GOING OUT

The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

They are all gone now: the movie palaces with their majestic marquees climbing five stories high; the amusement parks with their acres of roller coasters, tilt-a-whirls, chutes, and carousels; the stately asymmetrical ballparks squeezed into residential neighborhoods. Once, these amusement spaces defined the city as a place of glamour and glitter, of fun and sociability. But they have vanished forever. The spectacular yet tawdry, wild, and wonderful Dreamlands only a subway ride away have been replaced by theme parks surrounded by parking lots. The inner-city baseball parks, accessible by mass transit, have been covered over by housing projects or industrial parks. The movie palaces have been torn down or multiplexed into oblivion. And the huge and heterogeneous crowds that gathered there have been dispersed. The audience at a shopping center theater; the spectators at suburban ballparks; and the visitors to theme parks, festival marketplaces, and enclosed shopping malls are, by comparison, frighteningly homogeneous.

The era of public amusements that was born in the latter decades of the nineteenth century has come to an end. We have lost not simply buildings and parks but also the sense of civic sociability they nourished and sustained. In the early twentieth-century American city, residents were segregated from one another at work and at home, by income, ethnicity, gender, and social class. But they were also, I will
argue, beginning to share a common commercial culture and public amusement sites, where social solidarities were emphasized and distinctions muted. The world of “public” amusements was, in its “publicity,” its accessibility, and its “wide-openness,” as the New York Times characterized it in an 1899 editorial, a world like no other, situated in a magical corner of the city, where the city’s peoples came together to have a good time in public.¹ There were no restrictions as to gender, ethnicity, religion, residence, or occupation in the new amusement spaces. Unlike the landmen’s lodges and union halls; the saloons and church socials; and the front stoops, parlors, and kitchens, the new entertainment centers held more strangers than friends. “Going out” meant laughing, dancing, cheering, and weeping with strangers with whom one might—or might not—have anything in common. The “crowd” replaced the select circle of acquaintances as the setting in which one sought and found amusement.

Only persons of color were excluded or segregated from these audiences, although they were overrepresented on stage—as darkies, strutters, and shouters in vaudeville and musical theater; as coons in popular song; as savages in world’s fair exhibits; as buffoons in amusement park concessions; as mascots in baseball parks; as dim-witted children in the early silent movies; as rapists and beasts in D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation. As I will argue throughout this book, neither the segregation of African Americans in the commercial amusement audiences nor their overrepresentation in parodic form were coincidental. To the extent that racial distinctions were exaggerated on stage, social distinctions among “whites” in the audience could be muted.

This is a book about the rise of public amusements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and their decline and fall in the post–World War II decades. It is the story of the vanished world of phonograph and kinetoscope parlors; of vaudeville halls and ten-twenty-thirty-cent melodrama theaters; of world’s fair midways; of amusement parks, ballparks, dance halls, and picture palaces.

In the 1870s and 1880s, “nightlife” was still the preserve of the wealthy few who patronized the first-class playhouses and of the “sporting” crowd that spent its evenings in “concert” saloons with live entertainment. Within only a few decades, however, the landscape of amusements—and their place in the everyday life of the city—changed dramatically. The city’s muddied streets and gray edifices receded into the background, overwhelmed by the “Great White Ways” that studded the central business districts with their flashing lights advertising the newest, the most spectacular, the biggest shows in town. By 1900, New York City had more theaters than any city in the world. By 1910, the seating capacity of its playhouses and movie theaters approached two million. (In 1869, average daily attendance had been estimated at a little more than 25,000.) San Francisco in 1912 had five playhouses, eleven vaudeville houses, and sixty-nine moving-picture theaters with an estimated weekly attendance of more than half a million. (In 1870, there had been two playhouses and one opera house.) The increase in the number of theaters and seating capacities was just as great in other American cities, east and west.²

When we add to these numbers the world’s fair, amusement park, and ballpark visitors, the enormity of the twentieth-century entertainment revolution becomes even clearer. The only world’s fair held in the United States after the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia was the 1885 New Orleans World’s Industrial and Cotton Exposition. Then, with dizzying regularity, the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 drew 14 million visitors; the Atlanta exposition in 1895, 1.3 million; Nashville in 1897, 1.8 million; Omaha in 1898, 1.5 million; Buffalo in 1901, 4 million; and St. Louis in 1904, 10 million. In 1870, there had been no amusement parks or baseball parks and only a handful of accessible picnic groves and beer gardens on the cities’ outskirts. By the early twentieth century, there were enclosed baseball and amusement parks in every city and town in the nation, with visitors numbering in the tens of millions. Over twenty million men, women, and children visited Coney Island alone during the 1909 season. A number that, adjusted for population increases, is about 20 percent greater than the total number of visitors to Disney’s Orlando and Anaheim amusement parks in 1989.³

The rise of public amusements was a by-product of the enormous expansion of the cities. Commercial entertainments were, in this period at least, an urban phenomenon. Their rise and fall were inevitably and inextricably linked to the fortunes of the cities that sustained them.

Between 1870 and 1920, American cities flourished as never before. The urban population of the nation increased from under ten to over fifty-four million people. Per capita income and free time expanded as
well. Between 1870 and 1900, real income for nonfarm employees increased by more than 50 percent, while the cost of living, as measured by the consumer price index, decreased by 50 percent. This increase in wages was accompanied by a steady decrease in work hours. The average manufacturing worker worked three and a half hours less in 1910 than in 1890; for many blue-collar workers, unionized employees, and white-collar workers, the decrease in the workweek was even more dramatic. It also was in this period that the Saturday half-holiday and the “vacation habit” arrived in the American city. Although, as we will see in chapter 6, most workers still had to finance their own vacations, increasing numbers of white-collar employees were beginning to take days, even a week or more, off during the warm-weather months.4

As Roy Rosenzweig and a generation of labor and social historians have argued, the quest for leisure time “reverberated through the labor struggles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a compositor told the U.S. Senate Committee on Relations Between Labor and Capital in 1883: ‘A workingman wants something besides food and clothes in this country. . . . He wants recreation.” “Going out” was more than an escape from the tedium of work, it was the gateway into a privileged sphere of everyday life. The ability to take time out from work for recreation and public sociability was the dividing line between old worlds and new. Peasants and beasts of burden spent their lives at work; American workers and citizens went out at night and took days off in the summer.5

Recreation and play were not luxuries but necessities in the modern city. As Daniel Rodgers has noted, the workday had been shortened by “squeezing periods of relaxation and amusement out of working hours, by trading long hours of casual work for shorter, more concentrated workdays.” Instead of the older “interfusion of free and work time,” there was now “an increasing segregation of work and play into distinct categories.” The fear of idle time as the devil’s workshop gave way to a reverence for play, promoted alike by middle-class reformers and working-class organizers. As the Yiddish Tageblatt advised its Jewish readers in the spring of 1907, “He who can enjoy and does not enjoy commits a sin.”6

