

RACE AND GENDER IN THE BROADWAY CHORUS

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Throughout the history of the American musical, the chorus, has remained a key component in the foundation of the form. The anonymous men and women who sing and dance help create the spectacle that is an intrinsic part of the musical. While the chorus line of fifty that characterized the revues in the early part of the twentieth-century has dwindled, for economic and aesthetic reasons, it has not disappeared. The role of the chorus has changed from a titillating backdrop for headlining stars to an accomplished ensemble of dancer/singers who may be the featured performers in their own right. This dissertation creates a cultural history of the chorus as it has evolved from the The Black Crook in 1866 to the beginning of the twenty-first-century. Specifically, how have the issues of sexuality, gender, race and class affected the development of the chorus? Chapter one is an overview of the history of the Broadway chorus, beginning with a brief look at the origins of the chorus in Greek drama, through various dance trends, the popularity of the revue, and the emergence of director/choreographers and their influence on the form. Chapter two investigates how gender informed the construction of the image of chorus girls and boys, and how that image was manipulated through the years to reflect social concerns and anxieties around the issue of changing gender roles. Along with the schism created by the performance of gender in the chorus, the performance of race also marks a serious divide in the American musical theatre world. Chapter three examines the history of African-American performers in the chorus. The chorus is one small, but significant, component of a musical. Yet, this usually anonymous group of performers has often figured as the subject of the story in a

medium that admittedly, enjoys talking, singing and dancing about itself. The final chapter of this study looks at how the chorus as a subject functions in the musical by focusing on four examples that span fifty-two years: Allegro (1947), A Chorus Line (1975), and 42nd Street (1981), and Contact (1999).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
1.0 From the line to the ensemble	11
1.1 KEY MOMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHORUS PRIOR TO 1866.....	12
1.2 THE BLACK CROOK.....	16
1.3 LONDON’S INFLUENCE – GAIETY, FLORODORA, AND TILLER GIRLS	19
1.4 ZIEGFELD’S FOLLIES	24
1.5 PROFESSIONALIZING THE CHORUS – UNION.....	36
1.6 GEORGE BALANCHINE	41
1.7 TWEAKING THE LINE.....	46
1.8 OKLAHOMA!.....	50
1.9 WEST SIDE STORY	57
1.10 BOB FOSSE AND MICHAEL BENNETT	62
1.11 MEGA-MUSICAL	66
1.12 THE CHORUS TODAY.....	69
1.13 CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER ONE.....	72
Notes To Chapter One	74
2.0 Gender in the Chorus	76
2.1 THE “LEG BUSINESS”	78

2.2	LYDIA THOMPSON AND THE BRITISH BLONDES.....	81
2.3	GLAMOUR OVER GAMS – THE GAIETY GIRL	84
2.4	WHAT ABOUT THE MEN?	88
2.5	OPERETTA.....	93
2.6	SOCIAL DANCE	95
2.7	THE 1910’S.....	96
2.8	THE 1920’S.....	100
2.9	1920’S CHORUS BOY	107
2.10	THE DEPRESSION.....	111
2.11	BUSBY BERKELEY	114
2.12	1940’S BEAUTY AND ABILITY – THE BALLET GIRL	121
2.13	1940’S CHORUS MEN.....	129
2.14	THE 1950’S.....	131
2.15	THE GAY CHORUS BOY.....	134
2.16	BEEFCAKE.....	139
2.17	RAZZLE DAZZLE.....	144
2.18	CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER TWO	148
	Notes.....	150
3.0	African-American Chorus.....	152
3.1	MINSTRELSY	153
3.2	EARLY OPPORTUNITIES.....	158
3.3	MOVING TOWARDS MUSICAL COMEDY.....	161
3.4	EARLY MUSICAL COMEDY.....	166

3.5	THE WHITMAN SISTERS.....	177
3.6	SHUFFLE ALONG.....	179
3.7	HARLEM INVASION—LOSING CREATIVE CONTROL.....	184
3.8	DEPRESSION—THE REVUE GOES ON HIATUS.	192
3.9	ADAPTING THE CLASSICS	195
3.10	POST-WAR	196
3.11	NEW GENRES—“NATIVE” OPERA AND GOSPEL PLAYS	200
3.12	INTEGRATING THE STAGE.....	209
3.13	BLACK MUSICAL TODAY	218
3.14	CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER THREE	226
	Notes to Chapter Three	229
4.0	Chorus As Ensemble.....	231
4.1	ALLEGRO—EXPERIMENTATION	232
4.2	A CHORUS LINE—BECOMING THE SUBJECT.....	242
4.3	42 ND STREET—NOSTALGIA	251
4.4	CONTACT—DANCE PLAY.....	261
4.5	CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER FOUR.....	269
	Notes to Chapter Four	273
	Bibliography	275

PREFACE

I have been the beneficiary of some very kind and helpful people along this journey. I would like to thank the librarians at the New York Public Library of Performing Arts who helped me make the most of my visit and the librarians at the Pittsburgh Carnegie Library. My colleague Brian Carney sparked my interest in this field by inviting me to team teach a class in musical theatre many years ago, and has been nudging me along every since. Tomé Cousins for generously sharing his experience in Contact. My friend Christopher Murray, who connected me with John Ganun and Tim Hunt—two chorus men who were kind enough to answer questions. Also thanks to Scott Wise and Jeff Howell for helping me hunt down scripts. My home away from home, City Theatre, which allowed me time away from the theatre to write about it. This project could not have been completed without two people—my tech support, my husband Saul, whose patience and generosity kept me going, and my advisor, Dr. Attilio Favorini, who has been encouraging and supportive throughout.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of the American musical, the chorus, whether a troupe of foreign ballerinas, a waltzing crowd of aristocrats, a high-kicking line of young women, the villagers of a Russian shtetl, a gyrating group of hippies, or a fur-covered tribe of cats, has remained a key component in the foundation of the form. The anonymous men and women who sing and dance their way through the show help create the spectacle that is an intrinsic part of the musical. While the chorus line of fifty that characterized the revues in the early part of the twentieth-century has dwindled, for economic and aesthetic reasons, it has not disappeared. The role of the chorus has changed from a titillating backdrop for headlining stars to an accomplished ensemble of dancer/singers who may be the featured performers in their own right. This dissertation will create a cultural history of the chorus as it has evolved from the The Black Crook in 1866 to the present in 2006, over one hundred years later. Specifically, how have the issues of sexuality, gender, race, and class affected the development of the chorus?

Chapter one is an overview of the history of the Broadway chorus, beginning with a brief look at the origins of the chorus in Greek drama, through its transformation into the role of the confidant in Neoclassical drama. The study then proceeds to theatrical phenomenon of The Black Crook and its contribution to the image of chorus girls and Broadway dance. The evolution of the chorus girl to the fashion plate of early musical comedy, through the popular Gaiety and Florodora Girls is chronicled, followed by the powerful influence of the revue. The revue, which

provides the most successful exploitation of the chorus, also helps elevate the status of dance and the dance director. For the first forty years of the twentieth-century, dance directors like Julian Mitchell, Ned Wayburn, Sammy Lee, Busby Berkeley, and Bobby Alton, helped create the spectacle of the revue by staging masses of chorus members. They were influenced by military drills, the formations of cotillion dancing, precision dance, and in the 1920's, jazz dance, all of which informed their choreography. When ballet, which had been the province of the soloist or specialized troupes, is introduced into the chorus in the 1930's it changes the skill set required for chorus members. Ballet-trained choreographers George Balanchine, Agnes de Mille, and Jerome Robbins develop the story-telling skills of the chorus by working closely with their collaborators to make the dance communicate the plot and character's emotions. Their success contributes to the creation of powerful director/choreographers in the next generation. In the 1950's, '60's, and '70's Bob Fosse and Michael Bennett, further experiment with the way the chorus is portrayed and utilized. The primacy of the dancing chorus is challenged in the 1980's and 90's by the "British invasion" of mega-musicals which, because of the romantic, almost operatic sweep of their music, employ large singing choruses to create the necessary lush sound. Today members of the chorus have the opportunity to work in long-running mega-musicals, revivals, and with a new generation of director/choreographers including Susan Stroman, Graciela Daniele, Rob Marshall, and his sister, Kathleen Marshall. This chapter also briefly examines the unionization of the chorus in 1919, and its impact on the working conditions of the chorus members.

Chapter two investigates how gender informed the construction of the image of chorus girls and boys, and how that image was manipulated through the years to reflect social concerns and anxieties around the issue of changing gender roles. The late nineteenth and early twentieth-

centuries were a period of rapid change and development for the United States, and this change was reflected on the stage, which was the nation's most popular form of entertainment for the first half of the twentieth-century. Artists were quick to seize trends, headlines, tastes and put them on the stage. Their livelihoods depended on audience patronage and approval, and they were eager to please their customers with new and sometimes provocative entertainment. American audiences during this time could choose from a wide variety of entertainments: plays, operettas, burlesques, extravaganzas, minstrel shows, vaudeville, and revues. While the presence of the chorus begins to make itself known as early as 1866 with The Black Crook, it is the revue format, under the guidance of Florenz Ziegfeld, which changes our perception of the chorus girl.

Over the course of twenty-four years Ziegfeld built his career on "Glorifying the American Girl." In those tumultuous times the American woman would experience a world war, the passage of the nineteenth amendment, the "Roaring Twenties," Prohibition, the crash of 1929 and the Depression. The upheaval helped create different economic and social possibilities for women. Changes in fashion helped free her from the tyranny of the corset and the heavy layers of Victorian fashion. Women were becoming increasingly independent, public and sexualized figures. A version of this "New Woman" materialized on stage as the chorus girl. She was perceived as attractive, independent, and sexually available. The reputation for moral laxity that attached itself to all actors, but especially women, was quickly applied to the chorus girl, who was often using the spectacle of her body, as well as any actual talent she might have as a dancer or singer, to earn her living. "Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire" (Mulvey 162). In the audience was the "tired businessman," and it was under his gaze that the "girlie revue" came of age.

The revue, in its many incarnations- Ziegfeld's Follies, George White's Scandals, The Passing Show, Earl Carroll's Vanities, exploited the spectacle of the female body, both in the chorus, which could number fifty or more women, and in the hybridized form of the showgirls, who were selected for their "all-American" looks. Ziegfeld was famous for his involvement in selecting each member of the chorus. These "ponies," as they were called, backed up the line of luminous showgirls who were set against the, often equally spectacular, sets of Joseph Urban. Ziegfeld's exploitation of the female form reached its apotheosis in the work of Broadway and film director Busby Berkeley who, in the 1930's, produced an impressive catalogue of production numbers in film musicals, whose chief feature was beautiful chorus girls barely dressed, arranged in geometric patterns. Berkeley readily admitted in interviews that his chorus girls were chosen for their looks and not any talent they might have for singing or dancing. While Berkeley's greatest contribution to the musical was in film, he is included in this study because his use of the female chorus was the ultimate realization of woman as object, as well the ultimate realization of nineteenth-century spectacle entertainment, in its extravagance and insistent search for novelty.

The popularity of social dancing helped feed into the appetite for novelty. Every season a new dance would be "introduced" or featured: the Turkey Trot, the Black Bottom, the Charleston. Frequently, these dances were adapted from black social dances that were modified for white audiences, who took them up as their own. The ability of the chorus performers was initially limited to learning patterns of steps, which were simply executed, delivering their impact from the costumes and, in a period where labor was cheap, the sheer number of women on the stage. These routines were created by male "dance directors" who often, like the chorines, lacked formal dance training. With the advent of precision dancing, which came over from

England in 1918 with John Tiller and his Tiller girls, the skill and the reputation of chorus women began to change. Precision dance emphasized uniformity, military drill-like execution, with the emphasis always on the line. Marching, kicking, and stepping in time, the chorus became less of a sensuous, fleshy spectacle than a machine of perfection. Women could now enroll in schools that would train them as teams, headed by captains, who not only were responsible for the corps' dancing, but also for their social behavior. Members of precision drill teams were expected to be of good moral character, had curfews, were chaperoned on dates, and were instructed to save some of their wages. This totalized training was designed to redeem the profession, which was perceived as sloppy and a haven for the talentless who relied only on their good looks, and the reputation of the performers, who were believed to be little better than prostitutes.

In early musical theatre dance, the chorus boy was virtually invisible. Western male dancers have always had to fight the stigma of effeminacy, especially in ballet, which, for a long time, was built around the supremacy of the ballerina, with the male dancer acting as a frame for her grace and beauty. Although dance directors were primarily men, the emphasis remained on female dancers in the chorus up until the 1920's, when male dancers began to receive featured attention in such shows as The Student Prince (1924), Take to the Air (1927), and Hit the Deck! (1927), the latter two featuring a chorus of aviators and sailors respectively. Dance directors, conscious of the public's prejudice, and sometimes succumbing to their own personal ones, often chose specific physical types of men, moving as far away as possible from stereotypical effeminate forms. Yet, in less than one hundred years, the role of the male chorus dancer will come so far that chorus boys will not only dress, but pass as women in La Cage aux Folles (1983). What has happened culturally to allow this trajectory to take place? Why did the male

dancer suddenly become visible? How did the portrayal of the chorus boy's sexuality differ from that of the chorus girl's? How does the performance of both female and male sexuality in the chorus change over time? What do these changes say about the shifting values of American audiences?

With the demand for the novel came an increased demand on the skill levels of chorus members, who were expected to quickly pick up new routines and changing dance styles. Precision dance teams peaked in popularity in the early 1920's, although they still exist today in the form of the Radio City Rockettes. Tap dancing swept the nation and the stage from 1925-1936, but after eleven years of supremacy it faded (although it's now made a comeback in nostalgic pieces like The Producers (2001) and Thoroughly Modern Millie (2002) and the work of Savion Glover.) The ballet finally took hold in American musical theatre choreography in the 1930's, when the choreographer George Balanchine, trained at the Russian Imperial School, came to the United States with the encouragement of Lincoln Kirstein. Balanchine's choreography on Broadway for On Your Toes (1936) and his establishment, with Kirstein, of The School of American Ballet in 1934, changed the nature of theatre dance. Chorus members now required specialized training in order to leap and jété in the dream ballet sequence that seemed to be present in every musical in the 1940's and 50's.

As the role of the dancing chorus became more specialized, the singing chorus, which came out of the operetta tradition, remained constant. In the revues in the early decades of the century, the songs were written by a hodge-podge of composers, almost all of them working on Tin Pan Alley and looking to create a popular hit that would sell thousands of copies of sheet music and make their tunes ubiquitous in the parlors of America. These songs were designed to be singable with catchy melodies that were "sold" to the audience by the star. The chorus was

often featured in a rousing opening number, as support for the hero or heroine, and to close the acts. With the rising costs of production, the singing chorus began to dwindle in numbers. They also began to dwindle in importance with the rise of director/choreographers, like Jerome Robbins, Gower Champion, Bob Fosse, and Michael Bennett, who were focused on foregrounding the role of dance and dancers in shows. Robbins dealt the sharpest blow to the singing chorister when, in West Side Story, he required his dancers to do the singing, dancing and acting. This creation of the "triple-threat" performer was economically attractive and also worked well with the modern style of the book musical, which privileged the integrity of the story over all other elements of the production. Chorus members were now no longer simply the singers and dancers in the show, but they became characters with names. What is shifting in the culture and the form that allows for the ascendancy of the dancing chorus? Are the megamusicals of the 1980's, which virtually eliminate dancing in favor of large operetta style choruses, a reversal of this trend or a stylish fad?

Along with the schism created by the performance of gender in the chorus, the performance of race also marks a serious divide in the American musical theatre world. This study will examine African-American performers in the chorus. Broadway was slow to integrate its stages and houses. Black musical theatre was developed through the determination of early artists such as Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle, Bert Williams and George Walker, and the Johnson brothers. Stars like Bert Williams, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and Ethel Waters who "crossed over" onto white Broadway, were the exception, and even these actors confronted virulent racism and often had trouble supporting themselves. Very little has been written about the black chorus singer or dancer, or their construction and performance of gender, sexuality, and race and how this may or may not differ from that of the white chorus. In Chapter three, this study will focus

on the chorus in several of the early black musicals: the astounding success, on and off-Broadway, of Sissle and Blake's Shuffle Along (1921), the comedy team Lyle and Miller's Runnin' Wild (1923), and how the role of the chorus contrasts, or not, with the all-white created revue of the Blackbirds of 1928 and Gershwin and Heyward's Porgy and Bess (1935). I'd like to compare these performances with more contemporary African-American musicals: George C. Wolfe's Jelly's Last Jam (1992), and Bring in 'Da Noise Bring in 'Da Funk (1997), and the all white creation Dreamgirls (1981). Do these productions reflect, subvert, or interrogate the cultural shifts that have occurred in the intervening seventy years in their utilization of the chorus and their portrayal of race and gender?

This study will also examine the integration of the Broadway chorus. While integrated casts have been documented in minstrel shows, the first time black and white chorus members appeared onstage together was in The Southerners in 1905. The show caused a short-lived furor. The next high profile example of integration on stage was Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern's Showboat in 1927. Then, as it is today, the show's depiction of African-Americans was a source of debate, especially in the black community. While the chorus members were on-stage together, as the story, set in the 1890's dictated, and the society of 1927 demanded, the performers remained separate. In 1948, Finian's Rainbow, directed by Michael Kidd, integrated the cast for the purpose of the story, which dealt directly with bigotry. More recently, in Ragtime, which is set in America in the first decade of the century, the themes of racism and immigration are embodied in the three disparate choral groups that open the show – African-American, Eastern European immigrants, and prosperous whites, but by the end, the three groups are staged so that they appear to have melded into one seamless society.

Integration based not on the story, but on equal ability, is an important part of the history of the chorus. In the 1960's and 1970's Actor's Equity Association President Frederick O'Neal addressed this issue by seeking equal representation on Broadway stages for black artists. Other black artists encouraged the creation of separate theatres away from the racism and economic pressures of Broadway. The debate over equal access continues today around the issue of colorblind casting and the rights of minority performers to be cast in roles written for their ethnicity.

The chorus is one small, but significant, component of a musical. Yet, this usually anonymous group of performers has often figured as the subject of the story in a medium that admittedly, enjoys talking, singing and dancing about itself. There is something very American about the musical theatre chorus, whose voices often represent those of "the people," in much the same fashion as their ancient Greek counterpart. They are participants, witnesses, the enthusiastic cheerleaders to the stars they all secretly aspire to be. Broadway has always been a willing propagator of the show biz version of the American Dream myth, where with talent, determination, and that lucky break, the average chorus girl/boy can become a star.

The final chapter of this study will look at how the chorus as a subject functions in the musical by focusing on four examples that span fifty-two years: Allegro (1947), A Chorus Line (1975), 42nd Street (1981), and Contact (1999). Interestingly, all of these shows are directed and/or created by choreographers, and all of them feature a chorus that provides the spine of the show. Allegro, A Chorus Line, and 42nd Street employ the chorus as "demos," who are critical to the action and our perception of the play. In A Chorus Line and 42nd Street the aspirations and talents of individuals within the group are selected out and highlighted, and the chorus becomes more than a backdrop for a star, or a physical spectacle; the chorus becomes the engine

of the play, used to express the idea at the core of the work. What makes the chorus member so compelling? How does the role and presentation of the chorus change in these shows? How much of this is attributable to the director/choreographers? Do these shows employ the myth of the American Dream? And if so, how? Finally, how have we arrived at this shift in the function of the chorus? And how do all these changes relate, or not, to changes in American culture?

1.0 FROM THE LINE TO THE ENSEMBLE

Since the chorus is at the root of Western drama an extremely brief history of it, prior to The Black Crook (1866), seems in order. This chapter will delineate the emergence of the chorus girl, beginning with the Black Crook, trace her development in the early musical comedy in England, and her transformation in the popular revue format, as perfected by Ziegfeld and expanded upon by a host of other producers. Supplementing the all-important display of her feminine charms, was the chorus girl's ability to dance. This skill, at first rudimentary, became increasingly sophisticated as dance directors, later called choreographers, became an essential part of musical theatre production. Marching, gave way to simple routines and tap dancing, which incorporated jazz dancing, and finally ballet. In the 1980's the importation of British musicals, which emphasized spectacular sets and Romantic music, eliminated dancing in favor of operetta style choruses. This movement was countered by a surge of revivals of musicals from the 1940's and 50's, which feature dancing choruses, in tandem with the emergence of a new generation of director/choreographers. The popularity of revivals and dancing choruses is a trend still in effect today.

In addition to the aesthetic requirements, members of the chorus have had to confront difficult financial realities, made worse by unfair working conditions. In a move that reflected the class divide within the acting profession, members of the chorus formed their own union, the Chorus Equity Association, to fight along side the actors whose work they supported. The

Chorus Equity Association finally merged with the Actor's Equity Association in 1953. The following section will touch upon key developments in the chorus in western drama leading up to The Black Crook in 1866 in order to place the chorus, as it develops within the Broadway musical, in context.

1.1 KEY MOMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHORUS PRIOR TO 1866

According to Aristotle, the early chorus was formed to celebrate the fertility rites of spring by singing the dithyrambos, which chronicled the birth and life of Dionysus. This religious ritual involved choral singing and dancing in a circle, a shape which would ultimately be incorporated into Greek theatre design.¹ The dithyrambic chorus was eventually organized to include fifty male dancers, adding pipes and strings to the original flute accompaniment, as well as spoken verses. The worship of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility, had the potential to be wild and drunken. The choral dithyrambs provided a structure and order to the rite, while also capturing through movement and song the ecstatic nature of worship. The responsive intensity created by choral dancing and singing, remains one of its compelling traits.

General consensus on the origins of drama in Greece credit Thespis in the 6th century B.C.E. with being the first to step out of the chorus, or to join a solo actor to the chorus. In the surviving works of the great Greek dramatists of the 5th century B.C.E. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the chorus has several critical functions. In addition to worshipping the gods, they provide the exposition of the play, which helps establish the social and ethical framework of the drama. They question, debate and review events; in effect, standing in for the audience by serving as spectators and witnesses. The chorus also sets the mood of the play and creates a

rhythm through their song and movement, adding to the spectacle of the play with their dances (Brockett 23). Most importantly, the chorus is a character in the drama. Their exchanges with the protagonist and antagonist serve a didactic function for the audience. “The moment of performance was controlled not by a beat imposed from the darkness of the [orchestra] pit, but by the collective of dancers. Power, as in the *polis*, had to be visible. Greek tragedy took for its subject matter the relationship of the individual and *polis*, and the conventions of the genre demanded that chorus and actors should be in equilibrium” (Wiles 91-92). Sometimes the chorus served as the protagonist, as in Aeschylus’s The Suppliants, or the antagonist, in his play The Eumenides. Occasionally, there were even two choruses, for example, in The Suppliants and Euripides’ Hippolytus (Brockett 23).

Aeschylus’s The Suppliant Women had a chorus of fifty, like the dithyrambic chorus. However, within twenty years, the chorus for Sophocles’ dramas was reduced to fifteen men. The comic chorus numbered twenty-four. The chorus entered during the *parados*, probably forming a rectangular shape, composed of columns (Kirstein 35). The style of dance for tragedy was called “*emmelia*,” for comedy the “*kordax*,” and for the satyr plays, the “*sikinnis*.” The big choral dances occurred during the *stasima*, three or four lyrical interludes where the chief actors were either offstage or quiet. “Their movements were usually sober, often more plastic attitudes accompanying song than we would consider dance. Movement varied to the metric of the song, recitative, or conversation” (Kirstein 36). The comic chorus did less dancing and more mime and buffoonery. The comic *parados* was not the stately processional of the tragic chorus but made to a more energetic trochaic beat. Their big moment came in the *parabasis*, where they dropped character to address the audience directly either on their own behalf, or on behalf of the playwright.

Early Greek theatres reflected the importance of the chorus in their design, which featured large circular orchestras in which the chorus members would sing and dance. As Sophocles and Euripides added more actors to their dramas, the role of the chorus diminished. In the extant comedies dating from the 5th century B.C.E., all of which are by Aristophanes, the chorus is still an important character who can influence the action. Aristophanes often made the chorus the title character: The Frogs, The Birds, The Acharnians, The Wasps. Over the next hundred years the chorus declined in importance, a trend reflected in Greece's changing theatre architecture, which would add a raised stage for the principal actors, and shrink the orchestra circle in half.

Four hundred years later in the 1st century B.C.E., during the Roman Empire, playwrights patterned much of their work on their Greek predecessors, while making significant changes. The chorus was abolished from Roman comedy, and its role was severely reduced in tragedy. But the chorus is still present in the plays of Accius, Livius Andronicus, Naevius, Pacuvius, and Seneca. Unlike the Greek chorus, which never left the stage, the Roman chorus appears to exit and re-enter. Since this was the case, it's believed that they were also fewer in number than their Greek counterpart, to allow for the ease of transition. Since the orchestra was now used for seating, the chorus was on stage with the actors. Seneca's writing for the chorus, provides interludes that are only loosely connected to the action. While his writing for the chorus is often credited as some of his best, he has greatly reduced their dramatic use (Watling 24). However, there is some evidence from the tragedy Octavia, which is the only surviving fabula praetexta, that the chorus could be an active participant in the drama. One of the choruses attacks the palace of Nero in an attempt to restore Octavia. "Revolutionary acts on the part of the chorus were perhaps already a feature of the genre, and may have informed the plots of Naevius' Romulus

[insurrection against Amulius] and Accius' Brutus [insurrection against Tarquinius]" (Boyle 225). A new popular Roman genre, the pantomime, which was primarily tragic, prospered with the support of Caesar Augustus in 22 B.C.E. Pantomime dance drama, featured a chorus that chanted the stories the mimes performed. The chorus may have even sung interludes while the mimes were changing costumes and masks, but the dancing belonged to the mimes (Kirstein 49).

During the Medieval era, under the influence of the Christian church, theatre fell into decline. The chorus survived in the Mass where it was reduced to a strictly singing body. The singing, however, developed from the unison of the Greek chorus to complex antiphonal structures and harmonics. It is from these choral masses that theatre ultimately re-emerges.²

When theatre begins to flourish again during the Renaissance, the chorus resurfaces because playwrights have rediscovered the works of the Romans and Greeks. In England Elizabethan playwrights, who greatly admired the work of Seneca, adopted his use of the chorus. However, the chorus is now one actor, as in the tragedy Gorboduc or Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. The Elizabethan chorus typically delivers the prologue and the epilogue, framing the play. The chorus in Shakespeare's Henry V is an exception to this rule, playing a much more active role in directing the thoughts of the audience in the prologue, at the closure of each act, and in the epilogue. There is no dancing or singing involved, although the use of iambic pentameter creates a rhythmic, musical speech.

The Renaissance marks the last vestiges of the chorus, labeled as such. In Neoclassical drama, the solo chorus member disappears, and is transformed finally into the role of the confidant. The chorus, which occupied such a critical role in theatre has been reduced to a witness, with few lines and little to no power. Playwright and critic Friedrich von Schiller remarked, "The abolition of the Chorus, and the debasement of this sensibly powerful organ into

the characterless substitute of a confidant, is, by no means, such an improvement in tragedy as the French, and their imitators, would have it supposed to be” (69).

Over the centuries, the role of western drama shifted in public life, directly affecting the role of the chorus. In Greek drama the function of the chorus—delivering the exposition, serving as a representative of the people, and commenting on the action—made them central to drama and comedy, as theatre, a religious and civic observance, was central to public life. But as theatre loses its centrality to public discourse and becomes a diversionary form of entertainment, the civic function of the chorus may have held less interest for the audience and the playwright, who was increasingly concerned with exploring individual agency and the way characters shaped the world. When the Romans removed the art of song and dance from the chorus, the group also lost its aesthetic function. Not until song and dance are returned to the domain of the chorus in the form of musical entertainments, does the chorus regain its popularity in western drama.

1.2 THE BLACK CROOK

The first performance of The Black Crook is frequently cited as the birth of the American musical. However, it did not inaugurate the chorus line in America. Andrew Davis claims that one of the first recorded appearances of the chorus line on the American stage was in 1848 in a play featuring the popular native hero Mose the Bowery B'hoy in A Glance at New York. They were not an intrinsic part of the play, but rather one of the specialty acts interpolated into the show. "One of the specialty acts involved six lovely members of the Ladies Bowling Saloon attempting to dance. Voila. The first recorded chorus line on the American stage kicked up its toes" (29). Historian Cecil Smith quotes an 1866 review of the extravaganza The Balloon

Wedding which featured, “any quantity of young ladies in the most eccentric ballet that was ever seen or heard, for this ballet sing as well as dance, and are perpetually saying or singing ‘tra la la la’ on the slightest provocation” (7). But The Balloon Wedding closed within a fortnight. Other forms of entertainment, burlesque and comic opera, were also using attractive young women to sing and dance in shows. But for the purposes of this dissertation, The Black Crook is a logical starting point because a large part of what makes the show a phenomenon is the presence of the chorus.

Late in the summer of 1866 the general manager of Niblo's Garden, William Wheatley, was preparing to present Charles M. Barras's melodrama The Black Crook when he was approached by impresario Henry C. Jarrett. Jarrett had imported a French ballet company to present La Biche au Bois at the Academy of Music. But the venue had burned down while the troupe was en route, leaving Jarrett and the troupe, who had no return fare, in a bind. The two producers decided to combine their productions, gluing them together with some additional music. Their five and a half hour extravaganza opened on September 12, 1866. The book was a mess, and the quality of the music uneven at best, producing only one popular song, "You Naughty, Naughty Men." What drew the crowds were the spectacular sets, which cost an extravagant \$55,000, (a fact prominently advertised on the poster), and the dancing women.³ Both the ballet troupe and the chorus line created a sensational stir. Some scholars attribute the show's success to "the chorus line of tall, voluptuous girls in tights, billed as ‘Amazons’ doing ‘Amazon Marches’ lightly choreographed by David Costa" (Davis 36). Others, including the critic from the New York Times and George Odell, gave the praise to the ballet, which was encored twice on opening night. Costa also choreographed the four principal ballerinas: Marie Bonfanti, Rita Sangalli, Betty Rigl, and Rose Delval, who all became stars.

Both the ballerinas and the chorus line were scantily clad by 1866 standards and the amount of feminine flesh on display caused considerable protests. Reverend Charles B. Smyth's sermon was published in The Herald as "The Nuisances of New York, Particularly the Naked Truth." Smyth gives a detailed description of the costumes from the show:

The immodest dress of the girls; the short skirts and undergarments of thin, gauze-like material, allowing the form of the figure to be discernible through it; ...the flesh colored tights, imitating nature so well that the illusion is complete; ...exceedingly short drawers, almost tight fitting; ...arms and back apparently bare, and the bodice cut and fitted as to show off every inch and outline of the body above the waist. (qtd. in Knapp 22)

Smyth's objections most likely pleased the producers, who were given free publicity for their show. Considering that the dress of an average American woman in the latter half of the nineteenth-century kept her well-covered from neck to toe, the opportunity to see the female form revealed would have been a powerful draw for the men in the audience. There was also the sheer number of women, over one hundred chorus girls graced the stage, decorating the set. Mark Twain gave this report of the spectacle:

Beautiful bare-legged girls hanging in flower baskets; others stretched in groups on great sea shells; others clustered around fluted columns; others in all possible attitudes; girls—nothing but a wilderness of girls—stacked up, pile on pile, away aloft to the dome of the theatre, diminishing in size and clothing... The whole tableau resplendent with columns, scrolls, and a vast ornamental work,

wrought in gold, silver and brilliant colors –all lit up with gorgeous theatrical fires... (85-6)

The "Amazon march" of the chorus also offered a contrast to the movement style of the teenage ballerinas (none of the troupe was over twenty). While dance was not notated at this point, the marching the women performed would have derived from military drills. According to Gerald Bordman the "Amazon march" was the dance form that most seriously rivaled classical ballet on the stage until The Merry Widow opened in October of 1907 and the waltz took over (Chronicle 19). Not only did the chorus dance an Amazon march, but they sang a song by the same title. The Black Crook's combination of extravagant scenery, a plot (however loose and preposterous), and scores of women singing and dancing, proved an irresistible ticket. Stylistically, the play did not revolutionize the theatre. What mattered most to producers of the day was the one million dollars in ticket revenue and the profitable sixteen month run (20).

1.3 LONDON'S INFLUENCE – GAIETY, FLORODORA, AND TILLER GIRLS

The next significant development in the history of the chorus girl would, again, come from the continent. Beginning in the 1850's, burlesque had become one of the most popular forms of entertainment in England. Producers like John Hollingshead, who built the Gaiety Theatre in London in 1868, programmed their spaces with burlesque, which was traditionally derived from classical sources or fairy tales that were satirized with popular song and dance. Productions could contain impressive amounts of spectacle, with casts of extras numbering in the hundreds. There was plenty of physical and verbal humor, and the comedy was peppered with topical references. There were low comedy dame roles for men, who dressed as women, and

more importantly, there were trouser roles for women, who dressed as boys and men, showing off their legs in tights. The chorus in early burlesque was separated into the dancing chorus, derived from the ballet tradition, and the singing chorus. Hollingshead recognized that, "If physical beauty could be got in combination with brains and talent, so much the better, but my first duty seemed to me to be to get physical beauty, and I got it" (Parker, Natural History 52). Hollingshead, who called himself a "licensed dealer in legs, short skirts, French adaptations, Shakespeare, taste, and musical glasses," made sure that both choruses were large and made up of pretty young women. This formula proved successful for over a decade (52).

George Edwardes, who took over as manager of the Gaiety in 1886, continued to produce burlesque throughout the 1880's. In 1892 Edwardes's two big stars, Nellie Farren and Fred Leslie died suddenly, and Edwardes felt that burlesque would not play without them. He turned his hand to developing a new form called musical comedy. "Edwardes set about producing a variant, a show that retained the songs, the dances and the girls but was no longer dependent on satire and punning titles" (Lamb, 150 Years 116). His first effort in a new direction was In Town in 1892 at the Prince of Wales Theatre. The show was billed as a "musical farce" with a loose plot about backstage life. It had song and dance numbers by F. Osmond Carr, and featured popular British comedian Arthur Roberts along with performers of the comic-opera and variety stage, and a chorus of beautiful women (116). Edwardes, however, replaced the burlesque chorus girls in tights with a chorus of elegant women costumed in the latest fashions. In Town, with a chorus of six women called the "Ambiguity Girls," had a successful run of almost three hundred performances, encouraging Edwardes to present A Gaiety Girl the following year. Billed as a "musical comedy," with a very loose plot centered around romantic rivalry, class divisions and a stolen comb, the success of these two shows established a formula, which consisted of high

fashion, young attractive casts, lively popular music, contemporary dialogue and a chorus of glamorous women, who were chosen for their looks and their ability to show off the latest fashions. Gaiety girls didn't have to be good singers since "Edwardes used a chorus of people from local church choirs hidden behind the scenery to swell the music" ("Gaiety Girls," People Play).⁴ They also didn't have to be good dancers. The Gaiety Girl, "sat (beautifully) while the star did a number-perhaps moving an elegant arm in time to the music, pointing a neat foot in one direction, then another, and walking sinuously around the stage. Nothing very demanding; nothing requiring years of training, concentration, pain" (Parker, Natural History 55).

The new musical comedy plots were thin but "A Gaiety Girl did something else, of course, it established in the public mind immediately and irrevocably the notion of a mobile team of singer-dancers attached to one theatre and one management. From 1894 to 1914, Gaiety Girls were to London precisely what the Ziegfeld girls of a later generation would be to Broadway" (Morley 20). Like the Zeigfeld showgirls, some of the Gaiety Girls were immortalized in photographs. These early products of photography were purchased as souvenirs by their ardent fans. Their popularity also spawned a slew of "girl" titles- fourteen in the next twenty years: The Shop Girl (1894), The Circus Girl (1896), A Runaway Girl (1898). The Gaiety Girl proved a popular export, debuting in New York City at Augustin Daly's Theatre on Sept. 18, 1894 bringing "a new more svelte and sophisticated silhouette" to Broadway (Davis 61). The show was such a success that Daly continued to import or imitate Gaiety shows for the next few years.

The chorus girl achieved a new level of fame in 1899 with the debut of the musical Florodora at the Lyric Theatre in London on November 11th. The title of the show came from the name of the perfume, produced on an imaginary island in the Phillipines. Unbeknownst to her, the heroine Dolores, who works at the perfume factory, owns the rights to the perfume. But

the factory owner, the very wealthy Cyrus W. Gilfain, attempts to cheat her out of the perfume by convincing her to marry him. But Dolores is in love with the factory foreman, Frank; he and the wacky phrenologist, hypnotist Tweedlepunch, help her defeat Cyrus's plans. The show featured six lovely ladies all matched in height at 5' 4" and in weight at 130 lbs. They were accompanied by a male chorus of six. While they were listed in the score as "English girls," they were quickly dubbed the "Florodora girls." The double sextette scored a hit with the song "Tell Me Pretty Maiden." Composer Leslie Stuart gave his recipe for the success of this number:

For the business, take one memory of Christy Minstrels, let it simmer in the brain for twenty years. Add slowly, for the music, an organist's practice in arranging Gregorian chants for a Roman Catholic church. Mix well and serve with half-a-dozen pretty girls and an equal number of well dressed men. (Gänzl, British Musical 713)

"Tell Me Pretty Maiden" became the first Broadway song hit that was not sung by a principal actor (Bordman, Chronicle 172).

Florodora was such a success in London, running for seventeen months, that it was brought to Broadway in 1900, where it opened at the Casino. The Florodora girls became a cultural phenomenon. They were modestly and fashionably attired, more in line with the Gaiety Girls than the burlesque chorines of Lydia Thompson. They sang sweetly but the fashions at the turn of the century did not permit vigorous dancing. Instead, they performed a gentle promenade. The original Florodoras were: Agnes Wayburn, Margaret Walker, Marie L. Wilson, Daisy Greene, Marjorie Relyea and Vaughan Texsmith. Stage door johnnies abounded for these pretty women, with Florodoras being swept away at such a pace that there were over seventy chorines

in the show's two year run. Some of the more famous were Evelyn Nesbit, whose husband Harry K. Thaw, shot and killed her lover Stanford White; Frances Belmont, who became Lady Ashburton; and Nan Patterson, who was acquitted of murdering her lover. Florodora closed after its 501st performance, becoming one of only five shows to surpass the 500 mark on Broadway at that time. Forty-eight hours after it closed, another production opened with a cast of 250 at the Winter Garden where it ran for another six weeks. The show was revived on Broadway in 1905, and remounted by the Shuberts in 1920 at the Century Theatre. Florodora was also a hit in Paris, Sydney, Australia, and South Africa (Gänzl, British Musical 713).

While the Gaiety and Florodora girls were a different type of chorine, the predecessor of the show girls who would become the stars of the revue, that did not mean that the burlesque style chorus girl, clad in tights and executing military drills had disappeared. For the hundreds of young women who were not beautiful enough to make it into the elite ranks of these smaller corps, burlesque, extravaganzas, and pantomimes remained the mainstay of employment. The poor discipline and dance skills of these chorus members bothered Englishman John Tiller, who noticed the sloppy chorus work in musicals in the late 1880's. He believed that if the popular stage chorine trained with the discipline of the corps de ballet, if they were drilled in routines, the results would be much better. Accordingly, he trained his first four dancers in 1890, calling them the Four Sunbeams. These four ten-year old girls were matched in height and weight, and dressed in similar costumes to give them uniformity. While an aesthetic quality is achieved by uniformity, it also allows for easy substitution should a chorine leave or need to be replaced. The Sunbeams were such a success that Tiller went on to create the Fairy Troupe, Tiller's Troubadours, the Forget-me-nots, Tiller's Mascots and the Rainbow Troupe. All of the teams performed high kicks, cartwheels and splits as part of their routines. He opened two schools, one

in London, the other in Manchester, and had over three hundred young women in training (“The Tiller Girls,” PeoplePlay). Early Tiller troupes were trained in toe dancing, as well as marches, formations, kick lines, and tap. On a visit to the States in 1912 he described his training as ideally beginning at the age of nine and lasting for a year. “The uniformity in type, training, and performance so admired by critics and audiences alike was due to the fact that the same set of girls remained together for years and profited as a unit from personal familiarity and continuous practice” (Kislan 45-46). Tiller was also concerned with the moral reputations of his chorus girls. His students were given a dress code, etiquette lessons and a curfew. They were chaperoned when on the road.

Tiller was so successful that producers of musical comedies began to come to him to hire their chorus lines. By the 1920’s, Tiller chorus lines were working in America and all over Europe. After John Tiller’s death in 1926, his wife took over the school, which was later taken over by former students who ran it into the 1960’s. The Radio City Music Hall Rockettes are direct descendants of the precision style chorus line dancing that Tiller exported.

1.4 ZIEGFELD’S FOLLIES

It would be in the revue where the chorus girl would make her mark on American culture. The revue debuted in America with The Passing Show, which opened at the Casino Theater on May 12, 1894. Produced by George Lederer, but greatly influenced by the Parisian revue, as well as burlesque, minstrel shows, variety and vaudeville, The Passing Show format created the framework for the revues to come. The show was a series of acts or sketches all performed by the same central cast of principals, with a large chorus. The subject matter was often topical, (it

was billed as a “topical extravaganza” as well as a “review”), a feature that would prove a draw, while also dating the shows (Bordman, Chronicle 128). There was a thin plot that was often abandoned by the final act. Early revue scores were the product of one composer, a characteristic which wouldn't last long. All of these features: plot, one cast used throughout the performance in repeating roles, a single composer, helped distinguish the revue from vaudeville. Producers could afford huge casts because performing talent, with the exception of the stars, was cheap. The Passing Show featured a cast of 100 (129).

The Passing Show was a moderate success, running until August before it went on tour. It would take impresario Florenz Ziegfeld to revolutionize the revue, turning it into a sumptuous spectacle that rivals struggled, and generally failed, to match. The Ziegfeld Follies with their beautiful chorus girls would set the standard for the revue for thirty years. Ziegfeld, born in Chicago in 1867, was an extraordinary showman whose name became synonymous with his mission of "glorifying the American girl." He would take his cue, not from English Florodora girls and early musical comedy, which sold high fashion, upper middle class culture, and feminine domesticity; or burlesque, which peddled a coarser form of humor and feminine display, Ziegfeld would find his inspiration in France where the Folies Bergère displayed and fetishized the female body in a way that combined class, fashion, art, and popular entertainment. Historian James Traub observed that Broadway at the turn of the century needed someone, “who could fuse the naughty sexuality of the streets and the saloons and the burlesque show with the savoir-faire of lobster palace society -- someone who could make sex delightful and amusing.” Florenz Ziegfeld, impresario and showman, would fill the bill (31). He would build an industry around the beauty of the female figure.

His career in show business began in his hometown with the 1893 Chicago World's Fair where he successfully showcased the strong man Eugene Sandow at the Trocadero as part of a vaudeville bill. Even at this early stage of his career, Ziegfeld displayed the publicity skills that would help make him rich and famous. He advertised heavily, he called in physicians to certify that Sandow was a perfect physical specimen, and on opening night, he used his society connections to invite several wealthy and influential Chicago matrons to Sandow's dressing room to feel his muscles. An ecstatic review and an invitation to one hundred people each night to visit the strong man in his dressing room, helped make the show a hit that ran the duration of the fair. At the age of twenty-six, Ziegfeld resigned his position at his father's highly esteemed Chicago School of Music to become Sandow's manager and take on the road and New York. He built a successful tour around Sandow and the Trocadero Vaudevilles that lasted for two years and earned him the impressive sum of \$250,000.

In 1896 Ziegfeld met the French born actress Anna Held, who would eventually become his first wife. Held, who had a daughter in France, visited the continent annually, bringing Ziegfeld with her where he would scout out productions. In 1898 he brought back The Turtle, a show that had run for two years in Paris. The scandalous moment occurred when the star began to remove her clothes in front of the audience, but slipped behind a glass paneled screen once she got down to her stays. This kind of titillation would become a part of The Follies, where Ziegfeld prided himself on tasteful suggestion that never stooped to vulgarity. For the 1899-1900 season he focused his attention on producing only one show, Papa's Wife, which featured Held and a chorus of sixteen lovely women, beautifully dressed. This successful combination would be repeated in a number of shows, including the 1905 production of The Parisian Model, with Held in the leading role and another sixteen member chorus of beautiful women, (referred to as “the

Held girls”), one of whose jobs was to shield Held as she changed one of her many gowns in front of the audience. The show was risqué enough to invite censorship in Pittsburgh. By 1900 "Ziegfeld already had the rudiments of his later success well in hand: he knew that a beautiful chorus attracted male patrons and that European fashion would draw society women" (Ziegfeld, The Ziegfeld Touch 35).

By 1907 Ziegfeld had yet to achieve his big Broadway break. He had made and lost several fortunes gambling and retired for a year in 1905. He had quarreled with a number of producers, including the influential Shubert brothers, as well as Oscar Hammerstein Sr. In 1907 he made a fortuitous alliance with Marc Klaw, who was a lawyer, and one half of the partnership that made up the powerful Theatrical Syndicate. The Syndicate, run by Abe Erlanger and Marc Klaw, controlled many of the theatres on Broadway. They had the power to kill productions and black ball performers. It's believed that Held suggested Ziegfeld should launch a show based on the revue format of the Folies Bergère. Since Ziegfeld was currently broke, Klaw's partner, Abe Erlanger, and two other investors capitalized the idea. Ziegfeld booked the New York Theatre rooftop, called by the romantic name "Jardin de Paris;" (hot summer temperatures made an indoor space impractical). The "Jardin" would host the first five editions of the Follies. The thin plot of the Follies of 1907 revolved around a reincarnated Captain John Smith and Pocahontas visiting New York. The show was heavy on comedy, satire, current events, and puns. While it didn't make much of a splash with the critics, the public clearly enjoyed the show, which opened July 8, 1907 and ran until September 14th; making it the first Broadway show to run the entire summer. Ziegfeld kept the run interesting by adding and dropping numbers, as well as performers. The principal entertainers included Nora Bayes, Grace LaRue, Mlle. Dazie, Henry

Watson, Jr. and his partner, George Bickel, Grace Leigh, Dave Lewis, and May Leslie. The show also included fifty chorus girls whose movement was directed by Julian Mitchell.

Julian Mitchell began his career as a dancer, but as he lost his hearing he took his talent for movement and translated it into directing. He scored a hit with his debut in 1891, A Trip to Chinatown. Since the title of “director” didn't formally exist, Mitchell's title was more often "stage management" or movement. His insistence on discipline made him much sought after by producers like Joe Weber and Lew Fields, who hired him as the director/choreographer for their Music Hall shows from 1895-1904. Mitchell staged the original 1903 production of The Wizard of OZ, Victor Herbert's Babes in Toyland (1903), and The Pink Lady (1911) for Ziegfeld (Grant 228-29). But it was his work in the Follies, which spanned nineteen years, for which he is best remembered. What distinguished Mitchell from his predecessors was his ability to stage not only the individual dance numbers, but large ensemble sequences, as well as handling shows, like The Wizard of OZ, that relied heavily on spectacle and special effects. Ziegfeld hired Mitchell to direct the chorus for the Follies of 1907-1909. In 1910 he was promoted to staging the entire production, a job that he held through the 1913 edition, until he quarreled with the producer. He staged the 1915 production with comedian Leon Errol, and returned again to stage the spring and fall editions of 1924 and 1925. Julian Mitchell helped Ziegfeld create the superior chorus that would distinguish his revue from his competitors. He is credited with taking the Tiller chorus line, animating it with a directors' vision and creating the “production number.” “Mitchell discarded the English concept of a chorus girl as a lifeless ornament. Instead, he brought the showgirls to life through personable groupings and individual lights to their distinctive personalities. He made them smile and listen to the tenor” (Baral 45-6). It was Mitchell who, to help showcase the gowns of Lucile (Lady Duff Gordon), Ziegfeld's costume designer, came up

with the processional or fashion show walk that helped imprint the Follies showgirls on the popular imagination. Mitchell staged them slowly parading down runways and staircases to best feature their outfits. According to lyricist and librettist P.G Wodehouse and Guy Bolton, Mitchell “knew his job, he did his job, and he was not going to have anyone tell him how to do it. He was fired oftener than a machine gun, but whoever fired him always had to take him back again, for Julian stood alone. He was the real creator of the *Ziegfeld Follies*, for two editions of which Flo Ziegfeld was merely the brilliant pressman” (22-3).

Mitchell was succeeded at the Follies by Ned Wayburn, who had been staging shows since 1899. He had staged his own revues, as well as working with producer/performer Lew Fields on his musicals since 1910. Wayburn also staged the dances in The Passing Show of 1912 and 1913 for the Shuberts. In 1912 J.J. Shubert revived the revue title hoping to establish his own successful summer series, designed to rival Ziegfeld's Follies. The Passing Show, which had little to do with its namesake, other than the title, took its structure from the Follies, adding burlesques of popular Broadway shows. The Passing Show series would run for more than decade, but would never come close to the artistry of Ziegfeld’s revues. "The various editions of *The Passing Show* were unabashedly girlie revues, full of low comedy and novelty effects, and produced with an eye to the budget and to the taste of the Tired Business Man in the audience" (McNamara 96).

Wayburn staged his first dances for Ziegfeld in the Frolic of 1915, a late night series that featured many of the same stars from the Follies in a more intimate setting with more risqué material than was performed in the rooftop theatre. Wayburn's long association with Ziegfeld was a prolific and innovative partnership that allowed him to discard the nineteenth-century organization and use of the chorus in favor of his own method and codification. He was so

successful that he created his own dance school, implementing his own dance instruction methods that encompassed tap, ballet, acrobatic and musical comedy dancing. He carefully laid out his methods in The Art of Stage Dancing, an instruction manual for the aspiring dancer.

Influenced by the movement theories of Francois Delsarte, Wayburn incorporated Delsarte's ideas on gesture, inflection, velocity, attitude, precision and opposition into his training of dancers (Stratyner 4). His style was also influenced by military drills, which emphasized precision and symmetry; minstrel shows, from which he borrowed the popular promenade; and ballet spectacles. Wayburn also used the social dances of the day, especially the popular cotillion, which is based on couple and group figures called by a leader, who often used a handbook; or Wayburn would invent figures himself. One of the figures that he frequently used in his staging was the march, which had hundreds of variations, but two of the most prevalent were the bisected circle and the march around the periphery of the room that wound its way into the center by means of a spiral (8). In addition to military drills, there were aesthetic and fancy drills, which were based on creating tableaux and featured costumes. These drills were considered part of the American Delsarte movement and were also used by Wayburn in his Follies choreography. For example, in The Follies of 1918 Wayburn staged an “Aviator’s Parade, “ as part of the Act One finale. Forty- eight chorus girls, “wearing gold aviator outfits and silver trench hats, emerged from the tent and alternately went right and left. After marching in precise formations, the women gradually disappeared the way they entered” (Ziegfeld, The Ziegfeld Touch 247).

The system of nineteenth-century ballet classification that Wayburn inherited, organized the women of the chorus by height, their ability to dance en pointe, and their age. “From a choreographic point of view, this reflected the division of tasks between the ballet master

(responsible for “toe” dancing and specialties such as aerial dancing) and the dance director (who handled the general movement and the “Amazon” line.)” (Stratyner 17). When necessary, the taller women played men and partnered the shorter women. Wayburn’s new system took height and physical proportion into consideration, along with a dancer’s ability to perform the basic styles of musical comedy dancing, tap, stepping, acrobatics, modern Americanized ballet, and exhibition ballroom dancing. Wayburn taught dance based on the idea of the “Routine,” which consisted of a series of ten steps: a traveling step to get the dancer on stage, eight steps that comprise the dance and an exit movement.

If the dance consists of eight steps, properly spaced, the most effective steps are put in where they will provoke applause. The last or the finish step must get the most applause or the dancer fails...One draws the applause on the eighth step by assuming a certain attitude or by “striking a picture” which asks the audience for the applause, and on the exit another round of applause can be earned, and in this way the dance “gets over,” or is “sold” to the audience as we say in the show business. (Wayburn, Art of Stage Dancing 48)

Dancers were differentiated by specialty and by height with colorful slang terms for each category.

E’s 5’-5’3”- called “pony teams,” “pacers” or “limies”

D’s 5’-5’ 5”- “ponies” or “thoroughbreds”

C’s 5’2”-5’6”- “chickens” or “squabs”

B’s 5’5”-5’7”- “chickens” or “peaches”

A's 5'7" and up- "showgirls" (Stratynier 53)

The E team was the precision dance team, with six, eight, twelve or sixteen women performing in a line downstage, generally in front of the curtain for "in one" numbers while scenery was being changed. While similar to the work of the Rockettes, the kicks this line employed were about fifty degrees in height. The E team worked in the Wayburn musical comedy style of dance. "It is a cross between ballet and the Ned Wayburn type of tap and step or American specialty dancing. It combines pretty attitudes, poses, pirouettes and the several different types of kicking steps that are now so popular. Soft-shoe steps break into it here and there in unexpected ways and places, adding a pleasing variety to the menu" (Wayburn, Art of Stage Dancing 84). He used the D team on the platforms and stair units that invariably decorated the elaborate sets designed by Joseph Urban. Wayburn also used them in flirtation dances where they interacted with the audience. The D team members were also able to do individualized work. The C and B choruses were the least specific and in smaller shows were merged. They often worked in the musical comedy style but could do character work as well- Egyptian, hula, clog, Spanish dancing, etc. These dancers were also used to frame the A chorus and vocalists, or to enhance scenic elements.

