

## A STAGGERING MACHINE OF DESIRE

Amy Henderson

**Marlis Schweitzer.** *When Broadway Was the Runway: Theater, Fashion, and American Culture.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. 320 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$39.95.

The rise of a culture of consumption in the early twentieth century catalyzed a sea change in the campaign for women's rights. The growth of urban centers, and particularly New York City, created an economy of abundance, desire, and choice: the modern idea of "fashion" emerged, and women learned that a desire for certain commodities could be transformative. Indeed, an unanticipated consequence of abundance was the "eureka" recognition that the right to choose *particular* products could change personal identity. In the years leading to the passage of woman's suffrage in 1919, the transformative power to "shop"—i.e., to choose—generated what one observer called "a staggering machine of desire." It also led to an epochal change in women's sense of control over their own lives.

These cultural strands weave throughout Marlis Schweitzer's new study, *When Broadway Was the Runway: Theater, Fashion, and American Culture*. Because of centrifugal urban growth, large-scale immigration, and enormous technological change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, New York emerged as the hub of a new American identity. New York became the vital center of the corporate and advertising world, and—as symbolized by Broadway—the heart of show business. It was "the imaginary if not geographic heart of the United States, the epitome of all things American" in these years; New York was also the site of convergence where consumer culture flourished (p. 5).

Schweitzer finds the linkage to women's self-perception an integral offshoot of consumer culture, both as a result of theater's penchant for spectacle and "stars" and because of the new vogue for shopping. She writes, "theater managers aggressively pursued . . . female theatergoers by transforming the stage into a glorious site of consumer spectacle." Nearby department stores absorbed this path to consumer success and became arenas for spectacle themselves, fusing "theatrical spectatorship and consumption" as they formed

a mass market for consumer goods and helped generate the rise of celebrity culture (p. 4).

Broadway played a very special role, providing the words and music for the American Dream. From the 1890s to the 1920s, the Lower East Side witnessed the arrival of twenty-three million new immigrants. German beer gardens, Irish brass bands, and curbside minstrel shows created a commotion of cultures that resonated through the Bowery, lower Broadway, and Union Square in the 1880s—and then migrated north toward West 28<sup>th</sup> Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue, where the din of tinny pianos clanging out new tunes led to the area's sobriquet as Tin Pan Alley in the early 1900s.<sup>1</sup>

The "genteel tradition" that had been central to America's mainstream culture dissolved in the new urban, industrial stew. Replacing it was a vernacular culture that rose from the streets and was captured best by vaudeville—the most successful entertainment of the time, and one that literally evoked the "voice of the city." Legendary performer and composer George M. Cohan brought a red-white-and-blue sensibility to Broadway musicals that were quintessential expressions of the American melting pot, including such notable songs as "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy" and "You're a Grand Old Flag." Schweitzer describes the theater—with its extensive ties to department stores and the emerging mass media—as "a central locus for producing modern consumers." The potential audience for both was vast: in the 1914–15 season, there were 133 productions on Broadway in forty-two theaters, with the names of such stars as W. C. Fields, Ed Wynn, Bert Williams, and Irene Castle illuminating marquees along the "Great White Way." The rise of these popular stage stars—as well as Maude Adams as Peter Pan and such other Ziegfeld *Follies'* headliners as Fannie Brice and Eddie Cantor—helped give birth to celebrity culture: star images and stories flooded newspapers and magazines to feed an insatiable public appetite that demanded to know more about their anointed favorites.<sup>2</sup>

To broaden theater's appeal, impresarios such as Tony Pastor and Florenz Ziegfeld focused on bringing more women into the audience. Vaudeville houses had to be tamed before women could be tempted to attend, and both Pastor and Ziegfeld went to huge lengths to insure propriety on and off their stages. Pastor assured his patrons that his Opera House (i.e., his vaudeville theater) was actually "The Great Family Resort of the City where heads of families can bring their Ladies and children." Order and cleanliness was guaranteed—there were strict rules against "peanut feasts and boisterous applause."<sup>3</sup>

It worked. Consequently, the rising urban class of young professional women working as stenographers, bookkeepers, nurses, and dressmakers began flocking to the theaters. "The matinee girls" became an important fixture on Broadway and, indeed, were so significant a force that they effectively controlled the box office by 1910. One theater manager said: "If women do not like a play, it is doomed" (p. 41).

