Some diehard theatre fans would recognize this from several behind the scenes looks into *Dear Evan Hansen*’s production, in which a new cast is made prior to each performance—before being sawed off at the appropriate time.⁶⁸⁶ Another design by “the playbillproject” shows the *Playbill* for *Next to Normal* surrounded by a plethora of pills—an obvious connection to the show’s focus on mental illness and psychiatric medications.⁶⁸⁷ Each of these images recreate moments from the productions; yet, “theplaybillproject” utilizes *Playbill* as the design’s focal point, thereby conveying its importance.

Another artist, “TheArtofBroadway” sells repurposed playbills on Etsy. Boasting over 250 playbills recently added to their collection, the seller creates collaged art by cutting several playbills vertically and reassembling them into a new design before framing. Some of these designs are of a single production, while others mix different productions to create a single piece with an innovative interplay of imagistic covers. In all pieces, however, the word “Playbill” is legible, as the artist cuts the covers in between the letters. Priced from \$60 to \$85, and with over 1,200 sales, this Etsy seller is utilizing Playbill in new, interesting, (and profitable) ways. This work brings up questions about the ways in which fans appropriate playbills for profit, which is exigently, a

departure from previous audience-playbill interactions, in which the theatregoer merely saves the playbill for their own nostalgia and personal enjoyment.

5.4 “Just a Small, Family Company!”: Shaping an Altruistic Narrative

Part of what draws such ardent fan support to Playbill is an overall sense that it is a “good” company, with P. Birsh continuing to build from his father’s branding of Playbill as a “family” affair. Historically, Playbill has avoided taking political stances in an effort to remain relatively neutral for a broader audience base. Although P. Birsh continues some of these politically neutral policies, he also has shifted the company’s brand to align more specifically with altruistic efforts, the most popular and visible of these being the June Pride month playbills. Yet, P. Birsh’s activism is not universal, and he frequently makes easy decisions that the general public will support. Although P. Birsh sometimes takes a “safe” approach to activism, his inclusive rebranding of Playbill through Pride imagery broadens the definition of “family.” If Playbill is, as the Birshes describe, a “family,” then the Pride playbills suggest that the LGBTQ+ are a part of that family. This section examines the tensions between political neutrality and activism through P. Birsh’s choices over the last few years, with a special focus on the Pride playbill campaign. P. Birsh’s methods cultivate a company image that is ethically minded and increasingly inclusive, while carefully avoiding alienating key theatre industry people who ultimately contribute to Playbill’s business success.

In previous years, Playbill rarely publicized any potentially polarizing opinion. A. Birsh describes this in regards to critical reviews, saying that Playbill must not show any favoritism because any reviews of productions, products, or even restaurants could theoretically alienate

theatre owners, producers as well as advertisers, and reviews that are all “raves” lose meaning.⁶⁸⁸ Today, Playbill.com publishes several online articles every day, and indeed, the need for neutrality continues. Rather than writing reviews, for example, Playbill does a review “round-up,” in which they provide links to most of the major theatre reviews for a production, and recently, Playbill has stayed out of major Broadway controversies. The sexual misconduct allegations surrounding cast member Amar Ramasar in Ivo van Hove *West Side Story* revival, and the subsequent protests outside the theatre, for example, have made headlines of every New York publication but *Playbill*. Playbill makes great efforts to avoid angering those theatre professionals that make their jobs possible. Although *Vulture*, *The New York Times*, *CNN*, *Variety*, *Deadline*, and others reported the protests surrounding Ramasar’s continued employment in *West Side Story*, *Playbill* only published the statements released by the official *WSS* production team and AEA.⁶⁸⁹

Still, P. Birsh is on the board of several charitable organizations and donates funds regularly; he also tries to “give back” to the theatre community through Playbill. Of his interest in charity work, he says, “I wanted to put something back and I wanted to be, as some called those that helped the business and its people, a ‘good citizen’ of our industry.”⁶⁹⁰ When describing his initiative against publishing tobacco and alcohol ads, P. Birsh says he lost friends and business, but it was the “right thing to do.”⁶⁹¹ Of course, by the early 2000s, Americans in general had become fairly anti-tobacco, making P. Birsh’s choice less of a risk and more of a well-planned, cost-effective decision.

As other theatres move towards digital programs—whether for financial or environmental reasons—Playbill’s distinction that they will always offer a printed version may have been seen as contrary to any “green” initiatives. Yet, P. Birsh addresses Playbill’s recycling efforts, stating:

I’ve talked to a lot of people, you know Broadway Green Alliance and they’re not against playbills. We use recycled paper as much as possible, we recycle our playbills – we take

them out of theatres and we recycle them regularly because paper is expensive and recyclists want the paper back – so we do a very good job and plus there’s no real harm if somebody keeps their Playbill and puts it in a frame or a binder, it doesn’t make a landfill that way, and it is a natural product, it’s all paper and clay so it’s not very damaging.⁶⁹²

Responding to the growth in recycling, P. Birsh cites one environmental organization that says playbills are not damaging to the environment, which suggests that P. Birsh was trying to get ahead of any potential backlash. That he also cites fans’ collecting habits as a way of lessening a potential environmental impact is notable; the assumption P. Birsh makes is that fans keep their playbills. If that is the case, P. Birsh is essentially putting the efforts towards going “green” in the hands of theatregoers. Regardless, the image that P. Birsh projects is one in which Playbill is a “good company” doing the right thing.

Yet, perhaps the most visible of Playbill’s “politics” is in the form of the June, rainbow colored, “Pride” playbills. P. Birsh conceived of this campaign, in which the rainbow colors that feature on the LGBTQ+ Pride flag replace the logo’s yellow background, as a one-time departure from the norm. Initially devised as part of the June 2014 “30 Days of Pride” campaign, the Pride playbills were almost surely intended as a response to the 2013 Supreme Court ruling against the Defense of Marriage Act and the increasing public approval for marriage equality. Yet, since then, the Pride playbills have remained a mainstay of the company’s business model likely because of positive feedback from the theatre and LGBTQ+ communities and relatively little backlash from producers. The Pride logo was designed by performer and graphic designer Robbie Rozelle. Of the partnership, Rozelle commented, “I feel like I’ve made an accidental career out of being a professional gay. When I was with Playbill, I was the designer of Playbill Pride, and two years ago I was honored to design Broadway For Orlando’s ‘What the World Needs Now is Love’, in response to the Pulse tragedy. I hope to give voice to people who feel marginalized.”⁶⁹³ Although Playbill’s Pride logo is likely its most well-known and popular divergence from the yellow banner,

it was not the first time Playbill changed the logo for a special occasion. In 2008, Playbill adopted a green banner for *Wicked*'s fifth anniversary for one night only—October 30th.⁶⁹⁴ Playbill changed its logo again in 2011 for the tenth anniversary of *Mamma Mia!*. The special masthead was a glitzy blue banner, the special design was a unique playbill for one evening performance only on October 18th.⁶⁹⁵ Although P. Birsh describes the Pride playbill as a financial “risk,” its existence follows a trend in corporate culture to commercialize queerness for mainstream consumers. In fact, the increasing public acceptance of those who are LGBTQ+ over the last five years indicates that this purported “risk” was more likely a safe business move. Even so, many LGBTQ+ people have been Broadway (and Playbill) fans over the years, and the Pride playbill presents a visual indication that these same people are included in the Playbill “family.”