While all the city’s workers, even its most recent immigrants, joined the assembling public for commercial amusements, it was the workers in white collars who constituted the critical element in the construction of the new “nightlife.” As the white-collar sector of the work force increased in size in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so did the potential audience for the new public amusements. In 1880, there had been 5,000 typists and stenographers in the nation. By 1910, the number had increased sixtyfold to 300,000, while the overall clerical work force had risen from 160,000 to more than 1.7 million. From a negligible 2.4 percent of the total work force in 1870, the number of clerical and sales workers grew to a substantial 11 percent by 1920. In the big cities, the percentage of white-collar workers was even greater: 24 percent of the Chicago work force in 1920 were white-collar workers, a large number of them women.7

The city’s white-collar workers were the most avid consumers of the commercial pleasures. Their work was increasingly regimented, concentrated, and tedious, creating a need for recreation. And, compared to that of blue-collar workers, it provided them with sufficient time, resources, and energy to go out at night. For factory, mill, and manual workers who had to get up at five in the morning to be at work by six, the consequences of a night “out” were considerable. Clerical and sales workers could, on the other hand, stay out late, get a good night’s sleep, and still get to work on time.8

The new amusements were “public” and “commercial” as well as urban. The terms, in this period at least, became almost interchangeable, as the city’s showmen, learning the new calculus of public entertainments, lowered prices to welcome the largest possible audience to their establishments. Although in the long run, it was growth in the demand, not the supply, side that would prompt the expansion of commercial entertainments, the showmen played a considerable role in assembling the new urban public. To succeed in the show business (as it was called throughout this period), the amusement entrepreneurs had to do more than build theaters; they had to provide commercial amusements and amusement sites that were public in the sense that they belonged to no particular social groups, exciting enough to appeal to the millions, and respectable enough to offend no one.

Leisure time remained a contested terrain, an arena of social life of such critical importance that the city’s social, political, cultural, and religious elites dared not abandon it to the whims of consumers and the marketplace. To keep their critics at bay and attract an audience from the diverse social groups in the city, the show businessmen had to mold and maintain a revised moral taxonomy of shows and audiences.
Vaudeville had to be certified as a decent entertainment for mixed audiences, with no relation to the male-only variety show that had preceded it; the amusement parks had to be promoted as “clean” outdoor shows for the whole family; the moving-picture theaters had to be distinguished from the penny arcades and peep shows. The envelope in which it was delivered mattered as much as the content of the show. An otherwise “indecent” act became “decent” when presented in an amusement site certified as “respectable.” It was permissible to stare at gyrating belly dancers on the world’s fair midway, if the dancers in question were performing “authentic” foreign dances; women in tights or tight-fitting bathing suits could appear on the vaudeville stage, if they were billed as acrobats or championship swimmers; holding onto a member of the opposite sex was acceptable at the amusement park, if it happened “accidentally” on the cyclone.

No matter how hungry city folk might have been for cheap amusements or how eager the show businessmen were to provide them, the expansion in commercial amusements could not have occurred without accompanying advances in technology, in particular the electrification of the metropolis. In the chapters to come, we will follow the “invention” of new electric amusement machines that spoke, sang, showed moving pictures, and told stories. We begin, however, not with these scientific wonders but with the lighting of the city by electricity, the sine qua non for the expansion of urban “nightlife” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Incandescent lighting transformed the city from a dark and treacherous netherworld into a glittering multicolored wonderland. Nineteenth-century authors had described city streets after dark as sinister and filled with danger. The gas lamps did not “light” up the night as much as cast into shadow the disreputable doings and personages of slum, tenderloin, and levee. In *New York by Gas-Light*, first published in 1850, George Foster, the *New-York Tribune* reporter and bestselling author, described in lurid detail “the fearful mysteries of darkness in the metropolis—the festivities of prostitution, the orgies of pauperism, the haunts of theft and murder, the scenes of drunkenness and beastly debauch, and all the sad realities that go to make up the lower stratum—the under-ground story—of life in New York!”

Fifty years after Foster wrote his account, Theodore Dreiser published *Sister Carrie*, an account of city life that turned upside down the sunshine/shadow, light/dark, day/night tropes used by Foster and other nineteenth-century authors. For Dreiser, it was in daylight, not after dark, that the city was at its grayest, cruelest, and most distressing. The coming of the night was a sign of promise, not depravity. “Ah, the promise of the night.... What old illusion of hope is not here forever repeated! Says the soul of the toiler to itself, ‘I shall soon be free. I shall be in the ways and the hosts of the merry. The streets, the lamp, the lighted chamber set for dining are for me. The theatres, the halls, the parties, the Ways of rest and the paths of song—these are mine in the night.’” Only after dark, when the “street lamps” shone brightly with their “merry twinkle,” did joy return to the city as the “artificial fires of merriment” dispelled the gloom and chill, providing “light and warmth.”

The sparkling city that Sister Carrie traveled to was Chicago in 1900, when electric lighting was still new and wondrous. A Chicago journalist, writing in 1900, declared that “he had witnessed a profound change in the city’s lighting, a revolution little short of marvelous. The field where but yesterday the flickering gas flame held full sway now blazes nightly in the glow of myriads of electric lamps, aggregating in intensity the illuminating power of 15,000,000 candles.” By 1903, the new Commonwealth Edison of Chicago turbogenerator was producing over 5,000 times more energy than the dynamos that had powered Edison’s 1882 Pearl Street station. Electricity had, in the words of the historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch, “begun to permeate modern, urban life.”

Unlike gas lamps, which were highly flammable, electric lamps could be kept on all night. The street lamps illuminated not simply the lamppost beneath but both sides of the street with a clear, bright white light, not the sooty gray of the gas lamps. The commercial lights of restaurants, shops, and theaters added the merry twinkle that gave the “nocturnal round of business, pleasure and illumination... we think of as night life... its own special atmosphere.”

The artificially illuminated streets provided city residents with an added incentive to leave their darkened or gas-lit flats to go out at night “when all the shop fronts are lighted, and the entrances to the theaters blaze out on the sidewalk like open fireplaces.” As the journalist Richard Harding Davis wrote of Broadway in 1892, “It is at this hour that the clerk appears, dressed in his other suit, the one which he keeps for the evening, and the girl bachelor, who... has found her hall bedroom cold and lonely after the long working day behind a counter or at a loom and the loneliness tends to homesickness... puts on her hat.
and steps down a side-street and loses herself in the unending processions on Broadway, where, though she knows no one, and no one wants to know her, there is light and color, and she is at least not alone.”

Earlier in the nineteenth century, young people who walked the streets after dark would have been admonished for placing themselves in mortal danger of moral contamination. But the electric street lights had gone a long way toward purging “nightlife” of its aura of licentiousness. Although there were no accurate statistics to prove the case, it was taken for granted that the electric street lamps were removing much of the danger that had lurked in the dark. A 1912 article in The American City listed first among “the advantages accruing from ornamental street lighting [a decrease in] lawlessness and crime . . . ‘A light is as good as a policeman.’ . . . A criminologist of world-wide fame, and one who is considered an authority, says that he would rather have plenty of electric lights and clean streets than all the law and order societies in existence.”