It would have been the C or B chorus who accompanied Follies star Lillian Lorraine in the 1918 Follies. Lorraine was portraying an evening star in a silver lame gown, as she climbed the staircase center stage that ascended to a blue background, she was accompanied by thirty-two chorus girls, also dressed as stars. "The women's costumes were studded with tiny mirrors that reflected the light and looked like twinkling stars" (Ziegfeld, The Ziegfeld Touch 247). The 1918 Follies had a cast of 118, of these thirty-two were step dancers, who would have been "ponies," twelve A chorus members, who were "show girls," and ten D chorus members who were

“specialty dancers”- dancers who could perform brief individual dance routines and were featured in gowns and dance numbers.

Wayburn is probably best remembered for his creation of the Ziegfeld walk for the showgirls. Wayburn, who was working with the physical limitations of Urban’s set designs, had to come up with an elegant and stylish stride for the women to negotiate stairs and platforms. The “Ziegfeld walk” was a slow promenade down a staircase or platform with the performer’s body at an oblique angle to the audience. “The footwork was simple- a step forward with the outside foot, followed by a closing step with the inside foot. The step forward took place on the first beat of a four-count measure, and the closing step on the third” (Stratyner 56). Because Urban often designed his stairs with rises that were higher than the usual seven and one half inches, the closing step was necessary for the showgirls to maintain their balance. Doris Eaton Travis, who was a Ziegfeld chorus girl, notes that, “the showgirls were young, tall, beautiful, and wonderfully costumed and were required only to walk with elegance and grace. Ziegfeld never wanted any obviously projected or emphasized sensuality. He wanted that to flow naturally from the beautiful bodies and revealing costumes” (67). She also comments on the fact that the while the dancers made around seventy-five dollars per week, (her tenure was in the late teens) the showgirls made more.

The showgirls were the great beauties of the revue, but they were not necessarily the most talented. A few went on to achieve stardom on their own: Paulette Goddard, Justine Johnson and Barbara Stanwyck among them. Some married their wealthy patrons or protectors, often briefly and unhappily. Showgirl escapades made the news and were even the subject of jokes in the Follies itself, with Will Rogers commenting on the brevity of their marriages (70). But it was the “ponies” who made up the bulk of the chorus and created the dance spectacle that helped make

the Follies famous. The chorus girl became such a staple in the revue and musical comedy format that P.G. Wodehouse and Guy Bolton honored them in the title of their witty memoir Bring on the Girls! They noted that if a show was in trouble the usual way to fix it was the panacea of bringing on the girls.

And how wonderful those girls always were. They did not spare themselves. You might get the impression that they were afflicted from some form of chorea, but the dullest eye could see that they were giving of their best. Actors might walk through their parts, singers save their voices, but the personnel of the ensemble never failed to go all out, full of pep, energy and the will to win. A hundred shows have been pushed by them over the thin line that divides the floperoo from the socko. (2)

While the female chorus was differentiated and colorfully named, the male chorus was generally used as a framing device for female soloists. Wayburn would stage them in lines, semicircles and inverted V formations between the footlights or apron and the first light border. Usually performing in the musical comedy style, with occasional tap mixed in, they were also used to partner the women in exhibition ballroom dancing. The male chorus could number twelve, sixteen, or twenty-four dancers.

Wayburn sought to professionalize the chorus girl, educating her in the basics of dance, diet, stage makeup, and etiquette. He was the best in the business for show dancing, and trained stars like Ann Pennington and the Astaires, as well as hundreds of aspiring theatre dancers. He significantly advanced the precision and achievements of the dancers by insisting on a solid foundation in basic Delsartian movement. He was accomplished at staging enormous pictures

that included over one hundred people, and could also make a routine for a chorus of eight that captured applause in smaller shows like Ziegfeld's Frolics. But his dance techniques did not require years of training. He could teach a girl how to dance in eight lessons, although he encouraged his dancers to train continually. The popularity of the revue created a need for chorus girls that Wayburn's school helped supply. With casts numbering over a hundred, replacements throughout the run were continuous as women left to get married, were promoted to principals, dismissed, got movie contracts, got pregnant or became ill. Ziegfeld also mounted touring versions of the Follies and chorus members were given the option to go on the road.

Wayburn's routines were not complicated combinations; those were left to the solo stars. His big picture finales were often based on marches and processions, which emphasize precision more than artistry. But he did change the way the chorus worked.

Despite the popularity of individual performers, the success of Wayburn's musical numbers ultimately depended on the chorus. Its formations defined the stage space, directed attention to the soloists, and created visually arresting stage pictures. Wayburn's use of the specialty chorus had enormous influence on the development of American dance technique in general and on the Broadway stage in particular. By eliminating the need for dancers to be adept in every idiom, he created a generation of highly skilled "specialist" performers-and put them in the chorus.

(Stratyner 59)

For the Follies, and all of the revues— Earl Carrol's Vanities, The Passing Shows series, George White's Scandals – a chorus girl's looks were just as important as her ability to dance.

Plenty of beautiful women, who were also talented dancers, began their careers in the chorus. The three Eaton sisters- Mary, Pearl and Doris, who were all in the Follies, quickly distinguished themselves and rose out of the chorus. But it is important to note that Doris, who became a Follies chorus girl at the age of fourteen, described how she and her two sisters worked hard to improve their dancing by taking classes and renting studio time so they could practice. The eldest, Mary, who was an accomplished ballet dancer, went on to become a Follies star in the late teens and twenties, while Pearl became a dance director in her own right. Doris, within a year, went from understudy and chorus girl to specialty dancer and then on to principal dancer. (Travis 64-6). By contrast, chorus girl Lucile Layton Zinman, who worked in the Follies from 1922-25, noted that until the Tiller Girls came along, chorus girls did not have to be great dancers or have a lot of training. She recalled the time the chorus did a pogo stick number. The number had few dance steps; mostly the women jumped in time to the music as they crossed the stage on their pogo sticks. In Baltimore the stage had a slight pitch to it, and on one occasion two women bounced off the stage into the orchestra pit” (Ziegfeld, The Ziegfeld Touch 254).

1.5 PROFESSIONALIZING THE CHORUS – UNION

The Tiller girls raised expectations for the professional and personal behavior of chorus girls. But this expectation was not reflected in the treatment of the performers by management. Prior to 1919, the working conditions for chorus members and actors were not regulated. Power had shifted from the actor/manager system of the nineteenth-century to a system dominated by producers who kept a sharp eye on the financial bottom line. Theatre was increasingly dominated by a cadre of producer/managers who were unchecked in their ability to exercise hiring and

firing power. The Theatrical Syndicate, a booking agency formed by Abe Erlanger and Mark Klaw, controlled hundreds of theatres across the country. Their influence was matched by the Shubert brothers, J.J. and Lee. Previous attempts by performers to unionize had been stymied or broken. The Actors Equity Association had been formed in 1913, but all efforts to negotiate even a basic standard contract with the managers had been ignored or thwarted. In six years the performers had not found a way to assert their power.

In 1919 chorus members and actors were not paid for rehearsals. For the large scale revues rehearsals could last anywhere from sixteen to eighteen weeks. Managers could schedule nine or ten performances a week for fifty two weeks in the year. During the holiday weeks of Christmas and Easter, as well as election week, performers received half pay. There was no guarantee of employment. Performers could be fired without cause. There was also no requirement for managers to give notice to performers. If a show was about to close, they were not required to tell performers, and it was not uncommon for managers to keep the closing night's receipts and run, leaving performers stranded. If the show ran for four days, performers received only four-days pay. There was no minimum wage. Managers often refused to pay for travel to the first stop on tour or for the return ticket home from the last stop. Chorus girls were expected to provide their own tights, stockings and shoes. Working conditions for chorus members were often extremely poor. "Charles Shay, president of the stagehands' union, told reporters at the time that he often did not know which subcellar had been set aside for coal and which for the chorus" (Rogers 93).

Tired of fruitless wrangling with the managers, Equity approached the American Federation of Labor for support. After a period of negotiation on July 18, 1919, the AFL created an umbrella organization, the Associated Actors and Artistes of America (also known as the Four

A's), which covered the entire entertainment field. The Four A's recognized Equity as representing theatre actors. Now affiliated with the AFL, Equity felt empowered to consider a strike. On August 7, 1919 the casts of twelve Broadway shows walked off the job thirty minutes before curtain. The managers: the Shuberts, E.F. Albee, George M. Cohan, among them refused to negotiate. Albee even proposed the managers form an organization that would include vaudeville, burlesque, and movie theatre managers so that actors would be locked out of all branches of entertainment if they chose to strike. Cohan went so far as to head a rival union, the Actor's Fidelity League (FIDO) and to pledge one hundred thousand dollars to its support.

Actors Equity was organized for principal actors, and did not include chorus personnel in its membership. This deliberate shunting aside of hundreds of women and men speaks to the divide within the profession between actors who considered themselves artists and chorus girls who were considered dilettantes. According to historian Sean Holmes, "...they seemed the most visible manifestation of the commercializing tendencies compromising the artistic integrity of the American theater. Equity leaders had little interest in their collective welfare and, in issuing the strike call, they put hundreds of chorus girls out of work" (1301). Producers took note and tried to turn the chorus members' unemployment to their advantage.

At the Cohan and Harris Theater, where the Royal Vagabond was playing, Sam Forrest offered mild opposition. He raised the curtain on a stage full of chorus people in street attire. He told the audience that all the actors who were striking were being paid \$200 to \$300 a week, and were shockingly indifferent to the welfare of the lower-paid chorus. Of the principals he declared: 'They have no grievance against the management. We have played

fair.’ Turning to the chorus people, he asked, if they had any grievance. ‘No,’ they shouted. ‘Have you not always been treated fairly by the management?’ ‘Yes,’ they cried. (Atkinson, Broadway 187)

This clever turnabout put pressure on the AEA, whose efforts to completely shut-down performances were thwarted by producers who promoted members of the chorus into starring roles; making the chorus to star mythology a reality (Holmes 1302). Losing ground, the union opted to accept vaudevillians into the union, and when the chorus girls formed their own union, the AEA quickly invited them into the fold.

On August 12th, when Ziegfeld revealed he had joined the Producing Managers Association, his chorus members created Chorus Equity with the help of a one hundred thousand dollar donation from Lillian Russell⁵ (“1919” EquityTimeLine). On August 13th Equity organized a meeting at the New Amsterdam Theatre for chorus members. Chorus members from Charles Dillingham’s expensive new production at the Hippodrome, Happy Days, who had been rehearsing through the strike, made a symbolic entrance into the meeting, accompanied by cheers, to join the group. Over 350 chorus members signed onto to join what would become the Chorus Equity Association of America for an initiation fee of one dollar. An organizing and constitutional committee was selected with one man and woman from each production represented to serve. The membership elected actress Marie Dressler as president.

Dressler, Canadian born, had begun her career in the chorus, but was now an extremely popular comedienne. She was eager to try to right some of the inequities she had suffered while in the chorus. She told a New York reporter, “No, I’m not a member of Actor’s Equity. But I started my theatrical career as a chorus girl at eight dollars a week [about 1884 at the age of 16].

As a matter of fact, I had to go back to the chorus twice. Bad luck sent me, but I worked my way up again. Now, I'm in the chorus once more" (Lee 137). Dressler was an ambitious negotiator. The proposed chorus contract was superior to what the principal actors were requesting. The chorus union wanted a minimum wage of thirty dollars a week in New York, and thirty-five on the road, with a maximum of eight performances a week. Producers were to provide performers with shoes, tights and stockings. Chorus members would rehearse for no pay for four weeks. If the rehearsal ran to five and six weeks, they were to be paid at half salary. If more rehearsal was required beyond six weeks they were to receive full salary. Managers were to provide sleeping berths on trains, with only one person to a berth. If a show closed within two weeks, performers were to be given two weeks salary.

Actors and chorus members took to the streets to promote their cause. They marched and staged benefits to raise funds for the union. Dressler was always out in front, garnering headlines for Chorus Equity. On August 18th, at the sold out Lexington Avenue Opera House, in the first of a week long series of benefits for both unions, Dressler took to the stage with one hundred and fifty chorus people. She "explained to the audience that the producers demanded six to sixteen weeks to prepare dances, but she and the choreographer Kuy [sic] Kendall would try to teach this chorus a dance routine in six to sixteen minutes. In a 1919 foreshadowing of A Chorus Line, the audience watched the dancers make mistakes, apologize, correct them and perform the routine right before their eyes" (Rogers 100). Chorus girls were recast during the strike from predatory gold diggers to working women who needed union protection from predatory male producers. This image would not stay long in the public mind, but during the strike it positioned the young women, "as industrial wage earners wrestling with the same gender specific problems as their sisters in other lines of work" (Holmes 1304). The strike ended exactly a month after it had

begun, on September 6, 1919 with performers scoring a swift and solid victory. The chorus contract was accepted and both new unions were recognized as legitimate bargaining agents for stage performers.

On October 24th the Chorus Equity Association held its first general meeting at the Amsterdam Hall. Dressler resigned from the presidency, claiming she was away on the road too much to be an effective leader. But the more likely cause was her own dispute with chorus members from her touring show Tillie's Nightmare. The chorus were insisting that Dressler adhere to the tenets of the contract she had successfully negotiated (Lee 143-4).

1.6 GEORGE BALANCHINE

With a new union in place, the members of the chorus were financially poised to enjoy the nation's economic boom, reflected on Broadway in the wealth of new productions throughout the 1920's. The revue remained the most popular format, employing hundreds of chorus members through the 1930's. A variety of producers tried their hand at the revue but none were as successful as Ziegfeld. George White's Scandals was known for its dancing, which made perfect sense since White was a dancer who appeared in his shows. The Passing Show and Earl Carroll's Vanities were known for their scantily clad, and some-times nude girls. The Greenwich Village Follies was known for its elegant simplicity. The role of the chorus was central in all of these shows, creating the spectacle that was the foundation of the revue.

In addition to the revue, chorus members found employment in musical comedy which, during the early 1920's, was dominated by Cinderella plots, where the poor girl, after overcoming obstacles, finally marries the rich boy. The other variation was the poor girl achieves

stardom (Bordman, Operetta, 109). Operetta, which had fallen out of favor during the war due to its European origins, also offered employment to chorus members who could sing. The new operettas, written by American composers, (although many were immigrants), featured large choruses of men and women. Audiences could choose among the works of older masters, like Victor Herbert, and newer composers, like Rudolf Friml and Sigmund Romberg.

With the Crash in 1929 the revue, based as it was on lavish expense and spectacle, suffered, with producers either closing up shop or decreasing the size and frequency of their productions. During the early 1930's the number of musicals produced continued to decline. Chorus girls and boys on Broadway experienced increased unemployment. On the west coast, Hollywood was employing large choruses to fill the screen of the popular film musical and some dancers migrated west.

With the decline of the revue, musical comedy began to gain in popularity in the 1930's, with two of its most adept practitioners, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, leading the way. With the help of George Abbott, they were developing a new project, On Your Toes. As the title indicates, dance and dancing were an integral part of the story. According to Rodgers biographer Meryl Secrest, one of the team's aims in On Your Toes was to introduce classical ballet into the modern musical (184). They needed a good choreographer to help them. George Balanchine was recommended to Lorenz Hart as perfect for the job.

Balanchine's fame is anchored in the ballets he created for the American Ballet over a sixty-year career. But he also, for a brief decade beginning in 1936, made his mark on Broadway. Trained as a ballet dancer and choreographer at the Imperial School for Theater and Ballet in St. Petersburg, Balanchine graduated in 1921, and joined the Maryinsky company where he was increasingly drawn to making his own ballets. Ballet, at this point in its history, was stultifying

under rigid rules that dictated costumes, restricted movement, and generally inhibited innovation and creativity. Balanchine and a number of his classmates fled the Soviet Union in 1924. They met up with Serge Diaghilev in Paris, where he hired all of them for his revolutionary ballet company Les Ballets Russes.

Balanchine spent five years, until Diaghilev's death in 1929, with Les Ballets Russes as a resident choreographer. Diaghilev's company brought together a broad range of some of the most interesting and innovative artists of the period to create an energetic and vibrant form of ballet. Balanchine's work grew enormously in this brief period. One of the areas he was intent on changing was the work of the corps de ballet. Under Marius Petipa of the Maryinsky Ballet, the corps had functioned as a frame for the principal dancers. There was a small set number of groupings that could be alternated, but essentially, the movement of the corps remained the same from ballet to ballet. The choreographer Fokine in his ballet Les Sylphides began to change this function by making the corps "a sensitive group that shaped itself in response to the movement of the principals, so that it too became a contributing "character" to the development of the ballet" (McDonagh 46). Balanchine, who was influenced by Fokine's work, would continue this trend, moving and using the corps in strikingly beautiful and responsive ways. It would be one of his greatest strengths as a choreographer.

Les Ballet Russes dissolved in 1929 after Diaghilev's death, leaving Balanchine on his own and looking for work. In his travels in 1933 he met a young American, Lincoln Kirstein, who invited him to the United States to help found a school and a company. While the school and company were being established, Balanchine needed to make money and Broadway offered him opportunities. He had worked in club settings and in musicals prior to his visit to the States. In London he choreographed the Cochran Revue of 1930 for manager Charles Cochran, who had

seen Balanchine's work with Diaghilev. In 1936 the Shuberts hired him to stage the ballet sequences in the Ziegfeld Follies, which they had taken over after Ziegfeld's death in 1932.

In that same season Rodgers and Hart hired him for On Your Toes. The story centered on Junior Dolan (Ray Bolger), a music professor, who really wants to be a vaudeville hooper like the rest of his family. He falls in love with a snobby Russian ballerina, and to help restore the ballet company's fortunes, he creates a jazz ballet, even dancing the lead role when the company's lead male dancer disappears, fleeing from gangsters. Warned by his old flame, Frankie Frayne (Doris Carson) that the gangsters are trying to kill him, believing he is the original dancer, Junior dances for his life in the ballet "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue." He wisely realizes that Frankie is the woman for him and escapes the mob (Bordman, Chronicle 498). The dance highlights were the two big ballets which formed the climaxes of acts one and two. The first ballet, a take-off on Scheherazade, was called "La Princesse Zenobia," and made fun of nineteenth-century fairy-tale ballets, as well as the romantic Oriental ballets that Fokine had made famous with the Ballet Russe. "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue," the ballet that ended the show, was a jazz-inspired number that was Rodgers's most ambitious show music composition to date. "The ballet's abrupt shifts of mood, its nervous rhythms, its brassy, reiterated themes, its atmosphere of menace, its sudden climaxes, painted a portrait of Winchell's Broadway" (Secret 184). Rodgers was nervous about how Balanchine would react to the music. He went to Balanchine's apartment with the rehearsal accompanist and the two of them played the piece for an expressionless Balanchine. When they had finished Balanchine stood and began to leave the apartment.

As they waited for the elevator Rodgers could stand the uncertainty no longer. In the primitive English he, and many of Balanchine's acquaintances, employed with him in those early years, when

Balanchine's command of the language was limited, Rodgers asked, 'You don't like?' 'What you mean-I don't like?' said Balanchine. 'You don't say anything,' pointed out Rodgers. 'Am too busy staging,' said Balanchine, touching his forehead. 'I love.'
(Taper 179)

Rodgers and Hart were trying to develop a musical with more integrated elements and they made sure that the ballets were part of the plot. In the "Princess Zenobia" ballet Junior, finds himself thrust on stage, completely unprepared to dance. He makes a hash of the ballet, but the audience loves him. Balanchine staged a dance in act two that had half the cast tapping and half en pointe, putting the vaudeville dancers and the Russian ballet company side by side. For "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue," since Junior believes he is going to be killed at the conclusion of the dance, he keeps on dancing and dancing and dancing to prevent his assassination. By hiring a chorus of trained ballet dancers and placing ballerina Tamara Geva in a principal role, Balanchine upped the ante on what was expected of the chorus dancer. The chorus was not a diversion to do high kicks or precision drill moves behind the principals, but a character that could carry genuine choreography. "To musical comedy Balanchine brought, it is generally agreed, an elegance, sophistication, and range of reference—all subtly conveyed and with a light touch—such as Broadway had not previously known" (Taper 180). In his autobiography Musical Stages Richard Rodgers claimed the show was the first to incorporate ballet into a musical-comedy book. He acknowledged that other choreographers, such as Albertina Rasch, had utilized ballet, but generally as a specialty inserted into revues (175).

Balanchine's other contribution was to request the title of choreographer. Before On Your Toes choreographers were listed as "Dance Director," "Dance Arranger," or "Dances

by...”. Producer Don Wiman was afraid the audience wouldn’t know what the word meant, “Balanchine replied that maybe it would intrigue the public to see a new word, and Wiman agreed to make the experiment” (Taper 180). While this change may seem small to us today, the title elevated the status of those who created dance for musicals. As Ray Bolger notes, “He allowed other choreographers to do what they wanted to and they had never been able to do. He also taught them a little something: that in the American musical you don’t have to do kick, stomp, thump, turn, jump, turn, kick. You can *dance*. It opened up a whole new world for the American musical comedy stage” (qtd. in Mason 158). On Your Toes opened on April 11, 1936 and was, along with Rodgers and Hart’s Jumbo, one of the longest running shows of the season, filling the house for ten months.

1.7 TWEAKING THE LINE

Since the chorus performs as an anonymous body it is impossible to talk about their history without focusing on the people who direct their movement. The dance director and later the director/choreographer are the people who determine the way the chorus moves. The former only controls the dances and the latter determines the entire vision of the production. In a brief sixty years dance directors will move from the bottom of the creative ladder, at the mercy of the producer, the director, the composer, the librettist to the top rung, where they answer only to the producer. As they rise they change the way dance works in musical theater. With the other members of the creative team, they determine how the play will be presented, or in the case of the revue, how the sketches and songs will be held together. The role that the chorus plays

changes over time to fit the new developments in musical theatre and the changing tastes of the audience.

The revue's popularity created not only a demand for chorus girls, but for dance directors who could arrange routines. We've already noted that Wayburn and Mitchell were two of the top dance directors of the day. But there were others who contributed to the development of the way the chorus was used. The nature of the revue, which thrived on novelty and current fashions and trends, kept most dance directors in search of the next dance step or craze. For the most part, the changes they made were alterations within the genres of the revue and musical comedy, not true revolutions in show dance. These dancers included Gertrude Hoffman, Albertina Rasch, LeRoy Prinz, Busby Berkeley, and Robert Alton. Both Gertrude Hoffman, a student of Wayburn's, and Albertina Rasch, formed their own troupe of chorus girls who could be hired for revues. The companies came with set routines that would be interpolated into any show. As female choreographers working in the first half of the twentieth-century, Hoffman and Rasch were rarities. Hoffman's troupe executed much more vigorous and athletic routines than their European counterparts. While they performed the usual precision drills, and high kicking lines, their novelty act was unison web dancing, where the women performed on giant rope webs. Hoffman was credited with combining the precision of Tiller with the freedom of Isadora Duncan (Kislan 46).

Rasch, who was born in Vienna in 1861, came from a ballet background, having performed with the Viennese Opera, and later as a ballerina with the Chicago Opera, the American Opera of Los Angeles, and the Metropolitan Opera. She created a vaudeville act, which she toured successfully, and was hired to create dance routines for the Keith-Orpheum circuit in 1924. At her dance studio she began to train corps of dancers, using ballet training to

send them out to perform on the circuit, in revues, and motion picture prologues under the name of the Albertina Rasch Dancers. George White hired her to choreograph his Scandals of 1924. She brought along her own dancers and distinguished herself from White's sixty-strong, tapping line of chorus girls by creating a routine that, "emphasized a balletic style, using expansive port de bras, and the classical vocabulary, an area not often explored by Broadway choreographers" (Ries, Rasch 103). She went on to choreograph Ziegfeld's production of Rio Rita, which opened his new theatre in 1927. Again, she used her dancers, who at one point were framed by one hundred Ziegfeld girls. She also choreographed the landmark musical revue The Bandwagon (1931) and the dream ballets for Kurt Weill's Lady in the Dark (1941). Rasch made her mark through her combination of jazz rhythms with balletic movements, and her experimentation with the use of space and stages. She used rotating platforms and white cycloramas, folk dances, waltzes, and ballets. Her dances were not integrated into the book, but were often noted by critics as being more interesting than the play.

Two dance directors who helped break up the line were LeRoy Prinz and Busby Berkeley. Prinz, who worked on Broadway in the 1920's before taking his talent to Hollywood and the Warner Brothers and Paramount Studios, recognized that sometimes you needed to disguise the varying ability levels of dancers. He simply assigned different steps for different dancers in the line. He called this strategy the "conglomeration effect." He described it as "a matter of every dancer going to town and doing something different usually for the last sixteen or thirty two bars of music" (Kislan 56). Berkeley, who is most famous for his film work, which will be discussed in a later chapter, used the same kind of principles in Broadway staging. His emphasis was on beautiful women in the line, but he broke the uniformity of the line through other choices. He would have his dancers tap in a 3/4 or 5/4 time to a tune with 4/4 rhythm,

essentially making the beat of the dancer's feet a contrapuntal instrument that complicated the rhythm and syncopation of the song. Berkeley is also credited with placing the smallest dancer at the end of the line, "who as the perennial underdog who had to work harder and kick higher to fit in, was a surefire avenue to laughter, sympathy, and applause" (56).

Robert Alton's work perfected the tap dancing chorus line. His career spanned three decades on Broadway and Hollywood- the 1930's, 40's, and 50's. He created the dances for Anything Goes, Pal Joey, and Me and Juliet. His approach was practical, "I am a commercial man," he announced proudly. "I have exactly six minutes in which to raise the customer out of his seat. If I cannot do it, I am no good" (qtd. in Kislán 64). His expectations for his dancers were high. Pal Joey marks one of the greatest achievements of his career, with an impressive score by Rodgers and Hart, the young Gene Kelly dancing the leading role, and George Abbott directing. Alton was surrounded by excellent collaborators and the perfect vehicle for his kind of dance. In John Martin's review for the New York Times he notes, "His dream number in which Joey visualizes the night club of his ideals, the wonderfully common "Flower Garden of My Heart," the witty hunting dance, and the ingenious and comic "Do It the Hard Way," are delightfully smart and flavorsome. Indeed, the whole production is so unified that the dance routines are virtually inseparable from the dramatic action." Alton's work on Pal Joey is often cited as the beginning of dance integration into a book musical, or "one of the earliest successful examples of concept as form" (Kislán 66).

1.8 OKLAHOMA!

Balanchine's work in On Your Toes did not create a revolution, perhaps because Balanchine was working from the classic ballet tradition. The revolution arrived in Oklahoma! with the choreography of Agnes de Mille. Much has been written about Oklahoma!, the first show created by the new Rodgers and Hammerstein partnership. De Mille lobbied hard to be a part of the production. Since the financially embattled Theatre Guild was producing the show, she invited their executive director Lawrence Langner, to come see her piece, Rodeo. A contemporary ballet featuring cowboys and the Wild West, Rodeo tied in perfectly with the new Rodgers and Hammerstein play, currently titled Away We Go. Langner was familiar with de Mille's work and recommended that Rodgers and Hammerstein attend. Langner's partner, Theresa Helburn accompanied them. It had been her idea to make Lynn Rigg's play, Green Grow the Lilacs, into a musical. Impressed with de Mille's work, the team was interested in hiring her, but the paucity of her experience in musical theatre made her a risk. De Mille was thirty-seven in 1943, the same age as Richard Rodgers, but unlike Rodgers, who had scored a number of Broadway hits with his first partner Lorenz Hart, and was an established and respected composer, de Mille had been struggling to make her mark as a choreographer in the ballet world. Oklahoma! would be her first attempt choreographing a book musical on Broadway.

She was well aware of the challenge. In her memoir Dance to the Piper, she notes that in a ballet company the choreographer is the "complete, total boss toward whom all artists bend their will in the interest of common success." She would be a member of a creative team on Away We Go, and, as the choreographer, the one traditionally at the bottom of the ladder. A ballet company also had the advantage of working together for years, of sharing a training

background and discipline. “The cast of a musical play on the other hand I knew would be made up of a heterogeneous group, dancers from various schools, actors, singers, acrobats, all ages and sizes” (de Mille 242). To insure she would have performers who could do her work, in her first interview with Hammerstein she insisted that she must approve all of the chorus members. She records his reaction to her request, “Oh, pshaw! he murmured. He was very sorry to hear that I was going to take that attitude—there was his regular girl, and Lawrence Langner had two, and Dick Rodgers always counted on some. For one beat, I took him literally, there being no trace of anything except earnestness in his face, and then I relaxed on that score for the rest of my life” (246-7). That Hammerstein felt comfortable playing this joke, and that it took de Mille a second to realize he was kidding, gives us an idea that even in 1943 there was an expectation that chorus girls were hired more for their looks than their dance training.

Many of the dancers that de Mille cast were people she had worked with before or were her pupils. She cast her friend Katharine (Katya) Sergava from the American Ballet Theatre to dance the role of the dream Laurey. But her choices did not go uncontested.

There was deal of heated argument during the choosing of the chorus. Helburn and Rouben Mamoulian [the director] wanted slim legs above all. I wanted talent and personality. Rodgers wanted faces, but was inclined to stand by me on many occasions. His idea and my idea of a face I found, had frequently to do with the character in it. Oscar wasn't around. Langner was in Washington. We finally chose all but three. Mamoulian rejected my candidates categorically. “They're certainly not pretty. They can't act. Possibly, they can dance. That's your department. They're useless

to me.” ...I staged my first tantrum. “If I don’t have them, I’ll quit the show.” Mamoulian shrugged. “Then just keep them out of my way.” (247)

The three dancers de Mille fought for were Joan McCracken, sixteen year old Bambi Linn (who would be promoted from the chorus to the role of “Aggie,” a name she chose for herself) and Diana Adams. Both Linn and McCracken would go on to have very successful careers, and Adams became an accomplished Balanchine ballerina. The dancers made \$45 on the road and \$40 in New York City.

Reinforcing de Mille’s perception, stage manager Elaine Steinbeck remembers that, “Dick and Oscar and Rouben Mamoulian, were terrified they weren’t going to get pretty girls. It was, ‘Who cares about how they move their legs, we care how they look!’ They fought for good-lookin’ girls with good-lookin’ legs and pretty faces, and Agnes fought for the good dancers” (qtd. in Easton 203). De Mille wanted dancers with strong technique and acting ability, who could convey a sense of character. She would make dancers walk across the stage with emotional purpose to see what they could do. She was interested in casting individuals, not a homogenous, interchangeable group. De Mille recognized that the success of the show would hinge on her ability to make the transitions between the dances and the realistic style of the scenes. By breaking down the traditionally homogenous appearance of the chorus she was helping to integrate her dancers into the rest of the cast by making them as varied physically as the rest of the company.

De Mille’s men also had ballet backgrounds and included Marc Platt, formerly of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, who was hired to dance the role of the dream Curly; George Church, who was dancing the role of Judd Fry; and Paul Shiers. De Mille would use Platt and

dancer Ray Harrison to run simultaneous rehearsals to maximize her time, although, “George and I were both hired as soloists,” recalls Marc Platt. “But later on, when we started rehearsals, Mamoulian began to put us into every scene in the show, because he wanted everybody to act as his chorus. We resented that; we were soloists. So every time they called the entire ensemble onstage, we would go back and hide behind some flats, or back of the house, behind the curtains” (qtd. in Wilk 138-9). Although Church admits that Mamoulian was right in his desire to have them onstage, he would ultimately feel compelled to leave the show when his solo number was cut out of town. He agreed to open the show in New York, but insisted he be uncredited in the program since he felt it was a step backward for his career to appear on Broadway without a solo, essentially back in the chorus. Church’s determination to hold on to his solo status testifies to how hard it was (and is) to move out of the ensemble ranks into a solo position. And once won, how important it is to maintain that separation even at the cost of leaving what was looking more and more like a hit show (199).

The company had five weeks of rehearsal before they were scheduled to open out of town in Boston. De Mille worked her dancers for the Equity maximum of seven hours a day, six days a week. While five weeks was more than she received to make a ballet, she knew that she really had only two weeks to set the dances before the chorus would be called by Mamoulian to appear in songs and crowd scenes, and the third week she would start to lose them to costume fittings. Richard Rodgers sat beside her for the first three days of rehearsal, making both her and the dancers extremely nervous. But he was satisfied with what he saw, and left the group to their work. By the end of three weeks de Mille had set forty minutes of dance; nearly half of it would be cut before opening (Easton 205).

Away We Go is set at the very end of the nineteenth-century, Laurey and Curly are in love but too proud to admit it. To spite Curly, Laurey accepts an invitation to the dance with the sullen farm hand Jud. The romantic comic subplot involves Ado Annie, a girl who can't say no to either of her suitors, the peddler Ali Hakim, or the cowboy Will. Curly and Jud fight it out at the dance and Jud is killed when he falls on his own knife. Laurey and Curly marry, as do Ado Annie and Will. A larger theme of community and tolerance between farmers and cowmen also runs through the show. De Mille and Rodgers and Hammerstein were interested in using the dances to help develop character and move the plot forward. Act one climaxes in a dream ballet, which Hammerstein had originally envisioned would have a circus theme. De Mille ultimately convinced him that what the ballet needed was dramatic tension and sex. The eighteen minute ballet, composed to a medley of Act one tunes, begins as Laurey falls asleep and has a romantic vision of herself as a bride about to marry Curly. Curly, however, is transformed into Jud, and Laurey tries to flee. She is halted by the dance hall girls in Jud Fry's naughty postcards, who have come to life. The dangerous, mechanized, yet sexy Western dance hall girls become Laurey's frightened vision of the sexual threat posed by Jud. In her sketch for the dance de Mille carefully details Laurey's emotional state and translates it into movement and action. De Mille was also responsible for the hoedown square dancing of "The Farmer and the Cowman," the sweet cotillion dance of "Many a New Day," and the title number.

The dancers rehearsed in the Theatre Guild's 52nd Street Theatre in the unheated, dusty, windowless basement where they all caught colds. Later German measles would ravage the ensemble when they were performing out of town. The rehearsal conditions were grueling and abysmal, but the dancers and de Mille were tough. She would go on for chorus members in Boston as they came down with the measles. De Mille commented in a letter to her fiancé Walter

Prude from Boston, “This is a remarkable troupe. The actors are dumbfounded. They’ve never seen such stamina before; they’ve never worked with real dancers” (de Mille 253). De Mille highlights the sensitivity and artistry of her chorus, as compared to the gum cracking chorus girl of revue days when she cites an incident with dancer Diana Adams, who heard a musician hit a wrong note during the final dress rehearsal in New York. “Diana Adam’s face contracted in pain. It was not annoyance or amusement, it was agonized concern. Richard Rodgers saw the expression and marveled. That look had never crossed a chorus girl’s face; he was aware (as were not all of us?) that responsible artists had entered the ranks. Diana’s expression marked the beginning of a new era” (de Mille 254). It is hard to say how much of this tale is generated from de Mille’s need to impress upon us the distinction of Oklahoma!’s ensemble from everything that came before. But it is certain that this chorus worked extremely hard to pull off the show.

The title song was added in previews in Boston. Theresa Helburn wanted a song about "the land." "Oklahoma" was originally written for Curly as a solo with a dance solo in the middle of the number, but since the show deals so clearly with community, and union—both Laurey and Curly's and Oklahoma joining the union—it made more sense, and gave the number more impact to make it an ensemble number. A chorus member is reported to have suggested that the song would benefit from a choral arrangement, and orchestrator Robert Russell Bennett wrote one on the train up from New York. The cast rehearsed the song on their day off. De Mille came up with a W formation that placed Curly and Laurey downstage at the points, with the dancers in a V behind them. The actors and singers formed the legs of the W. As the song built, the flying wedge moved towards the audience, until everyone was lined up at the edge of the stage for the climactic finale of the song.

The ensemble numbers that swept the entire stage were with joyous, free movements, the huge slides, the men lifting saucy girls with swirling skirts, would become a de Mille trademark. So would the soft, turning arabesques and the lyrical lifts ... Agnes' work was so influential that forty-six of the seventy-two Broadway musicals to open during the next three and a half years would include ballets. Twenty-one would have dream sequences, many of them bad imitations of Oklahoma!'s. After Oklahoma!, it was taken for granted that show dancing would include ballet and modern dance, in whatever proportions the show required. (Easton 208)

While the dream ballet of Oklahoma! has achieved iconic status, in part thanks to the MGM film version from 1955, de Mille was not the first choreographer to use the device in a show. Balanchine had created dream ballets for On Your Toes, Babes in Arms, and I Married an Angel. In 1940 Robert Alton created one for Pal Joey, Albertina Rasch made three of them for Weill's Lady in the Dark. De Mille's work in Oklahoma! differed from her predecessors on a number of points that cumulatively created a shift in the function and perception of choreography in a musical. De Mille's dream ballets served to both advance the plot and to develop and provide emotional windows into the characters in the story. Her choreography, like the work of her peers Anthony Tudor, Frederick Ashton, and Eugene Loring, was also breaking with traditional ballet. "The younger choreographers believed that every gesture must be proper to a particular character under particular circumstances. (In the classic ballets the great solos could be interchanged with no confusion from one ballet to another.) The new choreographer does not

arrange old steps into new patterns; the emotion evolves steps, gestures, and rhythms” (de Mille 235). In looking for a new gestural starting point she found her inspiration in folk dances. “These are trustworthy models because they are the residuum of what has worked; there is no folk dance extant that did not work” (237-8). Her work helped integrate the book and music of Oklahoma! into a seamless story. “By vernacularizing the classical and elevating the vernacular, Agnes had altered the collective consciousness of Broadway choreographers forevermore” (Easton 210).

1.9 WEST SIDE STORY

Like de Mille, Jerome Robbins was trained in ballet. He moved back and forth between theatre and ballet throughout his career, as a dancer and later as a director/choreographer. He danced with the American Ballet, working with both Balanchine and Anthony Tudor. Balanchine hired him as a chorus member for the Broadway revue Keep off the Grass in 1940. Robbins achieved his first big choreographic success with his ballet Fancy Free in 1944. This was also his first collaboration with Leonard Bernstein. The success of Fancy Free prompted set designer Oliver Smith to suggest to Robbins and Bernstein that perhaps the situation of the show, three sailors on leave and looking for girls, could be expanded into a full-length Broadway musical. Betty Comden and Adolph Green, were asked to write the book and lyrics for the new musical that would become On the Town. Directed by the inimitable George Abbott, the show employed the largest corps of dancers Robbins had ever worked with. On the Town opened on December 28, 1944, and several reviewers noted Robbins’ contribution. In the New York World-Telegram Louis Biancolli noted a perceptible change in the world of musical comedy. “We’re used to actors bursting into song in a musical. Now they burst into dance...and we accept it.” He felt that

the entire production, “had been planned, worked out, and delivered in a ballet key. By that I mean the sense of kinetic action is felt, even when the ballet isn’t the featured factor. Ballet and song often appear geared to a dynamic pattern, as if any moment things will blaze again into dance” (qtd. in Jowitt 98).

Robbins went on to build an impressive career as a Broadway choreographer: Billion Dollar Baby (1945), High Button Shoes (1947), Look Ma, I’m Dancin’! (1948), Miss Liberty (1949), Call Me Madam (1950), The King and I (1951), Wonderful Town (1953). His first gig as a director/choreographer was Peter Pan in (1954), followed by Bells Are Ringing in (1956), where he hired Bob Fosse to share choreographing duties. Throughout this period he was also working in ballet. In 1949 he signed on with Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein’s rechristened company, the New York City Ballet, as a dancer and a choreographer. He became Balanchine’s right hand man, creating works and touring with the company when he wasn’t working on Broadway shows.

The idea for what would become West Side Story had been floating around among Robbins, Arthur Laurents and Leonard Bernstein for several years under the title East Side Story. Looking for a relevant way to adapt Shakespeare’s play Romeo and Juliet, they finally hit on a compelling idea with the timely topic of gang violence between Hispanics and whites. Once the team discussed the scope of the dance and music, Bernstein decided he needed help with the lyrics, and Stephen Sondheim joined the team. All of the collaborators seemed intent on pushing the musical to a new place. West Side Story has a very brief book, a product of an intense artistic collaboration that resulted in dance and song driving most of the story telling. The fights and the violence are danced, while the love of Tony and Maria, a more mature feeling, finds its release in

song. The adults have the dialogue, indicating how cut off they are from the world of the young people.

Much has been written comparing Romeo and Juliet and West Side Story. There are many similarities between the two plots, but the differences are striking. In West Side Story only Tony (Romeo) dies, while Maria (Juliet) lives. Tony kills Maria's brother, Bernardo and not her cousin, making the loss more personal. And Bernardo is dating Anita, complicating the plot and personal relationships. Laurents came up with a brilliant alteration that allowed the undelivered message that prompted Romeo's suicide to be delivered via an abused and vindictive Anita, who pronounces the lie that Maria is dead, causing the final rumble that leads to Tony's death (Jowitt 271). The adults in West Side are even less present than they are in Romeo and Juliet. Doc saves Anita from a probable rape, but Officer Krupke and his companion are either comic foils or potential enemies to the teenagers.

Denny Martin Flinn claims West Side Story has no chorus: "All of them sang and danced and spoke" ("Significance of Dance" 61). He is not the only critic to make this distinction. Robert Long also claims that Robbins "...dispensed with the chorus entirely by employing performers who could act, sing, and dance all in one, and who could perform a chorus function without looking like a chorus" (110). The fact that they functioned as a chorus seems to indicate that perhaps they were. What Robbins did was to eliminate the chorus line, not the chorus. The "American" Jets and the Puerto Rican Sharks serve as the choruses of West Side Story. They embody and, to some degree, forge the conflict of the play in the world where Tony and Maria play out their ill-fated love story. The Sharks and Jets act as frames, much as the revue choruses did, for the stars—Tony and Maria. Like Robbins, de Mille also eliminated the line in Oklahoma!, but Mamoulian posed the chorus to create pictures, very similar to the tableau vivants featured in

revues. The dancers in Oklahoma! were also separate from the actors. There was a dream Laurey and a dream Curly to dance de Mille's ballet. In West Side the dancers, actors, singers were one and the same person. Robbins' chorus was always in motion. While all of the gang members had names, they functioned very much as a corps. They traveled, danced, and sang together. For the most part, the singing they did was in unison, a concession to the fact that they were dancers first and singers second. And Robbins treated them as he would a corps de ballet. Carol Lawrence, who was cast as Maria recalled:

And you have to realize that Jerry came from a ballet background in which the choreographer is the master, and the corps de ballet the absolute slaves. Dancers get used to that kind of treatment only because it works. When you intimidate and humiliate a dancer and say 'you *can't* jump higher, you can't jump further'...his or her attitude is: 'Goddamn you, I'll show you.' And you do it, because the adrenalin flies through your system, and you do it to show them up. And so it's rebellion that the choreographer is calling upon to serve his ends. (qtd in Burton 177)

What Robbins did was elevate the chorus, in the form of the gangs, to a central character. Although Robbins, as was his wont, had time-consuming casting sessions. He spent a year assembling the company for West Side Story. He was interested in finding unknown young people who could sing, dance, and act, which was unusual in the 1950's when the singing and dancing choruses were still kept separate. Robbins primarily cast dancers; even Larry Kert and Carol Lawrence, as Tony and Maria, were dancers who beat out two singers for their roles. "Robbins knew that by assigning dancers such an important part of the story, he automatically

gained dramatic importance for his dances. That strength underscores every dance sequence in West Side Story—each one is deeply rooted in the dramatic action” (Flinn, “Significance of Dance” 63). As historian Richard Kislán notes, "Choreographers before Robbins allowed content to dictate form, but none had successfully added to the equation the concept that dictated the content that dictated the form" (Kislán 98). The content for West Side Story was the story of Romeo and Juliet; the concept was to tell this contemporary adaptation through movement. To assure that he could realize his vision, Robbins had bargained with the producers for double the amount of usual rehearsal time, receiving eight weeks.

Robbins had been a student at the Actor’s Studio and he went back to a Stella Adler Method class to brush up during his rehearsals. The stories of how he employed the Method with the West Side company are legendary. He addressed the performers by their character names and made them do the same. The gang members wore jackets that said "Jets" and "Sharks," and they were not allowed to fraternize during rehearsals, or even at breaks when they were seated at separate tables. The actress playing the young girl Anybody’s, who so desperately wants to be a Jet and is shunned by the gang, ate alone (Long, Broadway 100). When rehearsing the “Dance at the Gym” scene, Robbins worked with the Jets in one room, while his co-choreographer Peter Genarro, worked with Sharks in another. The dance challenge that is the centerpiece of that scene was created in a genuine atmosphere of surprise. Neither group knew what the other was doing. When they came together in rehearsal for the first time, the contest materialized as a real event (Jowitt 277).

Robbins always prepared for his work by doing intense research. For West Side Story he observed and spoke with teenage gang members who lived in Greenwich Village and Spanish Harlem (Kislán 98). Unlike de Mille in Oklahoma!, who used her ballet background as the

foundation of the style for the show, Robbins inverted the process and looked at the teenagers his dancers would be portraying as his movement source. The teenage slouch, aggressive quick movements, the dismissive snap, the cha-cha for Tony and Maria and the sexy mambo at the school gym, the flamenco-influenced “America,” –more elements of jazz and ethnic folk dancing than ballet– were the bedrock of his movement vocabulary. As a result, the language of the movement seemed more realistic to the characters, making dance an even more integral part of the story (Flinn, “Significance of Dance” 63).

The show opened on September 26, 1957, and the reviews were overwhelmingly positive, but not ecstatic. Some critics thought the book was thin, the music dull, the subject matter too grim, but almost all of them recognized that the show, like Oklahoma!, marked a change in direction for the musical theater. Part of the mastery of West Side Story is in its seemingly effortless blend of song, story, dance. De Mille and Robbins had broken the traditional chorus line to make the chorus a vital part of the story telling. Both choreographers became directors, paving the way for the director/choreographer. Robbins was the first person to have himself credited on West Side Story as "conceived, directed and choreographed by," a credit that would be used by his successors, Bob Fosse and Michael Bennett.

1.10 BOB FOSSE AND MICHAEL BENNETT

The choreographer-director was becoming a powerful auteur in the world of musical theatre, elevating the role of dance, and in the process, changing the role of the chorus. Bob Fosse came from a dance background based in burlesque and vaudeville. He styled himself as a Broadway hooper, with a background in tap and jazz. This vocabulary, and his own physical

limitations as a dancer, would shape his style. His early career was spent couple dancing with his first wife Mary Ann Niles in cabarets, clubs, and films. He performed small dance roles in films before receiving his first choreographing break, on the recommendation of his second wife Joan McCracken, on The Pajama Game in 1954. "Steam Heat," which became the show's signature number, has all of the elements of the Fosse style "knees turned in or out, locked ankles and pigeon toes, slouched back, forward-thrust hips, and pinched wrists" (Grubb 44). The Pajama Game was a smash hit, and quickly garnered Fosse an offer to choreograph Damn Yankees, which marked the beginning of his collaboration with dancer Gwen Verdon. Verdon was a Jack Cole dancer, trained in his unique blend of sexy ethnic and show dancing. In Fosse she found a kindred spirit, and for the next twenty years they would feed each other's creativity and careers.

Fosse's contribution to the evolution of the chorus was about more than his personal instantly recognizable style. "He elevated "gypsies" to the status of "players" (Grubb sleeve) by building shows around ensembles, most notably in: Pippin (1972), Chicago (1975) and Dancin' (1978). According to dance critic Kevin Grubb, Pippin was part of a movement in the 1960's and 1970's of "rearranging the hierarchy of a musical's structure. Dancers, traditionally at the bottom, suddenly became a sort of Greek chorus for the dramatic action. They slipped almost imperceptibly in and out of scenes, providing through lines as they danced, sang and even acted" (xi). Fosse had great respect for all dancers. In an interview with Richard Philp from Dance Magazine, Fosse talked about collaboration with the two stars of Chicago, Chita Rivera and Gwen Verdon. When asked if he took suggestions from the chorus he replied,

Oh, sure. I *have*. Sometimes the dancers come to me with steps, and sometimes I use 'em. Why, sometimes when I'm moving very fast, I'll say: 'I want you to do something like this, and I want you

to do it in twelve counts. Let me see something.' And they'll do something. And I might say, 'No. It's the wrong style. It has to be more so-and-so.' It's all being general and they'll contribute. And, a lot of times, it's better than what I could do! (Philp 40-1)

Dancin' was the culmination of the rise of the Broadway director/choreographer. Fosse eliminated the stars, the book and the score for Dancin'. While it is often compared to Michael Bennett's A Chorus Line, which opened close to the same time, Dancin' is a very different show. It is structured as a revue, consisting of pieces of Fosse's choreography, using all pre-existing music. One of the most famous stories about the show is the telegram that Alan Jay Lerner sent to Fosse on opening night, it read, "You finally did it. You got rid of the author"(qtd in Steyn 179). Fosse auditioned over two thousand dancers for fifteen slots. The cast was assembled from some of the finest dancers on Broadway. The choreography was grueling, resulting in an exceptional number of injuries. There were eight back-up dancers for the company, and all of them were given the opportunity to perform. Dancin', as the title indicates, was all about dancers, in all combinations including duets, trios, and chorus numbers. They were the show. This change, which moved the dancers from traditional supporting roles to principal performers was recognized by Actors' Equity during contract negotiations. Prior to Dancin' there were principal contracts, which paid more, and chorus contracts. Typically, the Dancin' cast would have been hired under a chorus contract, but the since they were all equally valued members of an ensemble Equity agreed to hire all sixteen cast members under principal contracts (Grubb 213).

The elevation of the director/choreographer to such a position of prominence has been viewed by some as the undoing of the book musical. With the emphasis on dance as a story telling vehicle, the importance of dialogue is reduced, and acting is given shorter shrift in favor

of movement. Fosse has also been accused of devising numbers that had little or no relation to the plot, seemingly taking the idea of integration a step backwards. "Certainly after Sweet Charity, Fosse's dances were about dance, not about the narrative or the through-line of the librettos they purportedly illustrated. Fosse was a brilliant and original choreographer, but his work, like Champion's did incalculable damage to the integrated Broadway musical's previous ability to create moving and coherent drama" (Grant 285). Richard Kislán offers another perspective: "Fosse's early exposure to the "do or die" entertainment values of the self-contained acts of vaudeville and burlesque led him to a career of creating show-stopping numbers for audience approval. In Bob Fosse, American show dance found the champion and master of ultra-professional, flashy, show-biz entertainments that ticket buyers and performers identify with the up-to-date Broadway and Hollywood musical" (103-4). While Dancin' received mixed critical reception because Fosse's work was considered uneven, the show ran for four years (and was the first Broadway show this writer attended). Dancin''s concept and success paved the way for dance-based shows like Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk, Contact, and Movin' Out.

Within months of Dancin''s opening, A Chorus Line was making its debut after an extensive workshop and development process. Where Dancin' abandoned the book, Bennett built his show around interviews with dancers, which were assembled and revamped by librettists Nicholas Dante and James Hamlisch. In A Chorus Line, the history of the chorus comes full circle, from a backdrop for the star of the Follies, to the star itself. The company of sixteen starts the evening at an audition and are winnowed down to the glittering line-up that ends the show. Many of the triple-threat performers in the company were given moments to shine in monologues, individual songs, duets or trios. There was even a fallen star, played by Donna McKechnie, who finds herself looking for a place in the line. While we spend the play getting to

know the stories of all of the individuals in the chorus, the final image is of their being subsumed into the anonymous line. "One Singular Sensation," the finale of the show, is a complete throwback to the precision kick lines of the Tiller Girls. As staged by the brilliant Bennett, it was a show-stopping conclusion. "No other director-choreographer in the history of American show business has been as outspoken or effective in celebrating the skill and dedication of the hitherto unsung chorus dancers" (Kislan 116).