Although P. Birsh shares many of the same business traits as his father, he fundamentally changed the company's approach to political neutrality by embracing LGBTQ+ activism. P. Birsh, who has previously worked for LGBTQ+ rights through his service as Treasurer for Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, felt that the political discourse surrounding the issue of marriage equality compelled him to make a stand through Playbill. P. Birsh noted, “we felt that it was important not just to care and to advocate, but to do something demonstrative that said ‘this is where we stand’. . . . it's not enough to talk about something—you have to *do* something—something unequivocal.”⁶⁹⁶ This move is commendable for the ways it provides space for LGBTQ+ individuals, but it can feel as yet another commercial effort to appropriate and commodify queer culture for the mainstream. In fact, despite P. Birsh's claim that the move was “risky,” he also acknowledged that the resulting small number of lost regional business was too few to make an impact.

Despite this loss in some regional business, Pride playbills were incredibly popular with theatre fans, and when the banner changed design, they professed their anger. In 2018, the color blocked design was replaced by a blurred color spectrum—still representing the rainbow image created by Gilbert Baker, who created the “Rainbow Flag” in 1978—but with a smoother transition between the colors. The new logo was less Pride Flag and more a representation of the visual light spectrum. Broadway message boards were home to several complaints about the new design. One fan stated, “Is no one going to point out how much worse the Pride playbills look as a gradient? The clearly defined colors were **so** much better. Bad choice, Playbill” (original emphasis).⁶⁹⁷ The fan pushback demonstrates that Playbill’s Pride logo had, in only a few years, become a tradition—one that certain fans did not want altered.

Although fans did not approve of the new banner, Playbill instigated one significant change for the better. Rather than having the Pride banner speak for itself, Playbill published an article describing the importance of the campaign, stating, “Playbill Pride returns June 1 for its fifth annual salute to the theatre’s vibrant community of LGBTQ artists, allies, innovators, and fans.”⁶⁹⁸ This year brought additional columns highlighting “visionary artists who have made an indelible mark on the American theatre through their dedication to their craft and to their community.”⁶⁹⁹ By running additional articles throughout Pride month, Playbill went a step beyond a simple logo adjustment—they made a more explicit stand in support of the LGBTQ+ community. Notably, however, these articles only appeared on the company’s websites, such as Playbill.com and other social media sites, such as Twitter. These queer positive articles did not appear in the playbills themselves, making this yet another “safe” move forward for the company. Playbill touted itself as wanting to represent the Rainbow Flag, itself “synonymous with the LGBTQ community and its message of activism, inclusion, hope, and diversity,” and yet, none of these messages (aside

from the banner itself) were present in the playbills that theatregoers would receive.⁷⁰⁰ Playbill also utilized Pride as a way of connecting with its audience, by encouraging those that followed its social media accounts to “Snap a photo with your Pride Playbill and tell us your personal stories of love, acceptance, and pride;” the images were to be shared on Instagram and Twitter along with the hashtag #PlaybillPride.⁷⁰¹ The article ended by commenting that fans should go to the official Playbill Store to purchase the Playbill Pride poster. These efforts, while notable for adding to the normalization of the LGBTQ+ community, are overtly marketed and commodified—but for whom?

During the month of June, American brands co-opt LGBTQ+ imagery in order to sell rainbow-colored products to presumably the queer community and probably also to its straight allies. The criticism of these capitalistic Pride events and products is that they appropriate queer imagery and culture for monetary gain while neglecting to affect any real change for the community they purport to support. In “How LGBTQ Pride Month became a branded holiday,” Alex Abad-Santos writes, “But what exactly are these stores and brands supporting? More important, what happens to the money we spend in these stores? Does brand support for LGBTQ issues have any real impact, or is it just, well, branding?”⁷⁰² As American support for the LGBTQ+ community grows, companies are incentivized to make a visual statement about their own political stance. The veritable proliferation of rainbow imagery that spills out all over the storefronts during the month of June is a symbolic and visual indication of “support,” but without any real financial backing or political activism, these visual signifiers become little more than “lip service.” P. Birsh has advocated for LGBTQ+ rights in the past, but does that matter if Playbill will not take a financial stance?

Just last year, Playbill made a visual change to the Pride logo, which moved it closer to Pride's history and meaning. Instead of the blurred rainbow banner, an image of a rainbow superimposed upon a brick wall became the new banner image. A nod to the 1969 Stonewall Inn riots, in which a riot broke out at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar on Christopher Street in the West Village. Often viewed as the beginning of the LGBTQ+ rights movement and made iconic by the images of bricks thrown through windows, Playbill's overt connection to this explicitly queer imagery evokes a level of queer coding, a suggestion that those "in the know" will *know* what the image references. Of the logo change, Playbill wrote:

. . . That night launched many things, among them the Stonewall Inn's reputation as the birthplace of the gay rights movement. But most importantly, June 28 offered the feeling that there was an LGBTQ+ community, one that could band together to fight back against injustice. Now, 50 years later, that community has only grown stronger as the country makes great strides towards equality while also suffering devastating setbacks. But every step forward that we take stems from that first night in 1969, when a group of people bravely risked imprisonment and public humiliation in the newspapers to resist. That's why this year the Pride banner on the cover of the Playbill in your hand is a departure from previous years. To Commemorate 50 years of gay rights and the courageousness of those at Stonewall in 1969, we're paying homage to those first bricks thrown in the fight for equality, ones that continue to echo throughout the country now, even as the fight wages on in different ways.⁷⁰³

This message, which appeared in the playbill that was handed to guests, and its politics are far clearer than previous Playbill Pride campaigns. Although the rainbow "Pride" banner functions in similar ways to other major corporations that utilize queer imagery during June as a means of gaining queer customers, with the addition of this notice—written by "Staff" and therefore presenting a unified front—Playbill marks itself as more queer-friendly and political than many of the other corporations that have tried to capitalize on Pride month. It is the first, and so far only, time that Playbill has acknowledged the history of Pride, and rather than including the message in the online format only, they published it in every physical playbill, thereby making sure that every theatregoer will see its message.

The criticisms launched at the corporatization of Pride are both financial as well as political. If companies merely place a rainbow on a shirt without giving back to the LGBTQ+ community—either through donations or advocacy—then the rainbow is merely an empty gesture. Beyond the Pride playbills, in 2018 and 2019, Playbill decided to participate in the Sing for Hope campaign. The Sing for Hope campaign brings free public pianos to NYC throughout June. Following the end of June, the campaign donates the pianos to public schools across NYC. In its seventh year, Playbill donated a piano to the campaign, further cementing its presence as a charitable brand.⁷⁰⁴ Along with donating the piano, Playbill arranged public performances, including those by “members of the cast of *SpongeBob*, *Waitress*, and more joined Playbill for a series of pop-up performances in Times Square.”⁷⁰⁵ Essentially, Playbill took what was perhaps only “lip service” and created a financial *and* visual display of support. With the addition of the Stonewall editorials and imagery, Playbill attempted to honor LGBTQ+ history and advocate for change. As the Stonewall playbill commemorated that anniversary, it will be interesting to see what the company does in future years.