Electricity was not simply providing power to light the urban landscape but was reconfiguring it into a fairyland of illuminated shapes, signs, and brightly colored, sometimes animated, messages and images—forty-foot green pickles, gigantic pieces of chewing gum, Roman chariots racing on top of a hotel. The lights of the city created “a new kind of visual text,” a new landscape of modernity. They foregrounded the city’s illuminated messages, its theaters, tall buildings, hotels, restaurants, department stores, and “Great White Ways,” while erasing its “unattractive areas and cast[ing] everything unsightly into an impenetrable darkness. If by day poor or unsightly sections called out for social reform, by night the city was a purified world of light, simplified into a spectacular pattern, interspersed with now-unimportant blanks.”

The lights “marked” the city as a “sight” worthy of respect, even admiration. But they also focused attention on the city as a source of amusement. The lighting of the lights signaled that the workday was over and the time for play at hand. As the editorial in the February 1904 issue of The Four-Track News declared, “It is an old, old theme, and an oft told tale—but when the lights are on, and the season is in full swing, as it is now, any evening, that great thoroughfare, with its business activity, its wonderful social life, its rialto with its tragic comedians and its comic tragedians . . . when Broadway is really itself, it is a continuous vaudeville that is worth many times the ‘price of admission’—especially as no admission price is asked. Where else is there such a free performance—such a festive panorama of gay life as Broadway ‘puts up’ when the lights are on.”

Electrification made going out at night not only safer and more exciting but easier and cheaper than ever before. The dynamos and generators that lit the street lamps also powered the trolleys that tied together the city and its neighborhoods. Between 1890 and 1902, investment in electric and cable cars quadrupled, track mileage tripled, and fare passengers doubled. In 1890, only 15 percent of all American streetcars had been electrified, and the remainder were connected to horses. By 1902, 94 percent were electric. The flat nickel fare and free transfers between lines made streetcar travel accessible to more city residents and workers.

In connecting the city’s business and residential districts, the electric streetcars fostered the growth—and transformation—of “downtown” into a central shopping and entertainment district. In Chicago, as Sam Bass Warner has written, the Loop, tied by electric streetcar to outlying neighborhoods, prospered as never before. “The downtown district became the city for Chicagoans. It was a place of work for tens of thousands, a market for hundreds of thousands, a theater for thousands more.”

The new “downtowns” were defined geographically by the convergence of the railroad and trolley lines and framed architecturally by the mammoth new terminals that welcomed out-of-towners into the heart of the city. The majority of those who resided temporarily in the nearby hotels had come for business purposes: to buy, sell, insure, inspect, or display their goods. Before, after, and sometimes even during business hours, however, they expected to be entertained. They were joined in this pursuit by white-collar workers who stayed “downtown” after work; by city residents who worked and lived in outlying residential neighborhoods but rode the streetcar to the theater district; and by suburbanites who were linked by electric “interurban” to the city and its nighttime pleasures. For all of them, the city was becoming as much a place of play as a place of work.
CHAPTER 2

Dollar Theaters, Concert Saloons, and Dime Museums

The early nineteenth-century theater, like the city itself, was inhabited by rich, "middling," and working people thrown together into the same space, then divided by income, class, and race. The most expensive seats were the cushioned opera chairs in the boxes reserved for "the dandies, and people of the first respectability and fashion." Beneath the boxes in the "pit" (the area of the theater known today as the orchestra) sat the city's manual workers, sailors, artisans, tradesmen, butchers, and Bowery b'hoys in "red-flannel shirt-sleeves and cone-shaped trousers," all, as Walt Whitman would describe them, "alert, well-dress'd, full-blooded young and middle-aged men, the best average of American-born mechanics." Above and behind the "pit" in the cheap balcony seats reigned the "gallery gods": the newsboys, apprentices, and assorted rowdies, who, though far away from the action on the stage, made their presence—and their displeasure—known by pelting the actors and the "better" classes below with pennies, rotten fruit, eggs, "apples, nuts and gingerbread" when offended by the show or offered less than they had bargained for.¹

Though their choices were influenced by the size of their pocketbooks, most theatergoers sat where they pleased. Only African Americans and prostitutes were restricted to separate sections of the theater. In a world where many still believed moral character was both immutable and encoded in physical appearance, blacks who could not "pass" and prostitutes who advertised their trade by their use of makeup and costume had to be quarantined in separate sections of the theater so as not to degrade by their presence more "respectable" theatergoers.

Almost every theater, even the illustrious Park Theater in New York City, according to George Foster, writing in 1850, reserved its third tier of boxes for prostitutes and their customers. "Within a few feet and under the same roof where our virtuous matrons with their tender offspring are seated, are ... painted, diseased, drunken women, bargaining themselves away to obscene and foul-faced ruffians, for so much an hour." While Foster was clearly perturbed—or thought his readers would be—by the proximity of painted ladies and virtuous matrons, the seating arrangements served all parties. The prostitutes no doubt preferred their accommodations in the third tier, complete with separate entrance, exit, stairway, and bar, because it gave them the privacy they needed to transact business; the "respectable" folk in their box seats were, Foster's alarm notwithstanding, effectively shielded from the disorder above them—unless of course they chose to stare up at it; and the theater owners profited from knowing that whatever the attraction, they could be assured of selling out their third tier of boxes.²

The situation of African Americans, who were, like the prostitutes, required to sit in separate sections of the theater, was quite different. Black theatergoers, slave or freed, were assigned the worst seats in the house in the upper balcony or gallery. Unlike the prostitutes who, if offered a choice, would probably have remained in the third tier, African Americans who could afford better seats in the pit or the boxes would undoubtedly have preferred to sit there. Their sequestration in the upper gallery was not only a public badge of dishonor, but it placed them with the white rabble who behaved atrociously and made more than enough noise to drown out the actors below.³

Wherever they sat and whatever they had paid, audience members, with the exception of the African Americans exiled in the gallery, got their money's worth. To fill their houses, theater owners assembled programs with "attractions" to appeal to every taste in the audience. In the spring of 1839, for example, the playbill advertising As You Like It in Philadelphia's American Theater announced that the Il Diavolo Antonio and his sons would also be presenting "a most magnificent display of position in the science of Gymnastics," a Mr. Quayle would sing "the Swiss Drover Boy," La Petite Celeste would dance, followed by a
Miss Lee who would also dance, Mr. Quayle would then return to sing “The Haunted Spring,” a Mr. Bowman would tell a “Yankee Story,” and the entire company would conclude the evening “with Ella Rosenberg starring Mrs. Hield.”

This heterogeneous mixing of entertainments on the stage and social groups in the audience pleased no one entirely. The playwrights, critics, and managers were appalled by the extent to which the theater had become hostage to its heterogeneous audience; the box holders were disgusted by the rowdiness of pit and gallery; the pit was offended by the box holders’ continuous chatter and inattention to the stage; the gallery was disgusted by the actors’ fawning attention to the box holders; the actors were distraught at the prospect at satisfying what they perceived to be the divergent demands of gallery, pit, and boxes.