1.11 MEGA-MUSICAL

With the early deaths of Gower Champion (1980), Bob Fosse (1986), Michael Bennett (1987), and the era of the director/choreographer subsided for a time in the face of the British invasion of the mega-musical from the 1970's through the 1980's. The two names most often associated with the mega-musical are composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and producer Cameron Mackintosh. Lloyd Webber's works: Jesus Christ Superstar (1971), Evita (1978), Cats (1981), and Phantom of the Opera (1986) to name a few, are notable for many reasons: of relevance here, they mark a move away from the integrated musical that uses book, song, and dance to tell a story in favor of a story that is sung throughout, much like opera, with little or no spoken dialogue, and minimizing the role of dance. Lloyd Webber's most successful work to date, Phantom of the Opera, inspired debates about whether or not the show was, in fact, an opera—since it was set in an opera house, depicted an opera company performing excerpts from three shows, and was written in a French Romantic opera style (Sternfeld 423). As indicated by the label "mega," the chorus, like the sweeping plots, the continual music, the spectacular sets, the enormous marketing campaign, is big (3-4). While they no longer need to be triple-threat

performers the chorus, like their operetta predecessors, are necessary to create the impressive choral numbers and, like their revue predecessors, their presence contributes to the important element of spectacle. Because dance plays a minimal role in most of the shows in this genre (with the exception of Cats and some of the Disney mega-musicals), the director/choreographer is no longer the first choice to direct this type of show.⁶ Lloyd Webbers' productions have far-reaching influences because they are popular with audiences, running for years in the U.S., London, and around the world. Biographer Michael Walsh observed that, “at any given moment in the 1990’s, more than half the tickets sold on Broadway were for Lloyd Webber productions” (266).

The most successful musical of all time, “mega” or otherwise is Les Misérables. Written by the relatively unknown French team of Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg, and produced by Englishman Cameron Macintosh, the show opened in 1985 in London. Adapting Victor Hugo’s novel, Boublil and Schönberg packed the stage with characters, while designer John Napier filled the stage with a revolving floor and a barricade. The show featured a large chorus, but no dancing or spoken dialogue; the presence of these performers becomes, “...one of the most important unifying features or “characters” of the show” (Sternfeld 365). Like the Greek chorus, the chorus of Les Miz function as the people, in this case, the miserable people of the title. They give voice to the unbearable living conditions in Paris in “At the End of the Day,” and “Look Down.” They play the poor whom the students rally to fight, decrying the poverty, working conditions, prostitution and starvation that they suffer. In the first act the men in the chorus play the prisoners, while the women are the factory employees and prostitutes. In act two the women become the widows, and the entire chorus cleans up to attend the wedding of Marius and Cosette. Providing the social context for the show, the songs of the chorus help create the

world of Les Miz. This fact is underscored when the chorus lines up for the anthem, “Do you Hear the People Sing?” (365). “Staged in a double line facing the audience, the song, like several other important numbers in the show, is constructed as an oratorio, giving it a hymn-like quality” (350).

Boublil and Schonberg have created two other mega-musicals: Miss Saigon (1989) and Martin Guerre (1996). The former, based on Puccini's Madame Butterfly, was choreographed by Michael Bennett's collaborator Bob Avian. “I read it and I go, ‘Wait a minute! Where are the showgirls? Where are the tap numbers?’ My friends ask me what the big choreographic opportunities were and I tell them: the reunification of Vietnam and an attack on American materialism” (qtd. in Steyn 291). The show was ravaged by critics, who seemingly did little damage to the box office, since Miss Saigon ran for over four thousand performances in both England and the United States. American successors to the form include Frank Wildhorn, whose musicals have met with poor critical reception and, at times, lukewarm popular approval. His most popular works are Jekyll and Hyde (1997) and The Scarlet Pimpernel (1997). His two most recent ventures, The Civil War (1999) and Dracula (2004), were flops on all fronts—with The Civil War closing within two months, and Dracula closing within five months. At this writing in 2006 the Disney corporation has four productions running on Broadway: Beauty and the Beast (1994), The Lion King (1997), Mary Poppins (2004) (produced with Cameron Mackintosh), and Tarzan (2006). Their fifth production, Aida (2000) with music by Elton John, and lyrics by Lloyd Webber's former collaborator, Tim Rice, is touring internationally. Disney smartly banks on stage adaptations of its popular films, aiming its advertising at the family market. The chorus in their shows function as an ensemble of animals (The Lion King and Tarzan) or objects—Beauty and the Beast. In his review for the New Yorker John Lahr describes the number “Be Our

Guest,” the “showstopping culinary cabaret”: “Here showgirls in bodices descend a stairway of plates, bearing cubist cups and saucers over their breasts and wearing headdresses piled high with tilting cups. Other chorines, dressed as flatware, sashay across the stage and wave among still more showgirls, with spinning plates attached to their backs. Ziegfeld eroticized objects; Disney makes a joke of them” (Light Fantastic 285). Disney’s ensembles often receive specialized movement training to create realistic animal movement and manipulate costumes. The Lion King, with Julie Taymor’s beautiful costumes and Garth Fagan’s choreography, is especially hard on the bodies of the triple threat performers. Disney has made an enormous financial investment in cleaning up Times Square. This “sanitization” has received a good deal of coverage. Its effects on the Broadway chorus are a positive one, since Disney’s substantial commitment indicates that their brand of the mega-musical is here for the long haul.

1.12 THE CHORUS TODAY

The work of the Broadway chorus today is influenced by economics and artistry. With the ever-increasing cost of producing on Broadway, fewer original musicals receive productions. And in the 1990’s the number of revivals frequently topped the original productions. In Ever After Barry Singer lists musicals produced by season from 1977 to 2003—combined the total number of original book musicals, revivals, and revues rarely reaches the double digits during a season. Compare with forty-eight new musicals in the 1926-27 season, seventy-six productions in the 1948-49 season, less than twenty in 1955-56. In 1969-70 season there fourteen new musicals, and half of them closed after running a week. Fourteen was also the magic number for the 1989-90 season, and this was much better the previous season where no Tony award was

given for book or score of a musical (Bordman, Chronicle 413, 562, 596, 666, 725, 727). Such abysmal declining numbers prompted Singer to begin his book with the introduction, “Is it Dead Yet?,” and Mark Grant to title his book The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical. There are simply fewer opportunities for chorus members. The number of shows has decreased and the number of shows with choruses are even smaller. Eliminating the ensemble is one quick cost saving measure. The latest attempt has producers trying to eliminate live musicians with “virtual” orchestras. In spite of cost saving measures, ticket prices continue to soar.

As audiences shell out one hundred or more dollars to see a show, they expect to see stars and spectacle, and as we have seen, the chorus is a vital part of creating spectacle. Disney’s mega-musicals are the most popular and consistent purveyors of spectacle, and their shows usually require sizeable ensembles who can sing, dance and act. Long-running mega-musicals like Phantom of the Opera and Les Misérables, provide steady chorus work. Revivals of classics such as Oklahoma!, Carousel, Gypsy, Bells Are Ringing, and The Boys From Syracuse, also provide employment, having been written in a time when the chorus was an integral part of the musical. Two or three times in the course of a season, a new musical may require a chorus, and if the company is fortunate, the show will be a hit that runs for years, like The Producers, Wicked, or Hairspray. The dance styles required for these shows can be very traditional hitch-kicking chorus lines, with Busby Berkeley style formations, like The Producers, looser jazz influenced show dancing with period 1960’s dancing like Hairspray, or in rare instances– Movin’ Out, may bare the signature stamp of a modern choreographer’s style, in this instance, Twyla Tharp.⁷

A new generation of director/choreographers has been working steadily in the last two decades. Susan Stroman, who directed and choreographed The Frogs (2004), The Producers (2001), and The Music Man (2000), and conceived, choreographed and directed Contact (1999)

and Thou Shalt Not (2001), is one of the most creative choreographers working on Broadway. As is Graciela Daniele, who choreographed Ragtime (1998), and has choreographed and directed Once on This Island (1990), Annie Get Your Gun (1999) (co-choreographed with Jeff Calhoun), Hello, Again (1994), Chronicle of a Death Foretold (1995), A New Brain (1998), and Marie Christine (1999).⁸ While Daniele believes the era of the director/choreographer has passed, she prefers to direct and choreograph her work. Her ideal musical is an ensemble, as opposed to star-centered, piece. “Because that’s what life is about: it’s ensemble, it’s not about stardom” (qtd in Thelen 50). Rob Marshall, who like the previous two directors, began his career as a dancer and worked his way up, served as a director/choreographer for Little Me, and the revival of Cabaret, which he co-directed, both in 1998. He has since made the leap to film, successfully bringing Kander and Ebb’s Chicago to the screen in 2002 and Memoirs of Geisha in 2005. His sister, Kathleen Marshall has directed and choreographed the revival of Pajama Game (2006), and Wonderful Town (2003). She is scheduled to direct a revival of Grease in 2007 that will select its two leads from a television show competition (Lipton, “Kathleen Marshall”). The presence of a new generation of working director/choreographers, some of whom are successful enough to attract producers to their own projects, will hopefully help create new work for the chorus. If current trends continue, the mix of revivals and original book shows will offer a combination of large ensembles that emphasize an older style of choreography, and small ensembles that have the potential to stretch the chorus members’ talents by making them act as much as they sing and dance.

1.13 CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER ONE

The history of the Broadway chorus covered in this study spans one hundred and forty years. Beginning with the extravaganza The Black Crook in 1866, the chorus has shown itself to be an essential part of America's musical theatre tradition. Initially helping to provide the spectacle, scandal and sex, the women of the chorus would remain central to the iconography of the musical for almost one hundred years. Early forms of entertainment: extravaganzas, revues, burlesques, required lots of bodies to create spectacle, a willingness to show your legs in tights and limited dance skills. The emergence of early musical comedy as it developed in England created a different kind of chorine, an elegant, fashionable contemporary young woman, eminently desirable for her beauty. She certainly didn't have to sing very much and she danced even less. The revue, as developed by Florenz Ziegfeld and his competitors, still made beauty the preeminent criteria, but changed the skill set for the chorus girl by requiring the ability to execute a dance routine. Dance directors, like Julian Mitchell and Ned Wayburn entered the picture to help instruct the chorus and create the stage pictures with stars and dozens of chorus members on large set pieces.

Long and unpaid rehearsals, brief runs that yielded little to no pay, managers who left chorus members stranded on the road, all helped form the call for a union to protect worker's rights in 1919. Chorus members formed the Chorus Equity Association and managed to negotiate a better contract for themselves than the actors did. The next significant change in the way the chorus functioned was instituted by George Balanchine, who brought ballet into the Broadway musical. His work was furthered by Agnes de Mille who, working with Rodgers and Hammerstein, was able to use the chorus to help develop the story through dance. While both Balanchine and Albertina Rasch used dance as a story telling device, de Mille, in Oklahoma! was

most successful at integrating dance with the music and the book. The dancing chorus members ceased to be parts of a well-drilled machine, and became individual expressive characters.

Together these three choreographers paved the way for the next generation of director/choreographers: Jerome Robbins, Bob Fosse and Michael Bennett. By assuming the role of director, these choreographers were able to foreground dance in shows in new ways. It was Robbins who merged the singing and dancing chorus into one ensemble for West Side Story, elevating the ensemble to a different kind of stature within the genre. Both Fosse and Bennett continued to explore the uses of the chorus—Fosse ultimately creating the all dance revue—Dancin' and Bennett creating a play about a chorus audition—A Chorus Line.

The British invasion of the 1970's and 1980's pushed the dancing chorus aside in favor of strong singing choruses reminiscent of the operetta choruses of the 1920's. The corporatization of Broadway in the 1990's and rising production costs have made musicals with large choruses increasingly rare. Disney's mega-musicals rely on ensembles who support one star, often a television or pop star, and sometimes a film star in a title role, who rotates out to be replaced by another media personality. Adapting their popular films, Disney musicals cater to a built-in family audience and have thus far generated shows that have run for years. A new generation of director/choreographers has emerged. Their work with the chorus consists of the occasional original musical with a large chorus, a revival, usually with a large chorus, or smaller chamber pieces. The future of the musical and Broadway are continually in question, but with the musical as the continuing bedrock of Broadway's economic prosperity, it seems unlikely that the chorus will disappear anytime soon.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

¹ The earliest ancient Greek theatre spaces are rectangular, with the circular orchestra, which is a feature of the Theatre of Dionysus, appearing around the middle of the 4th century B.C.E. (Brockett 28).

² Scholars generally cite the Easter service, where dramatic license was taken in the form of added dialogue called tropes inserted into the prescribed religious texts (around 925 C.E.), as the beginning of the re-emergence of theatre in the Middle Ages (Brockett 76).

³ Scholar Daphne Brooks connects The Black Crook and minstrelsy, claiming that the burlesquing of the popular show by Christy's Minstrels in a successful three month run, "provides the crucial link between minstrelsy and pantomime-influenced theatre" (25). Both forms are based on dualities and transformations that are frequently inscribed on the bodies of the performers.

⁴ www.peopleplayuk.org.uk is the website for The Theatre Museum, home of England's National Museum of Performing Arts. After failed negotiations between the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Royal Opera House, the museum is scheduled to close at the end of 2006.

⁵ Lillian Russell was a wildly popular music hall star in the 1880's through the first decade of the century. She made her name as a young singer/actress starring in Tony Pastor's vaudeville and appearing with Weber and Fields. She was as renowned for her beauty as she was for her voice.

⁶ Harold Prince directed Phantom of the Opera and Evita, while Trevor Nunn directed Cats and Les Misérables.

⁷ Tharp's second venture into musical theatre, The Times They Are A-Changin', which used the music of Bob Dylan to tell the story of a love triangle, opened on Broadway on October 26, 2006 and closed on November 19, 2006.

⁸ She will be directing Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahren's The Glorious Ones at the Pittsburgh Public Theater in the Spring of 2007.

2.0 GENDER IN THE CHORUS

The American musical comedy as it developed from The Black Crook was built on two elements- spectacle and the chorus girl. The chorus girl in all her incarnations would hold the public imagination through the first half of the twentieth-century, while her companion, the chorus boy would be as invisible as she was present. A woman in the role of chorus member was on display for public amusement and pleasure, and she became an object and subject of controversy. While a man on the stage in the role of chorus member was clearly an object of embarrassment. The cultural construct of gender, which determines what kind of behavior and attributes define our ideas of feminine and masculine, has been instrumental in shaping the image of the chorus girl and boy. For the women of the chorus from 1866 through the 1940's, who through their choice of profession, broke with acceptable behavior for respectable women, their gender was the site of an ongoing debate about their bodies, moral character, and intelligence. Men who chose to sing and dance in the chorus, also broke with the accepted norms for male behavior. "Real men" do not, to this day, dance in the chorus. The prejudice against male dancers, which has been present in the Western theatre dance tradition since the early nineteenth-century, often served as a mask for our cultural homophobia. While the image of the chorus girl was molded to the current fashion in femininity, the chorus boy remained under the radar, his presence barely registering, since his image as a man who dances can, by definition, never be considered a heterosexual norm.

Since the debut of The Black Crook in 1866 the primary draw of the Broadway chorus has been the girls, girls, girls, also quaintly referred to as the “merry, merry.” The image of the chorus girl, from her initial bursting on the scene in 1866, has proved problematic, raising issues about gender roles and gender relations that would occupy the media through the 1950’s. The confusion was reflected in the ongoing debate about what kind of women are chorus girls?—smart, stupid, automatons, artists, gold diggers, or good-hearted girls from small towns. As gender roles in society began changing, cultural anxiety about the emerging “New Woman” would play itself out through the image of the chorus girl. Susan Glenn defines the “New Woman” as, “a social reality and a cultural concept. Coined at the end of the nineteenth-century, the term was used from the 1890’s to the end of the 1920’s to describe women who experimented with new forms of public behavior and new gender roles” (6). The moral ambiguity of the chorus girl would be manipulated by producers and the media as they wrestled with containing and promoting her sexuality.

Men in the chorus served as partners to the women, and remained in the background literally and figuratively as supports for the display of the women. Chorus boys are emasculated by definition; their role is seldom addressed in the media or by practitioners, because of the prejudice that men who dance are “sissies,” and/or homosexuals. Efforts to counteract perceptions of dance as a feminine activity have been sporadic and not particularly successful in American culture at large. The sexual revolution of the 1960’s brought about cultural changes in our perception of gender that are reflected in American musical theatre. Sexualized portrayals of men in the chorus, as both heterosexual and homosexual, began to appear onstage in the 1960’s and 1970’s. The appearance of androgyny and cross-dressing on the musical stage reflected the increasingly blurred lines between male and female gender roles. New possibilities were

presented to the audience. Where once the “tired businessman” was the desired target market, and girls were displayed for his enjoyment, the chorus from the 1970’s on becomes a more democratically sexualized entity with women and men portrayed as desirable. As society’s ideas of what kind of behavior is appropriate and acceptable for women and men changes, so do the images of the women and men in the chorus.

2.1 THE “LEG BUSINESS”

In 1866 American women were generally dependent on men for their support, unless they chose occupations such as teaching, were servants, or took to the stage. The clothing during the post-Civil War era cloaked the female form from neck to toe in several layers including, for a time, the ungainly hoop skirt, which created a protective shell around the lower half of a woman’s body, bound her mid-section with a corset, and topped her off with a head covering in public. The body, especially a woman’s body, was deemed shameful and the site of temptation and sin. It was judged best to hide it under multiple layers of fabric. The repression around the female body heightened reaction against its appearance. Thus, ballerina Madame Francisque Hutin, who performed at the Bowery Theater in 1827 was greeted by a clamor of protest and an exodus of part of the audience who were shocked by the sight of her legs (Cooper 10). There were cries of outrage that ballet was the exposure of naked women. “Naked” in 1827 meant that the audience could see the shape of the lower half of a woman’s body. Mme. Hutin was wearing opaque silk trousers under her long silk skirt. According to burlesque historian Robert Allen, “not an inch of flesh beneath her waist showed” (88). When ballerina Fanny Elssler toured the country in the 1840’s she wisely lengthened her skirt by a foot, and was able to win the hearts of

the nation with her skill, and not strictly the appearance of her legs (88). In spite of the appeal of Elssler, and her rival, Marie Taglioni, the ballet still earned the moniker of the “leg business.”

The “leg business,” or any business connected with the stage, was no place for respectable women in the nineteenth-century; even dramatic actresses were maligned. The rhetoric surrounding women on stage was heated, with critics and defenders continually attacking and praising women performers. The Black Crook, with its corps of ballet dancers and chorus of marching women, would contribute to the controversy. Writing in 1926, critic H.E. Cooper postulates that the strain of the Civil War paved the way for The Black Crook. Where prior to the war the show would have been “mercilessly hissed from the boards and the players driven from the theatre,” now the public was “giving vent to the pent-up desire for excitement. After the strain and tumult, the disaster and horrible uncertainties, the sorrows and anguish that follow in the wake of all wars, there was a crying need for some lavish spectacle” (9). When The Black Crook arrived at Niblo’s Garden in New York on September 12, 1866, the state of anticipation and anxiety was high since it was rumored that the chorus girls and dancers would be almost nude (Freedley 5). While no one was nude, the women were, by the standards of the day, minimally clad. The ballet dancers, billed as the “Great Parisienne Ballet Troupe,” wore skirts that fell at, or a little above, the knee with a crinoline that hid the shape of their hips (6).

Given their dance training, the ballet dancers were in better physical condition and slimmer than the regular chorus, who were listed in the program as “Fifty Auxiliary Ladies” (6). By today’s standards, the ladies of the chorus were positively plump. An article circa 1914 provides an assessment of the physical proportions of the nineteenth-century chorus girl who: “...was not considered much of a charmer unless she possessed limbs like barrels, and with a spear in hand, waddled about the stage. It was then bulk, not beauty, that held sway” (“Passing”).

Pictures support the observation that heavier women were the standard for beauty. According to journalist Marjorie Mears, their weight was around 180 lbs., with forty to forty-five inch busts, and twenty-five to twenty-eight inch thighs. What is clear is that these women were willing to reveal more of a woman's shape than had ever been seen before by men outside the bedroom. And they were doing it in public, on stage. A poster from a revival of the production features three women: two ballerinas in knee length ballet skirts and corseted sleeveless tops, flanking one of the chorus women wearing a jumper that exposes most of her thighs with the same corseted, sleeveless top (Freedley 9). Even after the initial shock of the original production, revivals of the show, which continued steadily to 1929, (when Agnes de Mille choreographed the show), could prompt male reviewers into literary paeans of rapture. Here is a reviewer of the Kiralfy Brothers' remounting of the spectacle in 1883, "Rhetoric totters and the eye reels at the sight of so much woman and so little clothes." He goes on to note the distinction between the dancing styles of the ballet troupe and "Auxiliary Ladies," "The writer of this, having escaped at 11 o'clock to a neighboring hotel to recover his reason, was forced to admit in a moment of returning consciousness that what was not processional was ballet. When the play was not marching it was pirouetting" ("Black Crook"). The processional and marching would have been the work of the chorus, while the ballet company was responsible for the pirouetting.

The women also inspired admiration and curiosity to such an extent that they were immortalized on postcards and posters. Men waited to meet them at the stage door with gifts and flowers. "Brilliant suppers were given at the restaurants and in luxurious bachelor quarters at which the beauties of the chorus were the guests; a long procession of florists, confectioners and jewelers bearing tributes of admiration were constantly arriving at the theatre" ("High Cost"). Most of this attention was showered on the ballet dancers, whose art form was still perceived by

some as a scandalous excuse for the exposure of a woman's body, although what they wore was no more revealing than what had been seen on New York stages for decades. The "Pas de Demons" number being the one possible exception, since the women wore pantaloons that revealed their shape fully from waist to ankle (Allen 115).

The sight of so much feminine pulchritude was bound to cause a stir. It was not only the flesh, but the scale of the spectacle that helped make The Black Crook a cultural phenomenon. Over a hundred women, at various points in the production, adorned the stage to create the stunning pictures for the extravaganza. Since the women were not speaking, their sole purpose on stage was to be seen, to be watched as they moved. It was this element of blatant display of the female body that seemed to cause such anxiety, "that body was transformed into a more fascinating and terrifying specter than any the nineteenth-century stage manager could conjure with trapdoors and painted flats: the specter of female sexuality" (81). The combination of the painted flats, trapdoors, music, lights, and the women treated the audience to a sensual feast. The show inspired a series of imitators, but none would equal the popularity of the original.

2.2 LYDIA THOMPSON AND THE BRITISH BLONDES

The ballet was not the only genre in the "leg business," in 1868, two years after the debut of The Black Crook, popular British actress Lydia Thompson brought her company of four women and one man to America. Thompson was already famous in England as a Principal Boy player. As Marlie Moses points out, the Principal Boy was an established and beloved tradition on the English stage, but in America it seemed an excuse to allow women to wear flesh-colored tights, exposing most of their legs (90-91). Thompson worked in the burlesque genre, which

relied on send-ups of classics and popular culture, song and dance, satire, puns, and jokes, plus a scantily clad chorus. The company opened their production of Ixion; or The Man at the Wheel at the newly renovated Wood's Museum. They prepared their audience well, sending out press releases and pictures that touted the fame of the troupe and their ecstatic reception on tour. Ixion was an English extravaganza by F.C. Burnand that told of the mortal Ixion's pursuit of a goddess. For his crime he was punished by being tied to a revolving wheel. The show featured the women in britches roles, with Thompson as Ixion, singing popular American songs, as well as interpolating local contemporary references.

Thompson's company doesn't really fall under the definition of chorus girls, but they are included in this study because of their impact on the perceptions of performing women. While Thompson was the star, the entire attractive cast—Pauline Markham, as Venus, Ada Harland as Jupiter, and Lisa Weber as Mercury—was the real draw. It didn't hurt that Pauline Markham performed the scandalous can-can, flashing her drawers at the audience. The women became famous as individuals, with their images featured on cartes de visite and cigarette cards. They were similar to the principal ballerinas in The Black Crook, who became famous, and had less in common with the Amazon marchers who did not. Kurt Gänzl, in his biography of Thompson, recognizes this distinction, “But wooing a Lydia, a Pauline, a Lisa, or an Ada was not like pinning down a little *Black Crook* chorus girl” (93). Thompson's company was so popular that they were able to run for the whole season; beginning at Wood's Museum, where they shared the space with a baby hippopotamus on display, and finishing up at the much larger and classier Niblo's (Zeidman 23). Her company's forty-five week run in New York, with four different productions, brought in an extraordinary \$372,500 (Allen 20). The run in New York was

followed by a national tour that brought further acclaim. Thompson's impressive success started a vogue for "blonde burlesques" (Bordman, Chronicle 26).

By comparison with our current standards of female beauty, which tend more toward the androgynous and boyish, Thompson and her fellow performers were voluptuous and solidly built. Or to put it misogynistically, "although they might be mistaken for a beef trust or a female wrestling team today, they matched perfectly the male ideas of female proportions and protuberances of 1868" (Davis 37). They came under serious attack in a wave of "hysterical antiburlesque discourse" that started after the company moved to the more respectable location of Niblo's (Allen 16). Thompson and her manager husband, Andrew Henderson, were savvy show people. While the women received much abuse in the press, they did not take it lightly. The most famous incident occurred in 1868 when Thompson, accompanied by Pauline Markham and Henderson, publicly horse whipped a Chicago critic, Wilbur F. Story, who had attacked Thompson in the Chicago Times. Each of the offenders was fined \$100 and released, but the publicity was priceless (20).

While burlesque existed in America prior to Thompson's arrival, her company established burlesque as a "leg show" that also transgressed, through the English tradition of the Principal Boy, traditional gender roles. Women in tights were bad enough, but Thompson and other members of her company were impersonating men, which added another layer of wickedness to the show (138). While burlesque would stay on the boards in some form through the 1930's, the political, topical burlesque of the nineteenth-century, which Thompson worked in, would fade in popularity by the 1910's. But, "from *Ixion* on, burlesque in America was inextricably tied to the issue of the spectacular female performer" (21). Ultimately, burlesque

would develop into the strip tease show of the 1950's and 60's. But Thompson's shows, while risqué in their humor, kept the women clothed.

2.3 GLAMOUR OVER GAMS – THE GAIETY GIRL

The Black Crook and other extravaganzas set the standard for the voluptuous nineteenth-century chorus girl, who was expected to appear en masse, executing marching patterns wearing tights and a tunic. Corps of women could be found parading in spectacles and burlesque shows for several decades from the 1860's to the 1910's. According to an article from the Billy Rose Theater collection, circa 1914, the Amazon march saw its first rival in The Little Tycoon, by Willard Spenser. The show was first produced in Philadelphia at the Fox Theater in January 1886 before it was moved, with the original cast, to the Standard in New York (Bordman, Chronicle 85). The Little Tycoon is credited with introducing the first “dancing” or “moving” chorus through a song which “had as its refrain, “Heel and toe, away we go, away we go.” According to the author, prior to that time the movement that the chorus made was “in the grand old Amazonian march, the swinging of the arms and tossing of the head from one side to the other, or up and down, in unison. Then came the charming young girl, able to sing and dance” (“Passing”).

As the movement style of the chorus began to change so did the physical profile. In 1898 the perfect weight for a chorine was “135 or 136 lbs., with a 36 to 38 inch bust measure” (Mears). But in 1899 an American producer brought over a chorus of sixteen petite British women who were significantly smaller than American chorines. Their short stature and slim build earned their piece the nickname of the “pony ballet,” and their popularity helped cultivate a

preference for the smaller chorus girl. The term “pony” to describe a short chorus girl became ensconced in theatre slang and was contrasted to the taller and purely decorative “showgirl” (“High Cost”).

As the preferred chorine became shorter and thinner, they also began to wear more clothing. The leg-baring tunic began to give way to the much more modest long skirt. In an article in the New York Herald producer George Lederer claimed the credit for putting skirts on chorus girls in his 1896 production of The Lady Slavey. He had “arrived at the conclusion that ‘a chorus girl in clothes would be more alluring than a chorus girl without them. You see there’s that swish of a skirt,’ said Mr. Lederer. ‘That’s what I relied on when I put clothes on the girls in ‘The Lady Slavey.’ Everybody liked the innovation and since then tights have become exceedingly rare” (“High Cost”). While Lederer claimed this innovation as his own, long-skirted chorus girls had already appeared in A Gaiety Girl in London two years earlier. By the early 1890’s English producer George Edwardes had begun the process of transforming the Amazon marching chorus girl into a contemporary urban lady with a number of shows that were creating a new kind of musical. A Gaiety Girl, which scored a hit in 1894, helped set the trend for popular British imports like The Lady Slavey, which was one of eight British imports in the 1895-1896 season. Lederer, not atypically with imports at the time, “Americanized” the book; however, he also completely replaced John Crook’s original score with one by Gustave Kerker (Bordman, Chronicle 142).

A Gaiety Girl also gave its name to a new type of chorine. The chorus girl was transformed from a flasher of limbs to a fashion plate on parade, accompanied by men also dressed á la mode. In the U.S. the “Gaiety Girl” was called a “Florodora Girl,” who took her name from the hit show of 1900, and was essentially styled after her Gaiety sister. The new

urban musical comedy reflected a cultural shift in the United States. The upper class was flush with industrial wealth and itching to break with Victorian codes of behavior. Catering to this surplus cash, Broadway began to create a club life that would prove popular through the 1920's. The rise of fancy restaurants: Rector's, Bustanoby's, Reisenweber's, Maxim's, Martin's to name a few, which came to be called "lobster palaces," for the late night crustacean feasts that they served, catered to a varied crowd that included wealthy businessmen and stockbrokers, musicians, theatre people, and the sporting crowd (Erenberg 41). Situated on Broadway around Forty-Second Street, it was considered the height of fashion for men to indulge in a late night "bird and bottle" supper, which meant champagne and lobster with a pretty chorus girl, preferably at Rector's, the "in" haunt of the bohemian theatre crowd (51). As a result of their patronage at these extravagant clubs, chorus girls during the 1890's-1910's would earn reputations as indulgent and decadent women, who were accustomed to being wined and dined by men of money who lavished them with expensive gifts. The image of chorus girl as gold-digger would remain a persistent paradigm.

The younger, thinner, well-heeled Florodora girl marked a change, not only in fashion, but also in cultural standards of beauty. A New York Herald lead-in for an article on the chorus girl announced, "In Their Evolution the Girls Have Been Developing Willowy Grace and Losing Avoirdupois," ("avoirdupois" is a polite term for weight). By 1913 the standard weight for a chorus girl was around 100 lbs., while shows girls were weighing in at 125-130 lbs. ("High Cost"). Fashion dictated that the chorus woman of 1913 was still corseted; the neckline on her dress was high and her arms were covered. The hem of her fashionable gown was so long that the best the men in the audience could hope for was the glimpse of a slim ankle. With her long hair swept up, often in an elaborate style and sometimes topped with a wide brimmed hat, the

Florodora Girl image was sophisticated. This was reflected in the kind of shows that were being performed; the early versions of musical comedy emphasized urban settings, contemporary language, and youthful performers.

Chorus girls as fashion plates also incurred additional costs to producers, a fact that they were happy to exploit to promote the beauty of the girls they hired. An article on the price of costumes compares the expense of the late 1860's chorus girl wardrobe with that of a chorus girl of 1913. In the 1860's a chorus girl would have had tights of silk (\$8.00), wool (\$2.50), and cotton (\$4.00). Her tunic would have cost around \$12.00, with an additional \$4.50 for a headpiece and shoes, for a total of \$31.00. By contrast, the chorus girl of 1913 was wearing an evening gown that cost anywhere from \$75 to \$500 dollars, with another \$9.50 for stockings, knickers and shoes, for a total of \$84.50 to \$509.50. Hair ornaments, bejeweled slippers and silk slips could add an additional \$100 to the price tag. This detailed list of expenditures underscores the importance of the costume in musical comedy and the revue, by making the connection of the "important relationship between clothes as eroticized commodities and women as sexualized objects" (Glenn 163). Clad in the latest fashions, chorus girls became advertisements for the women in the audience and sexual objects of desire for the men. "The displayed female body helped sell commodities, but it was also a commodity in its own right" (166). The threatening headline– "High Cost of Dresses May Force Theatrical Managers to Resort Once More to Scanty Tights for Chorus Girls," was a ruse, since the chorus girls of the Follies were still dancing in their tights and showing plenty of leg.

The expense of costuming a fashionable ensemble, however, does provide an economic explanation for the chorus shrinking from fifty or more, to small groups of between six and eighteen, who were better suited to the emerging musical comedy. This created stiffer

competition for women looking for work. In Glenmore Davis's 1911 article "Ladies of the Chorus," he notes that, "To obtain a place in one of these smaller and hence more exclusive combinations a girl must be possessed of more than good looks-she must have a good voice and must be a skillful dancer" (1023). She was also frequently partnered by the dapper men of the chorus.

2.4 WHAT ABOUT THE MEN?

With the chorus girl as the object of the gaze of the "Tired Businessman" in the audience, the men in the chorus were literally in the background partnering the women, a tradition carried over from nineteenth-century Romantic ballet where the ballerina reigned supreme. Chorus men did start receiving some attention after the turn of the century. Max Beerbohm, in an article for the Saturday Review in November of 1909, pities the male chorister who, like his female counterpart, has been selected for his looks and performs the same kinds of routines. He acknowledges that someone must do their job, but cannot fathom how they can subject themselves to such an unmanly occupation. "I suppose it is the courage of despair that upholds them. They feel that since there is no escape they may as well put a brave face on the matter. But, heroes though they are, they excite only amusement and contempt among the audience" (560). The idea of men being the subject of a spectator's gaze, especially a male one, is probably the source of Beerbohm's discomfort. Ramsay Burt discusses this in his book The Male Dancer, "in order to represent masculinity, a dancer should look powerful" (51). But the men in musical comedy are not there to project power, but to act as foils for the women who are caught in an erotic gaze. Since men are in the picture with the women it is difficult for them not to be caught

in the same gaze. “As Steve Neale has suggested, ‘in heterosexual and patriarchal society, the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of the male look: that look must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed.’” (qtd in Burt 59).

Beerbohm’s observation is quickly refuted by a female colleague who declares that women, like men, admire physical beauty in the opposite sex. In fact, she uses Beerbohm’s argument that women admire strength of character most in a man to launch into a speech on the oppression of women and her assured vision of a day when women will be treated as equal. While the author lets his companion have her say, he cannot bring himself to take her seriously. He avoids directly disparaging her, but is happy to continue poking fun at the idea of male choristers, and through them her ideas of equality. In the end he attempts to envision the results of a future where women shall be equal with men:

...here and there you will find a man rejoicing, and him you will know to be a chorister of the Gaiety, no longer overshadowed by his female rivals, no longer serving in a ‘man-made’ theatre. Nightly the women in the audience will display frankly their delight in him. Week after week, the illustrated papers will reproduce full-page photographs of him, from this and that angle. He will be seen supping nightly in splendid restaurants, under chaperonage of his father or uncle, with splendid young Guardswomen. If he is careful, he may marry into the Peerage, who knows? (561)

Beerbohm has transposed the attention that women of the chorus receive: newspaper articles, photo spreads, fancy dinners and placed it on a man, which by the standards of

masculinity in the Edwardian era, makes him look ridiculous. He also throws in the gold-digging image of chorus women marrying into the aristocracy, which some of them did. When reversed, this too, emasculates the male chorister and makes him look silly.

While the chorus man is ostensibly the subject of the article, the real subject seems to be the unsettling idea of female equality, which Beerbohm undermines using the despairingly cheerful men of the chorus as his target. The chorus women come in for criticism too. At the close of the article, when he reverses gender roles by making the men in to objects of desire, Beerbohm lets us know that the chorus women are living a high life—dining out, and marrying well. Beerbohm's anxiety about women's equality is indicative of the rumblings of discontent created by the growing suffrage movement. In 1907 Harriet Stanton Blatch, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's daughter, formed the Equality League of Self Supporting Women, which introduced the English suffragists' tactics of parades, street speakers, and pickets. Beerbohm chooses to displace his anxiety onto the men, an easier target. But his fear is testimony to the chorus girls' association with the emerging New Woman. Nevertheless, the suffrage movement needed to battle eleven more years before achieving the vote.

When they are not being completely overlooked, men who dance in the chorus, or anywhere else, are condescended to. Social dancing, which was given an outlet in the cabaret scene of New York City, took off in 1911. In cabarets men and women from different classes and different backgrounds could mingle and dance unchaperoned into the wee hours of the morning (Erenberg 75). In 1912 afternoon dances were introduced and clubs provided male dancing partners, or gigolos, for the women. These challenges to domestic life threatened to grant women an unprecedented sexual autonomy, while emasculating men in the process. The

men who danced in the cabarets were characterized as “tango pirates,” who preyed on rich women. They were the mirror of the gold-digging chorus girl.

The tango pirate was an extension of the professional dancer, a man heavily involved in sensual expression, combining the traits of expressiveness, absence of work, love of luxury, and fascination with women. The opposite of the male business ideal of disciplined will, the pirate represented what could happen to men who directed limited bodily energy towards women. (Erenberg 85)

As a professional dancer the chorus boy fell under suspicion as engaged in a less than manly occupation. In Felix Borowski’s article “Truthful Information About the Chorus” c. 1915, he managed to dismiss them in a paragraph. He called their lot, “More pathetic than the lot of the chorus girls.” When he suggested to a gentleman that he was interested in interviewing the women and men of the chorus the response he received was, “ ‘Oh, you don’t want to bother about the boys,’ ” and his tone intimated that the male chorister was a poor creature—flat and stale and unprofitable.” Dance director Ned Wayburn doesn’t do much to contradict that opinion in an article dated May 1913. When asked, “Why are chorus girls of so much better type than chorus men?” He replies, “I suppose that is because it’s a rather lazy life for a man and doesn’t develop the best in him,” although he is quick to counter this negative assessment, “though I have several very fine chaps in the chorus of the “Honeymoon Express” (Morgan).

Even women chorus members seem to look upon them with pity. In an article from the Philadelphia Inquirer dated April 12, 1913 and titled “Comes To His Defense” with the sub-heading “Evelyn Smith Declares That the Chorus Man is Much Maligned,” Ms. Smith, a chorus girl with When Dreams Come True, begins: “They say that being a chorus man is a zero in

occupation. Well, being a chorus girl is being constantly under suspicion regarding your morals, origins and intentions. I don't know which I'd prefer!" (Not exactly a rave recommendation for the profession as a whole, but a nice summation of the cultural difficulties faced by both sexes.) She goes on to exclaim, "Just look at them! Mercy me, how awful to be just a background for a lot of pretty girls! It's like being some paint on the scenery!" When she recounts the woeful tale of a wealthy scion whose father squandered the family fortune, leaving the son to support an ailing mother, she concludes that he went on the stage since he didn't know how to earn a living, which doesn't speak well of the skill set necessary for being in the chorus. While she does extol the gallantry and kindness of chorus men, her overall "Defense" is defensive.

Even World War I seems to have done little to elevate the reputation of the men on the line. The Shuberts prepared a press release circa 1915 about American chorus men going to London to help fill in for all the English choristers who have signed up for military service. The Dramatic Mirror delivers the news with a firm tongue in cheek. "Now I should never have suspected the modest chorus boy of stepping forward in such a dire emergency, but according to the latest information from the Shubert offices, he is about to do this bold, dare-devil deed. He is both ready and willing to go to the front, not as a soldier or doctor, but as an excellent substitute in the London amusement field." There was clearly a cultural expectation that men who could would enlist. Performer Doris Eaton Travers noted the management of the Ziegfeld Follies of 1918 felt obliged to post notices on patron's seats "explaining that the boys appearing in the chorus "were not slackers," but had been exempted from the draft for one reason or another" (62).

American audiences had a chance to see the men in uniform as one large chorus in Sergeant Irving Berlin's revue Yip, Yip, Yaphank. Berlin was drafted as a private in the spring

of 1918 and sent to Camp Upton on Yaphank, Long Island. When he came up with the idea for an all-soldier revue, he was promoted to sergeant and given a staff to help him execute his idea. Berlin wanted to stage his show at the enormous Century Theater. He was given a cast of three hundred men, whom he split between onstage and backstage duties. The men of Camp Upton formed a giant corps, or chorus for the show. Berlin framed the revue as a minstrel show, complete with blackface in one number; he had members of the company display their individual talents, some of them impersonating the stars of Ziegfeld's Follies. In their uniforms they executed complex military drills, and then dressed in drag to imitate a female chorus line, their hairy chests and legs earning laughter from the packed house (Bergreen 158). Berlin himself performed the song, "Oh, How I Hate To Get Up In The Morning," which became the second most popular song of World War I, after George M. Cohan's "Over There" (Bordman, Chronicle 333). Originally scheduled to run for a week, the show ran for thirty-two performances. While something of an anomaly, Yip, Yip, Yaphank offered the chorus boy as soldier, a decidedly masculine image that no one could fault.

2.5 OPERETTA

The popularity of the British imported musical comedies, received a blow from another imported genre that was to dominate the New York stage for the next seven years- the operetta. Franz Lehar's The Merry Widow debuted in New York at the New Amsterdam Theatre on October 21, 1907. The Merry Widow had already scored a success in Vienna, where it debuted in 1905. American producer Harry Savage hesitated in bringing the work to New York since audience interest in operetta and comic opera had been steadily declining (Smith, Musical

Comedy 87). The Merry Widow proved a worthwhile investment, bringing New York quickly under its spell. The simple plot set in the mythical land of Marsovia featured Donald Brian as Prince Danilo, who is ordered to woo and wed Sonya, a rich widow played by Ethel Jackson, so her fortune will remain in the country. The Prince and Sonya had been involved before, when she was a poor farm girl, but the Prince's family would not give him permission to wed. He refuses now to chase after Sonya for her money. A series of misunderstandings keeps the two lovers apart until the conclusion of the third act. The centerpiece of the show was the "Merry Widow Waltz" at the end of Act Two, where the romantic image of the lovers, and then the entire company filling the stage with a whirling waltz, helped popularize ballroom dance. "It dealt a death blow to the marches, drills, and empty convolutions that had punctuated musical-comedy performances until then. It opened the way for Vernon and Irene Castle, the tango, the turkey trot, and the fox-trot. It humanized dancing, and made it warm, immediate, and personal" (89). The show's impact reached beyond the theatre and into American culture by inspiring what was to become a national dance craze. Hats, dresses, and drinks were named for the show, while vigorous sale of the sheet music helped spread Lehar's music across the country.

The success of The Merry Widow opened the door for European operetta and a host of American imitators. Even some of the American imitations were written by European-born or trained musicians: Gustave Kerker, Ludwig Englander, Victor Herbert, Ivan Caryll, Rudolf Friml, and Sigmund Romberg. World War I would effectively end operetta's dominance by reducing the musical output from Central Europe, and turning public sentiment against all things German and Austrian-sounding. In the 1914-15 Broadway season the number of imported operettas dropped to four and never rose above six during any year of the war. The decline of the genre created more opportunities for American composers and lyricists (Jones 49).

For the women and men of the chorus, the sudden revival of operetta's popularity, as producers sought a second hit on the scale of the The Merry Widow, would require their services in greater number than the budding new musical comedy. Operetta relied on its ensemble to help create the full sound of the score and the fantastic settings of the shows. With the renewed popularity of the waltz, and social dancing in general, the ability to dance, as well as sing became essential.

2.6 SOCIAL DANCE

The popularity of social dancing reached its peak during the teens with Vernon and Irene Castle as the adored teachers, stars and icons of dance. The Castles were not initially originators, but were good-looking and smart enough to pick up on a trend. They started popularizing American dances in Paris in the summer of 1911 when they were newly married and down on their luck. At home, ragtime was crossing over from black culture into Tin Pan Alley with the success of Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band." Ragtime's syncopated beat spawned a new kind of social dance that supplanted the formal group dances that relied on complicated footwork in favor of intimate couple dancing that encouraged freer body movement and individual expression (Erenberg 153). In Paris clubs the Castles demonstrated the "Turkey Trot" and "Grizzly Bear" and created such a sensation that word of their success got them called to the United States, where they danced their way through society and into their own establishment, Castle House. Vernon taught dance for a dollar a minute to society women, who were soon happy to hand over one hundred dollars for an hour. The Castles opened their own clubs, starred in vaudeville, and appeared on Broadway. For several years whatever they danced became the

new sensation. The Castles had a their own dance “The Castle Walk,” and with help of African-American band leader James Reese Europe, are said to have invented the fox trot (Churchill 256-7). Europe, who provided the scores for several African-American musicals, would form the Clef Club, designed to connect black musicians to wealthy whites who needed dance bands for their parties. Although, the couple fought against what they considered the vulgarities of African and Latin-influenced dancing, Europe’s orchestra became the Castles’ band of choice. They would take black-originated dances like the Turkey Trot and Grizzly Bear, and clean them up for white dancers. What they would do would be to remove any movement that suggested too much sensuality or sexuality (Erenberg 163-4). The Castles—married, youthful, attractive, and elegant—were able to purvey black and Latin culture to upper and middle class whites in a refined, i.e., safe and respectable, form. Irene, especially, “symbolized the active, free, and youthful women of the twentieth century” (166). The Castles provided in miniature what the all-white choruses of the revues gave to their audiences on a grand scale—black dance sanitized for white tastes.

2.7 THE 1910’S

The image of the scantily clad young woman did not entirely disappear with the advent of the Florodora style chorine. The revue format successfully inaugurated by Florenz Ziegfeld in 1907 preserved the idea of glamour and elegance, while also continuing to exploit women’s bodies by presenting them as technology, consumer goods, and food (Glenn 167-8). The beautiful chorus was the foundation of the spectacle of the Follies where they appeared as taxicabs (1908), battleships (1909), the rushing water of the Panama Canal (1913), and submarines (1915). “The outlandish nature of some of the costumes in these spectacles all but

erased the distinction between women and material objects they represented, suggesting the absence of independent female identity” (169). Ziegfeld had the chorus emerge from a swimming tank in form-fitting dripping bathing suits in 1910 (Baral 48). They danced their way up and down staircases, played baseball with the audience, played fisherman with the audience, burst through movie screens, providing the audience with flirtatious, erotic, playful, elegant and objectified visions of Ziegfeld’s conception of femininity. Ziegfeld was constantly seeking novel ways to present the line of attractive women who were the signature of the brand that he carefully established. Historian Susan Glenn argues that while the revue’s over-the-top style can be viewed as a self-reflexive, tongue-in-cheek parody, it nevertheless, did not flatter the women of the chorus. “As the presumptive avatars of fashion and as erotic objects, they might be admired for their opulence and beauty. Yet they were clearly butts of a visual joke that reduced female identity to the status of an erotically charged consumer object” (169). As a producer, part of Ziegfeld’s job, as he conceived it, was to titillate his audience without appearing crass. His primary tool was the body of the chorus girl and, with the help of his design teams, he continuously re-invented her image.

He created the modern cabaret revue in his Midnight Frolic series which ran from 1915 to 1922, when Prohibition put an end to the venue. The Frolic series played on the rooftop of the New Amsterdam and catered to a wealthy clientele, who paid an impressive ticket price of \$2 for the 10pm show and \$3 for the midnight performance. The higher ticket price bought food and drink, increased audience participation, and most importantly, closer proximity to the performers. The central focus of the Frolics remained the same as the Follies; the first of the sixteen editions was titled, “Nothing But Girls” (Baral 54). The shows were designed to attract a mixed audience, which dictated that the chorus girls, who often interacted with the patrons, have

both attractive figures and personalities. In the first edition Ziegfeld had a glass runway built ten feet above the heads of the first rows of the audience. To enhance the view, blowers were stationed along the runway to lift the skirts of the chorines. The show also featured a number where the cigar-smoking men in the audience were invited to pop the balloon costumes of the chorus girls (Glenn 163). In spite of the titillation and interaction, it was important that the chorus girls not be perceived as threatening by the women. Lewis Erenberg speculates that, “Although chorus girls danced among the tables, they ultimately retreated to the anonymous chorus line for the ensemble numbers” (218). Where Ziegfeld could afford to put thirty or more women in the Frolics most cabaret shows employed six to twelve chorus girls and occasionally a principal (216). The chorus girls were the stars of the cabaret revue, which was happening on rooftops and in restaurants like Maxim’s, Bustanoby’s, Wallack’s, and Chez Maurice. Male dancers were not required or desired since the emphasis was clearly on the women (215).

While Ziegfeld was the first and remained the most successful producer of the “whirly-girly” revue, he had plenty of competition. The Shubert brothers revived The Passing Show title in 1912 at the Winter Garden Theatre. The stage featured a runway into the audience, which allowed the men in the audience a close-up view of the chorus girls. Critics generally agree that the 1914 edition of the series was one of the best. Historian Cecil Smith believes, “the third *Passing Show* went down in history primarily as the moment of final triumph for the slender, modern chorus girl” (167). The chorus was the star attraction of this edition, as evidenced by an advertisement for the touring version of the show in the Cleveland Review on November 23, 1914. In an alliterative bonanza the women were labeled as a “Wiggling Wave of Winsome Witches,” “A Rosebud Garden of Girls,” “A Tantalizing Tambourine of Toe-Tapping Terpsichoreans,” and “Gorgeous Passing Show Girls Gowned Like Goddesses.” To fuel the on-

going battle over the morality of the chorus girl, and keep their product in the news, one of the Shuberts' stars of the Passing Show company, Frances Demarest, presumably penned an article that ran on the same page as the ad, declaiming the fate of the women in the chorus:

Well, the dear girls get married. Indeed, their penchant, proneness and propensity for matrimony is simply astounding! Everybody wants one! And what will hardly be denied, they make mighty good wives. They are beyond question the most devoted, domestic and delectable wives agoing! Ask any manager what has become of some dainty little dewdrop of femininity who was once in the chorus , and you'll find, nine cases out of ten, that she is the loving wife of some sickening rich old codger, or the admired helpmeet of some young silken son of dalliance, with plenty of cash to buy her automobiles, yachts and country homes.

While the article touts the desirability and respectability of the women in the chorus, through the agency of marriage, Demarest also makes sure to point out that the chorines are expensive to keep and destined to marry into the upper class. This is a popular version of the rags to riches myth. The chorus girls are positioned as highly sought after but tantalizingly out of reach of the average newspaper reader or man in the audience.

The chorus girl of the teens inaugurated what became the stereotype of the chorus girl as social climber accustomed to dining on lobster and champagne. This slimmer chorine eschewed tights in favor of the bare leg, or the "au naturel" look ("Passing") and allowed the audience to be treated to the sight of a bare midriff or fifty (Smith 108). But the era of indulgence and sumptuousness that characterized the economic boom that preceded America's involvement in

World War I was about to go bust. The war years would affect the national economy and the Broadway stage, as healthy young men were conscripted into the service, causing a shortage of chorus boys. The comparatively brief hardships incurred by America's involvement in the war were countered quickly by the prosperity of the 1920's. If the Civil War helped prepare American culture to embrace the lavish spectacle and bold chorines of The Black Crook, perhaps World War I served a similar purpose, creating a deep need for a cultural release that resulted in the boom period of the "Roaring Twenties." Once again, the image of the women in the chorus would be transformed by the times— they would become jazz babies.

2.8 THE 1920'S

"The text of a musical show is woman. Woman—of all sorts, of all sizes, all temperaments, all attractions—woman. The chorus girl is the principle part of this text." Ned Wayburn

In the post-war economic boom of the 1920's the revue dominated Broadway. There were the series mounted as challenges or alternatives to Ziegfeld's : The Shuberts' Passing Show (1912-24), Greenwich Village Follies (1920-1928), George White's Scandals (1919-1939), Earl Carroll's Vanities (1923-1931), Music Box Revue (1921-24), and independent productions from the Continent: Chauve Souris (1922) and Andre Charlot's Revue of 1924, as well as home grown shows—The Garrick Gaieties (1925), which introduced the team of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, and Lew Leslie's Black Bird Revue (1926-1939) series. It was an era of diversionary entertainment for a population with more discretionary income and leisure time (Jones 53). Historian Cecil Smith characterized the decade succinctly:

After the Armistice in 1918, the pleasure-seeking, prohibition despising, boom-rich American public enabled the musical theatre to revel in a decade of luxury and wastefulness and irresponsibility such as it had never known before, and will probably never know again in our time. Money was available to produce anything with the slightest prospect of success, and audiences were lenient, easily amused, and generous with their patronage. (125)

Even Prohibition, which went into effect in January of 1920, couldn't keep the decade down. Speak-easies, rum-running, bath tub gin, hooch all became part of the party. Cheap ticket prices kept the theatre within reach of lower and middle classes, with balcony tickets going for fifty cents to a dollar, although the orchestra seats were too expensive for the working class, costing \$4.50-\$5.50 in 1929 before the Crash (Jones 61).

Economic growth created more jobs for women, and ten million of them were employed by 1930 (53). The popularity of the chorus, "constituted the largest single category of regular employment for women in the entertainment industry" (Latham 467). The working woman had more money, more independence and the vote. The term "New Woman" during World I and the 1920's, "applied to a younger generation of independent women who demanded not only economic, political and intellectual opportunity, but also sexual fulfillment" (Glenn 6). To go with her new status she gradually acquired a new look over the course of the decade that was decidedly sexual "but in restrained or teasing ways—through bound breasts, a straight silhouette and a slender, boyish look that suggested cosmopolitanism or sporty independence rather than overt eroticism" (Hamilton 54). Her hem-line became shorter, as did her hair. Gone were the romantic curls of the teens, shorn in favor of a sleeker modern bob. New drop-waisted shifts

created a looser silhouette that allowed for more freedom of movement, allowing her to do the energetic dances of the period.