Whether it is through Pride playbills, honoring deceased members of the theatre community through “in memoriam” playbills, or providing advertising space to charities free of charge, P. Birsh says that it is Playbill’s responsibility to “advocate for people.”⁷⁰⁶ Despite P. Birsh’s focus on expanding its reach and proverbial financial footprint, he feels it necessary to utilize Playbill as a platform for social issues. He regularly advocates for the various theatre unions, publishes several advertisements for charities without receiving payment, and rejects advertisements from industries he feels are ethically negligent.⁷⁰⁷ These seemingly altruistic decisions reinforce the narrative that Playbill is a good company that looks out for its base. Before

coming to Playbill, P. Birsh spent twelve years on Wall Street in mergers and acquisitions. "It was soulless," he said. "What I like about working for Playbill is that we're in a community."⁷⁰⁸

Despite P. Birsh's proclamations that Playbill advocates for people, the Costume Professionals for Wage Equity (CPWE) recently condemned the "Jobs" section on Playbill.com. The organizers for CPWE wrote a letter to Playbill encouraging them to begin a "wage transparency" practice, in which all job postings require a salary range prior to acceptance. Currently, Playbill allows theatre companies to publish their job openings with no salary details. The letter pleaded that Playbill, as a leader in the theatre industry, "take a stand against unfair wages and predatory practices by requiring all job postings on its site to include a clear rate of pay."⁷⁰⁹ Speaking on behalf of the CPWE, organizer Genevieve V. Beller stated the importance of Playbill's support:

Playbill is a hub for theatre activity and has a wide range of professional and semi-professional theatres looking for employees on their site. It's also a place where early-career [*sic*] and non-union theatre practitioners in particular find work. It's also where connections are made. Requiring everyone to be transparent also exposes poor labor practices among companies that are large enough and have the resources to do better. It's especially important to address pay equity at the early-career level because that's where habits and expectations are learned.⁷¹⁰

Although many job posting sites function similarly to Playbill, with the option for job posters to omit pay specifications, the organizers expressed that Playbill, as a large and prominent theatrical company, could act as a trailblazer whose position other companies might follow. Both the Costume Designers Guild and the Fair Wage Onstage supported the CPWE's efforts. Playbill's "Jobs" section has not changed since the CPWE's letter was sent in November of 2019, neither P. Birsh nor any of his staff made any official response to the call for action, and there was no news coverage about the CPWE's advocacy. Given Playbill's strong pro-union, pro-theatrical worker stance, asking for wage transparency seems a small thing. Although Playbill is not actively

exploiting labor by allowing job postings that may take advantage of non-union workers, their lack of a clear position in this instance certainly assists exploitative practices.

5.4.1 Concluding Thoughts

In 2013, Phil Birsh stepped down as Publisher of the magazine and hired previous Time, Inc. president Bruce Hallett, who commented that Playbill's "fabulous brand story" was one of the chief reasons for taking the job.⁷¹¹ P. Birsh humorously commented that "[t]he C.E.O. and the president got together and fired the publisher," but the reasons for the change are unclear, and since P. Birsh remains the CEO, not much has changed since Hallett took over the day-to-day running of the publication.⁷¹² Hallett also stated that, although he was unsure about the longevity of Playbill's print model, he knew that Playbill's "unique distribution model" in which playbills are handed out to "people who are excited" is an immense help.⁷¹³ Hallett said, "It's a strong story that fits into advertising conversations about engagement, about passion points."⁷¹⁴ Hallett is correct; Playbill's fans are fiercely loyal and passionate. In fact, when other theatres steal the Playbill logo from the internet and create their own faux-playbills, fans call Playbill to report the infraction to them. It is a "transgression" akin to an "affront to a friend of theirs," P. Birsh says.⁷¹⁵ Any violation of the trademark or the company culture is reported. Additionally, when playbill collectors die, their relatives frequently send their collections back to Playbill's office, or as P. Birsh describes it, "it's funny how they come *home*."⁷¹⁶ The way P. Birsh discusses Playbill's relationship to the public is familial and informal—in his view (or in his "spin") theatre fans trust Playbill and likewise, Playbill has their best interests at heart. Playbill is simultaneously an expansive American brand that consistently puts its competitors out of business and a "small, family company" that wants fans to know they care. Can both versions of Playbill co-exist?

Playbill is, in fact, a series of interrelated or contradictory identities: it is both theatre program and magazine; monopoly and “small company;” New York and United States. Playbill has carefully crafted a brand that speaks to various members of a theatre community, and that brand has endeared itself to fans. These fans create nightly rituals with *Playbill* photo shoots; they collect and store their playbills in binders. Some fans profit from their *Playbill* art, while others create what can only be described as “art installations” for themselves—their playbills artfully strung together with twine and hung across their bedroom walls. Playbill is more than just an informational booklet—it is a Broadway, New York, and American theatrical institution and icon.

6.0 Conclusion

On March 12, 2020, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo mandated that social gatherings should not exceed 500 people to promote social distancing and slow the spread of the novel strain of coronavirus known as COVID-19. This resulted in a shuttering of many cultural institutions, including Broadway, whose theatres by definition seat a minimum of 500, with many being able to house 1,000 people or more. For the first time since a union strike closed theatres for nineteen days in 2007, Broadway went “dark.”⁷¹⁷ Currently, theatres are set to reopen on April 13, 2020, but a recent *Deadline* article reported that the Broadway League is considering lengthening this closure by another month, per CDC recommendations.⁷¹⁸ It is unclear when productions will return to the proverbial “boards,” and what kind of effect the shut-down will have on the future of Broadway, commercial theatre, and theatregoing; yet, there will assuredly be long-lasting repercussions.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Playbill circulates approximately 4 million playbills each month, with Broadway accounting for more than half of that number.⁷¹⁹ With the mass closures of theatres not only across Broadway, but also, the entire U.S., Playbill is undoubtedly relying on its online platform to see it through the economic devastation caused by this pandemic. Playbill has historically provided readers with escapism, and in recent years, Phil Birsh has touted the human connection through helping charitable organizations. COVID-19 presents Playbill with a unique challenge, in which they are caught between wanting to provide escapism, while also acknowledging the terrifying reality of the current moment. Although much is uncertain during this constantly changing time, I believe that Playbill will persist beyond this shutdown, but their “family” may be forever changed.

Although everyone around the globe has been affected by COVID-19, New York City has quickly become the epicenter of the pandemic in the U.S. As of April 6, 2020, NYC reported 67,552 positive cases, with 2,472 deaths (in comparison to 1,287,284 cases and 70,548 deaths worldwide), and given the rapidly changing situation, these numbers will certainly continue to rise.⁷²⁰ New York is in a state of “pause,” with Cuomo issuing a stay-at-home order for anyone considered “non-essential.” In New York City, officials have constructed makeshift “hospitals” with tents and cots at Central Park, the Javits Convention Center, and the National Tennis Center, and medical professionals are increasingly running low on personal protective equipment (PPE) and ventilators to treat the sick.⁷²¹ Given the frightening reality of this pandemic, worrying over the status of the theatre industry may seem frivolous. Yet, theatre remains an integral aspect of American cultural life and Broadway is a massive contributor to the overall financial health of New York. Cuomo expects the stay-at-home order to last upwards of nine months, with a potential revenue loss of \$10 to \$15 billion in lost revenue.

Of this projected loss, the Broadway shutdown could account for more than \$100 million dollars in expected revenue in only a single month.⁷²² The shutdown is likely to persist beyond the initial April 13th deadline, with even more losses in potential revenue the longer the shutdown persists. Notably, the Society of London Theatre announced that West End productions are cancelled now through May 31, 2020, leaving some to consider whether the Broadway League will announce a similar statement soon.⁷²³ At the time of the shutdown, six shows were scheduled to open before the end of March, while nine others were scheduled to open before April 23, the deadline to qualify for Tony Awards (which have now also been postponed indefinitely). Some shows are likely to close without returning, such as Martin McDonagh’s *Hangmen*, while others may never open at all, such as the revived *Thoroughly Modern Millie* starring Ashley Park.