There were moments when the entire unstable mixture exploded into chaos, as in the Astor Place Riots of 1849, when the “people” in pit and gallery became so incensed at what they perceived to be English actor William Macready’s aristocratic airs and insults to their nation, their manhood, and their class that they silenced him “by a storm of boos and cries of ‘Three groans for the codfish aristocracy,’ which drowned out appeals for order from those in the boxes.” The theater had to be closed as “an avalanche of eggs, apples, potatoes, lemons, and ultimately, chairs hurled from the gallery . . . forced [Macready] to leave the stage in the third act.” Two days later, under pressure from New York’s elite theatergoers who were not about to grant victory to the “mob,” Macready returned and this time completed his performance. Outside, a crowd of 10,000 gathered to protest. The militia was called to restore order, which it did, but only after 22 people had been killed, 150 hurt, and 86 arrested.

Prompted no doubt by incidents like this one, mid-century prosperous theatergoers in cities large enough to support more than one playhouse separated themselves from the “rabble” by building new academies and opera houses with smaller galleries and higher prices. “One theater was no longer large enough to appeal to all classes . . . One roof, housing a vast miscellany of entertainment each evening, could no longer cover a people growing intellectually and financially more disparate.”

After the Civil War, theater prices continued to rise, especially through the 1880s as touring productions became more and more elaborate. The result was a vastly different theater audience, one that no longer included as many of the city’s working and “middling” popula-

tions. In Pittsburgh, according to Francis Couvares, the local theaters that had “catered to a working-class audience” had by the 1880s disappeared entirely. The theaters that survived and prospered, in Pittsburgh and elsewhere, were those cultivated by “newly class-conscious bourgeois patrons” who were happy to pay higher prices for a more refined show.

By the mid-1850s, the average theater ticket price was a dollar, two-thirds of what the nonfarm worker earned in a day. Even the cheap seats in the melodrama and minstrelsy theaters cost far more than most city residents could afford. Balcony seats at Boston’s Globe Theater in 1886 were priced at seventy-five cents to one dollar, with second balcony and gallery seats at fifty cents, this at a time when the average hourly wage in manufacturing was twenty cents and the average daily wage for unskilled laborers was under one dollar and fifty cents.

For those who could not afford or preferred not to go to the theaters in the 1870s and 1880s, there were other entertainment sites in the city, although not nearly as many as there would be in only a few decades. There were restaurants, lecture halls, and lodges; beer halls, bawdy houses, brothels, and dance halls; billiard rooms, picnic groves, and pleasure gardens just outside the city; and thousands of concert saloons and cheap variety theaters.

The most popular of these were the concert saloons and variety theaters. The two terms were used almost interchangeably to refer to barrooms with free or cheap entertainment offered in adjacent barrooms, halls, or theaters. Some concert saloons were elaborately outfitted to attract slumming “sports” from uptown; others were simple barrooms with stages in front.

The primary source of revenue in the concert saloons was selling alcohol, with prostitution an important side line. Free “entertainment” was offered as a come-on in adjacent halls, back rooms, or upstairs “theaters.” The audience was exclusively male; the ambiance was pure saloon—the floor filled with peanut shells and spilt beer; the air saturated with tobacco smoke; and the odor so rank that according to one newspaper story, a monkey that had “escaped from an animal act and died under the floor of the Casino Theater in Spokane . . . was not discovered until a year later when some repairs were being made.”

While the concert saloons offered something for every male taste—drink and camaraderie at the bar, gambling in the back rooms, sex in the
boxes—the major source of entertainment was the stage show. In the smaller saloons, the “show” consisted of little more than local performers singing and dancing for tips on makeshift platforms opposite the bar. In the grander saloons, it could be as elaborate as any theatrical performance. Though most of the acts were simple song or dance numbers, every program had its bawdy or “purple acts”: Adam or the boys in overalls would appear on stage, disheveled and smiling, to banter about their trysts in Eden or the hay. Most shows also included a turn or two of “legmania” dancers who wiggled their hips suggestively or kicked high to expose their “drawers.” While there was a rough-and-tumble quality to the entertainment and the crowd, the ambience was more male than working class—unlike, for example, the English music hall, where audience, entertainment, and environment were decidedly male and working class. Concert saloons in the United States did not, for example, draw the bulk of their audience from factory, mine, or mill workers. Their prices were too high, they were inconveniently located far from working-class neighborhoods, and the stage shows were entirely in English and thus beyond the comprehension of most immigrants.12

Harry Hill’s, the most famous of the New York City concert saloons, was, according to James McCabe, writing in 1882, “filled with a motley crowd. . . . The men represent all classes of society. Some are strangers who have merely come to see the place; others are out for a lark; and others still have come in company with, or to meet, some abandoned woman. . . . Among the men you will see prominent judges, city officials, detectives in plain clothes, men of prominence in other parts of the country, army and navy officers, merchants, roughs, and thieves.” An 1883 Chicago guidebook observed similarly that the Chicago variety theaters were regularly patronized not only by “the lower class of society, but [by] journalists, professional men, bankers, railroad officials, politicians, and men of rank in society.” The dividing line between those who patronized the variety shows and those who remained outside was not social class, but gender and “respectability.”13

Dollar Theaters, Concert Saloons, and Dime Museums lacked the time and money to spend in theaters or concert saloons. The city’s more prosperous middle classes, on the other hand, had the time and money to go out but preferred not to. The home—not the club, the saloon, the firehouse, or the theater—was the heart and soul of middle-class existence. Indeed, it was this “reverence for quiet, seclusion, and privacy,” an emphasis on what Mary Ryan calls “entrenched domesticity,” that both normatively and experientially distinguished the nineteenth-century middle class from the upper and lower classes.14

Middle-class families did not abstractly celebrate the virtues of domestic privacy; they lived them on a daily basis. While moral reformers chastised the poor and immigrant classes and attributed much of their distress to their proclivity for socializing in public, the model middle-class family sequestered itself within the confines of its home and kept its children in residence as long as possible. While the wealthy were “attending the operas, giving sumptuous balls, and even gambling, men and women together, in posh, private casinos,” the middle class, as represented by the families Richard Sennett studied in Union Park, a Chicago suburb, confined its socializing to the home. In intentional contrast to the city’s upper and lower classes, middle-class behavior was “sedate and ascetic . . . dull and unsensual.”15

This did not mean that there were no organized leisure-time activities for the respectable classes. There were lyceums and lecture halls, libraries, churches, and church-affiliated associations, such as the YMCA, that sponsored musicals, concerts, travelogues, even an occasional magician or illusionist. There also was the museum, one of the few cultural institutions that was both accessible in price and respectable enough for the established middle classes to patronize.