The profile of the new chorus woman was also smaller. The average chorus woman was five foot three inches with hips that measured thirty-four inches, down from the Florodora proportions of forty-three inch hips (Mears). The flapper, whose star reached its ascendancy in 1924-26, wore flesh colored stockings, smoked, drank and used makeup, which she applied in public, and engaged in petting. All of these changes distinguished her from the Edwardian woman. Characterized as an adventurer, her forward attitude was reflected by the chorus girl whose, “naughty twinkle of the eye is healthier for the box office. The coquettish jade in the 3rd row whose judiciously directed smiles cause amorous and imaginative youths to buy tickets for future performances is really more of an asset than the stately beauty, who nearer the light-trough, adds completeness to the stage picture” (Metcalf).

The wild jazz baby, with her promise of sex, was not the only model of femininity devised for the chorus girl. Her contrast was the virtuous working-class heroine who reflected the ever-popular Cinderella theme, from poverty to riches. This fairy tale had been incorporated into American musical theatre since the turn of the century, when several members of the Florodora sextet married millionaires. The Cinderella story came in two versions: rich boy wants poor girl, loses girl, marries girl; or, in the backstage musical version– poor girl wins fame (and sometimes rich boy, too). Even some of the women in these book musicals exhibited a wild streak that called for taming through marriage (Glenn 196). The importance of the Cinderella type is indicated by the abundant titles: Irene (11/18/19), Sally (12/21/20), The O’Brien Girl (10/3/21), The Gingham Girl (8/28/22), Little Nellie Kelly (11/13/22), Plain Jane (5/12/24), and the list goes on. Marilyn Miller, one of Ziegfeld’s favorite stars, established her fame in this type

of show, playing the title characters in Sally (1920), Sunny (1925), and Rosalie (1928). Gerald Bordman, in his American Musical Theatre chronicle titles his chapter covering the years 1921-24 “The Cinderella Era” (362).

Ziegfeld stuck with the formula that had made him successful in the teens. He kept his productions in the news by writing articles for a number of publications on the most popular aspect of his shows, the chorus. In his efforts to “Glorify the American Girl” he addressed where chorus girls come from, how he selected them, how they were trained, how they maintain their good looks, and the disappearance of the Stage Door Johnny. While clearly a publicity angle, Ziegfeld was also latching on to the image of the new working woman. A full-page article which he wrote for the New York American in August of 1921 headlines, “Talent And Toil, Not Luck, Lift Chorus Girl Beauties To Stardom On Stage and Screen, Asserts Ziegfeld.” Ziegfeld established his own statistical formula for success, directly refuting Professor Richot of the French Academy of Science, claiming that Brains including Personality constitute 60%, Industry 20%, Beauty 15% and Luck 5% to make a stage beauty a 100% success. Yet in the daily routine he outlines for a chorus girl, she spends no time on education, unless one counts the hour she “Strolls on the Avenue to study human nature, styles, etc.,” which contrasts with the three and a half hours she spends at the salon, exercising, and getting her beauty nap. What appears to readers today as a ludicrous argument was, at the time, a public relations ploy. By the end of World War I Ziegfeld was receiving criticism that his chorus girls lacked personality. Writers complained that their individuality and sensuality were repressed or erased by the militarized ensemble dancing and spectacle. “The idea of personality was so firmly implanted in the public’s perception of the popular stage and was such an important issue in modern social thought that it eventually came to influence the critical reception of the girls” (Glenn 184-5). In the article

Ziegfeld was responding to public pressure, but his number one criteria would always be a girl's physical appearance. "Not only did he determine who and what was beautiful, popularizing if not creating certain standards by which beauty is still largely judged in American culture, he also helped establish beauty itself as an essential feature of female worth" (Latham 460).

Ziegfeld had a vested interest in promoting the image of the smart, hard-working, new woman as chorus girl to keep the pictures of his beautiful and famous hires on the pages of the papers and magazines. The Actors Equity Association campaigned for the same image for an entirely different reason. From their platform the smart hard-working women of the chorus deserved to be paid fairly for their work. In 1920 actors struck and in less than three months broke the producers. The Chorus Equity Association was chartered in 1920 and existed as a separate entity until 1955 when it merged with Actor's Equity Association. The union, having reluctantly admitted chorus members, now battled the image of chorus girls as lazy, untrained gold-diggers who were spoiled by living the high life. They stressed that the typical chorine frequently rehearsed without pay for weeks and paid for costumes out of her own pocket for shows that could close after only a few performances.

With the predominance of the revue on Broadway, the women of the chorus reached the peak of their popularity. Every aspect of their lives was chronicled, individual chorus girls were profiled in the paper, their marriages, divorces, morality, education, and their intelligence were subjects of public interest. In his article "The Why of The Chorus Girl," dated April 1921, James Metcalfe speculates about the image of the chorus as "ladies of the ensemble, as she was ceremoniously described during the hectic days of the Equity Strike," versus her image as a "gold digger." Or is she an "actress," a term he claims the women used for themselves when they brushed up against the law. He affirms that no matter what they are called, the women in the

chorus are very likely the most important element in a significant percentage of Broadway shows:

There have been girl-and-music shows which have successfully cut out the chorus boys; there have been others where the principals were negligible quantities and yet others where the book and score did not largely matter, but so far as known, there has never been a successful comic opera, musical comedy, or entertainment along those lines from which the merry-merry was omitted.

Dance director Ned Wayburn supports this idea in an article for Theatre Magazine in May 1920 when he states, “The text of a musical show is woman.” While Wayburn didn’t mean his statement in any semiotic sense, it can certainly be read that way. Not only were women the literal subject matter of many of the musical comedies of the decade, but their bodies were the physical text which the decade inscribed and consumed as part of its insatiable craving for pleasure. While the chorus girl was posited as a financially and emotionally independent being reflecting the “New Woman” of the 1920’s, there is evidence of some confusion about who is controlling that image. As Metcalfe noted, it seems to be whoever is speaking at the time—union representatives, the women themselves, or writers. Wayburn clears up the issue in his statement, “Ever since I’ve been a producer of the girl show, I have had to create the chorus girl. She is a creation as completely thought out, moved about, wired and flounced, beribboned and set dancing as any automaton designed to please, to delight, to excite an audience with sheer sensuousness” (472). Wayburn, who came from a family of inventors and manufacturers of industrial machinery, and had himself studied mathematics and mechanical drawing, not surprisingly, approached chorus dancing with an emphasis on precision and mathematics (Glenn

174-5). “In his staging and rhetorical posturing, Wayburn rejected the power, freedom, and self-expression of the autonomous dancer represented by women as diverse as Eva Tanguay and Isadora Duncan. Instead, he portrayed the girls variously as rarified ornaments, performing machines, and obedient soldier-like puppets” (179).

All of Wayburn’s efforts to please the audience did not go unappreciated. Historian Angela J. Latham notes critic Joseph Wood Krutch’s observations on the revue, where he claims that revues are “to a democracy what troupes of dancing girls were to kings.” His sense that the women of the chorus were dancing for his personal pleasure, and that he was entitled to their efforts, Latham says:

unintentionally but nevertheless quite starkly denotes the complex interplay of political, socio-economic, and gender issues inherent in the public display of women’s bodies. Moreover, his words aptly depict anonymous, uniformly fashioned women, displayed en masse; automatons performing rituals of the body to the delight of powerful others. (464)

Wayburn had succeeded in containing the “New Woman,” with his drills and marches that successfully obliterated her personality to create a fabricated vision, a pleasure machine, seemingly created by men for men, whether they are, in the over-used phrases of the decade, the “tired businessman,” or the “silken sons of dalliance.”

Discovering what would delight and excite an audience driven by novelty was a continual challenge for producers. It is no surprise given the temper of the time that it soon became clear that showing a leg and midriff were proving insufficient for the pleasure seeking public. More skin was required. While the “ponies” that are the subject of this dissertation were tapping their

hearts out, the showgirls were posing in less and less. But the law forced producers to be clever in their staging. The law allowed for nudity onstage as long as the women did not move. This provided the audience with endless visions of women as human curtains posed against or on every object imaginable in various states of undress. The “Nudity Craze” was exploited by most of the series producers with Ziegfeld remaining the most conservative, sticking to the “artistic” tableaux of Ben Ali Haggin designed after classical portraiture (Baral 159).

2.9 1920’S CHORUS BOY

With women remaining clearly the preferred gender on stage, the men of the chorus were ignored or insulted. O.O. McIntyre, in a 1925 article, argues for better treatment for the chorus man who are portrayed as “timid as rabbits,” who “prance out smirking and bobbing.” “Directors, as a rule, select them for lack of masculinity and agile limbs.” While they are making \$50 a week, which may be supplemented by modeling work, they are portrayed as throwing it all away on clothes. This effete pathetic portrait of an ostracized emasculated man, coded as a homosexual, paints a bleak picture of the 1920’s chorus boy. In spite of the fact that there are no statistics, the persistent charge of homosexual men working in the chorus must be taken to have some truth to it, backed up as it is by performers who commented on the gay men they knew who were chorus boys.¹ Historian George Chauncey notes that New York’s gay community during this time adopted effeminate mannerisms: “they provided one of the sure means of announcing one’s sexuality. But acting like a ‘fairy’ was more than just a code; it was the dominant role model available to men forming a gay identity, and one against which every gay man had to measure himself” (qtd in Hamilton 64).

While not a musical, Mae West's play The Drag (1927), deserves a brief mention here because of the influence it had on the perception of homosexuality during this period. West, who had been making a living on stage in vaudeville and burlesque, was looking for a vehicle that would make her a star. Observing audiences flock to plays with the topic of sex, she decided to write her own: Sex and The Drag were the results. Both achieved their desired end of winning West notoriety and fame and drawing large crowds of upper middle class men and women to watch what critics generally labeled as filth. Gay culture in the 1920's was thriving in New York and West determined that putting homosexuals on the stage would sell tickets. The Drag's real focus was, "showcasing a large supporting cast of flamboyant homosexual men recruited from New York's burgeoning gay underworld" (Hamilton 60). She reportedly visited a Greenwich Village bar for chorus boys and girls to recruit auditioners for the show (60). Marybeth Hamilton observes, "West brought homosexuality to center stage, treating it as a lurid local sensation from which she crafted her own kind of metropolitan "freak act" (67).

Prior to The Drag, by 1924 the image of the chorus boy had already begun to change. The operetta's supremacy peaked during the 1923-1924 season when thirteen of the thirty-four musicals on Broadway were operettas (Jones 47). The genre was experiencing a revival largely at the hands of Sigmund Romberg and Rudolf Friml, who began to produce works with large rousing male choruses. Where the operetta of the 1890's made peasants of the male choristers, the operettas of the 1920's, "specialized in tumultuous male choruses, generally representing some kind of martial enterprise" (Waters). Sigmund Romberg, who had worked as a staff composer for the Shuberts for years, was the first to present this new chorus man in 1924 with The Student Prince. But not without a legal fight. J.J. Shubert was unhappy with the piece for a number of reasons: he thought Romberg's score was too heavy, too operatic; the ending needed

to be happy; there needed to be a female chorus line; and there did not need to be a large male chorus. Shubert wanted to dump the score and fire Romberg, but Romberg threatened to sue if he did, and J.J., on his brother Lee's advice, retreated. The Student Prince boasted a chorus of thirty-six men to put over the military marches and the popular (especially during Prohibition) drinking songs (Hirsch, Boys From Syracuse 152). The male chorus received such a positive response that the Shuberts and Romberg put them in them in several successive shows: in Princess Flavia, which opened November 2, 1925, where the men were the troops of Ruritania, and Desert Song in 1926, which was set in contemporary North Africa, with the men playing French troupes and Riffians, (the Berbers of Northern Morocco). Operetta historian Richard Traubner notes that, "by now the stirring male chorus was *de rigueur* in these works" (388). By 1928 A.B. Waters notes in an article for the Public Ledger dated May 10, that operetta has overdone the rousing male chorus, "The first few were rapturously greeted; of late there has been a definite decline in favor of enthusiasm." After four years of boisterous male vocals the novelty had worn off.

Musical comedy was slower to pick up the trend. It was the rare female star, like Marilyn Miller, who had the clout to select the chorus boys that surrounded her. Miller began hand-picking the chorus boys in her shows with Jerome Kern's Sunny. "Handsome, talented partners heightened her own glamorous appeal and also set off a competitive spark that kept her performances fresh and exciting" (Harris 131).² (Miller's third marriage would be to a chorus boy, Chet O'Brien, eleven years her junior.) J. Brooks Atkinson, noticed a change in 1928, "Health and strength have been rushing in to the chorus man for more than year." He cites as examples the Texas Ranger chorus of Ziegfeld's Rio Rita, "There was the two-fisted men's chorus, "The Ranger's Song," the caressing waltz, "If You're In Love, You'll Waltz," the direct

appeal of the title song, and the production dance number “The Kinkajou” (“Then–But Now”). Not to say the show was short on women; there were over one hundred in the chorus, including Albertina Rasch’s dance troupe (Bordman, Chronicle 422). Atkinson also mentions the men in Hit the Deck, the Vincent Youmans show, which opened April 25, 1927, the varsity boys of Brown, DeSylva and Henderson’s Good News, from September 6, 1927, which was the show that originated the Varsity Drag, and displayed the last popular version of the Charleston (428), and the Marine chorus in Rodgers, Hart and Fields’ Present Arms, which opened April 26, 1928. Richard Rodgers wrote that the creative team “were in agreement that the show would be different in at least one respect from most musical comedies: there would be no effeminate young men in the chorus. We ended up with the toughest, burliest-looking group of singers and dancers ever seen onstage” (Rodgers, Musical Stages 115). He goes on to recount the general bad, drunken, and sometimes comic behavior of these chorus men who seemingly tried to act like Marines offstage. To emphasize the manliness of the chorus men in Present Arms Atkinson jokes, “the managers are said to have eliminated all applicants who winked when they were hit over the head with a quart bottle. Only experienced men qualified for the show.” Most interestingly, he spends some time detailing the “glorifying the American boy” moment when one of the chorus men has to change uniforms and the audience gets to see him in his skivvies (“Then–But Now”). It is not surprising that a strip moment occurs in a show in the 1920’s, a decade famous for its nudity on stage. What is different about this instance is that the sexualized object is not a woman but a man in the chorus. It’s also interesting to note that this sexual attention arrives as the chorus man has been given a new, more manly image. What could be more masculine, more worthy of desire than the Marine.

The chorus man of the middle and late 1920's looked poised to regain his masculinity, as he acquired not only vigorous vocal parts and martial character, but also class, brains, and money. An article in the New York Telegram depicts the Varsity boys who have taken their college degrees and headed straight for the boards. "In half a dozen musical shows there are chorus men with college diplomas, with athletic records, with fraternity pins, with grand opera aspirations." Some of them are the sons of wealthy members of the Social Register. These chorus men are positioned as contrasts to their predecessors, and with their college degrees, as a possible Broadway intelligentsia (Arne).

The prosperity of the 1920's gave gender roles a shake-up that was reflected on stage. The more staid attitudes, mores, and fashions that characterized the Edwardian teens were swept off the cultural stage after the Armistice. This most clearly affected the women of the chorus, but it also gradually began to affect the chorus men who, freed from gentlemanly constraints, took on the more traditionally masculine roles of soldier and sailor, familiar to a society celebrating the victory of the war. But the wild party of the 1920's would come to an abrupt end with the Crash of 1929. As the economy went into free fall, the good fortune that had benefited Broadway also crashed, taking with it the expensive revues and operettas that had showcased the women and men of the chorus.

2.10 THE DEPRESSION

Between the economy and the competition of the talking picture, the Broadway musical had a tough decade in the 1930's. Many producers, like Charles Dillingham and Arthur Hammerstein, went bankrupt. The Shuberts filed for bankruptcy but used the courts to save and

restructure their empire. In 1932 Florenz Ziegfeld died leaving his widow, Billie Burke, deeply in debt. For the theatre, Ziegfeld's death signaled the end of an era (Bordman,Chronicle 477). The large scale spectacle revue was almost done. A few of the annuals would squeak out editions (George White, Earl Carroll), but they were scaled down and not the hits they had been. Two thirds of Manhattan's playhouses were dark in 1931 and production of new musicals dropped from just over forty in the 1928-29 season to an all time low in 1933-34, when just thirteen new musicals opened (451). With finances tight it was not a time for experimentation. While there were adventuresome scores and plots, and great artists were still getting their work produced—it was a busy decade for George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, George Kaufmann and Moss Hart—it was a bad time for the women and men of the chorus. The operetta lingered, and the revue format was present in more modest guises. A classic of the revue genre that set the standard for the 1930's and illustrated the dilemma of chorus members was Band Wagon (1931), which eliminated the chorus line, substituting the Albertina Rasch dancers (Drake).

Year round production of musicals had ceased by the middle of the decade; the summer season was no more. The average run had dropped from thirty to forty weeks to ten to twelve. Jobs were available, but not on the scale they had been. Chorus Equity, not surprisingly, reported decreasing enrollment and a steady decline in dues-paying members. Membership turnover by the mid-1930's was sixty to seventy percent each year. Paid-up membership had dropped from high of 5,000 to 1200 in the 1935-36 season (Drake). By 1937 the paid membership was 600. The skill set required for the chorus was increasing in difficulty. According to Dorothy Bryant, Executive Secretary of the Chorus Equity Association, "It is very unusual for a girl to get a job without some kind of experience in a dancing school or singing school. Of course, the

exceptionally beautiful girl may always get a job” (Gould). She points out that most chorus girls join the profession at seventeen and eighteen, and once they looked more than twenty-five “they’re through.”

Journalist Herbert Drake observed in the fall of 1935 that 4,000 women lined up to audition for George White’s Scandals. White narrowed that number down to 400 and then to 60. His process was to have them walk to the table where he was seated and turn and walk away. His evaluations were by stars—one star meant passable, two okay and three a knockout. In his words, “Girls is girls and always will be. Only the hair dressing and dress styles change.” He looked for women between five feet five inches to eight inches tall and around 118 lbs. White’s criteria are indicative of the preferences of the time, when the average measurements for the women of the chorus in 1934 were: height—five feet four to seven inches; weight—115-120 lbs.; bust—thirty four inches; waist—twenty five to twenty six inches; hips—thirty five inches. By 1934 the tiny five foot pony chorus girl of 1899 was no more.

If the employment situation was bleak for women, it was even more so for men. The chorus boy seemed to be disappearing from the Broadway stage. According to Dorothy Bryant, “The only ones left have to be he-men, too, the pretty boys are out of style. Once, you know, men were the stand-bys of a show” (qtd. in Drake). An article from the New York Journal American from January 1938 echoes this sentiment, “The chorus man is almost extinct.” This article doles out the pity that seems to be the chorus man’s lot. Telling of his “bleak life” in “shabby rooming houses,” eating mostly in “Automats,” the article also, not so subtly, casts the chorus man as homosexual, claiming he “had little interest in the ladies” (“Chorus Men”). Speculation on the chorus man’s sexual preference did not stop questions being posed to chorines as to who they would prefer to marry, a stage door Johnny or a chorus man in their

show. Of the six women questioned in a Daily News article from January of 1938, half select the chorus men in their show. All three of them are careful to qualify the type of chorus man. Marie Vanneman comes to his defense, “I know that many people think that chorus men are sissies, but they’d better not say that to the chorus men.” The chorus men in Mary Ann Parker’s show are college types, “that affect plaid sox, odd trousers, loud neckties and the inevitable Heidelberg haircuts.” While Virginia Vonne spurns marriage, she does think you could do a lot worse than to marry one of the “manly chorus men” in her show (“The Question”). In the 1930’s the chorus boy, never popular, seems to have reached a new nadir, most likely as the result of economics. While he struggled to maintain his place on the Broadway stage, the chorus boy was still visible in Hollywood musicals.

Broadway’s woes were exacerbated during the Depression by the arrival of the talking picture in 1927. A boom of movie musicals lured Broadway writing talent to the West Coast and also proved a mecca of employment for members of the chorus. The films of Busby Berkeley, who began his career on stage, took Ziegfeld’s motto of “Glorifying the American Girl,” in to the realm of film. The stage revue would never be able to compete with the opulence of the movie studio. Where Ziegfeld had managed to fit a hundred chorus women on the stage, Berkeley could fit three hundred. Berkeley would master the art of the camera so that the audience could now look at the women of the chorus in ways they never could before.

2.11 BUSBY BERKELEY

While this study is concerned primarily with the stage, it is difficult to speak of the chorus without including the work of director Busby Berkeley, who began his career in the

theatre, but is remembered today for his work in film, where the chorus was the star of his elaborate, often surrealistic production numbers. Berkeley was born into a theatrical family on November 29, 1895. His parents ran a stock theatre company and his mother was a well-known actress. In spite of his parents' efforts to dissuade him from a career in theatre, Berkeley gravitated towards the business. Even his stint in the Army was built around staging entertainments for the troupes. During his service in France he was responsible for conducting the parade drill. Bored with the usual routine, he approached his commanding officer for permission to try something different. He worked out a trick drill for 1200 men.

I explained the movements by numbers and gave the section leaders instructions for their companies and had them do the whole thing without any audible orders. Since the routines were numbered the men could count out their measures once they had learned them. It was quite something to see a parade square full of squads and companies of men marching in patterns, in total silence. (Thomas, Busby Berkeley 18)

Berkeley's mastery of the military drill would become a staple of his choreography, especially in the larger scale of film, where he was frequently maneuvering hundreds of chorus women and men. With no formal dance training, he spent a good portion of his early career bluffing his way into roles and positions for which he had little to no experience. What he did possess was inventiveness and vision (Thomas, Dancing 104). In the 1920's he established himself on Broadway as one of the top choreographers along with Seymour Felix, Bobby Connolly, and Sammy Lee. Like his colleagues he built his reputation on the pretty lines of chorines that he cast. In the 1930's he was invited to Hollywood to serve as dance director for

Whoopee, a vehicle for Ziegfeld star Eddie Cantor. Samuel Goldwyn had brought Berkeley on board for the studio's first musical venture. When he asked Berkeley what his first step would be Berkeley replied, "Girls...Like everyone else, I doubt if he considered picking girls for the chorus more work than one would think. Actually, you had to look for more than pretty faces and shapely limbs. The girls needed intelligence, coordination, and the ability to understand intricate routines—plus good endurance, since the work was long and tiring" (Thomas, BB 24). Like Ziegfeld, Berkeley seemed to pride himself on being able to identify just the right kind of young woman for his projects. He claimed one of his best gauges was their eyes (24).

While Whoopee was his first picture, Berkeley immediately established himself by taking control of the filming of the dance numbers. He eliminated the usual four camera shot and made himself the sole cameraman. Berkeley quickly realized that the camera's single eye controlled the view. He determined that he would not only be the cameraman, but also edit the view himself in camera, a practice he continued to the end of his career. He devised an overhead shot that allowed for a wide perspective and would become a trademark, as would his staging the chorus in close formations and perfect symmetry (38). Martin Rubin has pointed out that Berkeley adapted a number of the gimmicks for his production numbers from the stage (59-69). Nevertheless, it was his distinctive work with the camera that extended the life and image of the chorus girl.

His technical achievements were in service to the exploitation of feminine pulchritude and the quest for novelty, exactly what producers were aiming to achieve on Broadway. Berkeley transferred this goal to film. Musical film prior to Berkeley had been long shots that showed the complete form of the dancers as they executed their numbers. This quickly became boring and Berkeley recognized that what was needed was a gimmick to make the dance numbers visually

exciting. He put his military training to use by dividing the chorus in to formations. While he recognized the power of uniformity and symmetry, he also was the first to use close up shots of the chorus womens' faces. His explanation was, "Well, we've got all these beautiful girls in the picture. Why not let the public see them?" (qtd in Thomas, BB 25). The close-ups also served to personalize the women just when the viewer may have been going numb to the gargantuan scale of the spectacle. Berkeley's work is a prime candidate for Laura Mulvey's gaze theory which, while the limitations of its psychoanalytic foundation have been pointed out by a number of critics, seems to be tailor-made for Berkeley's work. Mulvey argues that the controlling gaze is male and that this male gaze fashions the female object into whatever he desires her to be. Women in film "are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (162). His use of tight shining, flowing materials for the costumes, his penchant for water, pools, waterfalls, gushing fountains all cry out for Freudian interpretation. As the man behind the camera, the director and editor, Berkeley exercised control over the complete picture of the musical numbers from the casting of women who were physically similar, to the staging and costuming of shots, and most importantly, to how the camera viewed the women—close, far, high, wide, complete or in part, with props or without, en masse or individually. Berkeley took the viewer on a ride through a cavalcade of women. His fantasies became the fantasies of the audience, and his chorus numbers represent the pinnacle of his controlling interpretation.

Like the 1920's chorus girl, the 1930's film version exposed plenty of flesh and shapely limbs. The women were decorated like presents, wearing giant bows on top and bottom in a number in Stage Struck. In the "Lullaby of Broadway" number from Gold Diggers of 1935, the women are wearing black vinyl-looking bra tops with matching briefs and sheer chiffon skirts. In

Roman Scandals Berkeley convinced a number of women to be filmed as bound slaves covered with nothing other than their blonde wigs. To further titillate, Berkeley often used a floor shot that gives the appearance of looking up the legs and dresses of the chorus with the focus placed at the crotch. Not content to have the women appear solely as iconic and frequently scantily clad representations of femininity, he also transformed them into objects: the skyline of Manhattan in 42nd Street, a neon violin in The Goldiggers of 1933, human harps in Fashions of 1934, the pieces of a puzzle that formed a giant Ruby Keeler face in Dames, dancing bananas in The Gang's All Here, and the list could go on. Chorus girls as objects or representations of something else was an old device of the revue. But with the camera at his service, Berkeley could abstract the women, placing them in geometric formations, frequently with legs spread and midriffs exposed, shot from above with a kaleidoscope lens. This organization of the women into complex and abstract arrangements incorporated them, “into a transcendent pattern that subordinates individuality to totality, anatomy to geometry” (Rubin 72).

Berkeley's selection of women was based on physical proportions, weight, and an uncanny physical resemblance more than any dance ability they might have. In her article on Dames, film scholar Lucy Fischer notes that part of the humor of the numbers in the film derives from how identical the women are. But on a more serious level she states that, “What happens in most Berkeley numbers (and quintessentially in ‘Dames’) is that the women lose their individuation in a more profound sense than through the similarity of their physical appearance. Rather, their identities are completely consumed in the creation of an overall abstract design” (75). Berkeley's chorus was a well-rehearsed drill team, coached by him with blackboard diagrams. Film allowed Berkeley to work on a scale that dwarfed even the spectacles of Ziegfeld. In the movie Ziegfeld Girl Berkeley stages the signature Follies staircase number with

a sixty foot high spiral staircase in silver and gold. The women promenaded in lavish costumes by designer Adrian that are dripping with sequins, tulle, pom-poms, feathers, fringe, and bizarre headdresses that at times make the women look like something out of Dr. Seuss. As Berkeley noted, “With all due respect to the master, Ziegfeld could never have done on stage what we did with that number” (Thomas, BB 134). In the other big production number, “Minnie From Trinidad,” featuring Judy Garland, Berkeley had two hundred chorus men and women on the set cha-chaing around the star. Using his high and wide shot, the spectacle is the chorus in their bright ruffled South American costumes, surrounding the diminutive Garland.

Berkeley’s career working for Warner Brothers, MGM and Fox, spanned the 1930’s and into the early 40’s. He gave the image of the revue chorus girl an additional decade of life and completed a process that the Broadway revue had begun. The producers of the revue had made the image of masses of beautiful chorus girls the premiere feature of the genre. They profited from publicizing every aspect of their existence, especially any scandal. The chorus girls of the revue had the possibility of becoming famous, through their looks, talent or notoriety. Perhaps it was the live nature of theatre that made the stage chorus girl more of a living breathing human being to the audience. They could be wooed by stage door johnnies and their fashions imitated by women in the audience. The chorus women in Berkeley’s films are so numerous and so similar, so aloof and unapproachable, that it is not their presence that interests us. En masse Berkeley has transformed them into an image of “woman,” “a virtual substitute for woman herself” (Fischer 83). In some sense Berkeley made the chorus girl disappear.

In a wonderful irony, Berkeley would also help stage a comeback for the chorus girl. In 1971 he was invited to supervise a revival of the 1925 musical comedy hit No, No Nanette for the Papermill Playhouse. At 75 Berkeley had achieved icon status, with his name transformed

into slang for “an elaborate dance number.” By casting Berkeley’s former star, Ruby Keeler, in the show, the production, billed as “The New 1925 Musical,” garnered plenty of publicity. Berkeley auditioned three hundred young women for the twenty-two spots in the chorus. In an article for Life, he mentions the difficulty of finding gorgeous girls, but he says nothing about auditioning for the thirteen slots for male dancers (Wingo). The show, with choreography by Donald Saddler, (who won the Tony), was a dance show with plenty of tapping. In an article for the Saturday Review Walter Terry singles out the chorus: “The big chorus is also a star in the aggregate, just as the Rockettes at the Radio City Music Hall...are *etoiles en masse*. Saddler has given his chorus not only delicious supporting numbers but also stirring moments such as ‘Peach on the Beach,’ in which they dance precariously and joyously on huge beach balls. Ah, but this is a dance show and it is heaven.” It is interesting to note that the chorus is appreciated “in the aggregate,” and “en masse,” and related to the Rockettes, who come from the same era as the original Nanette where the chorus girl was a precision dancing, happy hoofing automaton. No, No, Nanette transferred to Broadway where it ran for two years. Its success helped inspire a raft of revivals. Broadway audiences in the early 1970’s, confronted with Watergate, Vietnam, and a series of recessions, seemed overwhelmed by politics and under-whelmed by the message-driven shows of the era: 1776, Hair, Company. Walter Terry readily acknowledges that Nanette doesn’t have a message. “But to thousands and, one day perhaps, millions, it does have a message: a message of innocence and gaiety and escape.” Berkeley did help bring back the chorus girl—the same one that graced the Broadway stage the last time Ruby Keeler did- in 1929.

2.12 1940'S BEAUTY AND ABILITY – THE BALLET GIRL

The end of the Depression brought relief to Broadway as it did the nation. While the pace of new musical production would never be what it had been in the 1920's, Broadway benefited from the economic upswing brought about by a war time economy. In the 1939-40 season there were forty-two musicals being produced throughout the country. By 1940-41 there were fifty-five, and in the 1941-42 season Broadway had twenty-one musicals that were scheduled to start before October 31st, employing 388 chorus women and men. In the 1940-41 season 1500 members found work. Of the 4,000 active members from that year 1300 are men (Laymon). While artistically, things were looking up, Broadway found that its audience had shrunk. The mass media forms of movies and radio proved serious competition, and Broadway found itself with a narrower audience market.

There were more employment opportunities for everyone in America, and that included the men and women of the chorus. Audience tastes, however, were changing. If the 1930's had been about survival, and sticking with formulas that had been successful, the 1940's on the musical stage seemed to be characterized by fantasy and escapism. World War II was rarely a song and dance subject. Instead artists looked to magic and folklore in I Married an Angel, Cabin in the Sky both (1940), Finian's Rainbow and Brigadoon (both in 1947) (Smith, Musical Comedy 190). Theatre historian John Bush Jones offers two reasons for Broadway's retreat from topical subject matter. As a major port of embarkation, New York City was often the last stop for soldiers and sailors leaving and he speculates, "that the last thing [they] wanted to see were plays and musicals about the war. Second, and equally important, Washington wasn't watching" (129). The government had formed committees to encourage the radio, film, and recording industries to promote and support the war, but Broadway was apparently too small of a market to merit

government attention. This is not to say that the theatre industry did not support the war effort, but their activities were primarily dedicated to off-stage benefits and contributing talent for the USO and the Stage Door Canteen (130).

While the 1940's musical avoided the war as a subject matter and engaged in escapism, it was also a time of growing psychological realism on the musical stage and, as a result, an increasing demand that dance at least relate to the story, if not further its development. This was the decade of Rodgers and Hammerstein's first successes, and one flop: Oklahoma! (1943), Carousel (1945), South Pacific (1949) and Allegro (1947). A new kind of musical was taking shape that emphasized the integration of the book, the music, and dancing. This evolution would effect the representation of the chorus. With the demise of the revue as the dominant form on Broadway, the women of the chorus lost their cultural prominence. The men who had created and promoted an ideal of feminine beauty embodied by the chorus girl had died or moved to Hollywood. In the 1940's a chorus girl found more employment than she had in the previous decade, but her role had changed. While she was still judged first on her attractiveness, her dancing talent had increased in importance. This was the era of the "dream ballet," popularized by Agnes de Mille, but first presented in the work of George Balanchine and Albertina Rasch. The rise of the choreographer would change some of the criteria for what makes a good chorus girl and who is the arbiter of that decision. Where formerly producers like Ziegfeld, George White, and the Shuberts decided who was beautiful enough to be in the chorus, and what characterized a good chorus girl, now the selection was often the domain of the choreographer, as dance became a more complex and integral element in the Broadway musical. The necessity of ballet training also affected what class of women and men could afford to enter what was becoming an increasingly skilled profession. The required years of ballet study, plus other forms

of dance training, and voice lessons made it less likely that working class performers could succeed. The amount of time chorus performers were devoting to training also made it less likely that they would leave the profession in three to five years, the average career length for chorus girls in the 1910's and 20's.

Since men continued to dominate the field of dance direction, now called choreography, they still made the decisions about who qualified to be a chorus girl. There were women choreographers, but they were outnumbered. Physical attractiveness remained the primary criteria. Robert Alton, who was one of the most prolific choreographers of the 1940's, working on Hellzapoppin, DuBarry was a Lady, Too Many Girls, and Pal Joey, to name a few, laid out his standards for Dance Magazine in 1942. At the top of his checklist were size and figure. He was looking for women between five feet four inches to eight inches tall, weighing between 108 and 115 lbs., who had at least two years of professional dance training, and were between the ages of eighteen and twenty five. He advised dancers to focus on ballet rather than tap, since ballet dancers were able to pick up tap quickly, but the reverse was not true (Frome 12). The preference for a ballet background indicates that routines were becoming more complex, requiring stronger technique. A year later, in the same magazine, he established criteria that included: grooming, (nail biting is a no-no.), disposition, figure, posture and movement. This was the first gauntlet that each woman had to pass; only then did he bother to see if they could dance. He underscored this point by recounting a group of girls whom he did not hire who got a newspaper to report on how unfair he was to talent. Alton's response was to invite them back, but each girl failed "the physical." One had legs that he judged wouldn't look good in short dresses, another bit her nails, another had messy hair, and the last looked grumpy. It's not clear whether the girls even had a chance to show their talent as dancers, or whether Alton looked

them over and waved goodbye. It's doubtful he would have hired them even if they had passed "the physical," since they had already proved themselves "bad sports," by questioning his judgment (Everett 25). Alton submitted the boys to the same dance test as the girls, looking at time steps, turns and a ballet combination, minus the kicks and back bends he required from the women; he does not mention whether they have to pass a physical beauty assessment (25).

While Alton emphasizes physical presentation in these articles addressed to dancers, his finished product shows the efforts of chorus members who, above all, are talented performers. According to dance critic Walter Terry, in 1940 Alton was, "the best choreographer in the business." In his review of the show Pal Joey he notes, "His girls can't get by with looking beautiful; they have to dance tap, ballet, acrobatic and whatever other styles may pop into the Alton head. Variety is the secret of the Alton successes, for he uses large groups, small units and solo bits in rapid, yet always well defined sequence" ("Broadway").

While the beauty standard to become a chorus girl remained, for the most part, in place, the necessary talent quotient had increased. Balanchine's introduction of ballet into Broadway chorus choreography, raised the "barre" for dancers who were now expected to know more than the five basic positions and be able to execute standards ballet moves with grace. In addition to ballet, the 1940's saw the introduction of the specialty dancer. Journalist Helen Ormsbee notes in a New York Times article from 1940 that for the Shubert's show Higher and Higher the chorus has been divided into "singing girls and boys," and "specialty girls and boys." The specialty performers are capable of more than basic routines. If the term "specialty dancer" sounds like a familiar term, it's because Ned Wayburn was training specialty dancers at his school during the teens. But those dancers were viewed as soloists: performers who had enough talent and ambition to be able to step out of the line and carry a bit themselves. Everyone who danced in the

Higher and Higher (1940) chorus was expected to be a specialty dancer. An article from 1941 by Theodore Strauss, entitled “Comeback of the Chorus Girl,” reinforces the ideal of hard-work and training. Chronicling the career of a chorus girl named Peggy, who has been taking dance lessons since she was ten, and working professionally since she was sixteen, she has now worked her way up to chorus captain in an unnamed hit show. Peggy still spends a third of her income on singing, dancing, and acting lessons because she wants to succeed in the business. This level of hard work and dedication was not part of the chorus girl image of the past. The article features a number of photos depicting aspiring chorines neatly dressed in street clothes before auditions, back-stage reading between numbers, hovering over the seamstress repairing costumes and knitting for the Red Cross. Where the chorus girl of the 1920’s was some one out of reach of both the average man and woman, the war-time chorus girl is “Like her neighbors at home” (Strauss). In order to keep the American war effort and the economy as a whole running, women needed to enter the workforce. William Chafe cites a study taken just a few months before Pearl Harbor where more than 80 percent of American men and women thought a married woman shouldn’t work outside the home if her husband was employed (21). America’s entry into the war quickly changed public opinion, and cultural attitudes toward working women. “Women workers became the secret weapons of democracy’s arsenal, “Womanpower,” the key to victory against fascism” (21). While chorus girls were doing the kind of work they had always done, it is now cast in a much more respectable and noble light. Simply by persevering in her work, preserving a state of normalcy, and lifting morale by entertaining, the chorus girl can be portrayed as doing her bit onstage, and offstage, as she knits for servicemen.

The hard-working chorus girl of the 1940’s is also described as an aspiring artist. Artistry in revues had been the province of the creators and designers of the spectacle and the stars. Now,

the girls of the line seem to have discovered that song and dance are art forms that call for personal expression. To prove the artistry of this new breed, writer Maurice Zolotow in an article ironically titled “Lo, The Poor Chorus Girl!” quotes Pearl Lang, one of the chorus girls in Carousel, “The dancer is not merely an automaton. Dancing is a form of human expression relating to actual experiences. We dancers in Carousel are dancing as people, expressing what people really feel and think in life.” Her statement directly contradicts Ned Wayburn’s philosophy and indicates a shift in the perspective of the chorus girl and her portrayal onstage and in the media. Chorus girl Fern Whitney, is depicted as a dedicated ballerina who danced up to seven hours a day when she was in school. All of the women in the article are portrayed as rejecting the decadent, gold-digging chorus girl image of the past. One of the women married for love (as opposed to money) and while Miss Whitney has tasted lobster it made her sick. All six chorus girls claim to dislike champagne and prefer soda. In an article from March of 1945 in the New York Times Magazine the chorus girls are wholesome types whose after-show supper is more likely to be milk and a sandwich than a “gay party with champagne.” She’s also described as a reader who likes to discuss books and who is interested in the theatre and ballet as a profession (Winslow). Chorus girls of the 1940’s are painted as rejecting a worldly sophisticated image in favor of the life of a dedicated artist. Emphasis is placed on individual expression, clearly rejecting the machine-age proficiency that marked the 1920’s and 30’s.

The 1940’s chorine was also depicted as smarter than the chorus girl of the past. The acquisition of ballet skills with its high art associations seems to have taken the chorus girls’ reputation up a notch. She has become an intelligent, individual expressive artist, not simply part of a tapping and marching machine. In his article, Zolotow qualifies the intelligence of the chorus girl, he “touts the new type of chorine as a smart, but not an intellectual person,” who is

dedicated to her work and clearly slightly intimidating. He does this by thoroughly bashing the chorus girl of yore as being a “very backward imbecile,” of “great stupidity.” Carefully negotiating and controlling the image he is creating, Zolotow leads off the article with a contest between six chorus girls and six Barnard undergraduates, pitting the lower to middle class working women against the wealthy and educated college women. Naturally, the chorus girls beat the college girls. The article is accompanied by a picture of a chorus girl in costume studiously reading a book.

While precision dance has fallen out of favor by the 1940’s, it has not completely disappeared, as evidenced by the continued success of the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes. The Rockettes, since their formation by Russell Markert, (former chorus boy in the Earl Carroll Vanities), as the Missouri Rockets in 1925, have represented the pinnacle of precision dancing in all of its spectacular exactitude (Francisco 51). The Rockettes were on the opening night bill of the opulent new Radio City Musical Hall on December 27, 1932 where they have reigned ever since. Inspired by seeing the Tiller Girls perform in The Ziegfeld Follies of 1922, Markert wanted to establish a line of women who were taller, with longer legs, could perform complicated tap routines, and higher kicks (48). In hiring performers he looked for dancers who fell within a certain height range (today the requirements are 5’ 6” to 5’ 10 1/2”) with a background in ballet, excellent tap skills and who “was willing and able to submerge her own personality for the good of the team” (51). This is a re-iteration of the philosophy that shaped Ned Wayburn’s work, and all precision chorus work, where the individual is subsumed into the group. As the continued popularity of the Rockettes suggests, there is a basic appeal in the spectacle of uniformity which, “masks all paradox and contradiction so that the ideology that flows from it has the appearance of neutrality and seems both spontaneous and genuine,” while

“it also focuses and conditions awareness by abstracting out the conventional as the proper prescription for human action” (Drewal 71). In other words, while the audience believes they are being entertained by a group of similar looking, high kicking pretty women, they are actually being sold an ideology that makes us appreciate the conventional value of conformity to a group aesthetic that values militaristic precision and uniformity in look and action.

By 1945 journalist Thyra Samter Winslow records that of the eleven musicals running on Broadway only two feature the old chorus kick line- Follow the Girls and Mexican Hayride. The rest of the shows feature corps de ballet. What caused the ouster of the old fashioned chorus line? There are several probable causes: the demise of the lavish revue, which made the chorus girl the center of attention; the success of the movie musical, which could afford to outdo the most lavish spectacle on the Broadway stage; the success of Oklahoma! with de Mille’s fun and energetic ballet that drew from American folk dance vocabulary, and launched a host of imitators; the chorus line had become routine and uninspired (16). In some ways we seem to have come full circle from The Black Crook of 1866. Once again, the ballet girl dominates the musical stage. Viewing this shift philosophically, Winslow comments, “But the girls in the ballet have brought an unusual degree of skill to their work. They’ve brought grace and knowledge and ambition to their profession. And if the old Stage Door John is gone, too, along with the chorus girl, perhaps it is just as well. He was getting a bit portly and old, anyhow” (37). But the chorus girl of 1945 has seen significant cultural advances since 1866 in terms of her rights and sexual freedom. She is not viewed through the same cultural lens as her 1866 counterpart, as evidenced from the preceding portrayals. Nor is the type of ballet she’s performing the same. She is not working in a Romantic ballet idiom, but a contemporary ballet style, adapted for the Broadway stage,

influenced by choreographers who are classically trained, but also knowledgeable about modern and jazz dance.

2.13 1940'S CHORUS MEN

While much had been made of the advent of the new “manly” chorus man, this did not abolish the prejudice that men who sing and dance are effete. In 1941 Miss Ruth Richmond, executive secretary of the Chorus Equity Association points out that “she has seen the men of the line change from a somewhat “sissified” lot to a group of manly fellows who are trained singers, dancers and actors, all well-educated.” She also notes that hundreds of chorus men have enlisted and “of the fifty who were called from New York not one, Miss Richmond said, was rejected because of physical defect” (Laymon). By 1942 the possibility of a shortage of chorus boys allowed the Shuberts to create some publicity. They had a call for chorus men for road show productions of Hellzapoppin and Sons O’ Fun. A call which would normally attract five hundred or more applicants turned up two hundred for the thirty to forty slots. Several applicants were over the draft age of forty-five, which also made them too old for the chorus, and others were just under twenty, which would make them eligible to be called up at any time and therefore too much of a risk (Blackford).

The chorus boy as soldier made a reappearance when the war gave Irving Berlin an opportunity to remount his soldier revue, Yip, Yap Yaphank, this time under a new title, This is the Army. Organizing a corps of three hundred men, many of whom were hand-selected for their show business experience, Berlin’s goal was to mount the revue in a month, strategically on July 4, 1942. All of the proceeds were to go to the Army Emergency Relief Fund. Berlin insisted that

the company admit African-American soldiers, essentially making the platoon the only integrated unit in the Army, although there were limits. While the twelve men were a part of the company, they were, at the insistence of an officer, made into their own squad. Biographer Laurence Bergreen doubts that Berlin's motives were solely socially progressive, but sprang more from his show business background where black performers were often hits with audiences. Berlin wrote the number, "That's What The Well-Dressed Man In Harlem Will Wear," for the men (Bergreen 397-8). Fortunately, his idea to open the show with a minstrel number was nixed by the director, Ezra Stone. Berlin reprised his number, "Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning," and the men again dressed in drag in a send-up of the female chorus line. The show was a rousing hit, bigger than Yip, Yap Yaphank. It's original Broadway run was extended from four to twelve standing room only weeks before it took to the road for a national tour that ended in San Francisco in February of 1943, having earned two million dollars for the Army Emergency Relief Fund (415).

In contrast to the This is the Army soldier were the ballet boys who partnered the ballet girls. With ballet as the new dance language of the chorus, there were more choreographers entering the field with ballet backgrounds: Balanchine, de Mille, Robbins, Kidd. Balanchine worked in the Romantic style that he had been trained in, which emphasized the pre-eminence of the ballerina. But de Mille, Robbins and Kidd were more iconoclastic in their treatment of the ballet tradition and gave male dancers more opportunities to show the athleticism involved in the art. The men in the chorus from this period were often cast in traditional masculine roles: the cowboys of Oklahoma!, the sword dancers of Brigadoon, the Navy men of On The Town.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's South Pacific also featured a chorus of Navy men and Marines, who appeared shirt-less to sing "There is Nothin' Like A Dame," and in grass skirts and

coconut bras for the performance of “Honey Bun” in the Seabee talent show.³ In an era where Broadway shows were famous for their ballet, South Pacific had no choreographer. Mary Martin recalls how director Joshua Logan staged the “Dame” number on the first day of rehearsal, “All these gorgeous guys, playing Seabees were up there on stage and Josh jumped up there with them. The music started and he began to pace around, saying ‘Follow me.’ He directed some of them forward, others backwards. He was singing all the time—Josh always knew the words—tramping, gesturing, shouting ‘Follow me,’ or ‘Reverse’” (Block 151). As the women in the 1940’s chorus were beginning to be treated as individuals, so were the men in the South Pacific chorus. According to Oscar Hammerstein’s biographer, Hugh Fordin, “A major departure from convention was to treat the chorus less as an ensemble and more as a collection of individuals who had differentiated characters and spoke separate lines of dialogue. Most of them were listed in the playbill” (276). The lines in “There Is Nothin’ Like a Dame” were divided among the chorus men with only the refrain sung in unison. The efforts to overcome audience prejudice against dancing men by casting the dancers in the masculine roles of service men, or substituting marching for dancing was a temporary, if timely, fix.

2.14 THE 1950’S

The 1950’s were a fairly dismal decade for the chorus in American musical theatre. Most seasons saw new works premiering in the single digits and few of them were lasting hits. By the 1950’s the members of the chorus had lost almost all of their appeal for the media, reflecting the diminished influence of Broadway, as it was displaced from popular culture by film and television. In tune with the conservative times, the image of the chorus girl is struggling to

become more wholesome and respectable. In an article in the New York World Telegram, chorus girl Carol Cole, refers to her colleagues as “kids.” “Kids in the chorus these days are very decent, lots of them from good homes. People have put a mark on the chorus girl as a bleached blond floozie and we resent it.” The women are also condescended to in the article’s title, “Chorus Girls Just Can’t Save on \$85 Weekly—My Gracious” (Morehouse). The hard-working studious women of the chorus have been replaced by earnest kids as American women as a whole suffered a post-war backlash. The invitation to join the economy, the glorification of “Rosie the Riveter,” was rescinded as quickly as it had been proffered. Once the men returned from the war, women were expected to give them back their jobs and return to the home (Diedrich and Fischer-Hornung 7). While chorus girls weren’t stealing servicemen’s jobs they did still present an image of the working woman, and that image had to be contained. If chorines were re-saddled with the burden of loose reputations, the chorus boys were also working under the same age old prejudices, “And those boys we have, those wonderful dancing boys, are real he-men” (Morehouse).

The “he-men” had an opportunity to show their stuff in West Side Story (1954) when Jerome Robbins showcased a young and aggressive male ensemble whose energetic dancing had its origins in ballet, but was both sexy and athletic. There are few images more macho than gang members, and by pitting Jets against Sharks, Robbins motivated the continual dance challenge of the play, as each gang confronts the other in its own choreographic language that contrasts the identity, Hispanic and white, of the two groups. Audiences had seen men dance powerfully before, but never had a chorus of men dominated the stage in such a fashion. “Jerome Robbins’ choreography for *West Side Story* eroticized the boys. Even in a number like “America,” the women’s skirts twirling and kicks, though exuberant, weren’t as sexy as those Sharks twisting

and leaping in those black pants” (Clum 205). Robbins’ dance, in tandem with the passion of Bernstein’s music, had found a way to present the male chorus dancer in a powerful and erotic light.

Another element at work in American culture in the 1950’s would help change the image of the chorus dancer. While jazz dancing had been present since the early part of the twentieth-century in the black community, and had appeared in white revues in the 1920’s, modern jazz dance did not appear on the Broadway stage until the 1950’s. This change coincided with the birth of rock ‘n roll in the mid-1950’s, which freed the dancing public from any sense of inhibition about shaking or shimmying any part of their anatomy to a guitar and drum-driven beat, would free the chorus as well. Contrast this with the proper forms of social dance encouraged by Vernon and Irene Castle, who would have been horrified to find that synchronized partner dancing had been abandoned in favor of individual expression that allowed young people to relate to everyone on the dance floor. Broadway attempted to reflect this new style in Bye Bye Birdie (1960), which depicted the generational conflict between teenagers and their parents, Hair (1968) a rock musical loosely plotted around a tribe of hippies and Claude’s decision to burn his draft card, Grease (1972) set in 1959, portraying the teenage life of girls and boys and the romance of a “good” girl and “bad” boy, and Hairspray (2000), set in 1962 based on John Water’s film about Tracy Turnblad and her rise from outsider to dancing star (Nadel 92-3).

Modern jazz dancing, which is the predominant style that has informed show dancing for the last fifty years, is different from the jazz dancing of the 1920’s, but just as difficult to define. Both forms are mixtures of African and European influences in an American environment. The jazz dance of the 1920’s developed alongside of jazz music, and according to Jean and Marshall

Stearns is distinguished by “*swing*, which can be heard, felt and seen but only defined with great difficulty” (xiv). Modern jazz dance incorporates all of the original elements plus modern dance and ballet, and is characterized by a sensual, erotic and passionate energy (Nadel 97). The combination of the music and dance served to sexualize the chorus dancer in a new way.

2.15 THE GAY CHORUS BOY

The sexual revolution in the 1960’s and 1970’s changed the way women and men engaged with their own sexuality and, as a result, changed society’s image of both genders. While the issue of homosexuality had hovered over the chorus boy for most of his involvement in the Broadway musical, talk about homosexuality was coded. To indicate that the sexual orientation of chorus boys was suspect, writers would comment on how they spent all their money on clothes, weren’t interested in girls, or lived alone. When questioned, the chorus women in the company seemed to protest too much about the masculine qualities of the boys in the chorus. These subterfuges only served to underscore what D.A. Miller observes in A Place For Us, “the widely suspected fact that, where the chorus of a Broadway musical is concerned, gay men do not form a minority at all” (130). The first chorus boy who had the opportunity to “come out” occurred, fittingly enough, in A Chorus Line (1975), when Paul disclosed his parents’ discovery of his drag queen performance. A Chorus Line, which had an extraordinary Broadway run of 6,137 performances over fifteen years, (with a revival scheduled to open on Broadway on October 5, 2006), marked a mini-comeback for the chorus. Cleverly reversing the pattern of putting the anonymous chorus in the background, Bennett and his collaborators, Marvin Hamlisch (music), James Kirkwood and Nicholas Dante (book), and Edward Kleban

(lyrics), personalized the chorus members, making them individuals and the stars of the show. The play was one long grueling audition that narrowed the field from seventeen auditioners to eight chosen performers. While Paul is given an emotional monologue, he is not given a musical number, nor is he cast in the chorus line, due to an injured knee. The other homosexual dancer, Greg, also fails to make the cut, causing one critic to observe, “The lie of *A Chorus Line* is its assumption that there may be gay dancers out there, but chorus boys who get cast are heterosexual” (Clum 204). Paul’s exclusion has been read by some as purposeful bashing which, considering the fact that all of the creators of A Chorus Line were gay men, seems a form of conscious, or subconscious discomfort (Miller 128).