Broadway's indefinite suspension means that countless numbers of workers are now unemployed. Members of the theatrical community, including actors, stagehands, and ushers, among others, are now finding themselves suddenly without pay. Charities such as Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, The Actors Fund, and Actors' Equity Association have launched emergency assistance funds to help these unemployed theatre workers with the costs of health insurance, counseling, and other bills they can no longer afford. Yet, the shutdown has affected other employees who are not covered by these funds, such as public relations firms that provide publicity for Broadway and media sites that report on theatrical events. Broadway publicist Keith Sherman reported that he had to furlough the employees working at his Times Square public relations firm because it was no longer sustainable for him to support the costs of their salaries, and Broadway.com silently furloughed some of their workers as well, keeping only a skeleton crew to continue providing COVID-19 related updates.⁷²⁴ It seems plausible that other Broadway-reporting publications, including Playbill, did the same.⁷²⁵

Chapter Four described how both Arthur and Phil Birsh referred to Playbill as a "family" company, but how does a company that is likely hemorrhaging funds support its business "family" in such a crisis? Without the need for printed playbills, I question what Playbill has done to support its print division employees. Did Playbill have to furlough some of their employees, as many other Broadway businesses have? A. Birsh once gave money to the widow of a former employee because he said it was important that Playbill take care of its people. His son, P. Birsh, has frequently supported charitable organizations and focused Playbill's efforts towards helping people. The current economic situation is unlike anything Broadway has experienced, and the situation is still developing. Yet, I wonder how Playbill is handling the needs of its workforce in such a troubling

time. In his manuscript, A. Birsh wrote about employee loyalty with a great deal of pride. How will this unprecedented situation affect that company loyalty?

For Playbill, whose legacy includes that they have never missed a delivery, having no playbills to assemble, print, and deliver is a first for the company. Although the online platform is arguably more profitable today, it is the printed playbill that has the longer history. When I met P. Birsh, I asked him about an antique printing press that sits in the lobby of Playbill's corporate offices. He said the press connoted "printing—it says who we are."⁷²⁶ Despite Playbill's expansion into digital spaces, printing remains at the core of their reputation. Yet, in this moment, Playbill's digital footprint is now representative of the entire brand.

As stated in the previous chapter, P. Birsh has given credit to the online platform for keeping Playbill's proverbial "doors" open. They are undoubtedly counting on the online space for carrying them through to the end of this pandemic. The ads sales from the online platform are greater than those in the printed version, suggesting that Playbill.com might be able to keep the company going. Playbill continues to publish content every day; although, understandably, there are fewer articles, as there is very little theatrical "news" on which to report. Undoubtedly, Playbill is navigating a tricky balance between publishing content for ad revenue and social media "clicks" against the cost of keeping staff employed.

Over these last few weeks, Playbill has published content that acknowledges the current crisis as well as columns that provide escapism. Following P. Birsh's affinity for charitable organizations, a large focus of these articles has been encouraging people to donate to the various causes assisting unemployed theatre workers. Other articles provide production news, such as which shows are cancelling their runs altogether and news of theatre industry people who have tested positive for the virus. These articles are kept in a separate section on Playbill's website titled,

“COVID-19 Updates.” This acts as a short-cut to access the COVID-19 news, but it also allows Playbill to hide potentially upsetting content for any online visitors who are merely looking to escape reality.

Despite some COVID-19 related material, Playbill’s articles have been largely fun filled, “fluff” entertainment pieces, offering readers content that might uplift the spirits in a difficult time. Yet, Playbill’s incongruous coverage of COVID-19 points to the ways in which the company has always tip-toed around serious matters. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Playbill did not begin including World War II coverage until it was mandated by the government, and A. Birsh’s penchant for staying politically neutral is described in Chapter Four. The majority of Playbill’s articles fall under their “Isolation-Friendly Entertainment” heading, which details the movies or previously filmed live productions a person might want to watch while social distancing. Some of this content includes interactive media, such as a collective campaign to re-watch the television series, *Smash*, and a game called “Broadway Brackets Championship” that asks fans to vote for their favorite Broadway shows. Meanwhile, Playbill’s social media director, Felicia Fitzpatrick, has been posting fun memes and hashtags meant to engage audiences who are “stuck at home,” such as a call to post selfies wearing your favorite Broadway t-shirt and a post asking fans to list the shows they wish they could see were there no shutdown. These efforts suggest that Playbill is attempting to maintain a sense of theatrical community despite the theatre shutdown.

When daily life is filled with upsetting news, it seems likely that many people would prefer these escapist articles, but one in particular suggested that Playbill was more concerned about their bottom line than the psychological well-being of their readers. Titled, “9 Ways to Be Productive While Staying at Home During the Theatre Shutdown,” this article was, in fact, an advertisement-in-disguise. The “article” listed various items one could purchase from Playbill’s online shop,

including Playbill-branded merchandise such as a puzzle, pajamas set, glassware, and playbill binders and frames. Accompanying the article was an image of a couple wearing Playbill branded pajamas with the headline, “Stay at Home With the Playbillstore.” Playbill thinking of its readership and wanting them to stay busy amidst a global catastrophe could be viewed as a compassionate move, but rather than focus on a variety of activities, the “article” merely asks its readers to keep up (or increase) their purchasing habits by buying from Playbill’s store. This could come across as insensitive considering the increasingly frightening global issue, but it also points to the ways in which Playbill might be scrambling for additional revenue. As someone who regularly receives Playbill emails, I can attest that over the last twenty days, Playbill has emailed eight times to encourage spending at their online store—a notable increase to the email frequency of two emails within the same period of time before the shutdown.⁷²⁷

Playbill’s digital components are arguably what will carry the company through this pandemic. Over the course of this dissertation, I have focused primarily on the printed version, since it has had the longest and most widespread history and has arguably had the biggest cultural impact. Yet, this pandemic has perhaps started a new era for Playbill—one in which the printed version takes a proverbial backseat to the digital space. As my project is the first to analyze and contextualize Playbill, there are plenty of avenues for future research. Their social media accounts boast followers upwards of 624,000 on Instagram, almost 424,000 on Facebook, and 368,600 on Twitter.⁷²⁸ Playbill’s interactions with theatregoers via digital and social media means is one method for further discovery. Furthermore, over the last few years, Playbill has expanded their business into additional areas, such as tourism (Playbill Travel), print templates (PLAYBILLder), and education (the recently terminated Playbill Education). These would further contribute to the field’s understanding of how Playbill functions today.

My project presented a comprehensive history of late nineteenth to twenty-first century American programs through a specific focus on a single company. However, an analysis of various regional theatre programs, independently published programs, or Off-Broadway programs would further contextualize the development of a modern American theatre program, especially in comparison to Playbill's business model and prevalent branding. Additionally, although Playbill briefly serviced the U.K., the West End has mostly returned to their previous model in which programmes are sold to theatregoers. These programmes resemble similar souvenir programs in the U.S., with glossy, full-length photographs on high quality paper. A study on these programmes and the U.K. business model could provide insight into the differences between American and British audience engagement via theatrical programs. Playbill attests that its website boasts "over 2 million monthly unique visitors . . . delivering high-quality content to audiences around the world."⁷²⁹ Given that Playbill is also expanding into global arenas—at least digitally if not through the printed version—further investigation into Playbill's relative impact on the global market could confer information about the relative success of this American brand across various geographies.