Nineteenth-century American museums were quite different from those established in other parts of the world. As an English visitor wrote in 1870, a “‘Museum’ in the American sense of the word means a place of amusement, wherein there shall be a theatre, some wax figures, a giant and dwarf or two, a jumble of pictures, and a few live snakes.”16

To establish their “bona fides” with the respectable public that they hoped to attract to their establishments, the museum owners posed as both educators and showmen. Visitors were greeted at the door of the museums by “lecturers” who guided them through the “scientific” and “historical” exhibits in the front of the establishment to the lecture hall, where the main show was presented. The stage show usually opened with a parade of “scientific oddities” presided over by a “lecturer” or
The Eden Musee in New York City was one of the nation's most prestigious museums, with a patronage that included respectable ladies and gentlemen like those posed in front of the building. This picture is from 1885. (*Museum of the City of New York.*)

"professor," who, pointer in hand, encouraged the audience to stare in the name of science at the dog-faced boys, bearded ladies, armless wonders, Fiji Islanders, Dahomean giants, and dwarfs assembled for their edification. The "freak" acts were followed by the "artists"—quick crayon-sketch masters, magicians, illusionists, mind-readers, sword-swallowers, glass-chewers, fire-eaters, and contortionists, especially prized by the museum managers, because they came cheaply and had no difficulty performing on tiny auditorium stages—and then by the variety acts: comics, Irish tenors, banjo players, acrobats, dancers, and "educated" animal acts.²

It was obviously not the quality of the entertainment that made the museum show acceptable fare for city folk who dared not enter a theater or concert saloon. It was the packaging and the environment in which the acts were presented. The museums barred liquor, smoking, prostitutes, and "blue" performers from their premises. As Barnum

This drawing of a night scene on the Bowery was published in *Harper's Weekly* in 1881. The Barker in the dime museum doorway is trying to lure customers inside by pointing to the painting of the "freak" attractions over the sign. The attractions and the customers for this museum were quite different from those for the Eden Musee. (*Museum of the City of New York.*)
himself declared, “so careful is the supervision exercised over the amusements that hundreds of persons who are prevented visiting theatres on account of the vulgarisms and immorality which are sometimes permitted therein, may visit Mr. Barnum’s establishment without fear of offence.”

While Barnum and his competitors tried their best to entertain the city’s respectable classes, there were dozens of dime museums located in storefronts in the cheaper entertainment districts and the city’s tenderloins that catered exclusively to the male-only population. On New York’s Bowery, one of the largest and most notorious of the urban skid rows, there were “anatomical museums” with “lantern slides of horrifying venereal deformities” and museums featuring “living picture” exhibits with women in flesh-colored tights impersonating Lady Godiva, Lady Mephistotheles, or “bewitching female bathers in real water.” These “Bowery museums,” according to Luc Sante, author of Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York, were “the true underworld of entertainment, and their compass could include anything too shoddy, too risqué, too vile, too sad, too marginal, too disgusting, too pointless to be displayed elsewhere.” Among the stars of their stage shows were egg cranks who ate dozens of raw eggs, foul-mouthed comics who recited limericks, tattooed ladies, and hootchi-cootchi dancers.

Such was the state of urban entertainments in the 1870s and 1880s. For the city’s drifters, transients, and unmarried manual laborers who lived or played in the city’s tenderloins, there were skid-row museums and cheap honky-tonks. For the sporting crowd, the most visible and regular denizens of nightlife, there were concert saloons and variety theaters. For the prosperous who could afford them, there were high-priced playhouses and legitimate theaters. For a small minority of the city’s respectable folk who for religious or moral reasons dared not enter the theater, there were the better dime museums. But for the vast majority of the urban population, working and middling classes alike, there were no affordable and “decent” places to “go out” at night.

In later years, the vaudeville and moving-picture pioneers would claim that they had intentionally set out to cater to the population of “decent” city folk who had been priced out of the first-class theaters. Though their story has the advantage of narrative clarity, it greatly exaggerates their role in the development of commercial amusements. Vaudeville and the movies were not invented by founders with a plan or a vision but by small businessmen who experimented with their products (their shows and theaters) until they began to yield a profit. Almost all of the early vaudeville entrepreneurs came from the lower end of the amusement business. Most had spent their adult lives traveling with circus or variety troupes from town to town. A few had owned concert saloons, honky-tonks, or dime museums.

Benjamin Franklin Keith, who would become the most famous of them all, had been a grifter, traveling with the circus selling novelties like hand-held blood testers to the crowd outside the tent. In 1883, road weary and with a small amount of accumulated capital, he opened a storefront museum in Boston with a partner. Instead of locating it in

*Benjamin Franklin Keith, Edward Franklin Albee, and Tony Pastor began their show business careers with the circus; Martin Beck and Percy Williams had traveled with variety troupes; Alexander Pantages and John Considine had owned saloons and box houses on the West Coast; Sylvester Poli had owned and operated wax museums and dime museums in New York and New England.
an area of cheap amusements and cheaper saloons, where most of the smaller dime museums were sited, he chose Washington Street in the central business district near the city’s major hotels, theaters, and restaurants. He purchased a few exhibits for the front of his storefront and improvised a stage in the back. When the storefront proved too small to hold all his attractions, he rented an upstairs room for his “theater.” His July 6, 1884, bill, a typical one, featured “Miss Amelia Hall, a jolly fat Brooklyn Miss weighing 516 pounds,” a “demon dwarf,” German midgets who performed on the zither, a young lady invisible below her head and shoulders, the biggest frog in the world, a Punch and Judy puppet show, a troupe of Guatemalan musicians, comedians Weber and Fields, and a closing farce, “Murphy’s Fat Baby.”

To make his show a bit more inviting and to attract the scores of passersby who were skirting his museum on their way to nearby offices, department stores, hotels, and legitimate theaters, Keith experimented in 1885 with what he called the “continuous.” Instead of emptying the house after each performance, he kept the show going, bringing the opening act back on stage when the final one exited. As Keith knew from his days with the circus, nothing attracted a crowd like a crowd, and nothing was so depressing as an empty house. “Continuous” performances guaranteed that he would have an audience all day long.

While he did better with his new format, Keith was still not filling his house on a regular basis. Had his establishment been located in a low-rent district filled with transients looking for cheap freak show entertainment, he might have done better with his “fat ladies” and “demon dwarfs,” but the city folk who passed his establishment on Washington Street, the future site of the posh Adams’ House, within a stone’s throw of the Jordan, Marsh and Company department store and the exclusive Boston Theater, had different tastes. E. F. Albee, his manager at the time, suggested that Keith replace his variety show with a scaled-down version of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta, The Mikado, then playing to full houses at premium prices in Boston’s first-class theaters. Keith and Albee stole it (the operetta was not copyrighted in the United States), decorated the front of their theater like a Japanese garden, and advertised the show with the slogan, “Why pay $1.50 when you can see our show for 25¢?”

There were, as Keith and Albee soon discovered, a large number of Bostonians who could not afford Gilbert and Sullivan at regular prices but were willing to climb the stairs to see a cut-rate version. Their scaled-down Mikado was so successful that it was sent on the road following its Boston run.

Because operettas were expensive to mount, Keith and Albee continued to alternate them with variety programs. The new format proved so successful that by 1887, they were taking in enough money from their museum theater to lease the full-size Bijou Theatre next door and a dime museum in Providence, where Keith had once owned a broom store. From Providence in 1888 to Philadelphia in 1889 to New York in 1893 and onward to dozens of cities through the Northeast and Middle West, they applied the same formula—with the same success. Wherever they opened a theater, they found an audience awaiting them.

Popular prices remained the key to success in the early vaudeville business. When in 1887, Keith and Albee took over the Bijou Theatre in Boston, they charged ten cents for every seat in the house, while the nearby Hollis Street and Globe theaters were charging a dollar to a dollar and a half for orchestra seats and fifty cents to a dollar for balcony seats.