At the turn of the twentieth century, the department store also reflected American dreams and possibilities—although with the added benefit that it offered products that were tangible and could be purchased for personal use. In the early twentieth century, department stores were viewed, in William Leach's phrase, as "palaces of consumption." They offered the promise of desire and fulfillment, and they stimulated women "to imagine a more varied range of individual expression and experience." Abundance, desire, and choice allowed women the perceived right to select whatever life offered.<sup>4</sup>

America's economies of scale had shifted from rural, remote, and small to urban, interconnected, and BIG in these years; the U.S. Census in 1920 established that, for the first time, more Americans lived in cities than in rural areas. The department store encapsulated this change. The American founder of Selfridge's in London, H. Gordon Selfridge, wrote lyrically of commerce as "the yeast of progress." The department store was the one contemporary institution that, because it brought diverse commodities together into one arena, established itself as a commanding presence in urban retail. Department store founders R. H. Macy, John Wanamaker, and others marketed their presence inventively, creating recurrent spectacles that spotlighted merchandise not only for Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter, but for such ersatz holidays as "Ladies' Day." Stores were decorated like Egyptian pyramids, Japanese gardens, or the streets of Paris to create enticing visions of desire.

New technologies fueled department store commerce as well, notably glass and light. Large plate-glass windows for display came into use in the mid-1890s, quickly followed by the advent of electrical lighting, which proved revolutionary not only for illuminating store interiors but for floodlighting large-scale billboards along such commercial arteries as the "Great White Way." Shoppers—and by the mid-teens, women constituted 80 to 85 percent of the shopping force—were drawn into the vortex of glass and light.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of "fashion" was emerging, with the intent not simply to provide necessary goods and services, but to instill merchandise with a value above its intrinsic worth: the compelling power of merchandise was desire removed from necessity. And nowhere was merchandise more abundant than in the department stores, which now indulged in orgies of unrepentant display: stores offered free gifts as well as restaurants and tea rooms, nurseries, art exhibitions, plays, and "extravaganzas." Theaters offered similar enticements: Schweitzer begins her book by describing an incident at the New Amsterdam Theatre in 1908, on the occasion of the 275th performance of Franz Lehar's *The Merry Widow*: 1,300 women had lined up at the theater in the hope of receiving a free Merry Widow hat—a terrific marketing idea, but one that resulted in a riotous free-for-all among normally respectable middle-class women who fought like floozies to get a free hat (pp. 1–2).<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the whole world of consumption decked itself out as a show—an unending cavalcade of glittering, dazzling spectacle that existed to keep the machine of commerce roaring.

“Celebrity” became a measure of success in this new commercial world. The machinery of mass media (newspapers, magazines, recordings, and silent movies) generated a modern idea of fame that was based on personality, and media-generated fame became a raging vogue. The popularity of such musical-theater lights as Anna Held and Billie Burke, as well as scintillating opera diva Geraldine Farrar, made them stars of the advertising world as well. With broad fan-based recognition, these stars were hired to sell products that bore their personal imprimatur: before 1900, cosmetics had been viewed as virtual masks of immorality; but with the advent of celebrity endorsements, beauty products and cosmetics became an especially lucrative market, a market expanded widely through advertisements in such new women’s magazines as *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Vogue*. The important marketing intention was that every woman could be beautiful if she learned to use the right products—products featured by her favorite celebrity in advertisements, of course (pp. 132–35).

Fashion also reshaped women’s bodies for modern life: the S-curve corset was abandoned, as were the puffed sleeves and bell-like skirts of the Gibson Girl era. Instead, fashion emphasized a sleeker style that allowed women to move freely. This new fashion suited the rage for ballroom dancing in the teens, and manufacturers of ready-to-wear garments worked overtime to capitalize on matinee girls’ demands for copies of gowns worn by dance queen Irene Castle. Castle was tall and thin, and her boyish figure and bobbed hair created a distinctly modern look women sought to emulate. The larger point was that women had the access and the means to emulate celebrity fashion, and they could vary their selection according to personal taste and financial resources. The choice was *theirs* (pp. 168–70).