This project is one version of Playbill's long history; naturally, there are a multitude of ways to tell this company's story. The limitations of the archive kept me from fully exploring the histories of all of Playbill's employees over the years. As stated previously, I made attempts to work against these archival exclusions, but my project did focus primarily on those employees with power—namely, the CEO/President, Publisher, and sometimes Editor. As much as I focused on the decision of CEOs, there is much more to add to the narrative that verbalizes the efforts of Playbill's diverse workforce, rather than privileging its leadership. There are several current staff members whose institutional memory might be able to provide details expansive of the archive.

My project briefly describes some of the ways that fans engage with Playbill through social media and online sites. Yet, fans have been interacting with their playbills since the early scrapbooking days. Throughout my research, I was intrigued and charmed by the ways that fans collected and engaged with their playbills. Some wrote commentary all over a playbill: what they did that evening as part of their night out, for example, as well as criticisms or praise for cast members. Frequent underlining marred the pages of the playbill. Sometimes the collector would have underlined a cast member's name several times—an indication of their adoration for their performance or potential disdain? Other times, fans would cut and paste their playbills into scrapbooks, along with their tickets and a review or two. Many playbills had tickets and reviews stapled inside the pages, sometimes with commentary and more underlining, potentially suggesting vehement agreement with the critic. Theorizing through these markings and assemblages may offer the field new ways of thinking about the historical past, from microhistories to larger conversations about audience engagement.

Following the news of Broadway going “dark,” “theplaybillproject” posted a new image on Instagram. Captioned “#BroadwayDark,” the image showed the familiar *Playbill*, yellow banner with black lettering intact, but the rest of the cover was black to represent the theatre closures.⁷³⁰ An empty *Playbill*, lacking its production-specific cover design, somehow conveyed so much about our current cultural moment precisely because of what Playbill means to Broadway, fans, and the American theatre at large. Although the cover image was “dark,” Playbill’s logo remained, as if to say that Playbill lasts forever. An adage of the theatre is that the “show must go on,” yet the current pandemic has indelibly damaged the industry and left us with a massive question mark as to when it will return. Broadway.com posted a notice to their readers that stated:

When this unexpected intermission comes to an end – and, make no mistake, it will come to an end – we’ll once again gather at lobby bars, sit beside one another in velvet seats, and

laugh, cry, and cheer together in unison. When that day comes, the chance to take part in this great tradition will feel more special than ever before. We can't wait to pick up right where we left off!⁷³¹

Playbill had no such verbiage on their website, but I imagine Playbill will emerge mostly intact from this unexpected shutdown. Playbill has survived wars, economic depressions, and poor business decisions, and they will rely on their digital spaces to keep the figurative lights on. Appearing alongside Playbill's COVID-19 Updates section is an image of a ghost light—a connection to the very real practice of leaving a light on when there is no one in the theatre—yet, the image also signifies that someone will return. Broadway will be back, and Playbill, the so-called “longest running act on Broadway,” will too.⁷³² We just need to leave on the lights.

¹ Michael Sebastian, “Playbill, the magazine of Broadway, makes its logo a rainbow ahead of Pride week” *Advertising Age*, June 16, 2014.

² Stuart Elliot, “A New Publisher for Playbill,” *The New York Times*, November 3, 2013.

³ Playbill attests that Strauss began the company in 1884, but my project argues that the company began in 1885.

⁴ Robert Viagas, Personal Interview, June 20, 2017.

⁵ Louis Botto, “Playbill: A Century of Playgoing Pleasure” (Unpublished manuscript, Playbill, 1984), a.

⁶ Marvin Carlson, The development of the of the American theatre program, *The American Stage*, Rob Engle and Tice L. Miller, eds. Cambridge University Press, 1993, 101.

⁷ Christopher B. Balme, “Playbills and the Theatrical Public Sphere,” *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography*, Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait, eds., Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010, 58.

⁸ Carlson, 101.

⁹ Balme, 37.

¹⁰ Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page : Popular Print Media in Antebellum America*, University of North Carolina Press, 2000, page 3.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Monopoly,” *Routledge Dictionary of Economics*, Donald Rutherford, ed., Oct. 10, 2012; “Monopoly,” *Investopedia*, Will Kenton, July 8, 2019.

¹³ Balme, 39.

¹⁴ James Harbeck, “A Case study in the pragmatics of American theatrical programs,” *Semiotica* 118 (1998), 215-238, 215.

¹⁵ Harbeck, 215.

¹⁶ See Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 3.

¹⁷ For a discussion on the history of the independent producer, see Adler, 30-66; for large corporate producing, see 67-101.

¹⁸ Adler, 29.

¹⁹ Julia Guarneri, *Newsprint Metropolis*, 4.

²⁰ Marlis Schweitzer, Marlis. *When Broadway Was the Runway : Theater, Fashion, and American Culture*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

²¹ Schweitzer, 4.

²² See Carlson’s *Theatre Semiotics*, xiii.

²³ Ibid, xiii.

²⁴ Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner, eds. *Women, Theatre and Performance: new histories, new historiographies*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 5.

²⁵ Ibid, 66.

²⁶ Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway, c.

²⁷ Playbill. Official Website. Accessed August 1, 2018. <https://www.playbillstore.com/playbill-1884-raglan-t-shirt.aspx>.

²⁸ Marvin Carlson, “The development of the American theatre program,” *The American Stage*, Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller, eds., Cambridge University Press, 1993.

²⁹ Robert Kornfeld, Personal Letter, Playbill archives, May 23, 1972.

³⁰ Jonathan Mandell, “Playbill: The Longest Running Act on Broadway,” April 1, 1984. New York Public Library Clippings File.

³¹ Ibid.

³² "The New York Theatres." *The Saturday Review*. October 24, 1885.

³³ "Chat from the Theatres: Threatened Litigation Over the play of 'Anselma.'" *New York Times*, August 27, 1885, *ProQuest*.

³⁴ William Winter, *The Life of David Belasco, Volume I*, New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1918, 281.

³⁵ Botto, 6.

³⁶ "Playbill: The Longest Run on Broadway To Open At the Museum of the City of New York Thursday April 12, 1984," Museum of the City of New York. Press Release. New York Public Library Clippings File.

³⁷ Playbill. Official Website. Accessed August 1, 2018. <https://www.playbillstore.com/playbill-1884-raglan-t-shirt.aspx>.

³⁸ Timothy R. White, *Blue-Collar Broadway: The Craft and Industry of American Theater*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015, 9.

³⁹ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁰ Botto, 62.

⁴¹ Guarneri, Julia. *Newsprint Metropolis : City Papers and the Making of Modern Americans*, University of Chicago Press, 2017, 13.

⁴² Ibid, 13-14.

⁴³ Marvin Carlson, "The development of the American theatre program," *The American Stage*, Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller, eds., Cambridge University Press, 1993, page 102.

⁴⁴ See Marvin Carlson, 104.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 105.

⁴⁶ Theatre programs 1800-1880, New York Public Library, Billy Rose archives.

⁴⁷ See Carlson, 103.

⁴⁸ See Marvin Carlson, 103.

⁴⁹ *The County Fair*, Theatrical program, Proctor's 23rd St. Theatre, June 8, 1889, University of Pittsburgh Curtis Collection, n.d.-1889 box, folder Jan-June.