While Paul’s homosexuality is openly discussed, he is not the first homosexual character in a musical. Much has been written about the coding of homosexuality in musicals, but the character most often cited as one of the first gay characters is Duane Fox, played by Lee Roy Reams in Applause! (1970). Duane, sidekick and hairdresser to star Margo Channing (Lauren Bacall), takes her to a bar to meet her fans; the bar is a gay bar and the fans are admiring gay men. The bar is never called a gay bar, but the giveaway is the fact that the fans, played by the chorus, are referred to by Margo as “silly boys,” and their dress is described as “flamboyant attire” (Clum 201). Three years later in the Cy Coleman/Michael Bennett musical Seesaw (1973), Tommy Tune would establish himself as a star playing a gay character, David (202). But the big revelation of the gay chorus on stage comes with La Cage aux Folles (1983).

With music and lyrics by Jerry Herman and a book by Harvey Fierstein, who adapted the show from a French film, the story centers on Georges and Albin, two lovers who face a crisis when Georges’ son, Jean-Michel, decides to get married. The couple owns a nightclub where Albin is the star drag performer surrounded by a chorus of beautiful drag queens, the Les

Cagelles. Jean-Michel, fearful of what his conservative political in-laws, the Dindons, will think, does not want Albin to attend the first family meeting. Georges does not have the heart to tell Albin, who finds out and reacts to this rejection with the triumphant song “I Am What I Am,” which ends act one. In act two Albin makes a surprise appearance as Jean-Michel’s mother, whisking the Dindons off to a restaurant. All is going well until, persuaded to perform by the restaurant hostess, Albin, in the final moment of his song, removes his wig out of habit, revealing that he’s a man. Horrified, the Dindons try to leave with their daughter, only to be entrapped by a photographer. In the end, all is untangled with the young couple marrying, and Georges and Albin happily reconciled.

The chorus in La Cage are a critical element of the St. Tropez nightclub act, the show within a show, and as mass signifiers of the show’s tantalizing publicity angle, drag. Marjorie Garber defines drag as a theoretical and deconstructive social practice that analyzes doubling, mimicry, impropriety, and undecidability from within, “by putting in question the ‘naturalness’ of gender roles through the discourse of clothing and body parts” (151). The show opened with the chorus line in glamorous drag proclaiming, “We are what we are and what we are is an illusion, /We love how it feels putting on heels, causing confusion.” As Jack Kroll points out in an article for Newsweek, “If the sight of that legendary bellwether of the Broadway audience, the tired businessman, having a gay old time watching not a high-kicking line of chorus dolls but a high-kicking line of chorus guys *imitating* dolls is not a showbiz turning point, then nothing is” (“Broadway Glitters”). The show is smartly constructed on the familiar framework of musical comedy, giving the audience a level of comfortability with the plot, while adding in the novel element of transvestism. The voyeurism of the backstage musical is layered onto the transformation of an individual character, Albin, from one gender to another, in the second

number of the show, “A Little More Mascara.” As Jerry Herman describes the staging of the song, every move was choreographed and timed so that Albin (George Hearn), in his backstage preparation for performance, would land the final line, “And Zsa Zsa is here!” perfectly made-up and gowned. On the audience’s reaction to this revealed transformation, Herman wrote, “well—you never heard such screaming in your life from an audience” (231). At the conclusion of the act, as he ends “I Am What I Am,” Albin undoes his identity as Zsa Zsa in the traditional manner, by ripping off his wig, an act he repeats in the restaurant when he reveals he is not Jean-Michel’s mother, and which the chorus will echo. For Garber “This emphasis on *reading* and *being read*, and on the deconstructive nature of the transvestite performance, always undoing itself as part of its process of self-enactment, is what makes tranvestism theoretically as well as politically and erotically interesting” (149).

Director Arthur Laurents added another level of complexity to the audience’s ability to read gender by casting two women in the Les Cagelles.⁴ The chorus appeared in drag for act one and then as men for the opening number at the top of act two, “Masculinity,” where Albin is exhorted to think of John Wayne, Charles de Gaulle, Jean Paul Belmondo, Rasputin and Ghengis Khan. Again, gender identity is deconstructed with the change to male clothing and, in this case, it is the women, dressed in white tailcoats, who are in drag. For the rest of the act, the chorus returned to an abbreviated version of drag. Laurents even staged a moment to deliberately fool the audience, using the classic signifier of having the chorus members remove their wigs. Two members shake out their long hair, presumably indicating that they are the women in the line, except only one of them was female. The other was a chorus boy with long hair (Grossman).

The chorus in La Cage, was carefully selected, not for their uniformity in looks, or ability to dance but, according to choreographer Scott Salmon, “They all had to have some particular

talent. It's not exactly 'You gotta have a gimmick,' but they had to have individuality...We weren't looking for the outer female mannerisms, not for dancers who walked like they thought a girl walked, but dancers who were able to *feel* like they thought a girl feels like (qtd. in Horizon, 54). This level of identification goes beyond putting on clothing and dance training and technique to a deeper emotional level, into the realm of acting; adding an additional skill for the chorus member. The ability of men to access their feminine side is a desirable quality for the men playing Les Cagelles, a distinct turnabout from the macho posturing often called for by the male chorus. And the audience loved it. They were comfortable gliding "into the gender gap" (Grossman) because the show let them in on the joke of the constructed identity in drag, by showing them the process. The gay chorus onstage did not cause walk-outs or close the show, on the contrary, they were the subject of the kind of press that the chorus girls of the 1920's used to receive. David Evans, one of the ten men in the Les Cagelles, was featured in Playbill on "The Gypsy Life," where he talked of his thirty years as member of the chorus. In the role of Mercedes at the age of fifty, he was twice the age of some of his colleagues (Flatow).

Perhaps this level of acceptance was a result of the formula of the show, which was built around the familiar marriage trope of boy wants girls, encounters obstacles, and gets girl in the end. In La Cage the young lovers become the plot mechanism by which the central couple, Georges and Albin, come into conflict, are estranged and re-united. Placing the show in the familiar, and in 1983, old-fashioned framework of a musical comedy, was a conscious choice by the creative team. Composer Jerry Herman in his memoir Showtune claims that as a creative team he, Fierstein and Laurents felt that the material would "work best as a charming colorful, great-looking musical comedy—an old-fashioned piece of entertainment" (227). They stayed clear of politics and sex, and focused on the emotional relationship between Georges and Albin, and

the familiar difficulties of parent-child relationships. The Les Cagelles and the nightclub provided the necessary element of spectacle.

La Cage was not welcomed by everyone as a liberating musical. Some criticized the show as a throwback to an old style of musical comedy, which it was. Others felt it pulled punches around the real issues of being a gay man and descended into bad farce in the second act. In spite of its critics, La Cage ran for over four years and over one thousand and seven hundred performances. The gay chorus was out and would appear again, this time portraying oppositional masculine images-tough heterosexual prisoners and then fans of Molina's film star fantasy, Aurora, in The Kiss of the Spider Woman (1993), and in Victor, Victoria (1995), a stage adaptation of the popular film. Rob Marshall, who choreographed both shows, in the latter seemed, "far more interested in placing his male dancers front and center than in spotlighting the chorines, and his aggressive choreography for his male dancers contains more than a "hint of mint" (Clum 46). While the gay male chorus dancer has found acceptance on stage in expressing his sexuality, off stage the issue of homosexuality for young male dancers is alive and still very painful, as evidenced by the articles devoted to sexuality in dance. The stories of young boy dancers being teased and tormented are matched by older adult male dancers who recall being on the receiving end of the same treatment when they were young. Only rarely is a boy validated by his peers or family for his dancing talent.⁵

2.16 BEEFCAKE

The changes in attitude brought about by the sexual revolution also allowed for the chorus boy to be viewed as a sex object, not only by the gay men in the audience, but by the

women, who had become the primary ticket buyers to the theatre. Perhaps prompted by the emergence of male stripping in the mid to late 1970's, chorus boys began to be portrayed as beef cake, showing off their bodies for the appreciation of the tired businesswoman (Margolis and Arnold 153). Male strip shows were popularized by the Chippendales in the early 1980's. Their muscled, greased bodies with the trademark black bow tie appeared on calendars, billboards and collector trading cards. In 2006 the franchise is still going strong, featuring twelve dancers in their Las Vegas show which promises, "hot dance moves, and sensual theatrics providing a sensuous and fast-paced performance that meets every female fantasy (Chippendales, The Show).⁶

Pride in the male dancer and display of the male dancing body can be traced to Ted Shawn, a modern dance pioneer, who with his wife Ruth St. Denis, founded the influential Denishawn company and schools. After the couple's marriage and joint artistic enterprises ended in 1931, Shawn dedicated his career to creating strong, powerful work for men dancers. In his effort to convince the public that dancing was not only an appropriate form of expression for American men, but that dance had once been solely the purview of men, Shawn formed his own company, Shawn and His Men Dancers, which toured the country from 1933 to 1940, giving 1,250 performances in more than 750 cities (Foster 161). He built his dances around the classical images of Greek statuary, and themes that inspired specific movements recognizable to the audience: such as sports, labor, and religion. With stiff torsos and clenched fists to emphasize the musculature of the upper body, his dancers moved swiftly and posed to display the beauty of their impressive physiques before moving into jumps and leaps that showcased their athleticism and strength. The company of eight to eleven rarely touched when they danced and when they were grouped together it was always in a combination of four or more. Shawn's "dances exalted

the male body's noble restraint, grandeur, and potency, proclaiming loudly that nothing effeminate, much less homosexual, could survive in this robust environment" (166). However, it is important to note that Shawn's philosophy also, "was based on an idealization of male homosexuality" (Foulkes 79).

Shawn was fascinated by the beauty of the male body and displayed it proudly in his dances. "Visual display of the body is a central component of dance, and Shawn exploited this characteristic to reveal the male body as an object of audience gazes and sexual enticement. The physicality of dance mirrored the physicality of sex; for gay men, choosing to engage in sex with a man meant choosing a male body over a female one. Through dance Shawn highlighted the centrality of the body (and particularly a muscular, hardened, male body) in this choice (95). Shawn's efforts were interrupted by the war, his own exhaustion from touring, and company members' desire to move on to other things. The group dissolved in 1940 and by 1942 almost all of the members of Shawn's company, including his lover Barton Mumaw, were in the service. Shawn, at fifty-one, was too old to enlist. In some ways ahead of his time, Shawn's contribution to men and dance would not make its way into show dancing until American culture at large was ready to catch up with his ideas. In 1940 the sexual revolution had yet to liberate women or men, and the idea of the male as the object of the gaze, by heterosexual women or homosexual men, was not a concept that would achieve popular acceptance for many years.

Part of Hair's (1968) aim was to bring sexual liberation to the stage, and its dramatization of hippie culture provided a brief moment of total nudity. The cast of Oh, Calcutta!, which opened off-Broadway in 1969, went Hair one better by having the ensemble of ten nude for significant amounts of time. A revue devised by English theatre critic Kenneth Tynan, whose aim was to "provide an evening of 'elegant erotica,'" the book was an assemblage of sketches

that included pieces by Tynan, John Lennon, Samuel Beckett, Sam Shepard and Jules Feiffer (Funke). The subject matter was sex and the sketches dealt with masturbation, sexual preference, courtship, and swinging. There was simulated heterosexual sex, masturbation, and a scene between two lesbians. The play's arrival coincided with a cultural moment when the topic of obscenity on stage, in film and literature was stirring debate (Weinraub). David Allyn observes, "That the explosion of on-stage nudity in the late sixties redefined the sexual revolution. It was a clear symbol that times were changing, that puritanical attitudes were disappearing. Theater critics might occasionally fret about the collapse of artistic standards, but for the most part, the cultural elite and busloads of Midwestern tourists alike welcomed the avant-garde assault on public decorum" (123). The show was such a success that it transferred to Broadway in 1971 where it ran for a year and a half. It was revived in 1976 and ran for thirteen years. Hair and Oh, Calcutta! brought the sexual revolution to the middle class Americans who attended Broadway. Interestingly, Gerald Bordman, when chronicling the opening of Oh, Calcutta! at The Eden Theatre, connects the show to The Black Crook, "What must have been the reaction of the ghost of the chorus girls in *The Black Crook* (9-12-1866), who had played just a few blocks away" (Chronicle 670). It seems unlikely that the proximity of the performance spaces is the connection but rather the nudity of Oh, Calcutta's! performers. Even one hundred years later the chorus girls of The Black Crook cannot escape their reputation.

Chorus boys as sex objects, who took pride in their physique had made sporadic appearances in shows that had a military theme. It wasn't until thirty-eight years later that the boys in the chorus would appear as beefcake. The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas (1978) featured chorus boys as Texas cowboys and members of the Aggie football team, while the women were hookers. This mediocre musical with a book by Larry King and Peter Masterson

and songs by Carol Hall, managed to run for four years on its country charm and cheese. To get the part, chorus boys were required to be buff and stay buff since they needed to perform a number shirtless. Tim Hunt, who performed the show in several regional companies, recalled at auditions in New York that it was an unspoken expectation that the men were to audition shirtless. “It was the first time I saw guys at an audition doing push-ups in a crowded dressing room.” Free weights and a bench press were kept backstage so that the chorus boys could pump up before they went onstage as football players (phone interview). Audiences had seen men with their shirts off in South Pacific and Present Arms, and by now had been able to see performers completely nude, but Whorehouse, a show about sex bought and sold, managed to offer the men, as well as the women, as sex objects. Hunt observed that one of the interesting things about the show was seeing who would be waiting at the stage door for the chorus boys—often it was a mix of women and gay men (phone interview). Tune wasn’t afraid to exploit the sexuality of his dancers. In his production of The Will Rogers Follies (1991) chorus boy John Ganun was one of the four male dancers who played wranglers in the show, and recalls wearing chaps with the seat cut out and “brown stretch jeans underneath (to show off our butts).”⁷ One of the chorus boys was given a specialty number in the opening number, “called Indian Of The Dawn, in which he danced on a drum in a loin cloth.” Ganun went onto to perform in the chorus of the revival of Damn Yankees (1994). “I was hired as a replacement for the Broadway opening. I think they wanted to “beef the show up.” They had a locker room scene in which the men wore only towels, and I found myself leading that entrance” (e-mail interview).

The subject of male stripping, once scandalous, has become so accepted that it’s a subject ripe for musical comedy. Witness The Full Monty (2000), a stage adaptation of the English film about a bunch of unemployed working class guys who decide to take up stripping to earn some

money. Americanizing the location to Buffalo, New York, the show spends almost all of its time interrogating the idea of stripping in act one, and preparing for it in act two, so that the actual moment of stripping becomes the finale of the show. The real subject is the marriages and relationships between the men, and how unemployment has affected their feelings of self-worth. The stripping provides comic relief.

2.17 RAZZLE DAZZLE

The sexual revolution provided an opportunity to present sexuality openly and in new ways for both men and women. Director/choreographer Bob Fosse recognized the erotic potential of show dancing and created a signature look for the chorus based in a charged sexuality rooted in jazz dance and the act of performance. “Displaying the body to the gaze of others automatically implies the availability of that body for sexual exploitation. Merely by coming on stage, an actor of any gender becomes a site for erotic speculation and imagination” (Senelick 8). Fosse’s dancing style had developed around his own physical limitations. His poor posture gave him a hunched over look; his knock knees caused him to create an exaggerated turn-in; his balding head prompted the addition of a bowler (Partridge). As a teenager, his experience dancing in burlesque houses made him partial to bump and grind moves. Clive Barnes described his style: “The derby tilted just so, the elbow bent, the fingers splayed, the hand limp, the body frozen in a pose, all arrogant yet mocking sexuality, the whole shape disgendered as a black silhouette picked out by the glitter dust of showbiz and immortalized by the razzle-dazzle of smoke and mirrors”(“Floss, Fosse”).

Fosse eroticized the chorus in a fashion that was nostalgic and seedy like burlesque, but also contemporary in the aggressive, hedonistic attitude the performers adopted. He achieved this effect through a combination of dance steps, costuming, and the subject matter of the shows he directed. His emphasis was not on big dance moves but isolated details and surprising accents, “the pulsing of the pelvis or fingers, the rebounding of a quick kick, the rolling of a single shoulder. Knees and elbows were bent at specific angles, and at the last moment, there may be a tortuously slow *développé*” (Partridge). These isolated punctuations not only emphasized parts of the dancers’ bodies but told the audience “ ‘where to look and how to feel’” (qtd in Partridge). As Fosse tailored his style to his own idiosyncrasies, he did the same for his dancers. The individuality of the chorus members, male and female, black and white, and at times, (as in Pippin) gay and straight, is recognized in a Fosse ensemble. “‘The chorus work is not a line dance,’ says Larry Billman, president and founder of the Academy of Dance on Film. ‘ Each dancer or group is doing individual movements and poses to make strong physical statements and contrast’” (qtd in Mettler).

One of the ways Fosse achieved a sense of unity was through costuming. In the famous “Steam Heat” number from The Pajama Game (1954), Fosse had the trio of dancers; Carol Haney, Buzz Miller, and Peter Genarro, dressed in Chaplinesque tramp outfits with baggy black pants and coats and derby hats. The look was unisex, seeming to erase sexual difference in service to the comedy of the number, which also mocked the sexy lyrics, as did the percussive instrumentation. In Redhead (1959) he staged a number with the ensemble, and the star, Gwen Verdon, in black unitards, bowlers, and white gloves. Martin Gottfried observes that, “He is original among Broadway choreographers in using abstract costumes to add an extra pictorial

dimension to his dances” (117). While this may separate the dance from the rest of the show, the effect is memorable.

Performer Lee Roy Reams believes that Sweet Charity (1966) was the bridge between Fosse’s early work in Pajama Game and Damn Yankees (1955) to his work in Pippin (1972) and Chicago (1975). “Suddenly, he became whatever his sexuality was. His choreography reflected that. People were doing more suggestive dancing. Males and females became one body, like in *Pippin*; there was a lot of unisexuality, where it was difficult to tell which sexes were which” (qtd in Grubb 129). In Pippin, one of the major themes was the exploration of sexuality. In an interview with the New York Times, Fosse explained, “Always before if I found a male dancer that I knew was homosexual, I would keep saying, no, you can’t do that, don’t be so minty there. This time, I used the kind of people they were to give the show individuality, and they were so happy about it. I think it helped the show” (Chase). In Chicago, set in the 1920’s, Fosse wanted to avoid the flapper look. The performers are dressed in black skin-tight costumes that at times look like variations on sado-masochistic fantasy gear. In this show sexual difference is also blurred, this time to create an erotic effect as men and women perform for the audience as if in a vaudeville number. Today the familiar image of Fosse’s ensemble, “degenerate, decadent, grotesque,” is derived from his later plays and films, Sweet Charity, Chicago, and the films Cabaret (1972) and All That Jazz (1979) (Gottfried 120). In Little Me, which Fosse choreographed and directed in 1962, dancer Swen Swenson performed “I’ve Got Your Number,” a striptease where he removed only his tie, vest and armbands and stopped the show every night. Of Fosse’s work Swenson observed, ““There is a sexual element in everything he did, and ‘I’ve Got Your Number’ worked because it teased the audience without getting too low and vulgar. I

think Fosse was fascinated with lowlife, and it was disappointing to me that, as the years passed, he became less restrained about expressing it.” (qtd in Grubb 106-7).

Like Michael Bennett, Fosse was most comfortable working in a show business metaphor because it allowed him easy access to song and dance. In Pippin he had the Lead Player (Ben Vereen) and the band of performers, in Chicago he used vaudeville as the metaphor, in Sweet Charity he used the dance hall, in Dancin' he dispensed with the book and invented the dance musical. By working within the concept of performance his chorus could adopt a Brechtian attitude toward the audience. Fosse's chorus was able to project their sexuality with a certain distance, irony, and humor that constituted an alienation effect. In Chicago, Brecht's work was a part of the conception of the piece, “The raunchiness, mechanical look, even the lack of emotion are actually necessary characteristics of a piece done in the Brechtian style” (Schoettler 231). By blurring lines with similar costumes and garish makeup, Fosse created fascinating, mysterious, and sometimes, grotesque representations of gender. “Stage-gendered creatures are chimeras which elude the standard taxonomies and offer alternatives to the limited possibilities of lived realities. That these alternatives cannot exist outside the realm of theatre makes them all the more cogent to the imagination” (Senelick 11). His ensembles are not like the choruses of Rodgers and Hammerstein, where the women of the chorus wore dresses and the men wore pants, where innocence and ballet were woven with the story to create a nostalgic Americana. Fosse's forté is not storytelling, but using the chorus to create atmosphere, mood, character and establish environment. His world is dark, comedic, gritty, pulsing with sexuality through disjointed, disgendered numbers that are always conscious of the razzle dazzle of show business.

2.18 CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER TWO

The cultural construct of gender determined both the portrayal and perception of the women and men of the chorus. The anxieties surrounding the changing relationships between men and women were often projected onto the image of the chorus girl. As women's social roles began changing with the struggle for the vote, their increasing involvement in the workplace during both World Wars, and the sexual revolution of the 1960's, so did the image of femininity embodied by the chorus girl. Perceived as immoral, social-climbing, gold-digging, stupid, studious, an automaton and an artist, and sometimes several of these qualities at once, the chorus girl remained the centerpiece of the Broadway musical, and an important cultural symbol through the 1940's. As women began to experience increasing sexual freedom and control over their own bodies with the advent of birth control and the passage of Roe Vs. Wade, and theatre became increasingly removed from popular culture in the 1950's and 60's, the chorus girl lost her centrality. While she remains important to the production of musical comedy, whether new and nostalgic like The Producers (2001) or revivals like Sweet Charity (2005), the democratization of desire has removed her from the pedestal she once occupied.

The chorus boy, originally treated as a partner and backdrop for the women, was a cultural embarrassment, ignored or acknowledged condescendingly. His ability and willingness to display himself onstage in a subordinate position to chorus girls, engaged in the feminine art of dance, placed the chorus boy outside of the model of western heterosexual masculinity. Working outside of traditional male gender roles, he was coded as homosexual, and this may have been true of the majority of men in the chorus (no statistics are available). Regardless of statistics, the perception was that chorus boys were gay. Efforts to counteract this image comes first from operetta in the 1920's, where masculinity is projected in thundering bass choruses.

Musical comedy picks up the idea in the late 1920's by making the chorus boys members of the military. Sometimes literally as in Yip Yap Yaphank and This is the Army, more often fictionally. The riot at Stonewall in 1969 begins the process of gay liberation that results in openly gay characters and openly gay male choruses appearing on stage in the 1970's. By the time La Cage aux Folles arrives in 1983, homosexuality is no longer coded, it is openly acknowledged and celebrated in a musical comedy. Bob Fosse eroticized the chorus, blurring gender lines even further. If sex remains on some level what sells a Broadway show, playing with gender roles will always be an essential element of the chorus— female or male, gay or straight.

NOTES

¹ Mae West in her autobiography, Goodness had Nothing to Do with It, recalls “The homosexuals I had met were usually boys from the chorus of some of the shows I’d been in. I looked upon them as amusing and having a great sense of humor” (91-2).

² Miller was also rumored to have had sex with a number of the men in the chorus, a claim that her biographer, Warren Harris, dismisses, even though he found chorus boys who admitted as much. Harris tossed out their claims with, “their word alone doesn’t mean much; they could merely be basking in her glory” (131)!

³ Laurence Senelick points out that drag performances in the military were not unusual during both world wars (350-368).

⁴ It was also an effective publicity stunt, which received coverage in many papers.

⁵ See November 2001 issue of Dance Magazine, Gold, Rhee. “Confessions of a Boy Dancer.” (56-60), and “Speaking Out: More Male Dancers Tell It Like It Is.” (53-56). Valin, Kathy. “Fear of Men in Tights.” Dance Magazine. Nov. 2005. 79:11; 56-60.

⁶ Outside the scope of this study is research on male stripping which shows that traditional gender hierarchies are maintained in male strip shows. Men refuse to be objectified by the female or the male gaze. Male strip shows are structured to allow the dancers to control access to their bodies, patron interaction and crowd control (see Margolis and Arnold 151-165). “The consumption of male sexual objects, then, is characterized by modifying traditional

patriarchal privileges within the arena of sexual objectification and consumption. Men control sexual access to themselves and women” (Tewksbury 179).

⁷ He also recalled that the women in the chorus, who play the Follies chorus girls, originally had “WR” imprinted on the buttocks of their costumes. This caused a women’s group to protest and the letters were removed before the show opened.

3.0 AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHORUS

As in American society, race plays a contentious role in the American musical theatre. This chapter will trace the portrayal of African-Americans in the American musical theatre chorus, the experience of chorus members as they sought work in the theatre, and their invaluable contribution to the form through jazz dance. The African-American chorus performer experienced several peaks and valleys in employment and popularity as the musical and American society wrestled with the issue of race. This chapter is divided into eight sections. The first two sections focus on minstrelsy and its portrayal of African-Americans. The third section examines the early development of black musical comedy by African-American artists from 1890 to 1913. The boom of the black musical, initiated by Shuffle Along in 1921, through its bust in the early thirties, and the influence of the chorus through the new jazz dance, is the subject of section four. White appropriation of the black musical is the subject of section five. Integration of the musical theatre chorus is examined through examples from 1920 through the post-war period in section six. In section seven the emergence of the black gospel and opera chorus is delineated. The final section of this chapter looks at the position of African-American chorus members in contemporary musicals.

3.1 MINSTRELSY

The racism, segregation, and discrimination that are the legacies of slavery kept the majority of African-American performers away from Broadway for the better half of the twentieth-century. After Emancipation performers found an outlet for their talent in minstrelsy, the most popular form of entertainment in the nineteenth-century. The portrayal of African-Americans in American musical theatre begins with blackface minstrelsy, a genre which predates The Black Crook (1866), by several decades. Minstrel troupes were composed of white men who blackened their faces with burnt cork makeup and played songs, performed comic sketches, and danced. The shows always made reference, either sentimental, humorous, or both to slave life on Southern plantations. Minstrelsy has been the subject of much recent scholarship, as academics attempt to decipher the complicated layers of performance and reception that make up America's first native form of musical theatre. One of the challenges that demands interpretation is the tradition of "blacking up," or creating a mask that hides white skin color and exaggerates other features, including the mouth and eyes, which can be circled with white makeup to bring them into relief. Also in question, are the motivating forces behind wearing the mask of blackness. Was it strictly a racist ploy, an effort to elevate the wearer above the enslaved? Was it, as Eric Lott proposes, a complex mixture of attraction and oppression, "The black mask offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening--and male--Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them"(25). Even more elusive is how the audience received minstrel performances. Were they there for the music, which made up most of the playbill? Were they there for the comedy, which was frequently topical, and aimed at what was becoming high culture—opera and ballet; or women, who were beginning to ask for social reforms at conclaves like the Seneca Falls meeting of 1848; or the anti-intellectualism of

the comic speeches on technology and science that were often highlights of the olio, (the middle section of the show)? Eric Lott notes that, “on the one hand they [minstrel shows] constantly deflated the pretensions of an emerging middle-class culture of science, reform, education, and professionalism, while on the other, they disseminated information about technology and urban life for working people very often new to the city” (64). Perhaps, more than any of these, the comedy derived from seeing a black man made the fool. That minstrelsy’s portrayal of African-Americans was racist is the one observation not in question.

What is clear is that caricatured portrayals of slaves and free blacks in the North made an indelible impression on American culture. The legacies of minstrelsy for the purposes of this paper are three fold: 1) Blackface minstrelsy promulgates a racist image of black men and women that creates artistic limitations and barriers for African-American artists that will take decades to surmount. 2) Minstrelsy, as America’s first native musical theatre form, creates an intersection, however tenuous, between African-American culture and the Broadway stage through ragtime and jazz music and dance. 3) This intersection provides an opportunity for black performers, giving them an entry into show business.

One of the legacies of minstrelsy is the stereotypes of black men and women that it embedded in the American psyche. Some of these are: “the Northern Dandy,” who was a fine dressing, foolish swell who mistakenly believed he was handsome; the “yaller gal,” by contrast, was a light-complected, highly desirable beauty, who “like the desirable white woman, was hard to win and harder to hold, but never coarse or mannerless.” (Toll 76); the “yaller gal’s” female counterpart was the plantation “Mammy” or “Old Auntie,” the matriarch, loved by black and white, but in no way viewed as a desirable sexual partner; “Mammy’s” male counterpart was “Old Uncle,” who was the source of much sentimental rhapsodizing, as either he himself died,

causing his master much grief, or his beloved master died, causing “Old Uncle” much grief. “These white-haired, ‘Old Uncles’ possessed what nineteenth century Americans considered the sentimental qualities of the ‘heart’ without the balancing qualities of the ‘mind.’ They represented feelings and emotions in their pure forms” (78). According to Fannin Belcher “the improvised Negro minstrel [was]: a high-stepping, ‘razor-toting,’ rent-dodging, white-lipped, wide-mouthed, flashily dressed, grinning, shiftless prevaricator who, in malapropish polysyllabics discoursed upon his insatiable appetite for crap-shooting, water-melons, fried chicken and ‘yaller gals’”(60). The audience of the nineteenth-century took some kind of pleasure in observing the world of slavery as portrayed by minstrels, and took the minstrels’ portrayals of African-Americans as truthful observations about an inferior race.

Another one of the legacies of minstrelsy is that it was the “first point of intersection between an African-American culture with a rich musical heritage that included African retentions and a largely derivative English and Italian stylistic tradition mixed occasionally with Anglo-American folk materials” (Mahar 4). This point of intersection, although funneled through white men, brought a form of African-American song and dance to the attention of the white public. The music and dance of minstrelsy would have a lasting impact on the Broadway stage. This intersection also created a window of opportunity for the first black performers who took to the stage and assumed the mask that supposedly represented them. Their appropriation of the mask, and their claim to an authenticity denied their fellow white performers, adds another layer of interpretive complexity. Minstrelsy provides one of the first employment opportunities to black men, and eventually, women.

Minstrelsy was America’s first native musical theatre expression. Initially performed solely by white men, minstrel troupes established permanent homes in the major Northeast cities:

Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia, as well as touring extensively throughout the North, South and into Canada. While the popularity of minstrelsy peaked during the antebellum period, 1846-1854, it remained the most popular form of entertainment in the nineteenth-century with a broad base of appeal, from illiterate working class men and women to authors like Mark Twain and presidents (Lott 9). The legacy of minstrelsy's music and its ideas continue to influence American popular culture to this day, witness Bruce Springsteen's recent hit, a recording of the minstrel song "Ole' Dan Tucker" (1843), written by one of minstrelsy's first practitioners, Dan Emmett, on Springsteen's 2006 release We Shall Overcome—the Seeger Sessions.

Minstrelsy had its roots in the earlier part of the nineteenth-century with the popularity of blackface entertainers, a growing sense of national and class anxiety, and Northerner's curiosity about slavery. T.D. Rice is generally credited as the man who popularized the combination of blacking up with a song and dance. While he had honed his performance of the dance that became "Jump Jim Crow" in Louisville, Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati, he came to fame in his debut at the Bowery Theatre on November 12, 1832 (Belcher 77). He had concocted a dance based upon the movements of a black man he had met in Kentucky, or one of the aforementioned cities. In some versions of the story, Rice appropriated not only the dance movements of the man, but his clothes as well. While the origins of the performance are contested, Rice's success was not. A little over a decade later, his solo effort was built upon by Dan Emmett, who created the Virginia Minstrels in 1843, a quartet of musicians who blackened their faces and sang plantation melodies, i.e. nostalgic tunes of plantation life penned by white male writers.

Early minstrel shows of the 1840's were composed primarily of unconnected music and dance numbers that frequently burlesqued the popular imported European artists performing in

the city. English, French and Italian opera companies were subject to send-ups, the singing of Swedish soprano Jenny Lind, the ballet dancing of Fanny Essler, the Highland Fling, all were mixed in with original dialect songs composed by the minstrels themselves (Mahar 24). These songs generally took one of two tacks, either they were sentimental about slavery and plantation life, or they were comic story songs about the lives of slaves told from the slave's (i.e. singer's) point of view. All of this was done behind a mask of burnt cork make-up, and sometimes, when called for, in drag. For historian Daphne Brooks, "Minstrelsy valorized a grotesquely humorous and often erotic exhibition of racial transformation, structuring entertainment elaborately around the titillating display of bodies and the corporeally transfigured white male figure" (26). Music scholar William J. Mahar argues that burlesque, in the sense of send-up and mockery, applied to every aspect of the show—that this was the real essence of minstrelsy (41). It is impossible, however, to deny the essentially racist propaganda presented by the presentation and content of the songs.

By the 1850's the minstrel show, in a move initiated by Edwin Christy, head of the popular Christy Minstrel troupe, developed a three-part structure. The format featured an opening musical number introduced by the interlocutor, who stood in the center of a semi-circle of seated musicians, and acted as master of ceremonies. The line of musicians was capped on either end by "Tambo," the tambourine player, and "Bones," who played rhythm sticks. These "end men" were the best comedians in the company and engaged in exchanges with the interlocutor and each other. The middle section, or olio, allowed the members of the troupe to display their various performance specialties, such as: banjo playing, a comic monologue, the whistling version of an opera aria, a burlesque of a political speech. The third part, called the "afterpiece," featured a sketch, usually about southern plantation life, mocking the follies of the

black man as “Northern dandy,” or a burlesque of a classic play. The show concluded in a grand finale which featured a “walk-around,” where couples would dance and promenade their way around the stage, stopping center to perform a bit of their specialty (Toll 54-6). The walk-around evolved into the cakewalk, a competitive couples dance that originated on the plantation where slaves would satirize the fine manners of white Southerners by strutting and prancing, inventing their own fancy steps in hopes of winning a prize cake. The cakewalk would become one of the first dance crazes that crossed over from black culture to white society. It was introduced by the minstrel show, but popularized by the African-American vaudeville comedians Bert Williams and George Walker, and the African-American show Clorindy. The dance “was an incubator of talent, a framework for new steps, which helped to prepare the way for ballroom dances” (Stearns 124). Claiming to provide accurate portrayals of the lives of African-Americans, minstrelsy ultimately reinforced racist stereotypes that influenced the portrayal of blacks in popular culture for years to come, and delayed the development of African-American artists as they fought to overcome the lies of minstrelsy (Lott 17).

3.2 EARLY OPPORTUNITIES

While there had been a few short-lived black minstrel troupes before and during the Civil War, it was in the mid-1860’s that the first black minstrel troupe, Brooker and Clayton’s Georgia Minstrels, scored lasting success touring extensively in the Eastern States. After Emancipation, hundreds of thousands of uneducated freed slaves needed to find ways to earn a living. Many chose to use the gifts of song and dance that had spiritually supported them on the plantation. Black minstrel companies were one of the few areas of entertainment where African-Americans

were allowed to perform. W.C. Handy, who began his career as a black minstrel, noted “The minstrel show at that time was one of the greatest outlets for talented musicians and artists. All the best talent of that generation came down the same drain. The composers, the singers, the musicians, the speakers, the stage performers-the minstrel show got them all” (36).

The heyday of black minstrel companies was 1865 to 1900. One of the first companies organized was Lew Johnson’s Plantation Minstrel Company (Johnson, Black Manhattan 89). At the end of the Civil War, the Georgia Minstrels were organized in Macon, Georgia by African-American Manager Charles Hicks, who put together a group of seventeen “genuine” Negroes. Management was taken over by the white Charles Callender, and the company became known as Callender’s Original Georgia Minstrels (89). Callender turned his company into big business in the 1870’s. The troupe featured some of the most talented black artists of the day, including dancer Billy Kersands, who later formed his own troupe. Other popular troupes included Mahara’s, The Eureka, and Primrose and West, who traveled with forty white and thirty black minstrels (Sampson 3).

With a few exceptions the companies were white-owned and managed. They retained the format of their white counterparts with the marketing advantage of being the “genuine” article and not mere “Ethiopian delineators.” Suddenly, white Northern audiences were confronted with real African-Americans, some of them for the first time. The Callender troupe, with the exception of the end men, did not don burnt cork. Critics expressed surprise at the various hues of the performers’ skin tones (Toll 200). It was not that easy to escape the confines of the mask, and black performers would continue to wear it in minstrelsy, vaudeville, and musical comedy into the 1930’s, as they aimed to meet the expectations of the white audiences who paid to see them. It may be tempting to ask why African-American performers would engage in what was

such a degrading portrayal of themselves. David Krasner points out, “if black performers appeared to adorn the stereotype in the narrowest sense, and to be eager to assume the blackface mask, this narrowness is in part a measure of their desperation. For an emerging black theatre, such stage stereotyping was the first step toward countering minstrelsy over the long haul” (Resistance 8). Although, little freedom was provided to black artists within the minstrel show format, “these performers could not help bringing to professional minstrelsy something fresh and original. They brought a great deal that was new in dancing, by exhibiting their perfection of the jig, the buck and wing, and the tantalizing stop-time dances. Billy Kersands, the most famous of all the genuine Negro minstrels, introduced the Virginia “essence,” which constituted one of the fundamental steps in Negro dancing” (Johnson, Black Manhattan 89).

Black minstrel companies also offered opportunities for black women performers, breaking with the all-male white company tradition.¹ African-American women were hired to take on the roles that white actors had been performing in drag. Minstrelsy would establish a long-lived prejudice favoring light-skinned women as the most beautiful members of their race. Black vaudevillian Tom Fletcher recalls in ads for the Harrison Brothers minstrel troupe the wording often went like this. “WANTED: Colored performers, men and women, Men who can double in band and orchestra or band and stage. Real black men and yellow women, Good dressers on and off stage” (42). Fletcher quotes another ad for the same company, “Wanted dark men and light complected colored women” (113). This additional layer of discrimination against black women would persist through the developmental decades of black theatre. Perpetuated by white producers, and eventually internalized in the black community, this standard of beauty that preferred black women to be as close to white as possible, was sometimes extolled by white theatre critics, and at other times criticized for being too close to white, or not black enough. In

spite of the obstacles, black women performers found a number of avenues onto the musical stage.

The Hyer Sisters provided a unique opportunity for men and women performers in their touring show. They were active professionally for three decades, beginning with their singing debut in 1867, through the 1870's and 1880's. Their significance to this study is the role they played in providing training for fledging chorus members at the beginning of African-American theatre history in this country. The Hyer Sisters chose to pursue their talents in opera entertainments and concert tours. Anna Madah (b. 1855), a soprano, and Emma Louise (b. 1857), a contralto, were considered musical prodigies who traveled the country performing opera selections. Enormously talented and successful, they were managed by their father, Sam, and began producing and performing in 1876 with Out of Bondage: or, Before and After the War. This comedy featured the two sisters and starred Sam Lucas, a famous blackface minstrel. The show had a burlesqued plantation theme as its first part, but the final act featured the sisters singing selections from their regular repertoire. "By shattering the traditional stage image of Black women, they provided a new image for the entry of the Black female performer on the professional stage in America. Moreover, through their talents and innovative ideas, they provided the foundation that would eventually lead to the evolution of Black Musical comedy into the form we know it as today" (Tanner 28).

3.3 MOVING TOWARDS MUSICAL COMEDY

The period 1890 through 1910 was an extraordinarily prolific time for African-American creativity on the stage. A core group of artists including Bob Cole, Bert Williams, George

Walker, Will Marion Cook, Ernest Hogan, Ada Overton Walker, J. Rosamond Johnson, Jesse Shipp, and J. Leubrie Hill, forged ahead through many cultural obstacles to create an impressive body of work that attempted to lift the portrayal of African-Americans out of the stereotypes of minstrelsy. These talented young artists, “encountered a federal government that turned its back on the rights of freedpeople, allowed rampant racist violence, upheld segregation laws as constitutional, and rendered the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments meaningless” (Sotiropoulos 3). They collaborated, created and performed together in a variety of combinations that helped lay the foundations for the black musical comedy of the 1920’s. While performing within the narrowly circumscribed limits of minstrel stereotypes, they managed to subvert the blackface mask, or abandon it altogether. Providing familiar entertainment for their white audiences, they were often able to insert a different message for their African-American audience members, “when black performers played to black audiences—even though they were segregated—they hoped these audiences would respond to their performances less as a “darky” act, and more as commentary on their own lives in a racist society” (6).

The first successful, professional African-American musical to take a small step away from the tradition of minstrelsy was The Creole Show, an idea that originated with the famous black minstrel Sam Lucas, and which was produced in 1890 by Sam T. Jack, a white burlesque theatre owner and manager. Unable to interest black investors in his ideas, Lucas approached Jack (Sampson 6). The Creole Show abandoned the all male minstrelsy format, and capitalizing on the success of burlesque, added sixteen light-skinned African-American chorus girls. This new addition to black shows was to have long lasting repercussions. “The original phenomenon of the light-skinned chorus girl was a necessity predicated by the system of white racism that valued white womanhood above all else and recognized beauty only in imitation of that

standard” (Gottschild 135). The show also broke with the southern plantation theme in favor of urban characters, who were not in the “Zip Coon” minstrelsy mode (Sotiropoulos 37). In addition to the women, the stars of the show were some of the best known black minstrels: Sam Lucas, Fred Piper, Billy Jackson, and Irving Jones. The show adhered to minstrelsy’s structure, without the blackface makeup, and with a twist. The women were now seated in the center of the semi-circle, and there were three female conversationalists, one of whom was played by popular male impersonator, Florence Hines; the sixteen chorus girls flanked the trio of interlocutors, eight on a side, while two of the men played the end men (Peterson 92). The first part of the show followed the traditional structure with music and jokes, followed by the olio, (which was becoming virtually indistinguishable from vaudeville, with its assemblage of various specialties), and a finale, whose significant contribution was the inclusion of the cakewalk. “For the first time women were introduced in the dance, ending the all-male minstrel show. From then on all Black shows had women in the company” (Tanner 36).

Several of The Creole Show’s chorus members went on to become stars: Stella Wiley, part of the vaudeville act, Cole and Wiley, and future wife of Bob Cole; Dora Dean, a celebrated beauty, who met her future husband and dance partner, Charles Johnson, on the show; they would become international stars on the vaudeville circuit as ballroom dancers; and Mattie Wilks, a talented singer and actress. Most of the performers were hired out of New York, but the company rehearsed in Haverhill, Massachusetts and made its debut at the Howard Theatre in Boston. Jack next moved the show to Chicago in 1891 where it ran for two years, playing the World’s Fair in 1893 at Jack’s Opera House, before it arrived in New York City where it ran for five seasons. “They created something of a sensation in New York when they edged up to the

‘Broadway zone’ by playing at the old Standard Theatre in Greeley Square” (Johnson, Black Manhattan 95).

The Creole Show is the first recorded example of a chorus of “real” African-American women presented as the object of desire traditionally signified by the white chorus girl. As David Krasner observes, “the presence of black women—who had rarely appeared on stage prior to this—was itself an indication of significant changes in perception” (Resistance 18). The Creole Show debuted in an era that valued the ideas of science, modernity, progressivism and facts. Some intellectuals were using the theories of Darwin and the emerging science of anthropology to create racial hierarchies and classifications that would provide scientific justification for the continuing oppression of African-Americans (19). As the title of the show indicates, the chorus women were all light-skinned. According to Jo Tanner, “Despite its contributions, The Creole Show performed a disservice to Black women performers: It helped to foster and preserved the ‘light-skinned woman’ image over the years, which tends to exclude ‘dark-skinned’ Black women from certain roles. For the most part, the Black chorus girls of the 1920’s and 1930’s were fairskinned” (132). This image was reinforced in the 1920’s and 30’s by the popular Harlem club scene, especially the legendary Cotton Club, which was famous for its “high yellow” chorus line (132). It wasn’t until 1932 that the Cotton Club hired Lucille Wilson as its first dark-skinned chorus girl” (Haskins 75-6).

The success of The Creole Show prompted John W. Isham, who was an African-American agent for the show, to assemble The Octoroons in 1895. The Octoroons took another step away from minstrelsy, billing itself as a “musical farce”; however, it too stayed with minstrelsy’s three-part format. Isham hired a female chorus, and six female leads, including Stella Wiley. The opening featured a rousing chorus with girls and a medley of songs; the second

part was a burlesque sketch that provided opportunities for the leads to show off their specialties. The finale focused on the chorus with a “cake-walk jubilee, a military drill, and a “chorus-march finale” (Johnson, Black Manhattan 96). The drill and the march, were both chorus dance standards in white shows, but the cakewalk was a black dance innovation. Unrelated songs were freely interpolated by the two male stars, Walter Smart and George Williams, who sang their hit “No Coon Can Come Too Black for Me ” (Woll 4-5).

Isham’s second show, Oriental America, produced in 1896, was the first African-American show to perform in a legitimate Broadway house, Palmer’s, and not on the burlesque circuit (Woll 5). The Morning Times in Washington, D.C. devotes a paragraph to the work of the ensemble as singers and dancers, mentioning the “powerful and well-balanced chorus,” and, “A flower ballet by a bevy of pretty girls, assisted by Naby Ray, was an attractive number in the second act” (qtd. in Sampson 64-5). Isham’s innovation in Oriental America was to make the finale an operatic showcase for some of the most talented African-American musicians and vocalists of the day who sang solos and choruses from Rigoletto, Faust, Carmen and Il Trovatore. Opera, the hallmark of white European culture, replaced the blackface stereotypes of minstrelsy afterpieces (63-5).

Isham’s productions were not the only source of employment for chorus performers. Madame M. Sissieretta Jones, popularly known as “the Black Patti,” was an African-American concert singer, who provided chorus women with the opportunity to perform in her company, Black Patti’s Troubadours, which toured the country and Europe in various incarnations from 1896 to her retirement in 1916.² The initial company included comedian Bob Cole, who also wrote the shows, Stella Wiley, as well as thirty chorus girls, a significant number of women (Riis, More Than Just Minstrel Shows 11). While the musicals she presented were based on

minstrelsy, her finale, like the finale of Oriental America, was a showcase for her operatic soprano. Patti was the only performer in the company trained in opera. “The other members of the troupe were instructed to sing loudly behind Mme. Jones in the finale” (Tanner 65). However, dance was not absent. Jacqui Malone notes that:

A typical Troubadours show had three parts: a buck dancing contest ended part one, a cakewalk ended part two, and the final section presented songs and operatic selections by Black Patti and the chorus. Ida Forsyne recalls her days with the company: ‘We had a cakewalking contest every performance and my partner and I won in seven nights straight in a row. We added legomania [dancing with high kicks] and tumbling in the breaks’ (60).

African-American artists were searching for a style that would combine the novel with the familiar. Using the old framework of minstrelsy as a launching point, they combined it with operetta, farce comedy and variety show elements. “Unabashed eclecticism was the hallmark of the black musical show from 1896 to 1900” (Riis, More Than Just Minstrel Shows 20). Black minstrel troupes, The Hyers Sisters, Black Patti’s Troubadours, and Isham’s shows were all laying the foundation for black musical comedy.

3.4 EARLY MUSICAL COMEDY

The first original full-length musical produced, written and performed by African-Americans was A Trip to Coontown: A Musical Comedy in Two Acts, (The show’s title alluded

to the smash hit of the 1891-2 season, A Trip to Chinatown.) which opened on April 4, 1898 at the Third Avenue Theatre. The creators were Bob Cole and his partner Billy Johnson. Both men had been with Black Patti's Troubadours until 1897 when they left to form their own company. Former collaborator James Weldon Johnson called Cole "one of the most talented and versatile Negroes ever connected with the stage. He could write a play, stage it, and play a part" (Along My Way 151). Cole issued a "Colored Actors Declaration of Independence" in 1898. He wrote, "We are going to have our own shows. We are going to write them ourselves, we are going to have our own stage manager, our own orchestra leader and our own manager out front to count up. No divided houses-our race must be seated from the boxes back" (48). The creation of A Trip to Coontown, which the authors described as a "musical farce," embodied Cole's ideals (Armstead-Johnson 134). Cole played a tramp called Wayside Willie, and Johnson played Jim Flimflammer, who, as his name indicates, was a con man. The performers did not wear burnt cork, but Bob Cole wore white face makeup for his role, an interesting subversion of the usual blackface (Krasner, Resistance 32). While the content was not revolutionary, the presence of a continuous plot, while thin, helped break away from the three part format of minstrelsy (Huggins 275).

Only a few months later on June 18, 1898 Clorindy-The Origin of the Cakewalk by Will Marion Cook, composer, and the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, librettist and lyricist, would debut at the Casino Theater Roof Garden. Cook's idea was to create a short play based on "how the cakewalk came about in Louisiana in the early Eighteen Eighties" (Cook 228). It would be a "Negro Operetta" written in the new syncopated style of ragtime. According to Cook, it took patience and a little subterfuge to get the show presented at the Casino as part of E.E. Rice's vaudeville style entertainments, "Rice's Summer Nights." Since Rice would not acknowledge

him in the waiting room of his office, let alone give him an audition, Cook decided to show up at a rehearsal with his company and create an audition, which won him the slot of the afterpiece on the bill.

Clorindy had been written for the team of Bert Williams and George Walker, who were, due to a successful vaudeville booking, unavailable. Ernest Hogan stepped in as the lead comedian, and also something of a director. Cook records that Hogan eliminated Dunbar's book, since an 11pm show on an uncovered roof was not conducive to dialogue. Hogan hired several dancers, and was the person who got them into performance fettle. Cook handled the rigors of the music, teaching the performers. "Remember, reader, I had twenty-six of the finest Negro voices in America, twenty-six happy, gifted Negroes who saw maybe weeks of work and money before them. Remember, too, that they were singing a new style of music. Like a mighty anthem in rhythm, these voices rang out" (231). "Cook was the first competent composer to take what was then known as ragtime and work it out in a musicianly way. His choruses and finales in Clorindy, complete novelties as they were, sung by a lusty chorus, were simply breath-taking. Broadway had something entirely new" (Johnson, Black Manhattan 104).

Clorindy's African-American cast of forty, according to Bordman, later reduced to thirty, was such a sensation that it was on the bill for most of the summer (159). Cook himself was astonished and deliriously happy with the results of the show, "My chorus sang like Russians, dancing meanwhile like Negroes, and cakewalking like angels, black angels! When the last note was sounded the audience stood and cheered for at least ten minutes" (Cook 232). In addition to the innovation of the catchy, syncopated music, the performance of the chorus in Clorindy marked another significant change. "Such a seemingly simple idea as presenting story in song and dance simultaneously-a traditional mode in Sierra Leone- was seen as a profitable novelty,

when it was introduced in Clorindy, although the songs and dances on the American stage were different from the African ones.” (Riis, More Than Just Minstrel Shows 47) The singing and dancing chorus made such an impression upon its white producer, George Lederer, who owned the Casino Theater, that it effected the way he presented future productions. “He judged correctly that the practice of the Negro chorus, to dance strenuously and sing at the same time, if adapted to the white stage would be a profitable novelty; so he departed considerably from the model of the easy, leisurely movements of the English light opera chorus. He also judged that some injection of Negro syncopated music would produce a like result” (Johnson, Along My Way 151).

In an effort to continue to draw white audiences, and break away from the stereotypes of minstrelsy, black artists took their cue from the popularity of operetta on Broadway stages and began to create their own. In Dahomey, produced by and starring George Walker and Bert Williams, with music by Will Marion Cook, lyrics by Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alex Rogers, and written and staged by Jesse Shipp, opened at the New York Theatre in Times Square, making it the first African-American play to open on Broadway (Tanner 42-3). Williams and Walker played Shylock Homestead and Rareback Pinkerton, who are looking for a stolen silver casket in hopes of claiming the reward. The money will help them move to Dahomey, which they do in act two, becoming rulers of the nation.

The show was set in Africa and America with African characters and featured a cast of forty, including a male chorus, who accompanied Ada Overton Walker in a minuet, “A L’Africane” (Woll 41). The chorus of women included Anita Bush and Laura Bowman, who began their long and illustrious careers with this show (Tanner 43). Bush would go on to found and run the Lafayette Players in Harlem, while Bowman would also run her own company. Both

women were teachers and coaches for a generation of performers. In Dahomey, also had a smashingly successful tour to London. “It’s reception and audience were interracial, international and transcontinental.” (Riis, More Than Just Minstrel Shows 55). The play ran for almost eight months in London, from May to December in 1903, with 250 performances. The company gave a royal command performance in Buckingham Palace (for Prince Edward’s ninth birthday party), before returning to the United States for a forty-week run, closing in June 1905 (55). In “Alien/Nation: *Re-Imagining the Black Body (Politic) in Williams and Walker’s In Dahomey*,” Daphne Brooks does an extensive analysis of the play that positions the black performers as transforming themselves and the images of African-Americans. Change is a theme that runs through the show, capped with a pantomime style transformation ending.