In the 1890 “catalogue” for his “Gaity Musee and Bijou Theatre,” Keith explained his rationale for charging “popular” prices in his vaudeville halls. “I have stood on the sidewalk mornings and afternoons, watching the people go by; I have seen shoppers walking aimlessly along, their trading over, trying to kill time until the hour for taking their suburban trains; I have seen young men and women unemployed who have glanced in upon various theatre entrances, and their faces have told either the desire for matinee performances upon off days, or prices at other times within their reach. Then I asked myself what could be done with the Bijou at cheap prices. If I were to sell an orchestra chair for twenty-five cents, four times a day, it would be just as lucrative to me as if sold once for a dollar.”

To reach the widest possible public at the least possible cost, the vaudeville managers advertised regularly in the daily newspapers. Each ad highlighted the price of tickets and listed every act on the bill, from the headliner to the midget dogs. As Roger Brett has written about the Keith organization in Providence in the 1880s, “at a time when other theaters considered a two-column by four inch ad to be large enough for any show, Keith doubled and quadrupled that size.” Keith and Albee bought advertising in every newspaper in the community. They advertised the opening of their new Pawtucket theater in the local...
across notices, ads, reviews, interviews, features, and photographs of the stars and shows that were appearing that week in the major vaudeville halls. Most of this material had been written beforehand by press agents and publicists. The newspapers published it, often exactly as they received it. Even the "reviews" contained catch phrases taken directly from the press releases. The weekend before Edmund Day opened at Keith's Theater in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, in January 1904, identical articles appeared in the Olneyville Times, the P. V. Cleaner, the Bristol Phenix, the Herald-News in Taunton, Massachusetts, just across the border, and the Providence Bulletin. In the days to come, similar versions of the same story would appear in the Providence Telegram, News, and Journal, the Pawtucket Gazette and Times, and the local French-, German-, and Italian-language papers.9

To city folk who could afford no other form of live theatrical entertainment, vaudeville must have appeared as a godsend. For a dime, they received hours of entertainment from dozens of acts, including at least one "headliner." And the vaudeville theater was open six days a week, from noon to near midnight, extending the temporal boundaries of the leisure world from nighttime into daylight. Unlike the first-class theaters with their Wednesday matinees and select audiences of wealthy "matinee girls," the afternoon shows attracted a heterogeneous population of men, women, and children who were invited to steal time away from work or family responsibilities to take in the show. In New York City, F. F. Proctor who had leased a theater on 23rd Street, a short walk from the Ladies' Mile department stores, specially advertised what he called his "Ladies Club Theater," which opened at 11:00 a.m. According to the vaudeville historian Joe Laurie, Jr., Proctor "sloganize[d] the town with thousands of one-sheets, snipes, and newspaper ads, all shouting 'After Breakfast Go to Proctor's.'"10

To attract an audience large enough to keep their theaters filled all day, the vaudeville managers had to include "something for everybody" on their programs. As Edward Albee explained in his own pretentious prose, "In the arrangement of the ideal vaudeville program, there is one or more sources of complete satisfaction for everybody present, no matter how 'mixed' the audience may be. In vaudeville 'there is always something for everybody,' just as in every state and city, in every county and town in our democratic country, there is opportunity for everybody, a chance for all."11

In providing "something for everybody," vaudeville borrowed from every nineteenth-century popular entertainment form: blackface
sketches, sentimental ballads, soft-shoe dances, and banjo players from the minstrel show; acrobats and animal acts from the circus; skits, satires, and full-costume “flash” acts from musical comedy; one-act playlets from the legitimate theater; magicians, mind readers, and curio freaks from the dime museums; monologists from the medicine show; classical musicians from the symphony hall; opera singers from the opera hall; sports stars from the boxing rings and baseball stadia. In rapid succession, female impersonators, song and dance men, operatic sopranos, jugglers, dancing bears, storytellers, pantomimists, masters of prestidigitation, strongmen, whistlers, puppeteers, banjo players, acrobats, and comedy teams tumbled on and off the stage. If you weren’t a fan of “The Freeman Sisters in their New Vocal Sketch entitled ‘Flirtation,’” you simply had to wait ten or fifteen minutes until they left the stage to be followed by Gus Williams and his “Dutch Character Songs and Sayings.” If you were bored by “Del Bartino, the great fire king, in a new and novel fire act, entitled ‘The Devil’s Care,’” all you had to do was sit back and await “Miss Flora Story, the queen of the African harp.”

Though many of these acts skirted the thin edge of indecency, few went beyond it. As Robert Snyder has argued, “vaudeville’s exuberant, irreverent, sensual style of music, drama, and comedy” was far from puritanical. Vaudeville’s comics, dancers, music, and sketches “sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly” challenged prevailing standards of moral purity and restraint. But this was all done, as it were, on the sly, never publicly acknowledged or even hinted at by the entrepreneurs who presented the acts or the audiences who cheered them on.

The vaudeville managers, on the contrary, plastered the town with their good intentions. Visiting journalists and critics were lectured on the stringent oversight exercised by managers and directed to dressing-room signs such as the one Edwin Royle reproduced in his 1899 Scribner’s article:

NOTICE TO PERFORMERS.

You are hereby warned that your act must be free from all vulgarity and suggestiveness in words, action, and costume, while playing in any of Mr. ___’s houses, and all vulgar, double-meaning and profane words and songs must be cut out of your act before the first performance. . . .

Such words as Liar, Slob, Son-of-A-Gun, Devil, Sucker, Damn, and all other words unfit for the ears of ladies and children, also any reference to questionable streets, resorts, localities, and bar-rooms, are prohibited under fine of instant discharge.

___ ___,
General Manager

This outpouring of publicity not only drew attention from what was actually occurring on the stage, but also it congratulated the vaudeville audience on its good taste and moral sensibilities. Audience members, still unsure as to whether or not they should be paying their dimes and quarters to see variety acts in cheap theaters, were reassured that in doing so they were certifying their inclusion in a new and expanding respectable public for respectable amusements.

Much of this publicity was directed at women who were doubly prized by the vaudeville impresarios: as customers and as icons of decency. Women remained, at the turn of the century, the emblems and guarantors of middle- and working-class respectability, even though
many were, at this precise historical moment, challenging the notion that the only proper amusements for the "gentler sex" were those that were sponsored by church or confined to the home.\footnote{15}

The presence of women has often been taken as a sign of embourgeoisement, of the transformation of raw and rough working-class amusements into more genteel, middle-class recreations. This was certainly the message that the show businessmen wanted to convey with their "ladies welcome" and "family entertainment" signs. But the effect of the women on the commercial amusements they patronized was both less and more than this. Their presence did not guarantee that off-color remarks, jokes, and skits would be removed. What it did do was mark the theater as a suitable arena for respectable folk to spend time in. The primary distinguishing mark of the "refined" vaudeville was not the show on stage but the women in the audience. A mixed audience was by definition a respectable one, a male-only one, indecent.