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- ⁵⁰ *Confusion*, Theatrical program, 14th Street Theatre, March 18, 1884, University of Pittsburgh Curtis Collection, n.d.-1889 box.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Guarneri, 3.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Carlson, 111.
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- ⁶³ Ibid, 19.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid, 67.
- ⁶⁵ Sabine Haenni, *The Immigrant Scene: Ethnic Amusements in New York, 1880-1920*, 2008, 61.
- ⁶⁶ In 1898, *Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cake Walk* premiered at the Casino.
- ⁶⁷ Sabine Haenni, *The Immigrant Scene: Ethnic Amusements in New York, 1880-1920*, 2008, 270.
- ⁶⁸ John Koegel, *Music in German Immigrant Theater: New York City, 1840-1940*, 273.
- ⁶⁹ *The Shaughraun*, Theatre program, Brooklyn Park Theatre, May 21, 1888, Curtis Coll, box: n.d.-1889 folder Jan-August 1888.
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⁷⁶ Monroe Lippman, "The effect of the theatrical syndicate on theatrical art in America," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, June 5, 2009.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 112.

⁷⁸ In correspondence and contracts, the fee was referred to as a "privilege."

⁷⁹ *The Shubert Foundation*, "The Shubert Brothers," The Shubert Foundation, Inc., 2014.

⁸⁰ Strauss continued to struggle obtaining classical theatres, opera, ballet, and symphony.

⁸¹ In 1908, Strauss paid \$500 for the West End Theatre, \$1125 for the Casino Theatre in 1909, and \$1500 for the 44th Street Theatre in 1917.

⁸² Letter from Frank V. Strauss addressed to Mr. C.A. Bird, Early General Correspondence (1908-1909), Box 87, Folder 4, August 6, 1908, Shubert Archives, New York.

⁸³ Letter from Frank V. Strauss addressed to Sam S. and Lee Shubert, Inc., Early General Correspondence (1908-1909), Box 87, Folder 4, August 5, 1908, Shubert Archives, New York.

⁸⁴ Letter from Frank V. Strauss addressed to Wilbur-Shubert Co., Early General Correspondence (1908-1909), Box 87, Folder 4, October 19, 1908, Shubert Archives, New York.

⁸⁵ Letter from J.W. Jacobs addressed to Frank V. Strauss and Company, General Correspondence Box 364, folder 1036, November 23, 1917, Shubert Archives, New York.

⁸⁶ Sharon Marcus, "The Theatrical Scrapbook," *Theatre Survey* 54.2 (2013): 283-307, page 287.

⁸⁷ Botto, b.

⁸⁸ Robert Viagas, Personal Interview, June 20, 2017.

⁸⁹ Letter from No Author addressed to Jules Murry, General Correspondence Box 364, folder 1036, September 4, 1916, Shubert Archives, New York.

⁹⁰ Letter from No Author addressed to Jules Murry, General Correspondence Box 364, folder 1036, September 4, 1916, Shubert Archives, New York.

⁹¹ *The Merry Widow*, *The Warrens of Virginia*, and *Irene Wycherley*, Theatre programs, University of Pittsburgh Curtis Collection, box New York 1908, folder February 1-17, 1908.

⁹² Botto, 67.

⁹³ Letter from J.W. Jacobs addressed to Ralph Long, General Correspondence Box 364, folder 1036, May 19, 1917, Shubert Archives, New York.

⁹⁴ Letter from A.T. Worm addressed to Lee Shubert, J.J. Shubert, and J.W. Jacobs, General Correspondence Box 364, folder 1036, September 25, 1917, Shubert Archives, New York.

⁹⁵ After Callahan left, Herman Pepper took over the job of reporting playbill numbers in 1949. He worked for Playbill for twenty-six years before he died unexpectedly at his desk at the age of seventy-seven in 1975. After Pepper's passing, reporting inventory became part of the truck delivery person's job. See Botto, 84.

⁹⁶ David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009, 42.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 42.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 43.

⁹⁹ Contract between Frank V. Strauss & Co. and The 39th Street Theatre Company, page 6, 4 May 1914, Contracts I, #356 Program Contracts City Theatres, 1911-16, 39th Street Theatre Co re printing of programs, Shubert Archives, New York.

¹⁰⁰ Mark Hodin, "The disavowal of ethnicity: legitimate theatre and the social construction of literary value in turn-of-the-century America," *Theatre Journal* 52.2 (May), 211-226, 211.

¹⁰¹ Hodin, 211.

¹⁰² Ibid, 212.

¹⁰³ Contract between Frank V. Strauss & Co. and The 39th Street Theatre Company, page 6, 4 May 1914, Contracts I, #356 Program Contracts City Theatres, 1911-16, 39th Street Theatre Co re printing of programs, Shubert Archives, New York.

¹⁰⁴ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: working women and leisure in turn-of-the-century New York*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986, 13.

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- ¹⁰⁸ Letter from Frank V. Strauss addressed to Wilbur-Shubert Co., Early General Correspondence (1908-1909), Box 87, Folder 4, August 5, 1909, Shubert Archives, New York.
- ¹⁰⁹ Letter from Frank V. Strauss addressed to Sam and Lee Shubert, Early General Correspondence (1908-1909), Box 87, Folder 4, May 25, 1909, Shubert Archives, New York.
- ¹¹⁰ Letter from Frank V. Strauss addressed to J.W. Jacobs, Early General Correspondence (1908-1909), Box 87, Folder 4, August 13, 1909, Shubert Archives, New York.
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- ¹¹² Letter addressed to Lee Shubert from John W. Jacobs, General Correspondence Box 364, folder 1036, July 20, 1916, Shubert Archives, New York.
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- ¹¹⁴ Guarneri, 69.
- ¹¹⁵ “Turkish Bath Co.,” Advertisement. Playbill. Botto scrapbook. Np. Nd.
- ¹¹⁶ Botto, 11.
- ¹¹⁷ *Victoria*, Theatre program, Lyceum Theatre, Jan. 2, 1905, Curtis Coll., box New York Programs 1905, folder Jan. 1905.
- ¹¹⁸ *Traumulus*, Theatre program, Irving Place Theatre, Jan. 16, 1905, Curtis Theatre Collection, box New York Programs 1905, folder Jan. 1905.
- ¹¹⁹ *Traumulus*, Theatre program, Irving Place Theatre, Jan. 16, 1905, Curtis Coll., box New York Programs 1905, folder Jan. 1905.
- ¹²⁰ Zoe Sherman, *Modern Advertising and the Market: The US Advertising Industry from the 19th Century to the Present*, Routledge, 2019, 1.
- ¹²¹ Ibid, 1.
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- ¹²³ Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990*, New York:

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¹²⁷ Willard Holcomb, "Theatricals in New York," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 19, 1899, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 26.

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¹³⁴ Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl : Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915*, University of Illinois Press, 2005, 3.

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¹³⁹ "In Her Boudoir," *The Merry Widow*. Program. Jan. 20, 1908. Curtis Theatre Collection. University of Pittsburgh. Programs New York 1908 (Jan. 1908).

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³³⁰ "The Three Sisters" Program, Ethel Barrymore Theatre, December 21, 1942, Curtis Theatre Collection, Box Programs New York Broadway Sept-Dec 1942, Folder Dec. 21-25, 1942.

³³¹ "The Damask Cheek" Program, The Playhouse, January 10, 1943, Curtis Theatre Collection, Box Programs New York Broadway Jan-Aprils 14, 1943, Folder Jan 1-10, 1943; "The Three Sisters" Program, Ethel Barrymore Theatre, January 24, 1943, Curtis Theatre Collection, Box Programs New York Broadway Jan-April 1943, Folder Jan. 21-31, 1943.

³³² "Flare Path" Program.

³³³ "Something for the Boys" Program.

³³⁴ "R.U.R." Program.

³³⁵ Martha Hall, et al.

³³⁶ Hegarty, 110.

³³⁷ Hegarty, 110.