Williams and Walker’s production conjured up a new paradigm for black performance that mixed, scrambled, and churned back out disruptive images of burnt-cork bodies and displaced ‘natives’ in order to express the distinct experience of African American alienation at the turn of the century. The duo and their company created a rupture in the inherited forms of black representation in order to re-envision social and cultural survival, and they sought to reclaim ‘blackness’ as a kind of property invested with wealth and induced with real social and cultural power for African Americans.

(224)

Black artists would continue to create work in popularly accepted genres, giving them a familiar framework within which they could carefully attempt to subvert the stereotypes white and black audiences were accustomed to without alienating their customers.

In a move clearly designed to push the social and creative envelope, Will Marion Cook created The Southerners (1904), billed as “A Musical Study in Black and White,” and “A Musical Romance.” The play is the dream of General Preston’s old slave Uncle Daniel (white actor Eddie Leonard in blackface) that takes us back to 1830. The plot revolves around preventing the sale of Preston’s slaves to a nasty Irishman, Brannigan Bey, and a love story between a younger Preston and Polly Drayton (Bordman 201). George Lederer, who had produced Clorindy, produced and directed the show and sprinkled the story with plenty of interpolated specialty acts (Riis, Just Before Jazz 105). It debuted on the New York Theatre stage on May 23, 1904. The white actors had all the speaking roles, while the black performers had some of the specialty numbers and a chorus of singers and dancers, including a specialty act of “picks,” African-American children (Peterson 327-8). Abbie Mitchell, (Cook’s wife), played a principal role, Mandy. The black chorus appeared in one scene, but the tension caused by this racial mixing was great enough to provoke comment from reviewers. The New York Times reviewer began his commentary with this observation:

When the chorus of real live coons walked in for the cake [walk] last night at the New York Theatre, mingling with the white members of the cast, there were those in the audience who trembled in their seats, as if expecting another Pelée [the volcano Mt. Pelée] explosion... But it presently became evident that the spirit of harmony reigned. The magician was discovered on inquiry, to be none other than the negro composer of the score Mr. Will Marion Cook, who all alone and with no other culinary aid,

had succeeded in harmonizing the racial broth as skilfully [sic] as he had harmonized the accompanying score. (“The Southerners”)

Anxiety around the racial mixing takes up the first half of the review. At one point, the reviewer notes that, “It was rumored that he [Cook] had supplied his darky aides with safety razors,” whether to protect them from the cast or the audience is unclear. Cook’s experiment, appears to have been just that, since I can find no other documentation from this period of black and white choruses appearing together onstage.

Walker and Williams went on to produce two more operettas, which they starred in, and both of which featured a male and female chorus. Abyssinia, continued with the African theme of In Dahomey, opening on February 20, 1906 at the Majestic Theatre on Columbus Circle, with the choruses receiving special praise. “The opening number ‘Ode to Menelik’ sung by the male chorus was especially pleasing and showed careful choosing of voices and subsequent training” (“Williams and Walker”). With a book by Jesse Shipp and music by Cook, the show featured a chorus of twenty women, billed as the “Abyssinian Maids,” and six men, including Charles Gilpin, who became a premier dramatic actor (Sampson 368). George Walker’s wife, Ada Overton Walker, who was one of the great dancers of the era, staged the dances for the production, as she did for their final show Bandana Land.

Bandana (or Bandanna) Land was the most critically acclaimed of Williams and Walker productions, with music by Cook and Will Vodery, lyrics by Alex Rogers, and directed by Rogers and Jesse Shipp. The show opened on February 3, 1908 at the Majestic Theatre in Brooklyn and was a success with black and white audiences alike. While African-American performers were working within a white European genre and appropriated popular numbers like

the “Merry Widow Waltz,” which was interpolated into Bandana Land, critics took note when black performers strayed too far into what was considered white territory, or too far from minstrel territory (“Bandanna Land”). Here is where the term “genuine” and “authentic” in the minstrel show continued to haunt African-American performers. Since the stereotypes had been billed as true depictions of blacks, to stray from them was considered unnatural, inauthentic, not true to the nature of the black man. A concerted effort to control the black body in performance was exerted by the white public (Brooks 5). The critic from the Dramatic Mirror wrote in 1908, “What the management’s objective object [sic] in permitting most of the men and nearly all of the women to wear straight hair, however, is difficult to understand. The types would be very much closer to natural if it were not for this point. But it really does not matter, and the singing of the straight-haired chorus is just as vigorous as it would be with kinks” (qtd in Sampson 131). The efforts of African-American artists were constrained by cultural expectations, but this did not stop them from introducing new ideas and discarding old ones. “That black performers intentionally straightened and styled their hair to their liking is not insignificant considering white demand for a particular representation of black life. If whites expected kinky hair, then performers’ insistence on straightening their hair was a kind of protest against the stereotype” (Sotiropoulos 112). A year into Bandana Land’s run, George Walker, who was suffering from syphilis, became too ill to perform, and Ada took over his role while they reconfigured the show.

Another African-American team working in the operetta vein was Bob Cole, who had teamed with the composer, J. Rosamond Johnson. Together they produced, wrote, directed and performed in two shows- The Shoo-Fly Regiment, which opened at the Bijou in August 6, 1907, and featured Abbie Mitchell, as the principal soprano, a role that was later taken on by Ada Overton Walker. The obsession with skin color as a determining factor of racial authenticity

crops up in review by the critic at the New York Sun who laments, “Although the company is made up entirely of colored performers there were times when one fairly ached for the sight of a man or woman who was really black and wasn’t ashamed of it” (qtd in Sampson 132). The Red Moon, which opened May 3, 1909 at the Majestic Theatre had a chorus of twelve women, six of whom were billed as “The Ada Girls” and six men listed as “College Boys.” There were also six children in a chorus listed as “The Dancing Picks” (Sampson 287). Again the show was criticized as being too “white.”

The thirteen-year boom of creativity in African-American theatre came to an abrupt end when George Walker, Ernest Hogan, and Bob Cole all died in 1911. Other changes also brought closure to an era. Bert Williams, the other half of the nation’s most visible African-American comedy team, joined the Ziegfeld Follies in 1910. Will Marion Cook and James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson had turned to other careers, or interests. With the exception of Williams, there were no black performers on the Broadway stage from 1912 to 1917. Black theatre artists redirected their energies to Harlem, drama, and vaudeville. But this early generation of creators had introduced two elements to white audiences that would make a formidable impact on American musical theatre: rag, or syncopated music, and in the cakewalk, vernacular dance.

The deaths of so many vital artists coincided with the beginning of the Great Migration of African-Americans to the North, particularly New York City. Rising racial tension, as a result of burgeoning Jim Crow laws, increased lynchings in the South, and years of poor crops made the North more attractive (Emery, Black Dance U.S. 221). With the advent of World War I, jobs in the defense industry created an additional draw. As blacks moved north, they brought their dances with them, and these dances: the Black Bottom, the Charleston, The Shimmy, Ballin’ the Jack, would all turn up in African-American and white theatre productions danced by huge lines

of chorus members, black and white. African-American contributions in music and dance would continue to grow in the following decades, particularly with the birth of jazz.

A notable exception to the African-American musical theater drought was My Friend from Kentucky, which was co-written, composed, designed, and also featuring J. Leubrie Hill, working with Alex Rogers on book, and Will Vodery as arranger and conductor. The show, which was later rechristened Darktown Follies, premiered in Harlem at the black-owned Lafayette Theater on November 3, 1911. The plot centered on a wastrel, Jim Jackson Lee, who flees his 6 foot tall formidable wife, Mandy (played by Hill) until he is brought home by her. The actors performed without burnt cork and the show contained an impressive amount of dancing, including the dance known as “Ballin’ the Jack,” where, “the entire company formed an endless chain, dancing across the stage and off on one end, then around behind the curtain and back on stage at the other end- circling continuously, snapping fingers with a “tango jiggle,” a “moochee...slide,” and a “Texas Tommy wiggle” (as the lyrics suggested) and singing “At the Ball, That’s All” (Stearns 125). The dance has its roots in the African Ring Shout or Circle Dance. According to Leigh Whipper, “its immediate inspiration was church ‘Watch Meetings ‘ the custom with which colored people watch the old year out and the new year in. A little before midnight, someone starts shuffling and singing ‘Tearing Down the Walls of Zion, Goin’ to See My Lord,’ and everybody puts his hands on the hips of the person in front of him and inches forward in a circle with a rocking motion” (qtd. in Stearns 129). In addition to “Ballin’ the Jack,” the show also featured the Texas Tommy dance which was similar to the Lindy, and would become a dance craze.

Darktown Follies’ success in the black community filtered to white audiences who, for the first time, ventured uptown to Harlem to catch a show. The critics were slow to follow, but

eventually made it, as did the enterprising Florenz Ziegfeld who bought three of the most popular songs from the show- “Rock Me In The Cradle Of Love,” “At the Ball, That’s All,” and “Night Time Is The Right Time” for his 1914 Follies edition. “Ballin’ the Jack” was remounted with the all white Ziegfeld girls, who were coached by Ethel Williams, the end girl on the line in Darktown Follies. Ziegfeld made no mention of J. Leubrie Hill in the program, nor were any of the original dancers hired for the show (Stearns 130). In spite of the success of Darktown Follies, vernacular dance doesn’t reappear on Broadway until Shuffle Along. White chorus girls were busy marching and cotillion drilling around the stages, performing simple step combinations, and being upstaged by the imported Tiller Girls, or showgirls posing on staircases. But the Darktown Follies marked the beginning of a turn of events where white musical theatre started to borrow, buy, and appropriate from black musical theatre. Critic Theophilus Lewis, writing for the respected Negro newspaper the Pittsburgh Courier in 1927 wrote,

This tendency to borrow from the colored stage openly is an interesting development and its beginnings closed one epoch of stage history and ushered in another. It began about two years before the war when J. Leubrie Hill produced his “Darktown Follies.”... The “Darktown Follies” immediately became the sensation of the theatrical world and in less than a year numerous white shows were imitating Hill’s evolutions of Balling the Jack... Hill’s production marked the turning point in the relations existing between the white stage and the colored stage. Before that time the Negro theater had borrowed its materials and methods from the white stage. Our comedians had accepted the minstrel tradition

without questioning its merit or authenticity... he [J. Leubrie Hill] turned aside from Indian themes and South Seas motifs when he wrote the music and arranged the dances for the show, and it was the singing and dancing that carried it over.” (Lewis)

Black musical theatre, pulling from black dance culture, would serve as the incubator for white musical theatre dance, as it sought to feed the dance craze that swept the nation in the years before World War I. The growing popularity of the revue on Broadway revolved around a relentless quest for novelty in musical numbers, themes and dances. With the numerous revue series in operation – Ziegfeld’s Follies, George White’s Scandals, The Music Box Revues, Earl Carrol’s Vanities, The Passing Show, Greenwich Street Follies, to name only a few—the competition was fierce to feature the best dances first.

3.5 THE WHITMAN SISTERS

With a dearth of African-American musical plays, performers shifted their focus to the boom of vaudeville. African-American vaudeville houses began springing up all over the country during the 1910’s. Black theatre owners followed the model of white producers and organized into several circuits, the largest of which was called the Theater Owners Booking Association, referred to by performers as T.O.B.A. Vaudeville acts were usually small—singles, duos, trios, and family acts. While Cole and Johnson, Walker and Williams, Cook and others were slowly dismantling the barriers of minstrelsy and providing opportunities for black chorus performers, another company, this one of women, were doing the same on the vaudeville circuit. One of the

key incubators of African-American dancing talent were the Whitman Sisters: Essie, Mabel, Alberta, and Alice who created their own a road show (1900-1943) featuring their singing and dancing talents. The company developed hundreds of future chorus members and vernacular dancers.

Nadine George describes a typical show as opening with a “before de wah” plantation act in blackface, replete with melodramatic, sentimental songs. Mabel Whitman would end the act by singing psalms. The sketch was followed by specialty numbers from solo singers and dancers; by the chorus of specialty dancers, who may have started with a cakewalk; and then by a precision dance number, comedy sketches, and a male impersonation act by Alberta Whitman. Alice “The Queen of Taps” Whitman would then perform, and a Gibson girl quartet would sing and promenade (actually the Whitman sisters themselves), before the grand company finale cakewalk and chorus girl kick line (72). The Whitman sisters were one of the few African-American acts to play the white vaudeville circuit. They were fair enough to pass, and used this condition to upset audience expectation, as with their Gibson Girl act, or for practical purposes, to get better treatment and accommodations for their company on the road. They also blacked up, performing sketches that subverted the old minstrel stereotypes, as Alberta’s cross-dressing, and sister Essie’s drunk act, (typically a specialty reserved for men), subverted gender stereotypes. When other African-American shows were casting only light-skinned chorus girls, the Whitman sisters, “rejected the light-skinned standard, even though they themselves were extremely fair-skinned, and made it a point to include black women of different shades in their chorus lines. As dancer Jeni LeGon remembered: “The Whitman Sisters had fixed the line so we had all the colors that our race is known for. All the pretty shading—from the darkest, to the palest of pale. Each one was a distinct looking kid. It was a rainbow of beautiful girls” (qtd., in George 74).

Through their performances the Whitman sisters brought into question standards of beauty, and racial and gender boundaries. “The comedian Pigmeat Markham felt the impact and popularity of this group: ‘They was like the Bible to Negro audiences-people saved up their money for a whole year to hear them when their show came to town.’” (qtd. in Malone 62).

3.6 SHUFFLE ALONG

“It is the utilization of jazz music and dance that makes the American musical unique, and had it not been for the black influence, there would be no uniquely American musical theatre” (Emery, Black Dance American Musical 306).

Shuffle Along, with music by Eubie Blake, lyrics by Noble Sissle, and book by the comedy team of Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles, opened in May of 1921 at the 63rd Street Theatre. According to Langston Hughes, “Shuffle Along began the vogue for Negro singing and dancing that lasted throughout the Twenties” (97). After almost a decade of quiet, African-American artists were back, but theatre managers were resistant to producing black plays of any kind as too much of a financial risk. The country was suffering a depression that year with falling stocks, a drop of 7.6 billion in retail sales that resulted in department store restructuring, and layoffs in New York and across the country. Twelve percent of the workforce, over 4 million people, were unemployed. Tensions and fears from the race riots of 1919 still lingered (Knoles 286). The quartet of creators had a difficult time putting together funding until they managed to meet with white producer John Cort, whose son Harry was interested in the show. Shuffle Along, with a cast of unknowns, a summer run in the dog days before air conditioning, in a broken down

burlesque house off of Broadway's beaten path, proved the surprise hit of the season with 504 performances, topped only by Jerome Kern's Sally.

Shuffle Along set the standard for black musicals of the 1920's and convinced skeptical white producers that a show with an all black cast could attract white audiences and make money. The book, based on Miller and Lyles vaudeville characters, Steve Jenkins (Miller) and Sam Peck (Lyles), is centered around a mayoral campaign in the southern city of Jimtown. The plot featured theft, a love story and the triumph of justice, told with a heavy dose of dance and comedy, including a twenty minute fight between Miller and Lyles. The second act featured the unrelated vaudeville act of Sissle and Blake, an indication that the book and score were not fully integrated, a legacy of The Black Crook, and not an atypical insertion for the time (Woll 69). The show was filled with catchy songs in a jazz based score, a number of which became hits: "Love Will Find A Way," "Shuffle Along," "In Honeysuckle Time," and "I'm Just Wild About Harry."

According to the program, the cast of the show included a chorus of eight men, billed as the "Syncopating Sunflowers," and twenty women, who were divided into three choruses: the "Jazz Jasmines," the "Happy Honeysuckles," and the "Majestic Magnolias" (in Kimball and Bolcom 94-5). "The showgirls were to Noble *'the heart of Shuffle Along,'* and its life also" (144). The chorus produced a number of stars in the course of the show's run: Paul Robeson, Fredi Washington, who later starred in the film Imitation of Life, Elida Webb, who became a director and choreographer, Katherine Yarborough, who became an opera singer, and Adelaide Hall among them. The show also introduced one of the most popular stars of the period, Florence Mills.

Josephine Baker, the Shuffle Along chorus girl who had been hired at the age of sixteen as an end girl, would become an international star. She came to the attention of audience and

critics by embellishing her role. “Every night she rolled her eyes, purposely got out of step, and mugged to the audience. The crowds loved her, and by the Philadelphia run she was billed as the ‘Comedy Chorus Girl’” (Woll 75). But while Baker was making an impression on the audience, she had some trouble with her fellow performers. Baker’s “Scene stealing and brown skin made her unpopular among the light-skinned dancers. [But] upon discovering that Baker’s makeup had been dumped in the hallway [chorus girl Fredi] Washington made those responsible return the dancer’s belongings. The two remained life long friends” (Chambers 27). Thirty one years after The Creole Show, a light complexion is still the preferred skin tone for chorus dancers.

Shuffle Along’s success was not without its critics in the black community. Miller and Lyles performed in blackface, a style they had adopted in their vaudeville act. Their characters, Steve Jenkins and Sam Peck were not that far from minstrel stereotypes, speaking fractured dialect and portraying a penchant for theft, deception and trouble with the law, “Depictions of African-Americans as shiftless, dishonest, and pretentious had been popularized during the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries; Miller and Lyles’s script did little to reverse this unfortunate state of affairs” (Krasner, Beautiful Pageant 247). Their dark comedic masks made a stark contrast to the scantily clad light-skinned chorus girls. It is clear from their popularity with white audiences that Miller and Lyles, if they did comment or dissent from minstrel stereotypes, did not do it in such a way that it was apparent to whites. By giving the audience what they expected, Miller and Lyles used their act to attract the public to a new kind of musical theatre. Overall, the cultural impact of the production should be judged as doing more good than harm, with thousands of audience members, black and white, experiencing the talents of black artists and the rhythm of jazz music and dance, while black performers gained the experience and income to further their own careers. In terms of its impressive success, Shuffle Along would be

an anomaly, with many imitators, but none that would have its impact. In spite of what can be interpreted as its regressive story, Shuffle Along was groundbreaking. By depicting a romantic love story between two black characters, the show broke a stage taboo. Act one climaxed in the romantic hit, “Love Will Find A Way.” More than anything else it was the romantic plot line, especially the afore-mentioned song, that made the creators nervous. Noble Sissle recalled, “We were afraid that when Lottie Gee [playing Ruth] and Roger Matthews [Harry Walton] sang it, we’d be run out of town. Miller, Lyles, and I were standing near the exit door with one foot inside the theater and the other pointed north toward Harlem” (Kimball 93). Touring companies of the show helped break segregation in the house by refusing to play unless some or all of the seats in the orchestra were available to blacks. (Krasner, Beautiful Pageant 243). James Weldon Johnson noted that by 1921 seating practices in New York City theatres had begun to change, which he credits to the success Shuffle Along, “where Negroes in considerable numbers were seated on the ground floor, and increased with *Blackbirds*; *Porgy*; *The Green Pastures*, and other Negro plays” (Along My Way 201). The success of the show opened doors for African-American composers and writers, who would create a succession of shows in the 1920’s: James P. Johnson (Runnin’ Wild, Keep Shufflin’), Thomas “Fats” Waller (Hot Chocolates), Andy Razaf, Maceo Pinkard (Liza), Creamer and Layton, Luckey Roberts and Donald Heyward (Kimball 148).

Arguably Shuffle Along’s most important contribution to the musical theatre was the introduction of jazz dance, along with Blake’s jazz score. According to Jean and Marshall Stearns, “The most impressive innovation of Shuffle Along was the dancing of the sixteen girl chorus line. When not dancing on stage, they sang in the wings to keep things moving. ‘Besides being superb dancers,’ says Sissle, ‘those chorus girls were like cheerleaders.’ They started a

new trend in Broadway musicals... Above all, musical comedy took on a new and rhythmic life, and chorus girls began learning to dance to jazz” (139). Florenz Ziegfeld and George White both opened special dance studios and hired the chorus girls from Shuffle Along to teach the white chorus girls jazz dance (Kimball 148).

The hunger for novelty drove the white musical revue throughout the 1920’s and 30’s. Without a compelling storyline to hold the audience’s attention, producers had to keep changing the acts and creating ever more fantastic spectacles to showcase their beautiful girls. The number of revue series only made the quest for material more urgent. While Ned Wayburn was training the white chorus girls in the teens and twenties, Buddy Bradley, an African-American dancer, was teaching white artists the latest black dances in his studio in Harlem. Bradley, who was born in Harrisburg, PA in the early teens, got his training as a young man in the chorus line of the popular Harlem club Connie’s Inn (Stearns 163). In 1928 Bradley was approached by a businessman, Billy Pierce, “who had been trying to effect a liaison between the white and Negro show worlds” (163). Pierce was looking for a teacher to coach a white client, Irene Delroy, from the Greenwich Village Follies of 1928. Delroy so loved the routine that Bradley created that she sent over other dancers from the show. The producer of the Greenwich Village Follies, Morris Green, asked Bradley to rechoreograph the entire production. Bradley did, but Busby Berkeley’s name remained in the program as dance director (164).

Business grew quickly, with a full-fledged studio and five assistants to help Bradley cope with demand. Like Wayburn, Bradley built his success on the routine, but what made his routine different was vernacular African-American dance steps. While African-American dancers were concentrating on the craze for tap, developing ever more intricate and complex steps, non-tap steps that made up the core of African-American vernacular dance were neglected. “We all knew

those movements as kids,” said Bradley. “They were a part of our life that we took for granted—and it was some time before I realized that they were pretty new to Broadway and that most white people couldn’t begin to do any of them” (qtd. in Stearns 165). Bradley’s studio helped create the bridge that Billy Pierce was seeking. It was a bridge built on dance. The syncopation of ragtime had given way to the swinging rhythm of jazz. Jazz dance would dominate the next fifteen years of Broadway show dancing, and exert an influence that can still be seen in Broadway shows today.

3.7 HARLEM INVASION—LOSING CREATIVE CONTROL

The twenties were dubbed the “Harlem Invasion” of Broadway, with a sudden spate of shows by African-Americans who hoped to repeat Shuffle Along’s success. While some of them rode the wave, none approached or surpassed the original. Robert Baral lists seventeen black revues in the decade, including the five editions of Blackbirds (15). The “invasion” created enough anxiety to provoke the creation of a number for Gilda Gray in the 1922 edition of the Ziegfeld Follies, “It’s Getting Dark on Old Broadway,” where she sings, “It’s getting very dark on old Broadway/ You see the change in every cabaret/It’s just like an eclipse on the moon/Every café now has the dancing coon,/Pretty chocolate babies/Shake and shimie everywhere/ Real darktown entertainers hold the stage/you must black up to be the latest rage/Yes, the great white way is white no more” (Hirsch). The song mentions the night club scene, which was providing serious competition for the stage, especially the popular Harlem clubs. White audiences were venturing uptown to check out the increasingly elaborate floor shows, which all featured a chorus line of light-skinned, jazz-dancing women. Gray danced her

version of the “shimmie” as she sang, creating a dance sensation with white audiences. While she claimed to have invented the dance (as did Mae West), the shimmy, was an old African-American dance that had been around for at least a decade before either of the two women shook it on stage (Stearns 104-5). The popularity of the Harlem floor shows may have helped contribute to the demise of the black musical comedy libretto, which was eliminated in favor of the revue format as the decade wore on. Hot Chocolates (1929), with a score by Fats Waller, Andy Razaf and Harry Brooks, demonstrates the close ties between the clubs and the theater. The show was developed at Connie’s Inn, owned by George Immerman, before it transferred downtown to the Hudson Theatre.

The 1920’s also introduced a growing contingent of white producers and artists to the African-American musical. Once Shuffle Along became a hit, white artists were quick to appropriate the production and creative control of African-American musical theatre, pocketing a significant portion of the profits in the process. African-American culture was in vogue. “It is ironical that once pioneer black producers had proven through sheer grit that money could be made with black shows, Broadway accepted them and they were allowed to progress to the extent that they could be exploited. And by the end of the 1920’s most of the profits from black shows went into the hands of white producers and owners” (Sampson 22). The brief burst of creativity that sparked Put and Take (1921), Strut Miss Lizzie (1922), Plantation Revue (1922), Oh, Joy! (1922), Liza (1922), How Come? (1923), and Runnin’ Wild (1923) would diminish by mid-decade as black artists struggled to find a successful form that was not dismissed as a thin imitation of Shuffle Along, or condemned as too much like Broadway’s white musical comedy.

One of the first white producers to fully exploit the popularity of the African-American performer was Lew Leslie. Leslie was young and relatively inexperienced, when he offered one

of Shuffle Along's stars, Florence Mills, a contract for a new show called Plantation Revue, the first black revue built around a female star, instead of two blackface comedians (Sampson 108). In spite of an offer from Ziegfeld, Mills opted to stay with Leslie when he promised to star her in an all black revue, which eventually opened in New York at the Broadhurst Theatre on October 29, 1924 as Dixie to Broadway. (The show had previously toured London and Paris as From Dover to Dixie with a white cast in the From Dover portion, and a black cast in the to Dixie segment.) Mills' explanation as to why she chose Leslie over the pinnacle of Ziegfeld provides insight into her ambitions. She said,

I felt that since Williams established the Colored performer in association with a well-known revue [the Ziegfeld Follies], that I could best serve the Colored actor by accepting Mr. Leslie's offer, since he had promised to make his revue as sumptuous and gorgeous in production and costume as Ziegfeld's "Follies," George White's "Scandals," or the "Greenwich Village Follies," at the same time using an all-colored cast. I felt that if this revue turned out successfully, a permanent institution would have been created for the Colored artists and an opportunity created for the glorification of the American High-Browns" (qtd.in Woll 97).

Leslie was offering Mills the opportunity to lead an entire cast of her own race. "High Browns" is an indication of the in-group racism where African-Americans coded themselves by skin color, with "high" meaning "light." Her use of the word "glorification" is an allusion to Ziegfeld's goal of "Glorifying the American Girl." Mill's hopes for "glorification of the

American High-Browns” is disputed in at least one the of critical notices for the show. The New York Sun headline was, “Florence Mills, Johnny Nit and Others in Mulatto Revue,” indicating just how fair the cast members were perceived to be (qtd. in Woll 102).

Both of these productions, Plantation Revue and Dixie to Broadway, had all white creative teams, a trend that Leslie would continue throughout his career as a producer/director of black musical revues. Allen Woll claims that Dixie to Broadway “served as a model for most of the black revues in the 1920’s” (100). There were two choruses in the show. The smaller male chorus was called the “Plantation Steppers,” while the women’s chorus was called the “Plantation Chocolate Drops.” As evident in their titles, the revue was nostalgic for the good old days on the plantation. The chorus’ first number was “Put Your Old Bandanna On.” Both choruses danced with Mills for the next number “Dixie Dreams.” The Chocolate Drops danced with her in Scene 7 “Jungle Nights in Dixie Land.” They also appeared in Sc. 13, “Jazz Time Came From the South,” Sc. 17 “Darkest Russia,” Sc. 19 “Dixie Wildflowers,” Sc. 23 “Trottin’ to the Land of Cotton Melodies.” The men, in addition to participating in the company numbers, had an in-one number called, candidly enough, “A Few Steps in Front of the Curtain,” while the set changed behind them, and were featured with Florence Mills in Sc. 17 as Wooden Soldiers. The men are described as “specialty steppers,” leading one to believe that the men’s dancing was based more in the step tradition and military drills, as opposed to the jazz dancing of the women (Woll 101). Alan Woll claims that Leslie’s shows were actually Northern and urban in their focus, with the southern material fading into the background (111)– interestingly, almost all the big numbers that include the chorus have a southern theme.

Leslie would go on to create the Blackbirds revue series beginning in 1926, starring Florence Mills. He developed the show at a Harlem Cabaret, The Plantation Club, which had an

exclusively white clientele. The show moved to Harlem's Alhambra Theatre, toured to Paris for five months, and London for six, before arriving in New York. The show made Mills an international star. It was to be her final show before her death in on November 1, 1927, at the age of thirty-two. Leslie found a replacement star in Bill "Bojangles" Robinson who was introduced to a white public in the smash hit Blackbirds of 1928, which made him the first African-American dancing star on Broadway (Stearns 151). Fifty at the time, his presence helped initiate a two year boom in the black musical by "establishing a dancing star and personality around whom a Broadway musical could be built and film roles written...Bojangles led the way in breaking down a variety of economic and social barriers while creating a new and much larger public for vernacular dance" (149). The other Blackbird editions: 1930, 1933, and 1939, were not as successful as the 1928 edition, although they offered showcases for some extraordinary talent, including Ethel Waters and Lena Horne (Peterson 36). However, Leslie's choice of a white creative team would help turn the black musical into a white commodity, and ultimately have larger repercussions for the art form. "First, white creative talent assumed an ever-increasing role in determining the images of black Americans that would be shown on the Broadway stage. Second, the change would also have a devastating effect on the evolution of a black theatre for black audiences" (Woll 112).

Throughout the 1920's, African-American creative teams continued to present material, (often with white producers), with the all important chorus dancer receiving intense scrutiny. "Black dancing remained the yardstick by which such evenings were rated" (Bordman, Chronicle 437). But it was a specific kind of dancing that critics and audiences expected: jazz dancing by a large line, or cutely named smaller ensembles. In 1923, after Shuffle Along, Miller and Lyles had taken up producer George White's offer to produce their next show, Runnin' Wild

which opened October 29, 1923 at the Colonial Theatre on 62nd Street with a score by James P. Johnson and Cecil Mack and book by Miller and Lyles. In Runnin' Wild Miller and Lyles reprised their Jenkins and Peck characters in another Jimtown scenario. The show was a hit that brought the Charleston, which had been introduced the year before in Liza, to broad public attention. The chorus boys called "The Dancing Redcaps" helped put the number over, as James Weldon Johnson records:

When Miller and Lyles introduced the dance in their show, they did not depend wholly upon their extraordinarily good jazz band for accompaniment; they went straight back to primitive Negro music and had the major part of the chorus supplement the band by beating out the time with hand-clapping and foot-patting. The effect was electrical. Such a demonstration of beating out complex rhythms had never before been seen on a stage in New York (Black Manhattan 190).

This hand-clapping, foot-stomping accompaniment was how the dance had been traditionally performed for many years in the South (Stearns 145). It was the chorus's job to introduce the featured dance number. This was true in white and black revues where chorus members could be either backing a big star like Ann Pennington in George White's Scandals or Ethel Waters in a Leslie revue. The big number needed to achieve maximum impact, and one of the sure ways to do that was to put the ensemble on stage. Putting a new dance number over could make a show a hit by attracting audience members eager to see and learn the latest dance.

White critics and audiences seemed determined to draw and hold a line between what constituted a "black" show and what were the characteristics of a "white" show. As Jim Crow

regulated the color line in society, many white Broadway critics seemed determined to police the stage with the same rigor, praising shows that promoted racial stereotypes and criticizing those that came too close to what they felt was “white” musical comedy. In keeping with tradition, the chorus of Runnin’ Wild were light-skinned enough to attract the attention of the critics, one of whom noted, “It looks good enough to be Ziegfeld Follies back from Palm Beach with a coat of tan.” A critic from the Messenger responded, “[He failed to see] any fundamental difference between Mr. White’s chorus of kanaka cuties and Mr. Ziegfeld chorus of O’fay frails” (qtd in Woll 112-13).³

Producer George White apparently thought little of the Charleston. “He brought his friends around to show them-in front of us-that the Charleston was nothing,” says Miller, “and he tried everything but cutting the dance, which would have made us quit” (qtd in Stearns 146). White, who was the producer and star of his own revue series on Broadway—George White’s Scandals, had ulterior motives. “I found out later,” says Miller,” that White wanted the dance for his Scandals” (qtd in Stearns 146). George White did use the Charleston in the 1925 edition of his show, danced by white entertainer Tommy Patricola, who was accompanied by sixty chorus girls. Miller and Lyles were also in the cast (Baral 140).

Sissle and Blake’s next show, The Chocolate Dandies, opened in 1924 at the Colonial Theatre. The cast, featuring Josephine Baker, numbered almost one hundred and featured a horse race with real horses! The chorus not only danced jazz, but did some precision and acrobatic ensemble work that was compared favorably with John Tiller’s dance troupes, indicating the influence of white theatre dance on black musical theatre (Kimball 173, 178). In spite of, and maybe because of its lavish production values and large and talented cast, the show ran for only 96 performances.

The New York Times critic was displeased when Miller and Lyles in their book show, Rang Tang (1927), attempted to imitate what he felt were dance practices for white shows only, “in this case dividing the ensemble into show girls, ponies, and ballet dancers.” The critic even makes a sly dig, “Indeed, there was around the entertainment last night the suspicion that it might be in the language of Mr. Van Vechten [the white patron of black artists, Carl], passing” (“‘Rang Tang’ Opens”). In other words, the show was trying too hard to be perceived as a “white” show. Even contemporary critics like Jean and Marshall Stearn appear to endorse the prejudice: “Unfortunately, the chorus girls imitated the *Tiller Girls*, in spite of the precedent of *Shuffle Along*” (151). The jungle choreography of “Monkey Land” and the segment where the entire chorus strummed banjos, was deemed much more appropriate (Bordman, Chronicle 426).

A critic for the New York Post took a stab at the chorus of Keep Shufflin’, a Miller and Lyles show produced in February 1928 on Broadway at Daly’s 63rd Street Theatre. The play had an “abundance in its ranks of quadroons, octoroons, and even smaller fractions of colored blood. The girls could, most of them, pass as white anywhere. We noted Jewish types, Italian types, and one head of genuine red hair. When they all danced together, the twinkle of their legs was barely a shade darker than the legs of any Broadway chorus” (qtd. in Woll 113) ⁴. In the critic’s opinion, this made the show too much like white musical comedy. And he was not alone; the critic from the American agreed that the chorus were too light skinned. “Presumably they expected what they referred to as “darkies,” though in Harlem only light-skinned girls had been hired since the teens” (Stearns 152).

3.8 DEPRESSION—THE REVUE GOES ON HIATUS.

In spite of a burst of creative activity in black musicals in the early 1930's, the role of the African-American chorus did not change significantly, since the revue remained the prevailing genre. More musicals and revues were produced in the early 1930's than had been seen since the early 1920's. Black revues had stripped down production values, and focused on the performers, music and dance. Since African-American performers were paid less than their white counterparts, this made the black revue a much cheaper proposition for producers. Many of the shows did not last long, but there would be other employment opportunities, including shows produced by the Federal Theater Project.

Hot Rhythm (1930) stuck around for sixty-eight performances, Brown Buddies (1930), which was built around Bill Robinson, when “the popularity of tap dance was never higher,” ran for 113 performances (Stearns 155). Change Your Luck (1930), in spite of the novelty of a female boxing match, sank after seventeen performances, while Blackbirds of 1930, even with Ethel Waters as its star, only lasted for sixty-two performances (157). In Rhapsody in Black (1931), another Lew Leslie revue starring Ethel Waters, the producer eliminated the libretto and the set, having the acts perform in front of a black curtain. He featured choirs singing Russian and Jewish songs, and amazing solo dance acts: tap dancers, Eddie Rector, Snake Hips Tucker, and the Berry Brothers. But by 1931 it was clear that “Tap dancing could no longer carry a musical” (158).

With the Broadway musical revue struggling, actors turned to the Federal Theater Project for a chance at employment. Created in 1935 and headed by Hallie Flanagan, the Federal Theater Project had a budget of \$7,000,000 and was able to employ twelve thousand five hundred actors across the nation at an average wage of eighty three dollars a month (Jones 103). There was a

Negro Unit, headed by actress Rose McClendon, but it concentrated on drama. Its one foray into musicals was a revue by Eubie Blake, Cecil Mack and J. Milton Reddie, called Swing It (1937). Deemed a throwback to Shuffle Along, the show was not successful and seemed to crush any impetus to produce another until Swing Mikado (1939), a black version of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta with the action moved to the South Sea islands, and a select number of tunes adapted to the popular swing beat. It debuted in Chicago to such success that it sparked the interest of private investors who were ultimately allowed to purchase the show. Swing Mikado was taken to Broadway where it ran across the street from its rival, another African-American Mikado, this one produced by Mike Todd, called the Hot Mikado. The Hot version had all of the advantages of Broadway money and star power in Bill Robinson. Todd felt less hindered by the Gilbert and Sullivan original and had more of the music altered so it could swing (Woll 178-9). His production also featured several choruses: a singing girls and boys chorus, two dancing girls choruses—one devoted to the jitterbug, a jitterbugging boys chorus, as well as the “Tap-A-Teers” (Peterson 176). The Hot Mikado, not surprisingly, won the war for the audience’s dollar, and toured the U.S.. But black critics like Alain Locke were not oblivious to the fact that Hot Mikado was, once again, a white created vehicle for African-American performers (Locke 745-50). Langston Hughes felt that their culture was being appropriated in these adaptations. In his poem, “Notes On a Commercial Theatre” he writes: “You put me in *Macbeth* and *Carmen Jones*/And all kinds of *Swing Mikados*/ And in everything but what’s about me--/But someday somebody’ll/Stand up and talk about me,/And write about me--/Black and beautiful--/And sing about me,/And put on plays about me!/I reckon it’ll be/ Me myself!” (104) Hughes would go on to fulfill this pronouncement.⁵

When the Depression hit, the theatre, like almost everything else, suffered from the economic downturn. Interest in black culture dried up as the public focused more on escapism in their entertainment and survival in their daily lives. The Federal Theater Project had offered a brief promise of work and fair treatment. But as black theatre artist Dick Campbell observed, “The Federal Theatre did help the black artist in many ways, but again—this was the Open-the-Door-to-Black-People-and-Shut-It-Fast policy” (qtd. in Mitchell, Voices 109). He was appointed director of the Federal Theater in Harlem in June of 1939 and four weeks later found himself out of a job when an act of Congress destroyed the project. John Bush Jones notes that the hit Green Pastures, with its 640 performance run, and a national tour, the moderate run of Porgy and Bess, plus the Federal Theater Project, kept black performers working during the Depression. “There were more African-Americans working in New York theatre in the mid-30’s than at any time before” (Jones 85).

The 1930’s gave the first indication that the revue might not be the dominant Broadway musical form forever. The African-American musical revue and the popularity of the singing and dancing chorus line would continue to limp along, but the revue was ailing. In speculating what caused the demise of the genre, Marshall and Jean Stearns believe, “The immediate causes were careless presentation, overexposure, and the Depression. The most crushing blow came from within. In 1936 On Your Toes featured the widely acclaimed ballet sequence “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue,” choreographed by George Balanchine, and any come back tap dancing might have staged was nipped in the bud” (159). But swing dancing and adaptations of the classics were poised to provide a new, albeit short-lived, direction. The introduction of ballet would also remove black dancers from the chorus. It wasn’t until 1955 when George Balanchine admitted

Arthur Mitchell to the New York City Ballet that African-Americans would begin to achieve acceptance in ballet (Valz-Schoettler 30).

3.9 ADAPTING THE CLASSICS

The Mikados helped initiate a trend of adapting the classics, which provided employment for African-American chorus members. Primarily the producers and creative teams for these adaptations were white. Swingin' the Dream (1939) was a swing version of A Midsummer Night's Dream with an integrated cast that used African-American performers as the clowns and fairies. Oscar Hammerstein's opera Carmen Jones (1943) was a black adaptation of Carmen, which ran for an impressive 503 performances at the Broadway Theatre (Bordman, Chronicle 540). (The same year that Oklahoma! opened). African-American playwright Loftin Mitchell was bothered by Carmen Jones, "*Carmen Jones* seemed to be a work that deliberately used the stereotype to assure a measure of success." He did not feel this was true of Green Pastures or Cabin in the Sky (Black Drama 120). A version of H.M.S. Pinafore called Memphis Bound! (1945) was conceived as a starring vehicle for Bill Robinson (now 67) that moved the action to Louisiana. Bernard Peterson describes it as "A stereotypical, brassy, white-authored song-and-dance show" (231). Other shows in this vein include My Darlin' Aida (1952), which cast a twenty-two year old white woman in the role of the African princess over the considerable protests of African-American artists. My Darlin' Aida was one of the last Broadway musicals to displace an African-American performer when the play clearly called for one (Woll 191).

There was an all black version of Hello Dolly! (1967) and Guys and Dolls (1976). In 1975 an African-American production and creative team adapted The Wiz from Frank Baum's classic The Wonderful Wizard of OZ. A satire on the original film, the show was not well-received by white critics, but found a black audience, and garnered seven Tony nominations. These shows did not have a lasting impact on the black musical as a form or the work of the black chorus. The Wiz, however, marked a significant change, as an African-American musical on Broadway aimed at an African-American audience and marketed to them, while also scoring crossover success with the traditionally white Broadway audience.

3.10 POST-WAR

The economic boom at the end of World War II created some Broadway opportunities. These shows were primarily white-created, with black subject matter aimed at white audiences. They were set in folk/fantasy settings, or exotic locales to avoid any semblance of relation to contemporary black life in the United States. Jazz and tap, which had been the staples of the black chorus line slowly began to be replaced by the influence of ballet and modern dance, as evidenced by the two choreographers who created Cabin in the Sky. The white Russian artist George Balanchine came from a ballet background to direct his first show, and African-American Katherine Dunham was developing her own technique based on her anthropological studies of West Indian dance.

There were three Broadway musicals in the 1940's with all African-American casts. The first was Cabin in the Sky, which opened on October 25, 1940 with a score by Vernon Duke and book by Lynn Root. African-American musician J. Rosamond Johnson directed the chorus, and also played a small part. Director and choreographer George Balanchine, was assisted in the dances by Katherine Dunham. Uncredited in the program as a dance director, Dunham played the part of the temptress, Sweet Georgia Brown, and her company of dancers were the dancing chorus for the show. Her drummers also were part of the company and their work "influenced Dukelsky [composer Vernon Duke], no question about it" (qtd. in Clark 239). While Dunham's career was in the modern dance world, she choreographed for theater, film, and opera. She combined her interest in dance with a degree in anthropology, which led her to study and perform the dances of the West Indies, as well as American vernacular dance and ballet. Dunham's studies and performances helped bring Caribbean dance to the stage, blended with her own interpretations of other genres. She was attracted to the material in Cabin in the Sky by her "sense of folklore, from an anthropological point of view, was attracted to the fact that we had so many folk settings and people, so much folk material that we had not really used" (qtd. in Clark 236).

Her company created several Broadway shows during the 1940's, including Tropical Revue (1943), Carib Song (1945), and Bal Negre (1946), and established schools teaching the Dunham Technique all over the United States. Her dancers would go on to perform in Broadway choruses for shows such as Finian's Rainbow, become stars, like Eartha Kitt, and choreographers in their own right, like Talley Beatty. "Dunham created a wide range of dances based on her research. Her school was the training center available to the majority of black dancers in the mid and late 40's" (Long, Black Tradition 326).

The second all black musical to open on Broadway during the decade was St. Louis Woman, with a book by African-American artists Countee Cullen and Arna Bontemps, and music and lyrics by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer, which opened March 30, 1946 at the Martin Beck. The show starred Pearl Bailey and the tap dancing Nicholas Brothers–Fayard and Harold (Bordman, Chronicle 551). Like Cabin in the Sky and St. Louis Woman, many of the post-war musicals avoided political themes, as the country celebrated the end of the war. Lost in the Stars (1949) did not. Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson’s adaptation of Cry, the Beloved Country, told the story of Stephen Kumalo, played by Todd Duncan, as he searches for his son Absalom, played by Julian Mayfield, in apartheid South Africa. In a letter to Alan Paton, author of the novel, Maxwell Anderson explains his desire to keep the dialogue and story structure intact, “And to keep the plot and the dialogue in the form you gave them would only be possible if a chorus—a sort of Greek chorus—were used to tie together the great number of scenes, and to comment on the action as you comment on the philosophic and descriptive passages” (Anderson 221). This African-American Greek style chorus received the same criticism as the chorus in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Allegro two years earlier. Gerald Bordman commented that the chorus in Lost in the Stars “gave a static quality to what should have been a compelling drive” (Chronicle 571). The racial tensions of South Africa did not impress critics as a parallel to those being experienced in the United States. The show did not find its audience, and was Weill’s last.

Throughout the 1940’s and ‘50’s there continued to be the occasional African-American themed show or integrated cast. Harold Arlen would go on to write a number of black-themed

musicals, with Yip Harburg he wrote Finian's Rainbow (1947), which presented the unlikely combination of African-American sharecroppers, leprechauns and a racist white Southern Senator to tackle the subject of bigotry; it was directed and choreographed by ballet dancer turned director Michael Kidd. "The one thing Finian's Rainbow did was to take a serious American [racial] topical matter and make it "palatable" to white audiences" (Mitchell, Black Drama 130). It also had black and white dancers performing together on Broadway (Meyerson 268). English dancer Ann Hutchinson Guest encountered the difficulties of race relations in the U.S. in her interactions with some of the black members of the company. "Having grown up in England without any contact with other races, I had my first experience in getting to know and work with them. I began treating them and talking with them as with anyone else. I soon learned that ordinary, quite innocent statements could be, and were, misconstrued. I had to learn to be guarded, to choose words carefully" (352). Guest's experience was, as she points out, partially due to her own cultural upbringing, but also the result of segregation in American society.

Arlen also wrote the music for Truman Capote's House of Flowers (1954), which had an all black cast and was set in the Caribbean. The stars were Pearl Bailey and Juanita Hall (of "Bali Ha'i" fame), with Diahann Carroll making her Broadway debut. Arlen teamed again with Harburg on Jamaica (1957), which starred Lena Horne, with choreography by Jack Cole, whose vigorous and complex jazz style would train and influence a generation of dancers and choreographers. But historian Alan Woll criticizes the popularity of the Caribbean motif:

In general, these white-created musicals used black characters as a form of exotica, and Caribbean locales allowed librettists and songwriters to escape the tremendous problem of American race relations...The recourse to Caribbeana as a popular setting for

black musical efforts in the postwar era symbolized a retreat from the complexities of refurbishing the black musical form in response to the changing social context (205).

There were artists, black and white, interested in exploring different forms of musical theater expression for black life that would bring about a new use of the African-American chorus member. Other opportunities, as presaged by the folk fantasy Cabin in the Sky, would arise. This time the emphasis would be not on dance but on song.

3.11 NEW GENRES—“NATIVE” OPERA AND GOSPEL PLAYS

While the singing and dancing chorus line of musical comedy began struggling in the 1930's, African-American choruses had started to find their way into plays and operas beginning in the 1920's. Different skill sets were needed for these new genres. “Native” or “Folk” operas required singers with opera or serious voice training. Gospel plays also emphasized singing, and both genres required minimal to no dance skills. Gone were the tap dancing, shimmying, shaking chorus dancers. These choruses would draw their power from the African-American church tradition.

The Negro churches (the unsophisticated and unpretentious ones) embodied a living drama. Throughout black New York City, and other cities and towns where black men and women met to worship, this most essential theater could be seen, and it was purely ethnic. Black men had taken the orthodox theology and the Old Testament stories and transformed them into vivid, powerful,

and exciting literary statements—it was part of their oral tradition, And the congregations were welded into the dramatic performance—as actors, audience, Greek chorus—their bodies, voices, and spirits fused into the most emotional, demanding experience” (Huggins 287).

Initially, many of these plays had white creative teams. Sometimes their content had little to do with the African-American experience. Most of them tried to draw on what they felt was an authentic African-American expression of music, whether this was spiritual, gospel or folk music. The choreography was not the jazz dancing of musical comedy but a different kind of movement that was subordinate to the music. Some of the shows, like Green Pastures, were not musicals, but used music. Two of the most popular African-American choir directors were Hall Johnson and Eva Jessye who brought their trained singers with them to various productions. In the 1960’s, the brilliant writer Langston Hughes would create a series of plays that used the African-American church experience, with the chorus as an important focus. This new use of African-American music would be picked up by other artists in the 1970’s and beyond.

One of the first shows to use an African-American chorus in a drama, Deep River, which opened on October 4, 1926 at the Imperial Theatre, was billed as a “native opera.” With a book by white artist Laurence Stallings and lyrics and music by composer Franke Harling, this tragic tale of the Quadroon Ball set in New Orleans in 1835 is a thwarted love story with duels and abandonment. “The second act, at the voodoo ceremony, had virtually no dialogue; the building tension of the rites, performed to a choral background, propelled the story” (Bordman 417). Henry Sampson notes that all of the major characters were played by whites, with three African-Americans in smaller roles (105). Green Pastures (1930) adapted and directed by Marc Connelly,

depicted an African-American heaven with a black actor playing the role of God. The play was a surprise hit and won Connelly the Pulitzer Prize. While it was not a musical, it did feature Hall Johnson's choir singing gospel numbers. Porgy and Bess's librettist Dubose Heyward had this to say:

It seems to me that in this play the spiritual has come in to its own in the theatre. Sung by a splendidly trained choir of thirty voices it is used after the manner of Greek chorus, and the songs rise so naturally and appropriately out of the action in the various scenes that they convey the impression of spontaneous creation, and carry the mood from scene to scene with an effect of unity unobtainable by any other possible means." (qtd. in Woll 139) ⁶

In 1933 Hall Johnson produced a response to Green Pastures with his show Run Little Chillun, which opened at the Lyric Theatre on Broadway on March 1st. The play featured his choir and told the tale of a conflict between the New Hope Baptist Church and the pantheistic New Day Pilgrims. When the married Baptist preacher's son falls for the beautiful Sulamai from the New Day pilgrims, a struggle ensues between the congregations. Johnson was looking to address the African roots of Christianity, which he dramatized in the play by showing the different services of the two groups (Peterson 297). Critics judged the outstanding feature as, not surprisingly, the choral music. "When Mr. Johnson reaches the spirituals, he is on familiar ground. Some of them deserve—without the usual equivocations—the adjective superb, and all of them are more than good. Partly they are haunting and wistful, and partly ringing; partly they take their tempo from old church litanies. And in their singing the voices of men, women, and children are blended perfectly" (qtd. in Woll 157). ⁷

In 1934 Four Saints in Three Acts opened on February 20th at 44th St. Theatre, Gertrude Stein's libretto and Virgil Thomson's beautiful score made it one of the most talked about shows of the season. While the libretto did not have a black subject matter, based as it was on the lives of St. Ignatius Loyola and Teresa of Avila, the cast was African-American. Thomson's score reflected his interest in the Southern hymns of his childhood. "In the fourth act (to be expected of Miss Stein after she announced only three) a choir recapitulates the saintliness of the saints" (Bordman, Chronicle 487). Eva Jessye, an African-American poet and choir director, trained the chorus and white ballet trained choreographer Frederick Ashton created a stylized movement (Sampson 136).

Another opera, this one about the lives of African-Americans living on Catfish Row opened October 10, 1934. Dubose Heyward's and George Gershwin's Porgy and Bess, was an ambitious work with an almost entirely black cast. Gershwin, having heard of Eva Jessye's work in Four Saints, hired her to be the choral director of the show. It became part of her job to make sure the chorus and all of the numbers had an authentic sound. "After all, being white you can go only so far into the black. Sometimes he just heard the surface, the part that was bubbling up. But what came from way down in the ground, of course, he couldn't get. But he indicated it. And so I made it my business to surface many things he indicated" (qtd. in Seidman 262). The power of African-American church life is present in the opera. For Jessye, "Porgy and Bess is about the Negro way of believing and testifying. The Negroes believe in testifying. In their churches they testified to their belief. When you testify in court, you speak what you know to be the truth" (Ibid). Jessye created a sound that was honest, that in her view told the truth of black life in song. She was the only African-American on the creative team (Woll 168).

While the dancer John Bubbles, of the vaudeville team Buck and Bubbles, played Sportin' Life, the traditional chorus line was abandoned for the show. This "American folk opera" concentrated on the story and the music. Controversy in the African-American community centered around the portrayal of the residents of Catfish Row as gambling, drug dealing, philandering hustlers. James Weldon Johnson, writing in the early thirties, called it, "the greatest colored musical show ever staged," (Along My Way 181) but others felt differently. Langston Hughes wrote, "The denizens (as the critics term them) of Catfish Row are child-like ignorant blackamoors given to dice, razors, and singing at the drop of a hat. In other words, they are stereotypes in (to sensitive Negroes) the worst sense of the word. The long shadow of the blackface minstrel coarsens the charm of Porgy and darkens its grace notes" (The Negro 843). This debate continues to hover over revivals of the show.

The multi-talented Langston Hughes was interested in creating an African-American theatre that did not cater to white tastes and showed African-American culture as he experienced it. While conflicted about religion himself, he recognized the natural dramatic potential of black church life, and transformed it into commercial theatre through a series of gospel plays (Huggins 323). His early ventures in this arena were for two of his own theatre companies. He created Don't You Want To Be Free? for his Harlem Suitcase Theater in 1937. Described as a "music-drama," the play demonstrated through spirituals, poetry, blues, and sketches how the oppression of blacks continues to the present day. Among the numbers the chorus sang were: "Go Down Moses," "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," "In That Great Getting' Up Morning," "John Brown's Body," and "Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child." The play had one of the longest runs the Harlem community had seen. It was picked up by several black college and

small regional companies, as well as being produced at the New Negro Theatre, another company that Hughes founded, this time in Los Angeles, in 1939 (Sampson 113).