To attract women to their entertainments, the vaudeville impresarios arranged special matinees, advertised "Ladies Invitation Nights" where women were admitted for free, and showered them with a variety of gifts, from coal, flour, and hams, to bonnets, dress patterns, and dresses. But gifts were not enough to convince "respectable" women that they were indeed welcome in the vaudeville theaters. The show businessmen had to remove the prostitutes who had been a visible and accepted part of nineteenth-century concert saloons, honky-tongs, variety halls, and theaters. No respectable woman could visit a site where she might encounter or, worse yet, be taken for a streetwalker.\footnote{16}

Smoking had to be regulated because the smoke permeated the vaudeville hall with noxious odors and because it signified that the space it filled was for men only. Drinking also had to be controlled. Tony Pastor was the first show businessman to ban liquor from his theater in 1881 (though he conveniently kept a refreshment stand next door). Through the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, other vaudeville impresarios followed his lead by restricting drinking to intermissions or removing bars from the premises entirely.\footnote{17}

The vaudeville managers succeeded in attracting large numbers of women to their shows because they kept their prices low and made the women feel comfortable inside. Even young shop girls and sales ladies who had to fight with their parents or scrimp and save to support an occasional night out were joining the crowd at the vaudeville hall. Louise Montgomery found that the subject of "leisure time [was] one

"Something for Everybody" at the Vaudeville Theater

of the greatest causes of family clashing" among Chicago's working girls and their mothers, because the girls demanded "a freedom in the use of their evening hours" that their parents were reluctant to grant them.\footnote{18}

Women who lived with roommates in boarding houses had more freedom to "go out" than those who remained at home but less money to pay their own way. Many had to "date," or, as one contemporary writer put it, play the "sex game," making implicit bargains with men who paid for a night out at the theater in return for "limited sexual favors."\footnote{19}

Women who would not have imagined accompanying their male friends or husbands to the saloon volunteered to go with them to the vaudeville hall. Mothers attended the weekday matinees with or without their children in tow. Suburban shoppers in town for the day took time out from their chores to visit the "continuous run" theaters within walking distance of the department stores. The recreation surveys undertaken after 1910 reported, some in a rather surprised tone, that women made up a significant portion of the vaudeville audience. They comprised one-third of the audience in New York City in 1910. Women and children made up 48 percent of the audience in San Francisco in 1912, 45 percent in Milwaukee in 1914, and comparable percentages in other cities.\footnote{20}

The vaudeville impresarios had begun by assembling an audience out of the vast numbers of city folk who could afford no more than ten to twenty-five cents for an evening's entertainment. Each "act" on the bill had its own special constituency. The animal acts appealed to the younger children, the slapstick comedians to the older boys and young men, the female singers to the lady shoppers. New kinds of acts could be added to bring in new customers.

To attract the male-only saloon crowd, vaudeville managers announced the scores of important home-town games and invited baseball players, wrestlers, tennis players, airship pilots, even the winners of Six Day Bicycle races to celebrate their victories on the vaudeville stage. Female swimmers were especially prized because they could appear in their swimsuits, further enhancing their appeal to the sporting crowd. As the manager of the Keith theater in Philadelphia reported in October of 1902, "A bunch of young and shapely girls is a good thing in any variety show." Boxers were also big attractions. City
folk who would never have dreamed of attending an actual match could for a quarter sit in a comfortable seat in a "clean" theater and watch John L. Sullivan, Jack Johnson, Jim Jeffries, and other champions act in specially devised playlets or sing, dance, joke, and spar a few rounds on the vaudeville stage.21

In this era before moving pictures and radio, only vaudeville and the daily papers could bring celebrities before the public. The newspapers identified and marked individuals for celebrity; the vaudeville theaters capitalized on the marking by parading the notorious across their stages to tell their stories or reenact the events that had made them famous. Evelyn Nesbit, whose husband had murdered architect Stanford White, was a big vaudeville attraction, as were the "Shooting Stars," Lillian Graham and Ethel Conrard, who had achieved celebrity by placing "bullets in the leg of W. E. D. Stokes, a social registerite." Alexander Pantages who operated a circuit of theaters west of the Mississippi supplemented his regular variety program with local outlaws such as Ed Morrell, the youngest member of the Evans-Sontag gang in California, just released after sixteen years in prison, and "Convict 6630—The Man Who Sang Himself Out of the Penitentiary," an ex-forgery named George Schroeder.22

The celebrity acts extended the vaudeville audience laterally by bringing in customers who read the daily papers. The vaudeville impresarios also wanted to extend it upward to new and more prosperous social groupings. To accomplish this, they recruited and booked what they referred to as their "gold-brick" or "dignity" acts. F. F. Proctor tried to attract upscale lady shoppers by signing Italo Campanini, a famous operatic tenor, to appear at his 23rd Street theater. Keith and Albee preferred as their "gold bricks" such stars of the legitimate stage as Mrs. Drew and Maurice Barrymore, who read, recited, and performed in specially condensed one-act playlets and sketches. As it became apparent that the "gold bricks" were, in Keith's words, attracting "the attention of a desirable class of patrons," more were added to the vaudeville bills, among them entertainers as varied in their talents as the "greatly respected and admired performer on the women's club and garden circuits," Mrs. Alice Shaw, who whistled; Edouard Remenyi, a concert violinist, who "at his opening bill" performed "Hearts and Flowers," the "Melody in F," and "Mendelssohn's Spring Song"; and stars from European stages, the opera, the classical concert hall, and the ballet, all of them only too happy—for the right price—to condense their art into fifteen-minute vaudeville turns.23

By incorporating the "gold bricks" into their program, impresarios distanced vaudeville further from the male-only variety shows and concert saloons. As the Dramatic Mirror exclaimed rather breathlessly in 1897, "By winning over to the varieties some who have acted only in serious drama the distinctions between theaters of various quality have been lessened, and art begins to tell for what it is, a democracy being instituted that can work no harm to a right cause." Although the vaudeville halls, even the highest priced, continued to charge much less than the first-class playhouses and musical comedy theaters, the social distance between the two decreased. It was no longer unthinkable, as William Morris proudly reported in 1909, for "the same audiences who on Monday nights patronize a two dollar Broadway opening" to attend a vaudeville performance on Tuesday—"and with considerable pleasure."24

To enhance their own status further—and that of their "shows"—the vaudeville impresarios built their own "palaces," as luxurious as any in the land. As the promotional pamphlet celebrating the 1894 opening of B. F. Keith's "New Theatre" in Boston exclaimed, "It may be stated at the outset that [this theater] is the handsomest, most solidly constructed, most elaborately decorated, and most sumptuously appointed amusement establishment on the face of the earth." Inside the theater was a "Bureau of Information" [with] telephone, messenger-call, writing desk with all appurtenances, directories, time-tables, guide books, etc.; a main foyer "which is unquestionably the most magnificent apartment connected with any amusement establishment in the world"; an orchestra reception room; three "sumptuously furnished apartments reserved exclusively for the use of ladies"; a men's smoking room "constantly supplied with all the leading daily papers"; and, on the balcony, a second grand reception room and ladies' parlor, complete with writing desk.25

Like the "dignity" acts, the palaces were intended to raise the status of vaudeville and its audience by enveloping what was still a relatively cheap variety show in luxury so extravagant patrons could forget that they were paying half of what it cost to attend the legitimate theater. Keith's Philadelphia hall was proudly referred to as the "million-dollar theater." The pamphlet celebrating the opening of the New Boston Theatre in 1894 reminded audience members—if they hadn't already grasped the point—that "money has been expended here with lavish prodigality."26

A decade earlier, in 1884, Keith and Albee had attracted a better
class of customers to their dime museum by featuring *The Mikado*. Now, in 1894, they used the same strategy and offered performances by members of the Boston Symphony orchestra to bring Boston’s social elites into their vaudeville palace. According to the critic Walter Prichard Eaton, the plan worked wonders, as Mrs. Jack Gardner, the leading socialite, hired a box to hear the orchestra. “What Mrs. Jack did was the signal. Keith’s became not only respectable but quite the thing. . . . In the 1890s, middle-class and suburban Boston regarded it as the last word in magnificence, as well as morally and socially respectable. They flocked to it by the thousands.”