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³³⁹ “The Skin of Our Teeth” Program, The Plymouth Theatre, April 25, 1943, Curtis Theatre Collection, Box Programs New York Broadway Sept-Dec 1942, Folder Nov. 11-21, 1942.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ “The Three Sisters” Program, Ethel Barrymore Theatre, December 21, 1942, Curtis Theatre Collection, Box Programs New York Broadway Sept-Dec 1942, Folder Dec. 21-25, 1942.

³⁴² Adkins, 9.

³⁴³ “The Damask Cheek” Program.

³⁴⁴ “The Damask Cheek” Program.

³⁴⁵ “Arsenic and Old Lace” Program, Fulton Theatre, January 31, 1943, Curtis Theatre Collection, Box Programs New York Broadway Jan-April 1943, Folder Jan. 21-31, 1943. Original emphasis.

³⁴⁶ “Something for the Boys” Program.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ “Something for the Boys” Program, emphasis mine.

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- ⁵¹³ Birsh, 41-2.
- ⁵¹⁴ Birsh, 42. Note: the reasons for the vice president’s firing is unknown; although, Birsh discusses the rumor mill surrounding the firing. The rumor at the time was that the VP had told Kluge some unsatisfactory details about his fiancée, and in order to save face, Kluge fired him.
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- ⁵³⁰ Ibid, 80.
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- ⁵⁴⁸ Birsh, 97.
- ⁵⁴⁹ Ibid, 98.
- ⁵⁵⁰ Ibid, 98.
- ⁵⁵¹ “Obituary: Bernard Gallagher, Newsletter Editor, 79,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1989.
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- ⁵⁵³ Ibid, 99.
- ⁵⁵⁴ Ibid, 101.
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- ⁵⁵⁶ Ibid, 103.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid, 101.

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⁵⁶² Ibid, 92-3.

⁵⁶³ Michael Riedel, *Razzle Dazzle: The Battle for Broadway*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015, 157.

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⁵⁶⁵ Laura Weinert, "End Program: Will acquisition of *Performing Arts* by national *Playbill* damage West Coast arts coverage?" *Backstage West* July 11-17, 2002.

⁵⁶⁶ Phil Birsh, Personal Interview.

⁵⁶⁷ Birsh, 21.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid, 21.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid, 109.

⁵⁷⁰ Botto, 83.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid, 83.

⁵⁷² Robert Viagas, Personal Interview.

⁵⁷³ It is unclear when this change actually occurred, but it was certainly after Birsh took over as CEO.

⁵⁷⁴ Note: AEA could not confirm when this was first added to these contracts. I was able to find digitized contracts from the 1990s, in which this language appears, but anything older than that is kept at the NYU special collections, which I had planned to visit before COVID-19 closed their doors. It is safe to say that this language was included in AEA contracts before the 1990s because A. Birsh discusses it in his manuscript, but as of this writing, I cannot confirm a specific year.

⁵⁷⁵ Phil Birsh, Personal Interview, June 21, 2017.

⁵⁷⁶ David Levy, email to Vicki Hoskins, September 16, 2019.

⁵⁷⁷ Phil Birsh, Personal Interview.

⁵⁷⁸ Robert Viagas, "Playbill, *Cabaret* Reach Agreement on Programs," *Playbill*, March 9, 1998.

⁵⁷⁹ "Playbill? Showbill? Stagebill?" *Talkin' Broadway*, n.d.

⁵⁸⁰ Phil Birsh, Personal Interview.

⁵⁸¹ “Playbill? Showbill? Stagebill?” *Talkin’ Broadway*, n.d.

⁵⁸² I use “under-performing” to encompass any theatre that Playbill would dismiss as having too few audience numbers, ticket prices that are too low, too little opportunity for ads sales, and any combination of those factors. Playbill is not transparent about how it makes these calls or how much *On Stage* costs.

⁵⁸³ “Off-Broadway Playbill Question,” Broadwayworld.com, December 8, 2004, accessed July 2, 2019.

⁵⁸⁴ Birsh, 213.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid, 213.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid, 222.

⁵⁸⁷ American Th. P. v. Tax Comm. Of St. of N.Y. Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of New York, First Department, Jan. 26, 1982, *Casemine*, Case code 86 A.D. 2d 570.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ Birsh, 222.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid, 223.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid, 223.

⁵⁹² Ibid, 172.

⁵⁹³ Ibid, 138.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid, 116.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid, 117.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid, 117.

⁵⁹⁷ “Herman Pepper of Playbill, No. 1 Theatregoer, Is Dead,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 1975.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁹ Birsh, 110.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid, 137.

⁶⁰¹ José Hernandez, *Broken Business: Seven Steps to Reform Good Companies Gone Bad*,” John Wiley and Sons, 2019, 48.

⁶⁰² Birsh, 111.

⁶⁰³ Hernandez, 48.

⁶⁰⁴ Birsh, 138, 117.

⁶⁰⁵ Nikala Lane and Andrew Crane, "Revisiting gender role stereotyping in the sales profession," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 40.2 (2002), 121-122.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid, 122.

⁶⁰⁷ Birsh, 118.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid, 138.

⁶⁰⁹ When Alleman began work for Playbill, she used her married name of "Joan Alleman Rubin," but following her divorce, she dropped "Rubin." I have seen articles referring to her as "Joan Alleman," "Joan Alleman Birsh," and "Joan Birsh." For the purpose of consistency, I refer to her as simply "Joan Alleman."

⁶¹⁰ Birsh, 128.

⁶¹¹ Ibid, 233.

⁶¹² Birsh, photo insert, 197.

⁶¹³ Robert Viagas, "Check Out Playbill's New Cover Design," *Playbill.com*, Sept. 21, 2009.

⁶¹⁴ "New Tony Nominating Committee Appointed; Artist Members Added," *Backstage*, August 1, 1986.

⁶¹⁵ Joan Alleman Rubin, "From the Archives: Truman Capote Talks About the Upcoming *Breakfast at Tiffany's* Musical—and wishing Shirley MacLaine Could Star," *Playbill.com*, Sept. 30, 2019.

⁶¹⁶ Birsh, 234.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid, 234.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid, 235.

⁶¹⁹ Wolfe.

⁶²⁰ Birsh, 284.

⁶²¹ Jonathan Wolfe, "The Future of Playbill," *New York Times*, April 20, 2018.

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Ibid.

⁶²⁴ Robert Viagas, "Check out Playbill's New Cover Design," *Playbill*, September 21, 2009.

⁶²⁵ Birsh, 268.

⁶²⁶ "Through the Years," *Variety* 382.8 (2001), 34-38.

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- ⁶²⁹ Lisa Gubernick, "Theater Magazines Battle for Top Billing," *WSJ*, April 26, 1999.
- ⁶³⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶³¹ Ibid.
- ⁶³² Ibid.
- ⁶³³ Ibid, 207.
- ⁶³⁴ Steven Adler, *On Broadway: Art and Commerce on the Great White Way*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2004, 206.
- ⁶³⁵ Lisa Gubernick.
- ⁶³⁶ Phil Birsh, Personal Interview.
- ⁶³⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶³⁸ Gubernick.
- ⁶³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴⁰ Birsh, 284.
- ⁶⁴¹ Kelly.
- ⁶⁴² Arthur Birsh, 104.
- ⁶⁴³ Zachary Pincus-Roth, "Ask Playbill.com: Playbill and Showbill," *Playbill*, October 18, 2017.
- ⁶⁴⁴ Jonathan Mandell, "Theater: Theater's Memory Bank Expands," *New York Times*, August 25, 2002, and Randy Gener, "Trends and Events: Get with the (New) Program," *American Theatre* 20.1 (2003), 20-21.
- ⁶⁴⁵ Gener.
- ⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴⁸ Ibid.
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- ⁶⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵² Keith J. Kelly, "Stagebill gobbled up by Playbill," *New York Post*, June 11, 2002.
- ⁶⁵³ Simonson.