The chorus in gospel plays acts in ways similar to the Greek chorus: as witness to the action on stage, as a narrator when necessary, and as a stand-in or bridge to the play for the audience. The gospel chorus also has a unique function, which is to lift the audience spiritually through the traditional and new religious songs that they sing. Hughes's instruction for the audience to come forward and join hands with the performers demonstrates this function as he attempts to transform the play from a performance to a worship service. "Hughes undertook first to explore and then to reappropriate the dramatic presentation of black religion and its music" (Sanders, Wrestled 65). His second venture in this new musical direction was The Sun Do Move in 1942, which was produced by the Skyloft Players, a company he founded in Chicago. Billed as a "music-play," the show was set during slavery and details the struggle of a slave couple, Rock and Mary, who marry, are separated, have a child and escape to freedom through the Underground Railroad. The spirituals in the show worked on two levels, as both songs of faith and maps to freedom (64).

Hughes's use of the chorus and black church experience was delving into unknown territory. "In bringing the black church and black religious music, to the stage, Hughes was, in his characteristic fashion, not only breaking new ground but also challenging white conventional depictions of black folk life" (64). Hall Johnson's Run Little Chillun' was the only African-American authored work in the same vein, and white authored works such as Green Pastures and Paul Green's The Prayer Meeting and Your Fiery Furnace according to Leslie Sanders, "assume the shape of set responses, displays of characteristic behavior, rather than serious explorations of the meaning of black belief" (64). Hughes wrote a number of successful gospel plays that

included a black chorus: Black Nativity (1961) celebrates the birth of Christ with a black nativity pageant in Act 1 and a revival meeting in Act 2. Directed by Vinette Carroll, the play was fueled with gospel music, spirituals, dance, drama, and narration. (She would go on to create her own very successful gospel plays.) Originally titled Wasn't It a Mighty Day? the change resulted in the resignation of two of the company's dancers, Alvin Ailey and Carmen de Lavallade who felt that the use of the term "black" in the new title might be viewed as sacrilegious and racist (Peterson 43). The play had a successful run off-Broadway and then toured Europe. The Prodigal Son (1965), subtitled "A Gospel Song Play" was also directed by Vinette Carroll, and recounted the popular Biblical parable. In Hughes' play Gospel Glory (1962), a passion play that had church performances in the single digits, the members of the chorus tell the tale. "No settings or costumes other than choir robes are to be used. "Do you know your Bible?" the elder asks the choir, and the play is their response" (Sanders, Development 113). Of the gospel plays he wrote, Tambourines to Glory: A Play with Spirituals, Jubilees, and Gospel Songs," (1963) was his favorite. This play about a battle between good and evil centers on the devout Essie Belle Johnson and her opportunistic friend, Laura Wright Reed, who are trying to set up a storefront church in Harlem. They are assisted by Buddy Lomax, who is the devil in disguise. While some critics lauded the play, the audience didn't show up. But Hughes's work helped initiate a genre whose popularity with black audiences would be firmly cemented by Vinette Carroll.

Vinette Carroll created several of her own gospel plays including: Trumpets of the Lord (1963), which used the writings of James Weldon Johnson and was staged as a church revival with sermons by three preachers interspersed with traditional music. The show opened on off-Broadway and moved to the Brooks Atkinson Theatre for seven performances. Her next venture proved much more successful. Your Arms Too Short To Box With God (1976) was conceived

and directed by Carroll from the Book of Matthew. The music was original with most songs by Alex Bradford, with Mikki Grant contributing. Jesus was portrayed by an African-American actor who never spoke, only danced. “Carroll brought together a pair of seemingly incongruous philosophies in *Arms*: a deep and abiding faith in Christianity, and black pride and awareness” (Burdine 76). The show opened on Broadway December 22, 1976 and ran for 429 performances before it toured nationally, and returned to Broadway. Carroll also directed Mikki Grant’s Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope (1970), which was not a gospel play, but a revue that chronicled the difficulties of black life. The play opened on Broadway in 1972 and ran for 1,065 performances. It won an Outer Circle Award, two Obie Awards, two Drama Desks, and was nominated for a Tony. Carroll’s other gospel plays include When Hell Freezes Over, I’ll Skate (1979), and What You Gonna Name That Pretty Little Baby (1979).

The most experimental show in the gospel vein to date has been the Gospel at Colonus by Mabou Mines creator Lee Breuer. Conceived as a gospel retelling of the Greek play Oedipus at Colonus it made the gospel chorus a witness, a narrator and a bridge to the audience/congregation for a classical tale of redemption. Critically well received, the show struggled to find an audience. Perhaps because it was produced by an avant-garde white company, it was perceived as not dealing with black life, and because it was a gospel play it may have been too much of an alien genre for white audiences. Warren Burdine recognized the unique qualities of Gospel at Colonus. “Instead of taking its audience over new artistic terrain, the gospel musical, with the exception of Carroll’s Arms and the Telson-Breuer collaboration Gospel at Colonus, has opted to give its audience the familiar or...to preach to the already converted” (Burdine 81).

While the gospel musical provided employment for black chorus members it is arguable whether it has made a lasting contribution to musical theater as a form. “The gospel musical has brought joy to literally millions of people who have patronized it, and some of its creators have reaped huge profits. On those counts it may be commended. What it has not done is to further the aesthetic development of an art form, the black musical, which some theatre experts feel is in a moribund state” (82).

Hughes created the gospel play genre in the 1960’s, a period when black musicals were continuing a nose dive that had started in the 1950’s. Of his many works, only Black Nativity has been a commercial success. The show has gone on to become a holiday classic, but in their original productions most of his gospel plays had short runs. The Civil Rights era and the Black Power movement were not receptive to song and dance. John Bush Jones points out that black musicals prior to the 1960’s had all been based on the differences between blacks and whites. “Now, with America’s blacks making demands to enter the nation’s mainstream in education, employment, and non-segregated public accommodations, African Americans in the first half of the 1960’s emphasized what blacks and whites had in common as human beings; a shared humanity was the basis for equal civil rights” (204). Black playwrights like LeRoi Jones, Ed Bullins and Douglas Turner Ward were delivering dramatic messages to audiences that grappled with racial issues in ways that were often confrontational and shocking. The black musical seemed to be in need of a dose of social relevance. For some this would come in the form of equal opportunity and integration.

3.12 INTEGRATING THE STAGE

There are several bases for integrating a cast. One could be that the content of the show requires it. Another basis could be “color blind,” or “non-traditional,” or “multi-cultural” casting, which places a performer of color in a role written with no ethnic or racial specification, or in a role traditionally cast as white. Integration first occurred in musical theatre based on the needs of the story. Non-traditional, or color blind casting, began to occur on the Broadway stage in the 1920’s and continued sporadically through the 1950’s and ‘60’s until legal measures tried to enforce some kind of equity into the casting process. The battle for equal access to jobs is ongoing in the Broadway industry, which remains dominated by whites at every level. The idea, however, of non-traditional and multi-cultural casting is not without controversy. Indeed the history of the black chorus member since the 1940’s seems to be divided in two with the majority of employment opportunities provided by shows that have all black casts, followed by shows that employ color blind casting and hire some minorities for the chorus. Shows whose storylines require a truly integrated cast are few and far between.

The philosophical arguments around integrated casting, have existed among the black intelligentsia since the practice began. There are black artists who view efforts at non-traditional and color blind casting as irrelevant and/or insulting to performers who should be employed in work by, for and about people of their ethnicity or race. They resist the idea of being assimilated into the white culture of Broadway. The most recent vocal proponent of this view was August Wilson, who said:

The idea of colorblind casting is the same idea of assimilation that black Americans have been rejecting for the past 380 years. For the record, we reject it again. We reject any attempt to blot us out, to

reinvent history and ignore our presence or to maim our spiritual product. We must not continue to meet on this path. We will not deny our history, and we will not allow it to be made to be of little consequence, to be ignored or misinterpreted” (p.14).

Wilson’s view is controversial but very much alive, as evidenced by the furious debate in 1999 over whether or not English actor Jonathan Pryce should be allowed to play an Asian character in the musical Miss Saigon on Broadway.

Others, like Actors equity President, Frederick O’Neal, fought hard for integration of the Broadway stage. From 1964 to 1973 he served as the first African-American president of the union. O’Neal made it one of his goals to increase the presence of black actors on Broadway.

“I don’t mean in the sense of all-black shows. That will take care of itself. What I mean is a real commitment to the integration of the Broadway theatre. Now, [1972] we have gotten to the point where you can see two blacks in a musical-one male and one female dancer in the ensemble. To me this does not represent a total commitment to the idea of integration. It just simply seems as though someone has said: “My God! We’ve got this show cast and we don’t have any blacks in it, so get so-and-so and so-and-so and bring them in here so we can get rehearsals started” (qtd. in Mitchell, Voices 182).

O’Neal believed in colorblind casting. “He felt that black and other ethnic groups should be cast without regard to race, creed or color whenever possible” (169). This put him at odds with

African-American colleagues who feared that such assimilation into the majority white theatre culture would efface black heritage. In O'Neal's view, because people of all colors are seen in all walks of life "theatrical reality would be enhanced by 'integrated' casting" (169). But others believed that, casting African-American actors in non-African-American roles, "does little to assist the Negro's effort to reclaim his heritage or to create a true image of the Afro-American" (Mitchell, Black Drama 218). Artists who espouse the latter view, generally agree that the culture of Broadway will not foster their work and that black artists need to found their own companies and produce their own work. Since the focus of this study has been confined to Broadway we will look at how integration has affected employment and portrayal of the African-American chorus member.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the first example of an integrated cast on Broadway was Will Marion Cook's musical The Southerners in 1904. While the idea of blacks and whites onstage together threatened to cause an uproar, no riots occurred, nor did a revolution. On the Broadway stage integrated casts remained rare, but they became worth counting in the 1920's. In an informal survey of integrated casts in the 1927 Broadway season Pittsburgh Courier reporter Floyd Calvin wrote that "Among the white shows that have taken in colored actors are Oscar Hammerstein's "Golden Dawn," about 30, with William C. Elkins in charge of the chorus; Florenz Ziegfeld's "Show Boat," about 45, with Jules Bledsoe in the lead; David Belasco's "Lulu Belle," about 60 with Edna Thomas and others; "In Abraham's Bosom," about 18; "Sidewalks of New York," about 8; "Porgy," 52; "Rang Tang," 80." The biggest employer is the musical Rang Tang, the Miller and Lyles show with an all black cast. This statistic, where one show with an all black cast will make up the bulk of black employment remains a trend eighty years later.

One of the show's in Mr. Calvin's list would become a landmark production. Show Boat opened at the end of 1927 at the Ziegfeld Theatre, the flagship theatre of its legendary producer, Florenz Ziegfeld. With lyrics and book by Oscar Hammerstein II, music by Julie Styne, and choreography by Sammy Lee, the only African-American on the creative team was Will Vodery, who did the show's vocal arrangements (Kreuger 30). The play was a landmark, integrating not only the company, but story and song to an extent that had never been witnessed before. "Neither a Viennese operetta or an American musical comedy, it was the first real "musical play" (Bordman, Chronicle 435). The chorus in this company were not simply a singing and dancing backdrop for the stars but by turns the people who lived on the Mississippi, the audience for the Cotton Blossom shows, the performers at the World's Fair, the witnesses to Julie's humiliation and Magnolia's triumph. They were characters in the play. "Hammerstein offered a serious and sympathetic portrayal of the African American. The problems faced by blacks during the last quarter of the nineteenth century is dealt with directly" (Graziano 74).

Set on the showboat the Cotton Blossom around 1890, the show chronicles the love story of gambler Gaylord Ravenal and Magnolia, daughter of Captain Andy who sails the showboat. The secondary plotline is about Julie, a mulatto who is "passing" and her white husband Steve. They work as entertainers on the showboat until Julie is exposed and they leave. The two principal African-American roles are Queenie, originally played by Italian actress Tess Gardella in blackface, and Joe, played by the African-American concert singer Jules Bledsoe. The show had sixteen black women singers, sixteen black male singers, twelve black women dancers, thirty-six white chorus girls and sixteen white chorus boys. The white chorus girls were divided in to twenty-four "Glorified Beauties" and twelve dancing girls (Ries, Lee 68). We see the entire ensemble in the opening number "Cotton Blossom," which features the choruses relating their

different experiences of life on the Mississippi, by contrasting the working black stevedores and their gals who sing "Cotton blossom, cotton blossom,/Love to see you growin' free,/When dey pack you on the levee/You're a heavy load to me," while the white "boys and girls" who enter the scene to sing about the "Cotton Blossom/Captain Andy's floating show!/ Thrills and laughter,/Concert after,/Ev'rybody's sure to go!" The river and the showboat are a site of work for the African-American characters and a site of pleasure and entertainment for whites.

The African-American chorus has a number of appearances in the show where they act as witnesses, commentators, and audience. They accompany Julie and Steve's departure from the showboat with the song "Mis'ry's Comin' Aroun'." In Act 1, Sc. 5, Queenie is told to recruit black people to see the Cotton Blossom show. While they are allowed on the showboat, they are segregated to the balcony. The most significant appearance of the African-American chorus in the original production is in the opening number of Act 2, which is set at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. In the number "In Dahomey" the Dahomey villagers, supposedly a horde of wild African natives, emerge from their pavilion and proceed to chant in native lingo. Choreographer Sammy Lee had "The men demonstrate their spear throwing, and the singing chorus of women has some folk-dance steps in a spiral and traveling figure eight formation; the dancers have jétés, running steps into a sliding fall onto the knees, and fast spins around the frightened crowd of white folk, who rush from the scene" (Ries, Lee 74). When the crowd exits in fear, the villagers suddenly begin to sing in perfect English that they are happy to see the white folks go and cannot wait to return to Avenue A in old New York (Kreuger 39). Clearly this scene depicts the racial stereotype of the African as a savage, frightening creature. Although Hammerstein could be viewed as commenting on the savvy of the black performers who play into the stereotypical expectations of whites, only to drop the act and reveal they are clever urban dwellers. The scene,

which came to be viewed as racially insensitive, was dropped from subsequent revivals of the show (Kreuger 108).

While Showboat was a landmark in musical theatre history on a number of fronts, it did not create a vogue for stories with integrated casts. The onset of the Depression slowed production of black musicals in general, while the Federal Theater Project managed to employ more African-Americans than all of Broadway theatre in the 1950's. Integration, or "color blind" casting, became more prevalent in the 1940's. The expansionist mood of the nation seemed to open up new possibilities for African-American performers. Integration occurred in small steps which were usually most evident in the chorus, where a large cast show would now have one or two or ten black chorus members in an otherwise all white cast. Companies that employed color blind casting and featured African-Americans mostly in chorus roles were: Kiss Me Kate (1948), which actually offered two feature numbers to ensemble members: Lorenzo Fuller, "Too Darn Hot," and Annabelle Hill, who led off the opening number. Langston Hughes, in his chronicle Black Magic, counts out the numbers: "Sing Out Sweet Land [1944] had eleven Negroes in the cast, This is the Army [1942] had ten, On the Town [1944] six, Call Me Mister [1946] had four, Street Scene four and Annie Get Your Gun [1946] three" (255). In his book Black Drama Lofton Mitchell felt, "Something new was happening, and this became evident when On The Town opened with a "mixed chorus" (121). Where Sing Out Sweet Land and This is the Army were revues that featured black chorus members in numbers related to their culture, On The Town was a book musical with ballet based dance choreographed by

Jerome Robbins. The story line had nothing to do with race and the chorus members were clearly there based on talent and not as a racial statement.

In the 1950's and 1960's Frederick O'Neal, who served on a variety of commissions and panels on desegregation in the arts, would continue to document the statistics of integration on the Broadway stage in charts that chronicle the number of jobs available and the number of integrated casts from 1960 to 1965. The numbers swing radically from season to season depending on if there was an all black show on the boards. For example, in the 1963-64 season 168 African-Americans were employed on Broadway and 99 of them were in Porgy and Bess, Tambourines to Glory, and Sponomo, all three predominantly black casts. The number of African-Americans employed on Broadway in the 1964-65 season would drop to 74, in a year where 69 shows were produced (Mitchell, Black Drama 229-30). Another factor affecting the hiring for chorus members black and white was the economic crunch that resulted in smaller choruses for Broadway shows.

The late 1960's and early 1970's found the black musical catching up culturally to integration issues by placing the creative control back in the hands of black artists. Melvin van Peebles, who had two shows in the 1971-72 season, Ain't Supposed to Die A Natural Death and Don't Play Us Cheap!. Ain't's cast of characters announced that the show was different from anything audiences may have seen before. A pimp, whore, a corrupt black cop, a militant, a bag lady, and a homosexual queen, all from Harlem sang their way through van Peebles' score. While the reviews were mixed, van Peebles fought to keep the show alive using a variety of marketing techniques that included star African-American performers doing guest bits in the show, talk backs, television coverage and a telemarketing campaign to drum up black group sales (Woll 258-9). It worked and van Peebles found a black audience for his show. Don't Play Us

Cheap! may have had a better critical reception because the show had more humor and less hostility. The play was about a rent party in Harlem where two demons show up in disguise determined to ruin the fun. Van Peebles' plays showed ghetto life was a subject matter fit for musicalization.

The 1970's saw shows as diverse as van Peebles plays and Mikki's Grant's upbeat Don't Bother Me I Can't Cope, along with musical versions of Ossie Davis's Purlie Victorious, as Purlie! (1970), the musical version of Raisin in the Sun–Raisin (1973), and the send-up of The Wizard of Oz in The Wiz (1975). In an article for the New York Times dated August 9, 1972, reporter George Goodman, Jr. raised the question, "More Blacks in Theater? Yes and No," indicating that the question of black representation on stage and in integrated casts was still alive. Actors Equity, at this point, was relying on the Human Rights Division to put pressure on producers to improve minority hiring. Producers had agreed and the AEA had ceased to keep records, but now vowed to resume "head-counting."⁸ The 1970's also saw several revues that looked back on the contributions of African-Americans to the musical, including Bubblin' Brown Sugar (1976), Ain't Misbehavin' (1978), the music of Fats Waller, Eubie! (1978), celebrating the talents of Shuffle Along's composer, and Sophisticated Ladies (1981), dancing its way with ballet and tap through the music of Duke Ellington.

Historian John Bush Jones looks at the 1970's and sees the beginning of a trend towards multi-cultural casting that stems from the rock musical Two Gentleman of Verona, which opened December 1, 1971. With lyrics by John Guare, a score by Hair's Galt MacDermot, and directed by Mel Shapiro, the play featured Chinese, African-American, Puerto Rican and Jewish actors in Shakespeare's tale of two young couples. By his estimation the show "became a model for much musical theatre casting in the remainder of the 1970's and beyond" (260). He cites other hit

shows from the period that also featured casting diversity including: Godspell, Jesus Christ Superstar, Pippin, The Magic Show, A Chorus Line, Dancin', Runaways, and Working (260). It would seem that Hair, which opened in 1967, could also be attributed with starting this trend. The show featured a diverse cast, and included songs that specifically addressed racial difference, “Colored Spade,” “Black Boys,” “I’m Black.” Perhaps that is the distinction in Jones’ argument: that Hair, because it talks about civil rights and race relations, requires a diverse cast, while the shows he lists generally do not.

By the 1980’s, Allen Woll notes that racial difference is no longer a newsworthy topic. He cites reviews of Debbie Allen’s starring role in Sweet Charity, a role originated by Gwen Verdon, which included not one mention of her race (276). Integrated companies receive no attention now. One would hope that the reverse is noteworthy, when looking at a large chorus, like those featured in The Producers and Les Misérables, that audience members notice if the chorus is entirely white. It is to be hoped that we have come to expect that even musicals, the bastions of fantasy and escape, are expected to look something like the world we live in. Racial stereotypes have been discarded in favor of black musicals that trace their own cultural histories (Dreamgirls [1981], Bring in Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk [1996]), define their own icons (Jelly’s Last Jam [1992]), and adapt their own stories (The Color Purple [2006]). Casting statistics for union affiliated theatres across the country are kept by Equity to attempt to insure equal opportunity and fair hiring practices. The fact that an organization like the Non-Traditional Casting Project still exists, testifies to the fact that performers and producers still need assistance in making sure equal access occurs and in finding minority performers.

The arguments around integration are alive and well. But the fact remains that the major employers of African-American chorus members are all black shows. Bring in ‘Da Noise, Bring

in 'Da Funk, Jelly's Last Jam, and most recently The Color Purple provide the most numerous opportunities. Shows with integrated casts like Ragtime and Hair Spray, in which racism is a theme, also create jobs.

3.13 BLACK MUSICAL TODAY

The 1960's and 1970's saw black artists changing American culture in the black power movement and taking control of the representation of black life onstage. This next section will consider how the black musical of the last two and a half decades differs from its predecessors in its portrayal of race and gender. We will look at three examples: Dreamgirls (1981), directed by Michael Bennett, with a book by Tom Eyrn and music by Henry Krieger, which features an all white creative team telling a story modeled on the rise of the Supremes; Jelly's Last Jam (1992), written and directed by George C. Wolfe, with music by Jelly Roll Morton, and lyrics by Susan Birkenhead, about the judgment day of jazz musician Jelly Roll Morton; and Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk (1996), also directed by George Wolfe, with music by Daryl Waters, Zane Mark, and Ann Duquesnay, book by Reg E. Gaines, and lyrics by Gaines, Wolfe, and Duquesnay, a dance revue that examines the history of tap from an African-American perspective.

Dreamgirls centers around the Dreamettes, a Chicago singing trio of young women, Deena (Sheryl Lee Ralph), Effie (Jennifer Holliday), and Lorell (Loretta Devine) who start as friends pursuing a dream to become stars. Initially managed by Effie's brother, who is muscled out of his position by the ambitious Curtis (Ben Harney), who takes over as both manager and lover of Effie. When Curtis leaves Effie for Deena, he also decides to drop Effie from the group,

which is becoming increasingly popular. Effie is shunted aside and the Dreamettes become stars. At the end of the play, the original trio are reunited for a successful final concert before the group splits up. Michael Bennett was attracted to the material because of its backstage nature, which made it easier for the show to be continually singing (Mandelbaum 217). While the creative team was white, Alan Woll notes that “*Dreamgirls* revealed that several of the desires of those who created the black musical had come to fruition. For far too long, white versions of black musicals had created their own vision of Afro-American and Caribbean life. With the black attempt to reclaim this cultural form in the 1960’s, it became evident that such stereotypical constructs would no longer be accepted by critics or by audiences. Even when most of the authors were white, the newer black musicals looked to black sources” (276). In this instance, although denied by the creators, the source was Motown and the Supremes.

For Bennett Dreamgirls was not ultimately about race. “The important thing about Dreamgirls for me was that I approached the material as if cultural assimilation is something that has happened in America...Dreamgirls is not about being black, it’s about being human. It’s a black musical, but it’s about people. It’s not a black version of a white show. It’s very nice for young blacks to go to the theatre and see role models who are successful and still human” (qtd. in Mandelbaum 217). While there is something frightening about the hegemony that Bennett assumes, what seems clear from this quote is that Bennett did not want to be caught up in racial politics. Even though the play is set in the 1960’s, he neatly avoids the troubled politics of the time by working from the assumption that assimilation has already happened, which clearly it had not. His attempt at justification, that the show provides role models, comes off as condescending. His defensiveness may come from the fact that he was aware, as a white man

dealing with black material, that his work would come under additional scrutiny; he was also under pressure to create another hit after the megahit A Chorus Line and the flop Ballroom.

The chorus in Dreamgirls served as ensemble and also as characters in some of the groups that the Dreamettes encountered in their rise to fame. They provided context and background. Breaking with the stereotypical mold of black shows, Dreamgirls did very little dancing. Dance critic Norma McLain Stoop observes that “in lieu of conventional production numbers, large groups move in neatly choreographed packages of dance tied up with kicks, swivels, contractions, backbends, and the raw energy of the discolike movement” (107). She makes mention that Dreamgirls, unlike most musicals on Broadway, featured no tap dancing. The extensive movement came not from the chorus but the set, a group of moving light towers that helped Bennett achieve the most cinematic staging of a musical to date (Mandelbaum 219).

If Bennett was able to convince himself that race was not an issue in the show, others were not so quick to agree. Marcia Gillespie in Ms. points out that her issue with Dreamgirls is, “it does not articulate where dreams come from. The result is that the experience is made to seem simply another formula rags-to-riches story” (238). For her the show makes the achievement of the Dreamettes seem sleazy and their manager Curtis seem a villain. For Gillespie, this ignores the price black artists had to pay to succeed, to cross over to white audiences. Dreamgirls tries to portray this price through Effie’s firing, which is as much about her size, as it is about her emotional state, which Curtis uses as an excuse to fire her. While Ms. Gillespie doesn’t mention this, her point is certainly supported by the ending of the play, which brings Effie back, a happy mother, for a final reunion. Given how closely the play is modeled on the Supremes, it seems almost cruel to treat Effie (whose story resembles the fired Supreme Florence Ballard, who died in poverty at age 37), to a fantasy success. But this may be considered a structural flaw that

should not be attributed to race but to the needs of a commercial genre, which wants to send the audience home happy.

Ms. Gillespie also keenly feels that, once again, her culture has been appropriated. For her, drawing the story from a black source is not good enough because, "... Broadway is still the white way and the few blacks who appear there today perform in white folks' versions of our story. We still be singing and dancing and damn lucky to get it..." (90). Critic Robert Brustein, in his review of the show, agrees with her, "What I learned...is that despite the occasional nod toward social matters, Broadway is still primarily interested in black people if they can display a nice sense of rhythm, along with a little singing and dancing" (26). A different perspective is offered in Bonnie Allen's article for the black magazine Essence, "With *Dreamgirls* something different has happened. They've taken our blues all right, but they've handed them back to us in mint condition with an explanation of why we were singing them in the first place" (17). For her the issue is not appropriation, but the economic ability to witness a story she views as her own. The \$40 dollar ticket to Dreamgirls is, in her opinion, out of the reach of most black people's budgets. The performers in the show testify to the fact that the show attracts a mostly white audience. "They've done taken our blues and gone to a place where we can't afford to hear them. Maybe that's the ultimate form of crossover" (Allen 158).

Part of the problem with Dreamgirls may be that the play shows the black sound of the Dreamettes being adapted to suit white tastes. While it is the black manager of the group who is making the changes, the fact remains that cultural authenticity is being traded for fame, a process that, arguably, the show Dreamgirls is engaged in itself. Bennett may have sought to dodge the idea of race in the play, but that is difficult to do when the premise contains black artists being molded to fit white tastes. Nostalgia for the sound of the 1960's can't successfully gloss over the

fact of how we got that sound, which is part of the point of the show. For black audience members the show reads on this level as well as one of pride in the achievements of the people who succeeded in obtaining the American Dream.⁹

George Wolfe tackled the issue of race directly in Jelly's Last Jam (1992). Jelly Roll Morton had tried all of his life to achieve the American dream of wealth and fame, but the self-proclaimed "inventor of jazz," died in obscurity. George C. Wolfe made his Broadway debut as a director and writer with this show, his first musical. The play is based on the Judgment Day of Jelly Roll, a light-skinned Creole, who Wolfe portrays as denying his blackness in an effort to separate himself racially and socially from darker-skinned members of his race. The play is a trial that looks back on his life in order to determine the quality of Jelly's afterlife. Morton, played by dancer Gregory Hines, with his younger incarnation played by Savion Glover, is not a pleasant man. He treats people, including friends and lovers, like dirt. The play examines the hurts caused by racism within a group, a ground-breaking subject for a musical. Wolfe uses a chorus of three women, called the Hunnies, played by Mamie Duncan-Gibbs, Stephanie Pope, and Allison M. Williams, who "function as a cross between a Greek chorus and the Supremes, in addition to an ensemble who are listed as "One of the Crowd" (Wetzst 20). Wolfe calls the Hunnies, "ministers of fate" and "hostesses of death," not typical images for chorus girls. An interesting passage from New York Magazine deserves quotation in full for the images it juxtaposes of contemporary femininity with the function of the chorus.

'They're extraordinarily talented, intelligent, and sexy women,'

Wolfe says 'Not since Willy Loman walked onstage with his slumped shoulders has Broadway seen such an eye-opening entrance. But I can't take credit—their mommies and daddies made

those legs!’ Legs?’ ‘Actually, we’re not at all like typical chorus girls,’ Pope says, making up in the dressing room the Hunnies share. ‘We’re more like agenda girls, commenting on the action.’ ‘So we’re all out there with a *purpose*,’ Duncan-Gibbs says. ‘Not just to look pretty.’ (qtd in Wetzst 20).

The women resist Wolfe’s attempt to demote them to sex objects by asserting their difference and their function. In an article in Dance Magazine about the three performers, who are described as triple threats, Stephanie Pope talks about the acting value of stillness, “We learned it from Bob Fosse, when we each played Helene in different productions of *Sweet Charity*. Bob had studied acting with Sanford Meisner, whose approach is basically about living truthfully under imaginary circumstances. When I studied Meisner’s technique, a sign in the classroom said, ‘Don’t just do something, stand there. The tendency as a dancer is to want to jump and turn, but there’s something wonderful about communicating through stillness’” (qtd. in Sandla 76). These chorus girls are artists–actors, as well as dancers and singers, not the dilettantes who were accused of making the theatrical profession look bad from the 1910’s onward. They are married with children, established in the business, which is now seen not as a career for two to four years before a woman marries, but a profession to be studied. They are seen and treated as individuals by Wolfe who encouraged them to have individual personalities in the show, even though the Hunnies dress alike (76). The Hunnies are the new chorine–intelligent, sexy, talented triple threats who project different personalities while moving and singing as one.

In Jelly Wolfe takes a different approach to the issue of race and culture. Not only does he expose prejudice within the group, but he feels no need to explain or stake out cultural terrain

as he feels black artists in the 1950's and 1960's did. Wolfe acknowledges the benefits that he has received from his predecessors have allowed him to take his own stance. "I don't feel I have to explain anything or be defiant against anything. I'm coming from a place of casual arrogance because I feel that black culture is one of—if not the most dominant forces in American culture...I don't have to translate it to anyone, I can just move forward and explore its peculiarities and complexities'" (qtd. in Nixon 50-1). Frank Rich observed in his review that Jelly "is itself an attempt to remake the Broadway musical in a mythic, African-American image" (11). Jelly was hailed as a "watershed" and a chance at redemption for the American musical by critic John Lahr. "The show opens the musical up to new mythologies, new aesthetics, and a new historical sophistication" (262). He believed the show was a definitive break with the black shows of the past that had pandered to racial stereotypes. He was not alone in this estimation.¹⁰ While the critics acknowledged the play had flaws they were full of praise for its efforts and accomplishments. The play received eleven Tony nominations, winning in three categories, and running for almost a year and a half.

Wolfe's next musical adventure, inspired by his work with Savion Glover on Jelly's Last Jam, was Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk (1996), whose subtitle is "a tap/rap discourse on the staying power of the beat." A historical dance revue through black tap, the show was largely an ensemble piece, albeit with a star in tap dancer Savion Glover. Not a chorus piece, it is significant to this study for its portrayal of black dance. The title of the show is from Glover's response to George Wolfe's question of what he would like to do in the theatre after Jelly's Last Jam. The show grew from a collaboration with the ensemble shaped by Wolfe as they developed ideas that traced the beat of tap from Africa to slavery to the present day. The show is a celebration of survival, but also a tale of racial oppression, depicting lynchings, urban poverty,

drug dealing, and the appropriation of the beat by Hollywood in a send-up of Bill Robinson and Shirley Temple. It gives cultural meaning to tap, which in musical theatre is often divorced from anything but rhythm and spectacle. Noise/Funk presented an image of black dancers who were young, all male, athletic, aggressive, and attired in the latest in street gear. They were cool, loud and competitive tap dancers—the anti-thesis of Step ‘n Fetchit in their style of performance. The only woman present was the vocalist, Ann Duquesnay. With no women dancers, the show reinforced the image of tap as a man’s world, or at least that tapping in this kind of heavy-footed, aggressive style, is the province of men.

Glover is a musician with his feet, which he treats as instruments of self-expression. When a dancer successfully speaks with his feet Glover calls it “hitting.” His loud, percussive, rap influenced style, and his impeccable rhythm set him apart. His mission is to “reclaim the beat that he feels got lost when tap dancing was recycled—first on Broadway, where it was brought downtown from Harlem, with Sissle and Blake’s 1921 musical “Shuffle Along,” and then in the Hollywood fun machine. ‘The dance just got lost,’ he says. ‘It started to be this entertainment-type thing, Instead of keeping it real, keeping the rhythms there, people started mixing tap with jazz dance... Tap dancing really has nothing to do with arms or big smiles or anything like that’” (qtd, in Lahr 272-3). His illustration of empty tap is Tommy Tune, “‘He is like sensationalism. He don’t express himself’” (274). For Glover the work of Tune and his colleagues is classroom stuff that provides a dancer with vocabulary and nothing else. For him, this demonstration of technique is meaningless and has been holding back the art form. For John Lahr, Glover’s style of dance “showed a glimpse of how the musical might find its way out of decadence back to dynamism” (268-9).

Now thirty-two, Glover has helped spread the gospel of tap through touring Funk and teaching. His hip-hop image and street credibility fights off the stigma of male dancers as effeminate. His recent performances have not been on Broadway but in concert dance, where he is expanding the possibilities of tap as an art form by working with musicians and spoken word artists. It is too early to say if Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk was Glover's one visit as a choreographer to Broadway. Perhaps, if he does not find his way back, one of his students will.

3.14 CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER THREE

The African-American chorus member has had to struggle with the racial prejudice of American society that was absorbed and reflected by the Broadway stage and consequently limited opportunities to find work. Black artists created their own opportunities, initially through the vehicle of the minstrel show, where they portrayed the stereotypes established by white artists working in the same genre. Minstrelsy helped black performers acquire the skills that gave them entry into show business. Paralleling white artists, a core of talented black entertainers began exploring musical comedy from 1890-1910. Their model, understandably, was minstrelsy and not burlesque. This was the kind of entertainment they had been trained in and, more importantly, what their white audiences were familiar with. Playing off the minstrel trope of the pretty "yaller gal," the light-skinned beautiful chorine was featured in early ventures into musical comedy like The Creole Show (1890), establishing the chorus as the domain of fair-skinned women until the 1940's. In these creative twenty years Bob Cole, J. Rosamond Johnson, George Walker, Ada Overton Walker, Bert Williams, Madame Sissieretta Jones, and Will Marion Cook,

among others, used the chorus in early versions of the book musical. The chorus was used to introduce syncopated music, in Cook's Clorindy (1898), and to integrate the stage in The Southerners in (1905). Ragtime caught on, but racial mixing onstage would remain an anomaly until the 1940's.

White audiences, as the primary ticket buyers, and critics, as the arbiters of taste, imposed their prejudices on the black chorus, rewarding acceptable portrayals of black life and denouncing or ignoring efforts to break down barriers. Black shows were expected to feature a light-skinned chorus line, lots of vigorous jazz dancing, and plenty of singing. Plots of shows were confined to comedies that often employed minstrel stereotypes. Romance between blacks was seen as taboo, a barrier that Shuffle Along (1921) broke. Shuffle Along's phenomenal success was in some ways the undoing of black theatre artists. Once a money-making formula had been found, white producers moved in and co-opted black musicals, which kept portrayals of African-Americans frozen in racist paradigms for decades. Imitations of Shuffle Along kept the chorus working, as did revues, which proved increasingly popular during the Depression, since their production values could be kept low, as could the artists' salaries since black performers were willing to work for less than whites. In his efforts to find an original black musical form, Langston Hughes helped develop the gospel play, which eliminates chorus dancing to emphasize chorus singing in worship situations. Black artists took this form in the 1970's and created several inspirational hits, a few of which made it to Broadway. By the 1970's cultural circumstances had changed to the extent that black artists had abandoned Broadway. Black chorus members were now being cast on a more regular basis in white created shows, and the economics of Broadway were making it impossible to launch a show without significant financial backing. Black musicals, because they can be perceived as having appeal only to black

audiences, are seen as riskier than musicals that could attract whites, blacks, and tourists. The Color Purple, a 10 million dollar venture, which opened on Broadway in 2005, has received more attention for its price tag and producers than the fact that it is a black musical. The show, the first predominantly black musical on Broadway since Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk, opened nine years ago, has proved so successful that it is preparing to tour.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

¹ While a few women performers, like white actress Lotta Crabtree and Adah Issacs Menken, whose race, while she lived was problematic, and today is read as black (see Chapter 3 “The Deeds Done in My Body” in Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910 by Daphne A. Brooks) donned blackface, and there were all-white women novelty minstrel troupes, white women were not a part of white male companies.

² The nickname “Black Patti” came from a comparison made to white opera singer Adelina Patti (1843-1919), who was an international opera star. The performances of Black Patti’s Troubadours were revues that usually concluded with an “operatic kaleidoscope,” where Patti would perform excerpts from the classical opera canon. Racial prejudice prevented her from performing with the all white opera companies, like the Metropolitan Opera Company. She made her own opportunities to showcase her voice in her performances.

³ “Kanaka” is Hawaiian for “human being,” but the word refers to a South Sea Islander and like other words that refer to ethnicity can be seen as derogatory. “O’fay” is derogatory black slang referring to a white person.

2 New York Post, February 28, 1928.

3 The Macbeth Hughes refers to is the Federal Theater Project production that opened on April 14, 1936 at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem. Directed by twenty year old

- Orson Welles, with an all black cast, it was a rare opportunity for black actors to perform Shakespeare. The production came to be known as the Voodoo Macbeth.
- 4 Brooklyn Daily Eagle March 9, 1930.
 - 5 Variety, n.d.
 - 6 Chorus boy John Ganun observed that in the Will Roger Follies (1991) “...there were no African Americans in our show when we opened. Actors Equity came down hard on the producers, and when the first original female cast member left the show six months after opening, a black woman named Stephanie Pope was hired.”
 - 7 A film version of Dreamgirls starring Eddie Murphy, Jamie Foxx, and Beyoncé Knowles is scheduled to open on Decmeber 15, 2006.
 - 8 Both Frank Rich of the New York Times (“The Energy and Pain”) and Robert Brustein of the New Republic (“Cause Jam Don’t Shake Like That”) believe the show marks a break from black musicals of the past.

4.0 CHORUS AS ENSEMBLE

The chorus is one small, but significant, component of a musical. Yet, this usually anonymous group of performers has often figured as the subject of the story in a medium that, admittedly, enjoys talking, singing and dancing about itself. There is something very American about the musical theatre chorus, whose voices often represent those of "the people," in much the same fashion as their ancient Greek counterpart. They are participants, witnesses, the enthusiastic cheerleaders to the stars they all secretly aspire to be. Broadway has always been a willing propagator of the show biz version of the American Dream myth, where with talent, determination, and that lucky break, the average chorus girl/boy can become a star. The final chapter of this study will look at how the chorus as a subject functions in the musical by focusing on four examples that span fifty two years: Allegro (1947), A Chorus Line (1975), 42nd Street (1981), and Contact (1999). Interestingly, all of these shows are directed and/or created by choreographers, and all of them feature a chorus that provides the spine of the show. Allegro, A Chorus Line, and 42nd Street employ the chorus as "demos," who are critical to the action and our perception of the play. In A Chorus Line and 42nd Street the aspirations and talents of individuals within the group are selected out and highlighted, and the chorus becomes more than a backdrop for a star, or a physical spectacle; the chorus becomes the engine of the play, used to express the idea at the core of the work. A similar function is also performed by the chorus in Allegro, but they remain an anonymous ensemble. What makes the chorus member so

compelling? How does the role and presentation of the chorus change in these shows? How much of this is attributable to the director/choreographers? Do these shows reflect larger cultural changes in the audience's attitude towards performers and Broadway? Do these shows employ the myth of the American Dream? And if so, how? Finally, how have we arrived at this shift in the function of the chorus? And how do all these changes relate, or not, to changes in American culture?

4.1 ALLEGRO—EXPERIMENTATION

Allegro (1947) was the eagerly anticipated third collaboration of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, who had scored back to back hits with Oklahoma! (1943) and Carousel (1945). The team had been so successful that they had moved into producing, backing Annie Get Your Gun (1946) and two straight plays, Happy Birthday (1946) and John Loves Mary (1947), all of which were running when Allegro opened. The team could afford to take artistic risks, and Allegro was meant to push the envelope of musical theater. Rodgers noted that, “We got tired of that old type of show... A scene, a song, a dance, a scene.. We just took a story and worked it all in together” (Crichton). The men invited choreographer Agnes de Mille, who had worked on both their previous hits, with critically acclaimed results, to direct.

Allegro, unlike Oklahoma! and Carousel, which were adaptations of plays, was conceived by Hammerstein as an original work that would follow the life of Joseph Taylor, Jr. from birth to the grave. It would be Hammerstein’s first play and he had put much of himself in it (“Careful”). He was inspired by Thornton Wilder’s Our Town, which related the seemingly simple love story of George Gibbs and Emily Webb, as told by a narrator in the context of their

small American town. Wilder's play embraced and transcended the mundane in such a way that his small town play communicated larger truths about human existence. The idea of examining a large idea through a single life attracted Hammerstein, and making Joseph Taylor, Jr. a doctor appealed to Rodgers, whose father and brother were both physicians. When the scope of his original idea proved too large, Hammerstein scaled the story back to cover Joe's life from birth to the age of thirty-five, when he makes a life altering decision (Hyland 167).

Rodgers' and Hammerstein's Oklahoma!, had created the musical version of the myth of the Western frontier. In Carousel they had translated a Hungarian play into a New England setting. Both plays were set around the idea of romantic love and marriage, bringing together two people representing opposing ideologies: Laurie (a farm girl), Curly a (cowman), Julie (honest working girl), Billy (manipulative schemer). This merger of incompatibilities, as Raymond Knapp points out, feeds into the American melting pot myth of inclusiveness (122). Hammerstein was trying to create a work that would show the dangers that come from not being true to yourself. Joe wants to be a physician, like his father and grandfather, from the time he is young. But the girl he loves, Jenny, is less than enthusiastic about being married to a small town physician. Joe and Jenny are incompatible, a fact the audience perceives long before Joe. In Allegro, romantic love does not solve the problem, it creates it, a radical break with the boy meets girl, loses girl, and gets her back formula.

Jenny's ambitions pressure Joe into bad choices. To please Jenny, who with her girlfriends has a clever and bitter song "Money Isn't Everything," Joe moves to the city and joins a practice where he spends most of his time catering to neurotic wealthy clientele, giving unnecessary shots, and hosting cocktail parties presided over by his avid social climbing wife. Joe is not practicing medicine and is miserable. His misery is complete when he discovers his

wife is having an affair with one of the wealthy trustees of the hospital where he works. When he is offered the coveted position of Physician in Chief at the hospital, he decides to publicly reject it, sending his wife into her lover's arms and taking himself, and his nurse, Emily, and his best friend, Charlie, back to his hometown to practice medicine. ¹

By betraying his heart's desire to work with his father, Joe has betrayed his values in the process. Hammerstein "wanted to deal with the assaults on the individual integrity, forces that make him adopt false values, the 'conspiracy of the world' that keeps him from his true path of satisfaction and fulfillment" (Fordin 251-2). Some critics interpreted Allegro as promoting the benefits of small town life and the people who live there, over the unnecessarily fast-pace, (hence "Allegro"), of empty urban living and the neurotic, vapid people who live in cities. To no avail Hammerstein pointed out that the most reprehensible character in the play, Jenny, comes from a small town. While he may not have intended to deify the small town over the big city, the title song certainly seems to support this interpretation when Joe, Charlie, and Emily sing of their lives:

We spin and we spin and we spin and we spin

Playing a game no one can win,

The men who corner wheat,

The men who corner gin,

The men who rule the airwaves

The denizens of din...

The girls who dig for gold

And won't give in for tin, (Rodgers, 6 Plays 253-4)

The capitalist struggle for material wealth is what creates the futility, the sexual infidelity, the consuming sense of anxiety. This dilemma is not present in Joe's hometown where an authentic life of service can be lived. "American nationalist mythologies tend to adopt some tropes of 'authenticity' derived from European models, finding their highest value in simple goodness, most often in rural or small-town settings, rather than in the sophisticated complexities of modern urbanity" (Knapp 122).

To navigate the audience through Joe's life, Rodgers and Hammerstein employed a number of experimental elements. One of the most visible was the Greek chorus. Hammerstein decided to use a Greek chorus to help negotiate the passage of time, communicate inner thoughts and ideas of the characters, and serve as extras in Joseph Taylor, Jr.'s world. They would also lend an air of gravitas that would separate Allegro from the escapist musicals that were popular in the post-war years. A Greek chorus had never been used in a Broadway musical, but the term is something of a misnomer in Allegro's case. Instead of a Greek chorus, which sings, dances and speaks, there were three choruses in Allegro: a singing chorus, a dancing chorus, and a speaking chorus. Combined, there were sixty chorus members—twenty-two dancers, thirty-eight singers; almost double the number of thirty-nine actors (Grant 265).² While a few of the chorus members had bit parts: Cheerleader, Chemistry Professor, Mrs. Lansdale, Mrs. Mulhouse, Coach, the majority were part of the nameless chorus. As indicated by their numbers, the chorus was conceived to be a vital part of the show. Unlike a Greek chorus who usually identify themselves or are identified by principal characters quickly, the chorus in Allegro never tells us who they are. They seem, from their 1905 costumes, to be the residents of Joe's small Illinois town. De Mille's biographer Carol Easton described Allegro's chorus: "An omniscient chorus, always onstage, spoke and sang directly to the actors and the audience—bridging the episodic

scenes, commenting on the action, and conveying the thoughts of characters living and dead” (265). They also fit Raymond Knapp’s description of the characters of Oklahoma!, “very white, very mainstream Euro-Americans” (122). Allegro begins with a homogenous community, that is disrupted when one of its members, Joe, departs. The community is restored to wholeness when Joe decides to return. In a chapter which analyzes musicals from this period, Knapp problematizes this homogeneity when he observes, “That race is scarcely an issue in these musicals, which purport to portray a country that has in fact been beset throughout its history by racially motivated violence and discrimination, speaks to a smugness endemic to mythologies created, as they seem to have been, to reassure a nation of its own essential goodness” (122). The chorus, serving as the community, encourages and validates Joe’s choice to return home, singing, “Come home, Joe, come home!” (Rodgers, 6 Plays 264)

The chorus are the first people the audience meets. They begin the show with a song about Joseph Taylor Jr.’s birth. In his review, critic Joseph Krutch recalls that in an effort to have the audience identify with the infant, de Mille had the chorus and parents directly address the audience as if they were the baby (568). The chorus acts not only as a bridge between the audience and the characters, but between the audience and the play itself by inviting them in immediately to become a part of the play. Roger Travis, in his writing on the Greek tragic chorus, makes this relevant observation, “Whereas a tragic character cannot be other than his or her self, the chorus are mobile between action and theatre” (43). The chorus operates on a level, “that allows it simultaneous freedom from the Real and correlation to it.” (6). They participate in the action as the polis—young girls, aldermen, drunks, a church choir, children—the whole town spreads the word that Doctor Taylor and his wife Marjorie have had a son. In this instance the chorus demonstrate their mobility by enacting the fantasy of a principal character, Joseph Taylor,

Sr., the new father. The chorus serve as the community again at Joe's wedding to Jenny, where they act as the disgruntled family members, the church choir and themselves, telling the audience, "These children desperately/Need our hope!" (Rodgers, 6 Plays 228) and urging us to "Wish them well!" (230). By not identifying the chorus Hammerstein gives their character a malleability that separates them from their Greek counterpart. In Sophoclean tragedy, "the specific human character with which the poet has endowed each [choral] group has a vital part in conveying the themes of the play" (Gardiner 191). The chorus in Sophocles' plays were their own separate entity. The chorus of Allegro is used to portray a number of roles, both departing from and returning to their central role as the townspeople.

The chorus sings the thoughts of the infant Joseph as he learns to distinguish his parents from each other, how to get attention, and how to walk ("One Foot, Other Foot"). They voice unspoken internal thoughts. As he grows, they articulate his puzzlement at girls, and his fears and insecurities surrounding the girl he loves. As Joe matures and is able to speak for himself they become a prompter, introducing the love song he sings to Jenny, "You Are Never Away." The chorus also comments on his emotional state, expressing Joe's confusion with this repeated refrain, "Poor Joe!/The older you grow,/The harder it is to know/What to think, What to do, Where to go!" (Rodgers, 6 Plays 221). The women of the chorus also serve as prompters for Jenny in act two when she angers Joe. They urge her to make it up to him and coach her on how to manipulate Joe into getting what she wants. Their advice to seduce him is successful—a fact that the men in the chorus register when Joe picks up Jenny and starts to carry her back to bed, and they sing out, "That's all brother!"

By the beginning of act two, the chorus has guided us through Joe's childhood, education, and marriage. Hammerstein deftly keeps the focus on Joe's insular life, avoiding all

mention of both world wars, which fall within the time span of the play. The role of the chorus diminishes in the second act as the individuals in the play begin to take on more active roles in their own destinies, and as one new character, Emily, a nurse, and one old one, Charlie, a fellow physician, are further developed. The chorus play the guests at Jenny's cocktail party, but rather than having them sing the inanities of small talk, Hammerstein's lyrics comment on the conversation. He has the chorus sing, "Yatata, yatata, yatata, yatata," or "Broccoli, Hogwash Balderdash/Phoney Baloney Tripe and Trash" (262). For the title number, which criticizes the empty speed of the life Joe, Charlie, and Emily are living, the three characters lead the critique, with the chorus chiming in from behind a scrim. In the decisive final moments of the show, when Joe is confronted with the choice that will seal his fate in the life of an empty medical practice or free him to return to a small town practice to work with his father, the chorus re-introduces a song from his childhood "One Foot, Other Foot," and his mother's song, "Come Home." These prompts help Joe decide to reject the offer. The chorus approves his choice declaring, "Now you can do whatever you want,/Whatever you want to do." The show ends with Joe leaving his old life and his cheating wife to the chorus's words, "the world belongs to you!" (265).

As they had in their two previous projects, Rodgers and Hammerstein separated the singing and dancing choruses. De Mille used the dancing chorus most notably in two numbers. The comic freshman dance at college, where the students danced in the fashion of 1925, watched by chaperones, is transformed when the chorus portrays the college students as they imagine themselves to be—graceful in evening dress, dancing in a ballroom adagio style, caught and turned by accomplished partners (Easton 267). Their other big number is the "Allegro Ballet," designed to portray the frantic pace of urban living. The dancers wore costumes designed in the manner of Salvador Dali, with external organs displayed on the outside. They ran up and down

steps, leapt off and on platforms, and tried to avoid the treadmill at the front of the stage. “If you didn’t watch yourself,” said one dancer, “you could get killed” (qtd. in Easton 270). This comment reflects the scale of the show, which had, in spite of the original intentions to keep the set and staging simple, become enormous: forty stage hands, sixty sets, a semicircular treadmill that brought actor and furniture off and on, three levels of moving platforms upstage, with a giant projection screen, and a record five hundred light cues (266).

Three weeks before the out-of-town tryouts began in Boston, de Mille was unable to keep up with the new songs, scenes and dances. Hammerstein took over directing, leaving much of what de Mille had done in place, while she focused on the choreography, and Rodgers worked on staging the songs. Not having conceived the project, de Mille had significantly less control over the production than her collaborators. She had no input on the hiring of Jo Mielziner for sets and lights or for Lucinda Ballard for costumes (269). De Mille felt she was never given complete freedom to direct, while Richard Rodgers claimed she was “unprepared to take on the additional chores of directing the dialogue and staging the musical numbers” (Rodgers, Musical Stages 251). De Mille, however, was praised for choreographing the movement of the many groups, “Their omnipresence must have given her sleepless nights thinking up something more for them to do; and even more than for her excellent choreography she deserves the Theatre Guild’s appreciation for enabling the production to absorb these apparently indigestible lumps of massed humanity without calling attention either to her own mechanisms or to the shortcomings of the script” (Smith, “Three” 14). Critical praise would not restore her in the favor of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Allegro would be her last collaboration with them. As Robert Long observed, “Agnes’ reign as preeminent choreographer on Broadway, from *Oklahoma!* to *Allegro*, had

lasted only a brief five years. In the future she would have some successes, but her great years were already over” (48).