Department stores joined the fray by producing fashion shows to display merchandise and create demand. In the early 1900s, stores like Wanamaker’s and Gimbel’s introduced fashion shows straight from Paris—the “*promenade des toilettes*” took place with ramps and stages and live models (a first!); there was a heavy emphasis on Parisian glamour as well as the aura of the theater. Later shows were organized and choreographed as pageants and sought to attract matinee theatergoers in large numbers. Some offered cabaret shows, some society dramas, and some even integrated current hit scenes from the Shuberts’ *The Passing Show* or Ziegfeld’s *Follies*. All presented current fashion in the most enticing and extravagant format possible (p. 182).<sup>7</sup> A key factor in the emerging fashion industry was that everything be “new.” One of the pioneers of fashion merchandising, Amos Parrish, pronounced that without newness, there was no turnover. “Nothing is going to stop fashion. It wears

things out. And industry wants things worn out in order to make more things to build bigger businesses, to pay larger dividends. Things must grow. Fashion is the one thing in the world that will do it.” The way to accomplish that was to shape taste, thereby helping to determine choice. In a culture of consumption, advertising would shape desire, while abundance relentlessly fed the hunger for more. For shoppers—i.e., women—the engine of fashion churned up merchandise that met their desire for personal transformation.<sup>8</sup>

Late in her book, Schweitzer focuses on designer Lucile, one of the most influential early figures in the creation of modern American design. Lucy Sutherland—“Lucile”—worked with Ziegfeld to invent the showgirl look of the *Follies*, but even more importantly, she bridged the gap between the international worlds of theater and fashion. Her designs became a favorite of society women, and her fashion shows—originated as “theatrical mannequin parades”—enjoyed great vogue before the war. She also brought her designs and mannequins to vaudeville, notably in the show *Fleurette’s Dream*, which played to capacity audiences at the Palace in 1917. She became a strong advocate of fashion nationalism and urged American women to create their own gowns—or buy American—as gestures of patriotism (pp. 194ff.).

Schweitzer notes that the “Made in America” movement inspired by Lucile not only boosted American talent, but it captured the attention of all avenues of mass commercial culture. Women’s magazines like the *Ladies’ Home Journal* voiced strong support for “American Fashions for American Women.” But America’s entrance into the Great War altered this movement when such government spokesmen as Bernard Baruch, chairman of the War Industries Board, launched an anticonsumption campaign that ordered women “to limit extravagance.” Lucile herself shifted gears and even announced that the proceeds from *Fleurette’s Dream* would thereafter go to war charities—the show, she declared valiantly, was a legitimate fundraiser for the war effort (pp. 210–13).

The war climate and the progression of time itself did effect real change in consumerism and women’s priorities: as Schweitzer concludes, “by 1918 fancy clothes and dreams of mass consumption were no longer enough to sustain the millions of disenfranchised American women who had helped the country to victory. . . .” The new battle in the forefront of postwar America was aimed squarely at woman’s suffrage (p. 220).

In the midst of the master narrative about consumer culture and women’s rights, theater historian Schweitzer interjects a parallel story about the battle to control Broadway. Briefly, this was a contest pitting actors against the monopolistic “Theatrical Syndicate,” resulting in a 1919 strike that led to the recognition of Actor’s Equity as a labor union. Schweitzer’s epilogue also notes the formation of the art theater movement in the teens. She suggests that both of these issues were significant forces that altered Broadway’s identity as the

"premiere site for displaying elite fashion." Another generation of playwrights entered the scene as well, and henceforth, theatrical designs existed primarily to illuminate the meaning of the play, rather than to fashionably showcase particular actors (pp. 221, 222).

The force that would redefine modern American fashion altogether was the rise of Hollywood as a cultural denominator in the years between the wars. Not only were "personalities" essential to the heyday of the star system, but all major studios employed costume designers who stamped movies with a studio's unique signature look. The result was that studio designers like Adrian, Travis Banton, and Howard Greer would create a truly *American* style for the generations of moviegoers who followed.

Amy Henderson is a cultural historian at the National Portrait Gallery. Her publications include *On the Air: Pioneers of American Broadcasting* (1988); *Red, Hot & Blue: A Smithsonian Salute to the American Musical* (1996); and "From Barnum to Bling: The Changing Face of Celebrity Culture," *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture* 7 (Spring 2005). Her most recent essay is "The Flashpoint of Fame," in *Elvis 1956* (November 2009).

1. See Amy Henderson and Dwight Blocker Bowers, *Red, Hot & Blue: A Smithsonian Salute to American Musicals* (1996), 7–37.

2. Margaret Knapp, "Introductory Essay" to "Entertainment and Commerce" section in *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World*, ed. William R. Taylor (1991), 125.

3. Henderson and Bowers, *Red, Hot & Blue*, 10.

4. William R. Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890–1925," *Journal of American History* (September 1984), 339, 336.

5. *Ibid.*, 321–22, 333.

6. See also *ibid.*, 327, 333.

7. See also *ibid.*, 328.

8. William Leach, "Brokers and the New Corporate Industrial Order," in *Inventing Times Square*, 103; Leach, "Transformations," 328.

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