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- ⁶⁵⁴ Phil Birsh, Personal Interview, June 21, 2017.
- ⁶⁵⁵ Claude Brodesser, "Playbill will go dark in 6 Off B'way venues," *Variety*, September 2, 1998.
- ⁶⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵⁷ "The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2018-2019 Season," *The Broadway League*.
- ⁶⁵⁸ Innovative Theatre Foundation, "Who Are We?" Jan. 20, 2010.
- ⁶⁵⁹ "How to tell Broadway from Off-Broadway From..." *Playbill.com*, Jan. 13, 2019.
- ⁶⁶⁰ Christopher Zara, "This NYC theater set ticket prices at \$35 and sold a million of them," *Fast Company*, May 22, 2019.
- ⁶⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶² Ibid.
- ⁶⁶³ Robert Hofler, "Playbill corners legit market," *Variety*, June 9, 2002.
- ⁶⁶⁴ Jonathan Mandell, "Theater: Theater's Memory Bank Expands," *New York Times*, August 25, 2002.
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- ⁶⁶⁷ Laura Collins-Hughes, "I Want My Playbill! Why Programs Are No Mere Extras," *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 2019.
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- ⁶⁷⁰ Erica Moss, Comment on "I Want My Playbill! Why Programs Are No Mere Extras," Feb. 13, 2019, *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 2019.
- ⁶⁷¹ "Chuck D.," Comment on "I Want My Playbill! Why Programs Are No Mere Extras," Feb. 6, 2019, *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 2019.
- ⁶⁷² "Toreadorables" username, "I Want My Playbill!-NY Times article" Reddit thread, 2019.
- ⁶⁷³ "Usnavis" username, "I Want My Playbill!-NY Times article" Reddit thread, 2019.
- ⁶⁷⁴ "Tiktoktic" username, "I Want My Playbill!-NY Times article" Reddit thread, 2019.
- ⁶⁷⁵ "At_the-Roundhouse" username, "I Want My Playbill!-NY Times article" Reddit thread, 2019.
- ⁶⁷⁶ Ashley Lee, "How Playbills became social media must-shares," *Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 2019.
- ⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid.

⁶⁸² Ibid.

⁶⁸³ Over the course of the past year, I saw a variety of shows, including *Hadestown*, *The Prom*, *King Kong*, and *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, among others. Ushers encouraged audiences to snap photos with or of their *Playbill*. It was truly interesting!

⁶⁸⁴ Phil Birsh, Personal Interview.

⁶⁸⁵ “theplaybillproject,” Instagram, Feb. 8, 2019.

⁶⁸⁶ Dave Quinn, “Here’s How *Dear Evan Hansen*’s Signature Cast Gets Made—and Removed—Eight Times a Week,” *People*, Oct. 11, 2018.

⁶⁸⁷ “theplaybillproject,” Instagram, May 31, 2019.

⁶⁸⁸ Birsh, 128.

⁶⁸⁹ See *Playbill* articles titled “Broadway’s New *West Side Story* Releases Statement Regarding Casting Controversy” and “Actors’ Equity Releases Statement Regarding *West Side Story*.”

⁶⁹⁰ Birsh, 182.

⁶⁹¹ Phil Birsh, Personal Interview.

⁶⁹² “Podcast Episode 72 – Phil Birsh,” *The Producer’s Perspective*, May 16, 2016.

⁶⁹³ Mark Robinson, “Robbie Rozelle is Bustin’ Out,” *Mark Robinson Writes*, June 20, 2018.

⁶⁹⁴ Andrew Gans, “*Wicked* Playbill Will Go Green for Oct. 30 Anniversary Performance,” *Playbill*, October 17, 2008.

⁶⁹⁵ Michael Gioia, “*Mamma Mia!* Celebrates Tenth Year on Broadway,” *Playbill*, October 19, 2011.

⁶⁹⁶ Phil Birsh, Personal Interview, June 21, 2017.

⁶⁹⁷ “TBV Playbill,” Broadwayworld.com, “BroadwayConcierge,” June 3, 2018.

⁶⁹⁸ Playbill Staff, “Rainbow Playbills Take Over Broadway as Fifth Annual Playbill Pride Kicks Off,” *Playbill*, June 1, 2018.

⁶⁹⁹ Playbill Staff, “Rainbow Playbills”

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid.

⁷⁰² Alex Abad-Santos, “How LGBTQ Pride Month became a branded holiday,” *Vox*, June 25, 2018.

⁷⁰³ Playbill Staff, “Why Playbill’s 2019 Pride Logo Is a Nod to the Past,” *Playbill*, June 1, 2019.

⁷⁰⁴ Marc J. Franklin, “Go Inside Playbill’s Sing For Hope Piano Pop-Up Performances,” *Playbill*, June 25, 2018.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁶ Phil Birsh, Personal Interview, June 21, 2017.

⁷⁰⁷ Arthur Birsh, *The hind foot knows*. Unpublished manuscript, 2005, 18.

⁷⁰⁸ Jonathan Mandell, “Theater: Theater’s Memory Bank Expands,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2002.

⁷⁰⁹ Genevieve V. Beller, Personal Interview, Oct. 6, 2019.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹¹ Stuart Elliot, “A New Publisher for Playbill,” *New York Times*, Nov. 3, 2013.

⁷¹² Ibid.

⁷¹³ Ibid.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

⁷¹⁵ Birsh, Personal Interview.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid.

⁷¹⁷ “Broadway Goes Dark Amid Coronavirus Concerns,” *Playbill.com*, Mar 12, 2020.

⁷¹⁸ Greg Evans, “Tony Awards Schedule in Doubt as COVID-19 Broadway Shutdown Tests Eligibility Deadlines,” *Deadline*, March 18, 2020.

⁷¹⁹ “Playbill Media Kit,” *Playbill*, June 23, 2017.

⁷²⁰ “Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2020; “COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic,” Worldometer, March 2020.

⁷²¹ “Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2020.

⁷²² Jeff Lunden, “Broadway Shuttters its Stages Amid Coronavirus Threat,” *NPR*, March 12, 2020.

⁷²³ Olivia Clement, “West End Theatres to Remain Closed Until June,” *Playbill.com*, April 6, 2020.

⁷²⁴ Greg Evans, “Coping With COVID-19 Crisis: Broadway Publicist Keith Sherman Talks Employee

Furloughs, Dipping Into Savings And Staying Positive After Testing Positive,” *Deadline*, March 30, 2020; and Facebook post, Diep Tran, April 3, 2020, accessed April 3, 2020.

⁷²⁵ Facebook post, Diep Tran, April 3, 2020, accessed April 3, 2020.

⁷²⁶ Ibid.

⁷²⁷ Personal emails from February 15 through April 6, 2020.

⁷²⁸ As of March 22, 2020.

⁷²⁹ “Advertise with Playbill,” *Playbill.com*.

⁷³⁰ “theplaybillproject,” Instagram, March 20, 2020.

⁷³¹ Broadway.com Official Website, accessed April 6, 2020.

⁷³² Matthew Arnold, “Media Profile: Venerable theater guide takes its enduring show on the road,” *PR Week*, Oct. 14, 2002.

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