While Allegro received the largest advance in theatre history at \$750,000, it was Rodger’s and Hammerstein’s first failure. Its forty week run on Broadway and thirty-one week tour, failed to recoup its original investment (Hyland 171). Critics were divided, with some (Brooks Atkinson, Robert Coleman, and Ward Morehouse), citing it as exceptional, and others (George Jean Nathan, Wolcott Gibbs, Louis Kronenberger, and John Chapman) panning it (Fordin 255). This sharp division of opinion troubled Hammerstein, who recognized that such a variety of interpretations and dissatisfactions with the piece meant that he had failed to communicate his message (255). The scale of the show, which was enhanced by the huge choruses, seems to have been part of the problem, slowing down the pace by their size and burdening the show with moralism and sentiment. Allegro had several critics cracking the joke that the show was misnamed and should have been called “Lento” (Gassner) or “Largo Sustainato” (Krutch). Cecil Smith noted that “the most verbose speaking chorus in all history, reinforced by a singing chorus equally ready to commit itself on any subject,” ultimately left little for the central character, Joe Taylor , Jr. to say or do (Smith, “Three”). By contrast, John Gassner asserted, “Their use of the chorus is unquestionably the most original and the boldest innovation in the field, even if their craftsmanship is defeated by their matter” (24). He believed that the chorus, orchestra, and stereopticon projections were “incongruously heroic,” given the simple nature of the story. This opinion was seconded by Kappo Phelan in Commonweal, who criticized the scale of the show as cinematic, “All in all the *corn* is so carefully applied, the *gigantica* so firmly supported, the whole is as heavily significant as an embossed tombstone” (71). Joseph Wood Krutch in The Nation called the play “a cross between Handel and

Hollywood—by which I mean that the choruses permitted to relate so much of the story are really parts of a bastard oratorio; while the big ensemble scenes suggest nothing so much as the “production numbers” in a Technicolor movie” (567). Hammerstein himself felt that one of the faults of the show was that it became too unwieldy (Fordin 257). His attempts to give an individual life universal meaning drew unfavorable comparisons to Our Town. While Our Town was judged “casual and homespun,” Allegro was called “fulsome” (Gassner), Cecil Smith also makes the unfavorable comparison declaring that “*Allegro* fails where *Our Town* succeeded, in discovering the ways by which the commonplace may be transmuted into the universal” (13).

Allegro was the one play that both Rodgers and Hammerstein felt had not realized its potential. Hammerstein was said to be reworking the script for television when he died. (Fordin 251). The Greek version of the chorus did not catch on as a musical theatre device. Lost in the Stars (1949) would use it and receive the same kinds of criticism. It would be decades before audiences would see another one in Gospel at Colonus (1988) which, like its predecessor, was also an experiment. Ironically, it would be Mielziner’s multi-level, moving, abstracted set design, and Agnes de Mille’s position as director/choreographer that would leave lasting marks on the musical. De Mille paved the way for other director/choreographers, especially the women who would arise in the next generation: Kathleen Marshall, Graciela Daniele, and Susan Stroman (Long, Broadway 47). Kyle Crichton from Colliers wrote, “It was finally agreed that *Allegro* was a special mercurial substance comparable with the olive. You either liked it or you didn’t like it and rarely had adequate reasons for either judgment.”

4.2 A CHORUS LINE—BECOMING THE SUBJECT

On September 29, 1983 A Chorus Line broke the record established by Grease for the longest-running show on Broadway. At 3,389 performances, running for eight years, two months and four days, having earned nine Tony Awards and \$260 million worldwide, the show had become an international phenomenon (Haller). A Chorus Line had its beginnings in the frustrations of two chorus dancers, Tommy Stevens and Michon Peacock, who after several years of working in short-lived musicals, were interested in forming a dancers' company that would develop work for themselves and their friends. They decided to convene a meeting of interested "gypsies" to share their stories, and invited choreographer and director Michael Bennett, whom they had both danced for in Seesaw (1973), to join them. Bennett's career was firmly established by this time. He had received a Tony nomination for his choreography in Promises, Promises (1968), and Company (1970), and choreographed and co-directed Follies (1971), which earned Bennett and Harold Prince the Tony Award. His name was a powerful lure for the dancers, and he was also a potential collaborator who had the clout to create a project that could have a future.

Together Stevens, Peacock, and Bennett created a list of dancers to invite to the meeting. The group convened on January 18, 1974 at midnight in a dance studio on the Lower East Side. The session began with a dance warm-up and proceeded to interviews which lasted until noon the next day. The dancers shared stories of their childhood and early involvement with dance. The meeting was by all accounts a memorable and moving experience. It would also provide the groundwork for the script that would become A Chorus Line. A second taping session occurred two weeks later, with several new faces and, not surprisingly, a lot less spontaneity. It was an emotional let down for most of the dancers, but did produce the interviews that led to the number

“Dance: Ten; Looks: Three,” based on Mitzi Hamilton’s story and the character Paul’s monologue, from Nick Dante’s life (Viagas, Lee, Walsh 79-80). Bennett ultimately decided to workshop the material, which at the time was an unusual process on Broadway, where producers typically tested a show in out-of-town-try-outs. Bennett enlisted Joseph Papp from the New York Shakespeare Festival to back the project. Papp provided rehearsal space and a \$100 a week salary for the performers. Dancer Nicholas Dante was hired as the librettist who would cull the thirty hours of taped interviews into a show. Marvin Hamlisch was brought on as the composer and Edward Kleban as the lyricist. Two workshop sessions took place, the first in August and September of 1974, and the second in late January and February of 1975. Joseph Papp, who at Bennett’s insistence had distanced himself from the process, came in at the end of February and gave the green light to the production, which now had seven weeks before its first audience on April 16, 1975 in the 299 seat Newman Theater off-Broadway. The rest is well-documented history. The show was a smash hit, transferring uptown to the 1,472 seat Shubert Theater on July 25, 1975 where it ran for fifteen years.

A Chorus Line was the first show to look at the anonymous dancers who surrounded the star and make a show about them. Before A Chorus Line, the chorus was depicted as primarily decorative framing for the star and bodies to create the spectacle needed in a Broadway musical. On occasion a musical would feature a chorus girl who would leave the line to become a star, but the corps in its entirety remained anonymous. Bennett’s genius was to personalize the line. According to musical historian Denny Martin Flinn, “In his work Michael had always attempted to personalize the chorus. With each successive show he had gone a step further in creating a set of characters within the ensemble” (What They Did 11-12). Audience members for the first time heard the stories of the individuals who had dedicated their lives to a dream, the dream of

appearing in a Broadway show. Their aspirations and the events that shaped their lives spoke to millions of people who, even if their dream was not to become a Broadway dancer, could connect with the idea of a passion that shaped your life. The more mundane aspects of family relationships gone bad, nasty teachers, awkward and painful adolescence, personal and professional failure, healing moments, and the celebration of success, also allowed the audience to connect with the show on a personal level. Donna McKechnie, who originated the role of Cassie, “said she believed when people come to see “A Chorus Line” ‘They see something they can identify with immediately. It’s about dreams,’ ” she said. ‘Everybody has dreams. We’re all in the chorus’” (Rothstein).

To make the play even more compelling, Bennett began the action at the final dance audition for a show. Nineteen dancers start on the line to compete for the eight slots in the fictional show. The audience begins the play, like the performers, in a state of suspense. No one knows who will succeed. The chorus members even talk about the anonymity of their work, “who am I anyway/am I my resume?/that is a picture/ of a person I don’t know” (Hamlisch 22).

A Chorus Line comes out of the long tradition of the back-stage musical, where the audience is given a glimpse of how a group of “kids” puts on show. This genre’s appeal is based on giving the audience a voyeuristic glimpse into what is normally a private process. Rick Altman, in his analysis of the backstage film musical notes, “When we go to a backstage musical we lift a veil; by pulling aside the backdrop or peeking into the wings we are able to satisfy our natural desire to look beyond, behind, and beneath” (207). A Chorus Line allows the audience access to two different kinds of privileged viewing: they are invited into the normally closed audition process, where they can view, like the director, the competition and skill set of each performer. As well, the audience gets a glimpse into the private lives of the dancers when the

director Zach coaxes personal stories from the traditionally anonymous chorus. According to Altman, it is the private hidden part of the process that intrigues the audience, in contrast to what holds the interest of the performer, which in a backstage musical, is the show. In A Chorus Line the desire of the chorus is illustrated on two levels, one of aspiration, in the beginning with the number “I Hope I Get It,” and the realization of the dream in the finale “One.”

Originally, Bennett believed that “One” would horrify the audience. After spending an evening getting to know the chorus as individuals, he felt the audience would reject the idea of seeing them all subsumed back into the chorus where they are backing a star (Flinn, What They Did 117). The opposite happened. But why? What is so appealing about the uniformity of the chorus line in the glittering gold costumes of the finale? The audience reads “One,” not as a loss of identity, but as the achievement of a dream. They have so successfully identified with the individuals in the chorus that when they achieve the object of their desire, a place in the line, a job, the audience is transported with them. As Frank Rich observed, “Maybe the real power of “A Chorus Line” comes from its simple egalitarian message. Anyone can be a star in life” (“At the Age of 5”). To illustrate this point, in the workshop stage of the process Bennett had even considered bringing an audience member on stage to be the star of the “One.” This idea was scrapped for a number of reasons, including the desire to keep the show focused on the chorus (VLW 205). “One” not only refers to the “singular sensation” of the absent female star, but is read by the audience as referring to the chorus as a unit, and to the individuals they have come to know in the course of the evening who all, in their way, seem deserving of being a star.

But if the show succeeds in revealing the chorus as individuals, the finale seems to illustrate the point that the sum of the line is greater than its parts. We have spent the evening watching performers audition in their rehearsal clothes. “One,” is the only show number in the

play, and it serves to transition the audience into a fantasy world where every chorus dancer in the show is restored to the line. No one has been cut. The audition process has been forgotten. The audience is watching the finale of the play within a play and also the show. The performers all take their individual bows before “One.” But at this point it is hard to recognize the individual dancers we have come to know because their sparkling show costumes are identical, with both sexes sporting a top hat, vest and long sleeves, with the legs of the women in tights and flattered by short heels (Mandelbaum 171). The androgynous sexuality that marks the 1970’s and 1980’s helps to make them indistinguishable from each other.

In the finale, the audience experiences the spectacle of a corps of dancers moving in unison for the first time. We get to see show business, the reason everyone is in the room— the dancers to perform, the audience to watch. There is a satisfying sense of “emotional solidarity” that comes with watching people move in unison, a vision of uniformity heightened by the costuming, which harkens back to the glamorous the effect of the Follies (McNeill 31). Bennett’s final image for the show was the chorus lifting legs high in a precision kick line. “There are no additional “Bows” after this-leaving the audience with an image of a kick line that goes on forever” (Hamlisch 145).

The tension in A Chorus Line comes from Bennett’s desire to celebrate the individual dancers, while also trying to address the fact that the art of being an ensemble member requires the dancer to subsume their identity and to become one with the chorus line. This tension is immediately evident on the second page of the Playbill where the credits of the performers are listed collectively, broken into Broadway, National, and Bus and Truck tours, with 612 years of dance training, 748 teachers and 26 knee and 36 ankle injuries, above their individual names and roles (qtd in Flinn, What They Did flyleaf). While the show does celebrate the group, it also

recognizes the individual, and to be seen as an individual in show business is the opportunity to be a star. Cassie is a dancer who tried to make it in Los Angeles as an actor. She failed and wants to come back to the chorus. The director, and her ex-lover, Zach tries to dissuade her by saying that she is “special,” separating her from the auditioners, who are not. Cassie refutes this saying, “No, we’re all special” (Hamlisch 122), which was exactly Bennett’s point in creating the show.

This struggle between celebrating the anonymous group and the individual who needs to be recognized, was played out in the creation of the show and the lives of the performers. Bennett’s role as choreographer/director was critical in making the chorus the subject matter. According to theatre historian Ken Mandelbaum he was motivated by a number of factors, including the unappreciated and precarious position of the dancer in musical theater. Economics had shrunk the size of the average chorus to ten, and even though dancers were encouraged to sing and act, they were frequently passed over for smaller speaking parts in favor of singers (95). In the program Bennett is credited with “Conceived, Choreographed and Directed by,” indicating his control over the vision of the piece. It was Bennett’s choice to develop the taped interviews they had accumulated into a musical. He hand-picked performers from the beginning of the process for what they could bring to the project. His presence at the taping shaped the material. According to Bob Avian, Bennett’s co-choreographer on A Chorus Line, (and the director of the revival, which opened on Broadway October 5, 2006) “Because Michael was a working director-choreographer, it meant all of a sudden you had a father figure in the room. It was meant to be equal, but with Michael there, it wasn’t” (qtd in Mandelbaum 103). The workshops were, in some sense, long auditions for the show, with the performers competing for Bennett’s time and attention. They knew that the performers who did the best work would have a better shot at

having material assigned to them or further developed for them. The natural competitive streak in the dancers was utilized to bring out better performances.

Ironically, although Bennett intended to make a work about the chorus, he didn't avoid creating a star in the company. Donna McKechnie, who had worked with Bennett on a number of projects, was cast in the role of Cassie, the former star, who is now competing for a role in the chorus. McKechnie had name recognition on Broadway. Like her character, Cassie, who had a past with the fictional show's director, Zach, McKechnie had a special relationship with A Chorus Line's director, Bennett. The Cassie/ Zach story becomes a running thread through the play. Mirroring the onstage action, Bennett and McKechnie's friendship set Donna apart from the rest of the company. She received her own number, "The Music and the Mirror," which caused resentment when the four male dancers who backed her up were cut so that the dance became her solo. In the New York Times review she and Robert LuPone, who played Zach, were singled out for special mention. Little things like Hirschfeld's drawing of the company through a fishbowl lens that put Cassie and Zach at the front, or McKechnie being featured on the cover of Newsweek on December 1, 1975, made it seem as if the chorus was not the star of the show and created tension within the company (VLW 286-7). But the real distinction was in salary. The dancers were told they were under a "favored nations" union contract, which meant since they were in an ensemble show they would be listed alphabetically, there would be no individual dressing rooms, and they would all make the same amount of money. But dancer Pam Blair found out through her agent that Donna was making more money, which turned out to be true (222-3).

Bennett's directing style only exacerbated the problem. Like the choreographer he most admired, Jerome Robbins, he manipulated the dancers into the performances he needed. One of

the most famous stories is when Bennett faked a knee injury during a rehearsal to make the company address the question of, “What happens when you can’t dance any more?” The performers reacted to his injury with tears, confusion, calls to the doctor, but after four to five minutes of the ruse, Bennett got up and asked them if they remembered what they had done, said and where they were on the stage. He then had them recreate the scene he had just improvised. Clearly, Bennett was using the Method acting techniques that Robbins had studied and used with his dancers. The scene ended up in the show, but Bennett’s deception eroded the trust of some of the performers (Mandelbaum 123). Bennett’s tendency to favor certain performers created resentments that would ultimately turn some cast members against him. Actor Robert LuPone, observed that, “I do believe that terror is what brought the group together. The only way the group became an ensemble was a direct result of terror and manipulation on Michael Bennett’s part” (VLW 114). While his methods have been criticized the results were indisputable. In his introduction to the libretto, critic Frank Rich observes that in A Chorus Line Bennett had played a more dominant role than any other director/choreographer had before (xv).

When the show opened at the Newman to rave reviews, expectations grew in the company members that A Chorus Line would be their stepping stone out of the chorus to stardom. In true Broadway fashion almost all of them expected to be the chorus girl or boy who makes it big. Many of them wanted to be actors. By using the stories from the taping sessions Bennett gave his company, who were not trained as actors, an instant connection to the material. They were relating their stories, or the stories of people they knew. But while the fairy tale of chorus members becoming stars does happen on occasion, the likelihood of it occurring to an entire chorus was slim. Yet one of the ironies of the success of the show, was that many of the chorus dancers felt that taking another chorus job would be a step backwards for their careers.

Since Bennett had showcased and forged their acting and singing talents, the performers wanted to use them. Some were successful, but none achieved star status and most of them admitted to suffering from emotional problems caused by the creation and success of the show (Mandelbaum 181). The original company split a year into the run, when Bennett created a second company for the West Coast. Only four performers opted to stay in New York. Journalists wrote articles on the fate of the original company members five years after the opening, when the show broke Grease's record, and again when it closed in 1990.

In October 2006 the original dancers were back in the news again, this time regarding the revival, which opened on Broadway October 5, 2006. While their stories will once again have a hearing, none of the original company are entitled to royalties.³ Today, with A Chorus Line a multi-million dollar industry it is cause for embitterment for some performers. While their stories will be used, they are not billed as the creators of the show and the agreement they signed only covered the fifteen year run of the original production.

A Chorus Line changed the way audiences looked at chorus dancers by making them individuals. This was a different kind of publicity from the glamorous newspaper articles that featured individual chorines and their sanitized success stories. Because of the nature of its creation A Chorus Line achieved an honesty and authenticity (a problematic term in the theatre) that made it both moving and appealing. The New York Times review of the revival criticizes the failure of most of the performers to create strong connections with their characters. "It's hard to separate professional shtick from their private selves, which defeats the show's purpose" (Brantley). A Chorus Line inspired a number of dance-based musicals including Dancin', 42nd Street, and My One and Only. Bennett's success with workshop development changed the way musicals were created. His achievement confirmed the power of the director-choreographer, a

field that was dominated by a generation of men who are now deceased: Robbins, Fosse, Bennett, Champion, and the lone woman, Agnes de Mille.

4.3 42ND STREET—NOSTALGIA

42nd Street is the crowning achievement of Gower Champion's career as a director-choreographer, which ended the day the show opened. He began his career as a ballroom dancer in 1936, first with Jeanne Tyler, and then with his wife, Marge. The Champions were the most popular dance team in television and film during the 1950's, with Gower choreographing most of their routines. In 1948 he choreographed his first two revues on Broadway, Lend An Ear and Small Wonder. But the successes which he is most remembered for are Bye Bye Birdie (1960), Carnival (1961), Hello, Dolly! (1964), and 42nd Street (1980) (Payne-Carter 155-58). In the sixteen years between his two mega-hits, Champion had some modest successes and a few outright bombs. Prior to 42nd Street his last foray on Broadway was Rockabye Hamlet (1976), which lasted for eight performances. The offer to direct 42nd Street came from producer David Merrick, who had hired Champion to direct Hello, Dolly! At first he declined the offer for reasons of health; he had recently been diagnosed with a rare, incurable blood disorder. The show was then offered to Michael Bennett, Bob Fosse, and Ron Fields before another offer was made to Champion who decided, against his doctor's advice, that he needed to work (Gilvey 274).

The play was adapted from the 1933 film of the same title, which featured the choreography of Busby Berkeley. The story was in the popular backstage musical genre, where the protagonists find love and stardom by the end of the film. The stage version stuck closely to

the film plot, with one interesting variant. The story centered around aspiring chorus girl Peggy Sawyer (Wanda Richert), who accidentally breaks the ankle of the leading lady Dorothy Brock (Tammy Grimes) and gets kicked out of the show Pretty Lady. Desperate to save their jobs, one of the chorus girls suggests to the director, Julian Marsh (Jerry Orbach), that Peggy has the talent to replace Dorothy and save the show and hence their lives. Julian decides that since he fired her, he should be the one to get her back. He goes to the train station, where Peggy is waiting to catch a ride back to Allentown. She rejects his pleas, but when his urgings are reinforced by her friends in the chorus with “Lullaby of Broadway,” Peggy agrees to do it. In a mad frenzy to learn the role and open the show in thirty-six hours Peggy not only triumphs in Pretty Lady with the chorus behind her, performing “42nd Street,” but she is poised to succeed in love, with the director, Julian Marsh. In the film, Peggy (Ruby Keeler) finds love with the show’s juvenile, Billy Lawlor (Dick Powell), which was also the original premise of the musical version during its Washington, D.C. try-outs. In rewrites it was decided that a liaison between Peggy and Julian had more zip and the plot was changed.⁴ The score used Harry Warren and Al Dubin’s songs from the film, supplemented by other Warren/Dubin material. The playbill credit for the book was billed as “Lead-ins and crossovers” by Michael Stewart (an old friend and collaborator of Champion’s), Mark Bramble, and Bradford Ropes, who had written the novel from which the film had originally been adapted.

The chorus forms the spine of a backstage musical. While production elements can create striking visuals, it is the mass of the chorus that energizes the space, creates the movement within it, and sometimes literally makes it move. If A Chorus Line gave the audience a barebones, internal look at the psyche of the dancer, 42nd Street returned us to the glittering surface where an energetic ensemble of kids just wants to get the show open. Ben Brantley in his review of the

2001 revival noted, “There’s nothing like precision tap-dancing to turn a New York audience into a lab full of case studies for Dr. Pavlov. Throw us a big bunch of twinkly youngsters doing the same noisy step at the same moment, and we’re beating our flippers together like the seals at feeding time. It’s a conditioned reflex as old as the first chorus line” (“You’ve Got to Come Back”). Champion cast thirty-six dancers in the chorus, fourteen men and twenty-two women, a number that was unusually large at a time when Broadway and the nation were experiencing inflation. Champion recognized the centrality of the chorus, and the aspirations of the “every girl” Peggy Sawyer, who hailed from the most mundane of places, Allentown, PA, to become a star. He opened the show with a highly theatrical image, with the curtain raised just enough to glimpse the legs of the chorus, as they vigorously tapped into the opening number, which is called, appropriately enough “The Audition.” If A Chorus Line is on one level all about an audition, since the dancers never make it into the line until the end of the show (Mandelbaum 151), 42nd Street is about the glamour and allure of the show, and Broadway itself. Biographer David Payne-Carter believes that Champion “was conceiving *42nd Street* in terms of a production about show business as an institution—a fable celebrating the best of what Broadway can be—rather than a representation of particular events” (141). Since Champion was aware that this would most likely be his last show, it was also to be a summation of everything he knew about musical theatre (141).

42nd Street was one of the big hits of the 1980-81 season and judged by many to be an indicator of “the sorry state of creativity in the American Musical Theatre” (Bordman 703). The fact that the show was adapted from a forty-seven year old film was cited by some as proof that Broadway had lost its imagination. Critic Robert Brustein wrote that the character of the 1980-81 season, “reflects the times we live in—cautiously conservative, meretriciously self-confident,

smooth and cheerful, lacking aspiration or risk.” Set in 1933, 42nd Street is an exercise in nostalgia, a throwback to the popular backstage musicals of the 1930’s. As Rebecca Rugg explains in her article, “Nostalgia is the prime dramaturgical mode of musical theater.” The definition of nostalgia is “a longing for something in the past that never actually existed, at least not as remembered” (45-6). 42nd Street presents a view of the Depression where jobs are scarce and people are hungry, but a hit musical has the possibility to change your life. Producer Joseph Papp observed, “The whole idea of show business is related to the dream of overnight success, which feeds our own dreams of money and fame” (Lovenheim). Tapping into this desire Producer David Merrick wanted “a big, happy show, ‘the sort of lively, lavish, frivolous musical I believe people have been missing,’ he had told a friend, ‘I think the musical public is fed up with those solemn ones and those tiny little ones with half a dozen people, skimpy sets and squeaky orchestras’” (qtd in Jahr 2). Merrick also felt that the timing was right for 42nd Street. He believed “that the mood of the 1980 audience mirrored that of 1933, when escapist extravaganzas were the rage” (2). America in 1980 was suffering from double-digit inflation. The Carter administration was limping to a close that would end with the disastrous Iranian hostage crisis. Broadway would respond to troubled times with a comfortable wave of revivals that began in 1970 with No, No Nanette. 42nd Street, while not technically a revival, was based on a classic film whose story of the chorus girl, “going out a youngster and coming back a star” had reached mythological status (Warren 2-6-23). The point is reflected in the book, when at the end of the play Julian Marsh informs the successful Peggy that, “For years to come, thousands of little chorus girls will go to auditions and say to themselves, ‘Who knows? I might come out of this another Peggy Sawyer!’ I ask you only to be the sort of star those little girls would want you to be” (2-8-31).

The thirty-six members of the ensemble not only helped create the spectacle of the show, but gave the play its character. They function in the real world as hard-working, big-hearted folks who need jobs. In the context of the show Pretty Lady they provide the glamour in “Dames,” back-up for the star Dorothy Brock, and the spectacle in the tap numbers. The show opens, as does the film, with the buzz that Julian Marsh is doing a show, and seconds later we are in the audition, as the entire ensemble pounds out a routine. We meet the wisecracking women of the chorus: Lorraine, Annie, and Phyllis. They are the “kids” who invite the shy and aspiring chorine, who has missed the audition because she was too nervous, to lunch. When the co-author of Pretty Lady, Maggie, tells the girls they’ll dance to a café for lunch, Peggy replies, “I don’t know your steps.” When Annie offers to demonstrate them, they all discover Peggy is a quick and impressive study. To encourage her they sing “Go Into Your Dance,” where the answer to depression, bad weather, and getting a job, is to keep plugging away and dancing. Of course, the director happens to enter the café as Peggy is showing her skills and he makes an excuse to get her into the cast. When Dorothy Brock breaks her ankle and the director announces the show will close, it’s the kids in the chorus who mirror the opening scene with their lamentation of being out of a job, unable to pay their rent. Champion stages them in three tiers of dressing rooms, a set reminiscent of Bye Bye Birdie, as they sing, “There’s A Sunny Side To Ev’ry Situation.” The song abruptly ends as Annie solves the problem of the show closing by proposing that Dorothy Brock be replaced. It is the chorus who selects Peggy as the replacement, unites behind her, and convinces her to save them all. For the members of the chorus, her success or failure as the star of Pretty Lady, reflects their ability and potential to achieve the dream she is about to live. As Annie says to her as the show is about to open, “She’s gotta come through! Not for Jones or Barry [the producers] or any of those stuffed-shirts out there, but for us! The kids in the line,

You're not just Peggy Sawyer tonight, you're every girl who ever kicked up heel in the chorus. Get out there in front, kid, and show 'em what we can do!" (Warren 2-6-22) In case Peggy doesn't have enough pressure Julian assails her with a pep talk that makes her burden even more momentous, "Our hopes, our futures, our lives are in your hands" (2-6-23).

The songs from the production of Pretty Lady, constitute over half the score of the show. Champion staged the first showstopper, "Dames," as a "beauty parade" number, puts the women of the chorus on display, where they are serenaded by the leading man, Billy Lawlor, and framed by the chorus men. Champion brilliantly staged this as a work-in-progress to indicate the passage of time within the show, as the company prepares for opening night. The number is hastily begun as a rehearsal without the final scenery or costumes. Billy Lawlor gets his note from the conductor in the pit, four chorus men enter in rehearsal clothes with top hats and canes, and the entrance for the Maison des Dames flies in. At the end of the first chorus, the chorus men exit and the Maison piece flies out to reveal an Art Deco jungle gym festooned with chorus girls swinging from poles, tossing beach balls, frolicking innocently. The set revolves into a mirrored, multilevel setting on which the girls continue to play. When all sixteen of the chorus men re-enter with Lawlor, they are in their show costumes of burgundy tuxes and tails. The Maison set flies in, and through the doors parade the impressive line-up of the chorus girls in their production costumes of beautiful gowns in the hues of the rainbow. Robin Wagner's set revolves again to create a mirror wall that reflects the line in their final pose—the men upstage shoulder to shoulder with hands on hats, the women with one arm extended making a rainbow effect. The mirrored wall creates the effect of a never-ending chorus line, a trick that Wagner also employed in A Chorus Line. The crowning moment is the entrance of the leading lady who comes through the chorus to hit her final note and receive the applause of the crowd (Gilvey 283). Champion's

staging provides the opportunity to create a double layering for the audience, which is typical of the film backstage musical, which derives part of its power from enabling the voyeurism of the paying audience in the house. Watching the number evolve in front of their eyes, the audience is privy to the closed rehearsal process, which heightens their appreciation of the final product in all its razzle dazzle (Altman 206-7).

“We’re in the Money” is act one’s penultimate number, and begins with the chorus girls, who wore platinum blonde wigs and carried giant dimes that converted into platforms on which they tapped. A skyscraper backdrop composed of giant money flew in for the climax, while the chorus men tapped around the women, and Billy Lawlor, in a green suit, sang atop a giant coin center stage (Gilvey 282). Part of the show’s magic was that it was in constant motion. Singers were not allowed to do the traditional “stand and deliver,” but were choreographed by Champion. “He always had to have something going on. It was all very cinematic: scenery just moved on and off, and there was never any real break in the action. There were a lot of fade-outs and fade-ins” (Reams qtd in Gilvey 287). The act ends with an aborted version of the title song, sung by Dorothy, who is accidentally pushed by Peggy, falls, and breaks her ankle.

The second act features two songs from Pretty Lady, a romantic comedy number “Shuffle Off to Buffalo,” followed by the dramatic “42nd Street Ballet,” which features a young woman trying to navigate 42nd Street, portrayed as a world of pickpockets, gangsters, soldiers and random murders. Peggy triumphs in Pretty Lady, guaranteeing the company two years of employment. But her stardom doesn’t turn her away from her roots. When she is invited to two opening night celebrations, one at the Ritz with the creators of the show, and one that the chorus members are giving in her honor at Lorraine’s house, she chooses to go to the “kids party.”

The girl who was one of the chorus has found success on two levels—that of star performer and lover. The stage version of the show maintains the Berkeley formula, which Rick Altman notes develops a couple’s love in tandem with the show they are trying to open (228). As noted previously, however, it is not an exact parallel since the lovers inside the show, Peggy and Billy, do not become the lovers outside the show. Billy in the film, as portrayed by Dick Powell, is a more innocent juvenile, though not too innocent, since our first sight of him is in his underwear. In the stage version Billy is described as a wolf by one of the chorus girls (1-1-15). And his continual attentions to Peggy are cast more in a predatory light. The outside couple is Peggy and director Julian Marsh. This effectively solves the “sad clown” paradigm that Altman observed made the film something of a throwback to the backstage musicals of the 1920’s, in that the director in the film version, called Warren Baxter, was left alone and unappreciated (228). As in the film, it is Julian who coaches the innocent Peggy in romance for the show, by kissing her and giving her the experience necessary to deliver her lovelorn lines. But in the stage version she receives another kiss from Julian, “This afternoon it was acting. This one I really mean” (2-6-23). The play ends with Julian deciding, once Peggy has invited him, to follow her to the kids’ cast party.

42nd Street opened on August 25, 1980 at the Winter Garden Theatre. The show, which received a boisterous reception from the opening night crowd, was also marked by tragedy when producer David Merrick announced the death of director Gower Champion from the stage to a stunned cast and audience. It is impossible to say how Champion’s death affected the initial reception of the show, since it is indelibly tied to it. Frank Rich observed, “The flaws of 42nd Street are deniably real and damaging. But now, at least, they are nothing next to Gower Champion’s final display of blazing theatrical fireworks” (“Theater:Musical”). Rich felt that the

show was neither a parody nor a straight delivery of clichés, and that Champion’s work was the reason the show was worth watching.

42nd Street ran for over seven years and was revived in May 2001 at the Ford Performing Arts Center, where it ran for another three and a half years. The critical reception was less kind the second time around. Ben Brantley from the New York Times called the revival “premature,” a “faded fax,” and claimed that the show’s “legendary status has to do with the real-life drama surrounding its opening” (“You’ve Got to Come Back”). 42nd Street suffered with the improvement in Broadway’s economy. When it originally opened in 1980, Broadway was seedy, dilapidated and neglected. The Depression era of the show seemed to match its down-and-out surroundings at the Winter Garden. The revival opened in the new Ford Performing Arts Center and now seemed a celebration of the corporate take-over of Times Square, with “We’re In The Money,” paying tribute to the “bull market of the crass Clinton 1990’s” (Rugg 51).

Rebecca Rugg takes particular aim at the men in the chorus, who made her uncomfortable during “Dames,” with, “the sparkling effeminacy they projected. Whether or not the dancers themselves are gay, by performing cheesy Golden-Age-style musical theater choreography with plastered on toothy smiles, they place their bodies in a gay vernacular. Is musical theater possible after gay liberation?” (48). The question relates directly to the portrayal of gender roles. The sensibility of camp, so much a part of musical theater, is the missing ingredient in this male chorus for Rugg. In her estimation, by attempting to play the 1930’s “straight” the director has prevented the chorus from commenting on their performance and succeeded in inadvertently foregrounding their effeminacy. As spectators then are we essentially seeing the chorus men as the audience of the 1930’s would have seen them—before gay liberation, before camp was a recognized style, as contemporaries without nostalgia for the

Depression? These are the chorus men that Max Beerbohm objected to in 1909, passive in top hat and tails, a roles that is less than masculine. Rugg herself rejects the limitations of all musical theatre as “gay vernacular” in her criticism of D.A. Miller’s A Place For Us, who she claims dismisses the problematic relationship that female spectators bring to the prescriptive femininity portrayed in musicals (50).

As the director/choreographer, Champion’s influence on 42nd Street was, like Bennett’s on A Chorus Line, significant. Like Bennett, he had a deep emotional and professional investment in the show. Bennett was, for the first time, in the role of director/choreographer from the inception of the piece; Champion was looking for a hit that would put his name back on Broadway’s map. Bennett had a deep connection to the chorus dancers, having been one himself. He wrote part of his own story into the show. Champion was reflected in the character Julian Marsh, a director of musicals desperately in need of a hit. Both shows were backstage musicals, a trend revived by A Chorus Line. By the time 42nd Street opened, two-thirds of the musicals on Broadway were about show business (Lovenheim). Choreographer/directors like Champion, Bennett, Fosse, and Tune found the subject of show business attractive for a number of reasons. They liked the business and knew it well. There was no research required because they lived in show business. It is also much easier to justify song and dance in stories about people who sing and dance than it is in stories where people are accountants or doctors (ask Oscar Hammerstein). The emphasis on dancers as creators of musicals, has also led to a diminishment in the importance of the book. Choreographer/director Joe Layton (Barnum) observed, “Every choreographer can work without a story, but writers don’t like to hear that. A choreographer deals with an essence and can get a lot out without a word. I love economy in writing” (Lovenheim). Fosse would do away with the book for his show Dancin’ and Susan Stroman and

John Weidman would try a variation on this theme by using minimal dialogue in Contact.

Champion, in spite of his successes, is not put into the same category as Jerome Robbins, Michael Bennett, and Bob Fosse. He is credited with keeping the razzle dazzle and elegance in show dancing, and he was the man to come to when you wanted to frame a leading lady, but he is not viewed as an innovator. During the 1960's and 1970's he seemed unable to articulate the darker themes entering into musicals as a result of the changes in American society. But he is acknowledged by collaborators and peers as a master at staging. His strong visual sense helped him to create a more fluid cinematic style of staging that furthered the work initiated by Jerome Robbins (Long, Broadway 219). In 42nd Street, he brought together many of his experiences and devices that had made his past shows successful.

4.4 CONTACT—DANCE PLAY

In 1998 choreographer Susan Stroman received an invitation from Andre Bishop, the Artistic Director of the Lincoln Center, to develop an idea for a musical. She called her friend John Weidman, the book writer of Pacific Overtures, and Follies, and began brainstorming. Stroman had recently visited a swing club and was fascinated by a young woman in a bright yellow dress who seemed to effortlessly rule the dance floor as she accepted and rejected partners with a nod of her head. This image became the basis for a five-week workshop, conducted with eighteen dancers. The result was an hour-long dance piece called "Contact." While the dancer in a yellow dress was featured, the story now centered around an ad man, Michael Wiley (Boyd Gaines), who in spite of his award-winning success, is desperately lonely.

His downstairs neighbor keeps leaving messages on his answering machine begging him to buy a carpet so the noise he makes late at night won't keep her up. His shrink leaves messages too, concerned that he has decided to discontinue therapy. This doesn't stop Michael from trying and failing to hang himself. Frustrated when the noose breaks, he finds a swing dance club where he encounters a mysterious, beautiful woman in a yellow dress. The woman in yellow never speaks, nor do the other dancers in the club. Michael's only communication is with the bartender (Jason Antoon), whose voice sounds like Michael's shrink. The bartender tries to encourage him to approach the woman in yellow, but Michael is unable to dance. He watches longingly as the other men partner her around the floor. On his second visit he manages to find the courage to dance with her, but his dancing becomes, "too needy, too urgent, and too desperate" (Stroman 28). When the music ends, he will not let go of the woman, and she is rescued from his grasp by the other dancers. On his third visit, he does not hesitate, but fights off the other men to dance with her. This dance is described as "A dance of contact, connection, and completion" (30). At the climax of the dance Michael is returned to his apartment, where he is confronted by his downstairs neighbor, the distraught, sleep-deprived Miss Minetti, wearing a yellow bathrobe. He promises to buy wall-to-wall carpet if she will dance him. The play ends as the couple dances to the strains of "Sweet Lorraine."

Based on the strength of the workshop version of "Contact," Stroman and Weidman were asked to create two companion pieces. The first piece is an almost wordless pantomime, set in 1767 and inspired by Fragonard's painting "The Swing" (1767). Bringing the painting to life, the flirtation between a pretty young woman on the swing, her admiring aristocratic lover, and the servant pushing the swing was given a clever twist. When the aristocrat exits to fetch more champagne the young woman and the servant engage in "passionate, acrobatic sex," on the

swing (Stroman 1). When the aristocrat returns to resume his flirtation, the servant claps his hands and the two men exchange coats and places, leaving the audience to divine that the real aristocrat was the servant pushing the swing, who staged the role swap for his own amusement.

The second piece, “Did You Move?” is set in an Italian restaurant in 1954 and features a young wife (Karen Ziembra), married to a bullying Mafioso husband (Jason Antoon). Every time he leaves the table to fill his plate at the buffet she launches into a dance. Her first flight is a solo one to Greig’s “Anitra’s Dance.” None of her fellow diners seem to notice her abandon. She lands neatly in her chair just before her husband returns. For her second flight of fancy, which takes place to Tchaikovsky’s “Waltz From Eugene Onegin, Opus 24,” the Headwaiter becomes her partner, catching her as she turns and leaps through the air. Again, no one in the restaurant notices her. When her husband exits again in his quest for a “fuckin’ roll,” she stands and cues the music for Bizet’s “Farandole From L’Arlesienne Suite No. 2.” This time the whole restaurant joins in her dance, but her husband re-enters, catching her in motion, and draws a gun. Chaos erupts in the restaurant as husband and wife wrestle over the firearm, which goes off, hitting the husband in the chest. As he reels offstage with an eloquent, “Fuck,” a crash, and then silence, after which the wife resumes her dance, “a defiant dance of liberation and celebration” accompanied by everyone in the restaurant (8). As the music climaxes and the wife lands breathless and released in her seat, the husband returns with his rolls, seemingly unharmed. He hits her when she tries to brush crumbs from his lapel. As he returns to eating his roll, the wife closes her eyes and we hear the strains of Puccini’s “O Mio Babbino Caro,” from Gianni Schicchi.

Two of the three pieces feature an ensemble who serve as a community. While they never speak, they offer their support in dance. In “Did You Move?” the wife’s mental escape is

gradual, beginning with a private solo, building to a partnered duet, and finally inviting the community of diners in to celebrate her fantasy and then her escape, which proves to be a fantasy. Her daydream takes the form of classical ballet since the Ballet Russe was popular in the 1950's (Cousins). Without the ensemble to act as witnesses and co-celebrants, the wife's joy would have no audience. Like the rest of her life it would be an entombed, lonely moment. The two other couples in the restaurant reflect relationships the wife could have, demonstrating different ways of making contact—there is the engaged couple—he has brought his date to the restaurant to propose; and the pregnant couple, who seem blissfully content and comfortable with one another (Cousins). They are not an audience, since they never merely observe her. They are the chorus, and by dancing with her they serve to magnify her joy by multiplying her dancing image on the stage. In this sense they are reminiscent of an older style of ensemble, designed to frame the star. In fact, the chorus was “directed to become her dream of belonging to a community of friends that become the Ballet Russe and she the star” (Cousins). However, in this ensemble, each member is an individual, and while nameless each, like the wife, has been playing a character in the restaurant.

In the title piece the voiceless ensemble that inhabits the club functions as a community. While the club is a social space, Michael does not have access to the community because he does not dance. The silence of the dancers, as it does for the diners, serves to further close them off to the central character, Michael. They are absorbed in their action, to dance, and pay him no attention. Each dancer developed a character, named for the rehearsal process but not in the program. Some of these included: “Jack: Alpa [sic] male of the club, Johnny: A sexual pig... Pete: Italian Brooklyn (think the guys in Saturday Night Fever)... Boo Boo: Hip Soho artist.” Some of the women were: “Shannon: solo in club (sexy Amazon Ann Margaret)... Trouble:

underage in club... Dana: Partner of Pete (Brooklyn ethnic street smart), Lady, European beauty Soho fashion designer (partner of Boo Boo)” (Cousins). Michael’s need to be included in the club community does not manifest itself until he sees the woman in the yellow dress. Then the men in the ensemble become competition. According to dancer Tomé Cousins, “We were to represent the outside world to Michael and all the types in NYC that he so wanted to be. There are seven men and we are called the Michael dream men.” The male dancers have the ability to dance with the woman in yellow if she permits and their ability to dance privileges them. They become Michael’s obstacle to making contact with the object of his desire. One of the dancers blocks his view of the woman. At the end of his first visit he is surrounded on the dance floor and cannot find her. During his second visit the bartender has to push him out on the floor to get him to dance with the woman. Dancing is a social act, even in the hands of the eerily detached club habitués. When Michael asks why the dancers come to the club, the bartender replies with some of the same words Michael’s shrink used on his answering machine, “Maybe because they’re lonely. Because we all feel lonely sometimes, We all feel the anguish and despair of loneliness.—We all feel the humiliation of that loneliness, as if our isolation were somehow our own fault” (Stroman 26). This ensemble is not a warm and folksy community like Allegro, or even the brash back stage kids in 42nd Street; this is the post-modern version of a community. It ignores you in a restaurant and even, as it does for Michael, ignores you in your subconscious. The sought-after contact is a one-on-one connection of intimacy. While it is not exactly the marriage trope of Oklahoma! or Guys and Dolls, it is the 21st century version of love desired if not acquired.

While the members of Contact’s ensemble do not sing or speak, Stroman was looking for a particular kind of performer. She needed a strong background in ballet, great rhythm and great

strength for the swing dancing in “Contact.” The dance and the story were so tightly entwined that she needed dancers who could act. “I needed people who understood how to dance in a character. It was mostly about hiring dancers who had creative minds, who weren’t the type to stand there and just wait for the next step” (qtd in Gold 67). Dancer Tomé Cousins observed, “Stroman cast the show... from a pool of acting dancers and actors with physical movement training. She has great respect for dancers who are trained technically for both the concert dance stage and the musical theater. All of the original company had these things in common: We had all danced in companies at some point, done Broadway or tours and were all over the age of 28 all but one... she was 19 and for a reason.” The 19 year old played Trouble in the third piece. The show was conceived as an ensemble piece, and like Dancin’, all of the performers were contracted as principles (Cousins). The workshop process began with three days of just dancing. She would ask dancers to team up and do combinations flirtatiously, shyly, aggressively, as if they had had five Margaritas (Gold 67). Dancer Deborah Yates who played the woman in yellow said, “In Stroman’s work, there is no separation between acting and dancing. Every step, every gesture, every movement has a reason behind it. There’s not a moment where you can say, ‘Here I am dancing. Now I’m acting.’ You’re always doing both” (qtd in Gold 67).

Because the dialogue is minimal in Contact, movement is privileged over speech as the primary means of communication. Yet, Stroman sees herself as writer. “When I choreograph for the theater, my role is to propel the plot. I am a servant to the lyric and a particular character. So, in fact, I am a writer of dance. And I consider myself a writer of dance” (66). All three pieces in Contact are about fantasies, and it interesting to note that the fantasy world is broken by the act of speech. At the end of “Swing,” the aristocrat speaks two words, “Bien joué,” Good performance, nice play, that break the bubble of the spell. In “Did You Move?”, since the wife is

forbidden any form of self expression, the majority of the speech belongs to the husband, with the wife speaking only when spoken to. His words are terse and coarse, the antithesis of the romantic strains of music the wife hears in her daydreams. In “Contact” Michael is able to muster his courage and master his loneliness to dance as one with another person, his fantasy vision of the woman in the yellow dress, an act that requires no speech. In reality he needs to speak to make contact. Michael has to ask Ms. Minetti to dance with him. There is no instant attraction. He has to overcome his neighbor’s nerves and anger to bring them together in a dance. By repeating the image of the dancing couple with the much more prosaic Ms. Minetti in her yellow bathrobe, the audience makes the connection that in reality there is a possibility for Michael to make contact, a symbolism re-inforced by the dying ivy plant that blooms at the end of the play (Stroman 35).

Contact was not Stroman’s first foray into the theme of loneliness in the city. It was present in the piece she created for the Martha Graham Company in 1998, But Not For Me, and in a piece for New York City Ballet, Blossom Got Kissed in 1999 (Gold 66). Like its predecessor Company, Contact tackles the modern idea of alienation. Where Company demonstrated its theme primarily through song and the duets, ensembles, and solos of Bobby’s friends and lovers (with Michael Bennett’s “Tic Toc” dance serving to underscore the point), Contact used dance to communicate the idea. Jack Kroll of Newsweek pronounced that Stroman “had inherited the mantle of the departed dance giants Bob Fosse and Michael Bennett. But her sensibility is different. She calls “Contact” a dance play rather than a musical” (“Dancing” 87). Stroman’s distinction was more than semantics. She had preserved the idea of story, but had used dance as the primary medium for communication. The “score” consisted of pre-recorded songs from classical, jazz and pop genres, which meant that there was no live music, and no singing. Early in

the development process Stroman and Weidman had discussed bringing in a composer and lyricist to write an original score. But as the content of the show took shape they felt it would need to find its own form. Their characters did not seem to want to sing, but they definitely wanted to dance. The pre-recorded music was conceived as the subconscious soundtrack of the main character (Cott 11).

Contact grew out of the dance musical idea that Bob Fosse created in his show Dancin' in (1978) where he eliminated the book, an original score, a star, and singing to focus purely on dance. While Dancin' was a hit that ran for four years and won two Tony awards, (for choreography and lighting) it inspired no immediate successors. Eleven years later Jerome Robbins Broadway (1989), directed by Robbins, presented a collection of the director/choreographer's best work. While the show won six Tony awards, including best musical and director, it failed to recoup its 8 million investment, closing 4 million dollars in the red, after running a little over eighteen months (Bordman, Chronicle 726). Robbins' insistence on an extended rehearsal period and the large cast of sixty-four, contributed to the show's heavy financial burden. It would be another ten years before Fosse opened in 1999, directed by Fosse dancer and mistress Ann Reinking. The show had no book, no spoken dialogue, and was a pastiche of Fosse choreography (Vellela). It ran for two and a half years and won the Tony for best musical.

Perhaps Contact's arrival on the heels of another dance musical was what caused the uproar when it was nominated for a Tony Award for best musical. Broadway Musicians Union Local 802 protested because the show did not involve live musicians. Heated arguments arose over what constitutes a musical, an argument outside the scope of this study. Stroman told Tony Vellela from The Christian Science Monitor, "Overall, though, I think these controversies are

blown out of proportion. ‘Les Mis’ has no dance at all. Does that mean its not a musical? I think it doesn’t matter, all these definitions.” Stroman had already won Tony awards for her choreography in Crazy For You and Harold Prince’s revival of Showboat. But Contact was her first venture as a director/choreographer. In 2000 she won the Tony award for best direction and Contact won for best musical.

In his book The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical, Mark Grant takes to task choreographer/directors who “reversed history and brought the Broadway musical back to the nineteenth century’s emphasis on physical production and indifference to writing. Making the hypervisual director the star broke the compact of the integrated book show whereby composers, lyricists, and choreographers synergized” (300). He makes a point of excepting Susan Stroman’s Contact from his opprobrium by acknowledging her respect for the text, and calling Contact “through-danced,” the way other shows are “through-sung” (300). Contact was a runaway hit. Lincoln Center extended its initial engagement at their small Newhouse Theater before moving it to the larger Vivian Beaumont on March 20, 2000. Stroman’s experiment with the “through-danced” musical has so far proved a unique exception rather than a trend-setting change. Twyla Tharp’s Movin’ Out, (2002), which used Billy Joel songs to create score and story, has been the only successor.

4.5 CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER FOUR

Three of these four productions were experimental in nature, and that sense of risk is evident in their use of the chorus. Hammerstein’s determination to use a Greek chorus in Allegro

to navigate his sweeping story should have worked. The singing chorus functioned as a Greek chorus would—establishing the situation, commenting on and participating in the action, prodding the characters. Yet some critics blamed the chorus for slowing down the progress of the action, while others felt they were a stroke of genius. In addition to the singing chorus, de Mille choreographed a dancing one that seems to have supplemented the action and illustrated the not so subtle message of the play. In A Chorus Line, the chorus becomes the play, and its subject is the American dream of stardom. By making the show an audition Bennett immediately engages the audience on the side of the dancers in this competition for a job. By the 1970's the singing and dancing chorus have become one, so the performers possess both abilities. (Of course, they are also triple threats because they are all acting). As a backstage musical, 42nd Street has the chorus become the community that supports Peggy, who is motivated not by a desire to be a star, but to save the show and help all of her chorus friends. A nostalgic product of the 1980's, 42nd Street makes the Depression look good, and takes us back to the imaginary day when song and dance had the power to change the world. If 42nd Street was about the chorus as community, Contact used the chorus to show the audience how isolated we are as individuals. With dance as the only medium of communication for the chorus, the main characters are left with words to share and no one to share them with. Like 42nd Street, Contact is about escapism, not so much for the audience, but for the characters in the three pieces who use movement to create contact.

Neither Allegro nor Contact dealt with the American Dream, but with the American dilemma: how does an individual avoid the pressures of the world to find what is truly meaningful, whether that is work or, more often in musical theatre at least, love? The American dream of success/fame is rejected by both Joe in Allegro and Michael in Contact. As backstage musicals, A Chorus Line and 42nd Street share the American Dream of going out a youngster and

coming back a star. Stardom for the dancers in A Chorus Line is translated not as a solo turn, but as winning a spot on the chorus line. In 42nd Street the American Dream journey reverts to its more traditional path with Peggy leaving the chorus to become a star. 42nd Street is the most traditional of the four plays, following the musical comedy model, but using triple threat performers, a fact that is masked by the backstage conceit of the show where the chorus members are depicted as hoofers.

The director/choreographers on these plays each had significant impact on the work, with de Mille on Allegro having the least control, since her collaborators were also the producers and the most successful men on Broadway. The play was Hammerstein's baby and it is not surprising, given the enormous scope of the show, that directing was ultimately divided among the three partners. Bennett and Stroman both conceived their projects, which gave them most of the artistic control—directing, choreographing, (a job Bennett shared with Bob Avian), and script-writing—for Bennett through improvisation, and with Stroman, through movement. Both artists had the luxury of two workshops to develop their plays. Champion created 42nd Street much as Rodgers and Hammerstein had created Allegro, with an out-of-town tryout. While Gower Champion did not conceive the show, his directorial hand made the play move like the film on which it was based.

The idea of chorus as community is a part of all of these plays. The chorus of Allegro are the people of Joe's hometown, urging him to come home. The dancers in A Chorus Line are a community of gypsies whose shared love of dance brings them all together to compete for a chance to become part of a vision of dazzling uniformity. The chorus in 42nd Street are gypsies who represent the average person during the Depression who needs a job in order to eat. When their jobs are threatened, they pull together to solve the problem by putting forward one of their

own. In Contact the chorus is an ambiguous community, dancing partners are clearly in touch with each other, but closed off from the main character. The resilient nature of the chorus, and the multiplicity of its possible functions make it a promising source for further experimentation.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

¹ By breaking up the central couple in the play Hammerstein also broke with long-standing tradition. As Raymond Knapp points out, the marriage trope has been central to establishing the goodness at the heart of the musical. But Hammerstein indicates from the beginning, when Jenny declares war on her mother-in-law-to-be and causes a stroke that kills her, which Joe and Jenny will not fare well. He does restore the possibility of happiness with Emily, the nurse who loves Joe, but that is only Emily's dream, and left unrealized by the end of the play.

² Several of the reviewers reference a speaking chorus, but there is no other mention of a separate group of performers dedicated to this function, and since the chorus is either speaking or dancing it is unclear when they would simply be talking.

³ See Campbell Robertson's "'Chorus Line' Returns, as Do Regrets Over Life Stories Signed Away." New York Times. 1 Oct 2006. In 1975, to move ahead with the project, Bennett had the dancers sign away their stories for \$1. At the time, this caused consternation for some of the dancers but everyone signed. Bennett gave the dancers a stake in the original production. Their contributions were divided into three tiers of involvement. There were the people who contributed to the original taping session, but did not do the show, like Steve and Denise Boockvor who served as the models for Al and Kristine. They received a royalty percentage for the right to use their story. The second tier was made up of dancers who contributed only

peripheral material, not monologues and whole song ideas. The third group was composed of original cast members who had not attended the workshops or contributed material. They were only entitled to royalties as long as they performed in the original production. (Flinn, What They Did 142-3).

⁴The love story that evolved between the director and the star, paralleled the relationship that developed between Champion and Richert (Gilvey 289).

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