While Eaton’s words must not be taken literally, the palaces did extend the vaudeville audience to include a range of theatergoers who would not, under other circumstances, have set foot within a vaudeville hall. The vaudeville entrepreneurs in the beginning had charged popular prices because their audiences could not or would not pay more. The construction of the new palaces changed all that. Keith and Albee, who had set a top price of twenty-five cents in their first Boston, Providence, and Philadelphia theaters, raised prices for orchestra and box seats in their Boston and Philadelphia palaces to a dollar, then a dollar and a half.

By moving up in class—and in price—what was now known as “big-time” vaudeville opened the door in the early 1900s to countless cut-rate variations, including “small-time,” “ten-cent,” “nickel,” “family,” and “tab” theaters. Just as vaudeville’s founders had attracted an audience by lowering prices far below those of the first-class legitimate and musical-comedy theaters, so did a second generation of vaudeville impresarios compete with the older, established ones by charging half of what they did: a quarter for their best evening seats, a dime for matinee and gallery seats. Small-time theaters were built on the secondary shopping and entertainment districts to make them accessible to the city’s less prosperous residents and workers. As we will see in chapter 14, many of these small-time theaters would in the later 1900s and early 1910s be converted to “combination” houses that alternated full programs of moving pictures with their live acts.

The small-time vaudeville owners and managers called their establishments family theaters to emphasize that they were not only respectable enough but also cheap enough for the entire family. Like their big-time counterparts, the popular-priced theaters offered cus-

tomers a full bill of entertainment in a “clean” theater. The only real difference between the expensive and the popular-priced shows, except for the price, was that the ten-cent theaters were usually (but not always) smaller and less ornate, with bills containing fewer headliners and more moving pictures.

The vaudeville entrepreneurs had cast their net wide, and although they had not yet reached a large number of the city’s poorer working-class and immigrant populations, they had succeeded in assembling a huge and heterogeneous audience for their shows. According to the historian Albert McLean, Jr., “the rising class of white-collar workers” continued to make up the largest segment of the vaudeville audience. Even in the cheapest “vaudeville and moving picture shows” on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, investigators in 1910 classified the audiences in six of the eight theaters they visited as “middle class” or “mixed,” rather than “poor” and used such terms as “fairly well dressed,” “fairly prosperous,” and “respectable” to describe them. The San Francisco survey of “public recreation” completed in 1911 similarly reported that the audiences in the vaudeville houses were neither “predominantly ‘rich’ or ‘poor’,” but “fair-to-do” and “struggling.”

The only groups excluded from or segregated within the vaudeville audience were the city’s African Americans. * Ethel Waters, who performed in Keith and Albee’s Alhambra Theater at Seventh Avenue and 126th Street, recalled in her autobiography that “colored people could buy seats only in the peanut gallery.” As far as its theaters were concerned, “125th Street was still a white boulevard.” Many African Americans boycotted vaudeville theaters that sequestered them with newsies and rowdies in an upper or second balcony that was never cleaned and accessible only from a back entrance off a dark and dangerous alleyway. In his guidebook on building, managing, and operating a vaudeville theater, Edward Renton suggested that impresarios who wanted to attract more “negroes” should design their halls with one balcony instead of two. “It is well to remember that in some cities the better classes of the negroes have declined to patronize a ‘second balcony’ reserved for them exclusively and served from a separate ticket-

*In this chapter, we consider African Americans solely as audience members. While excluded or segregated from the vaudeville audience, however, they constituted a significant part of the performers on stage. In chapter 4, we will return to African Americans in vaudeville and focus on the performers.
window. Therefore, the better plan is to divide the balcony front and rear and provide a separate ticket-window and stairs for the negro patrons.\textsuperscript{30}

The vaudeville entrepreneurs were succeeding in attracting a huge and varied audience because they had secured for their theater and “show” a privileged place in a revised moral taxonomy of public amusement sites and activities. Respectability was correlated not with class background, income, education, or ethnicity but with race, appearance, dress, and deportment. As Warren Susman has argued, in this period of cultural transition what mattered most, at least according to the advice literature, was neither character nor inner moral qualities, but personality, one’s ability to get along and make oneself “pleasing to others” by proper grooming, dress, and “good manners.”\textsuperscript{31}

A decent person was someone who looked and acted decently. The well-dressed dandy or sport who made too much noise, spit on the floor, or appeared drunken in public was, no matter what his social background or education, not decent and, as such, not welcomed in the vaudeville theater. Lower-level white-collar workers, even manual workers, on the other hand, were welcomed into the vaudeville theaters as long as they dressed and acted decently. As Henry James had said of New York hotel society, the token of admission to the vaudeville theater was the “condition” that one “be presumably ‘respectable,’ be, that is, not discoverably anything else.”\textsuperscript{32}

Edward Renton, in his book on vaudeville theaters, cautioned managers to instruct box-office attendants to refuse tickets to drunken men and women, avoid seating the “mechanic in overalls ... where he may be conspicuous,” and direct “individuals who are likely to smell ‘garlicky’ or be poorly dressed” away from the better seats. In the larger vaudeville halls and palaces, ushers, dressed in pseudomilitary garb, patrolled the aisles to enforce minimal rules of deportment. Signs and underlined program announcements further instructed audiences not to snack, chat, drink, smoke, boo or cheer too loudly, or walk the aisles while the show was in progress.\textsuperscript{33}

Ushers and written rules, no matter how strict and censorious they might have been, never quite succeeded in transforming the vaudeville halls into churches, school libraries, or concert halls. Nor were they supposed to. Though Keith and Albee were happy to have their theaters referred to as the “Sunday School Circuit,” they were well aware that Sunday Schools did not attract many paying customers. While the women might have taken off their hats in the auditorium and the boys softened their cheers and jeers, few vaudeville patrons behaved as if they were in church or school. The “restraint of emotion in the theater,” which Richard Sennett has identified as the hallmark of the middle-class audience, was not only absent but also actively undermined in the vaudeville theaters. Instead, vaudeville provided its patrons with the opportunity to display their emotions in public.\textsuperscript{34}

In its “something for everyone” democracy, in its exaltation of good, “clean,” but not too “clean” fun, in its unholy assortment of the crude and the classical, in the short attention span it required of its audience, even in its racism, vaudeville was becoming a quintessential American institution. As Edwin Milton Royle concluded in his essay on vaudeville in Scribner’s Magazine for October 1899, “Vaudeville is very American. It touches us and our lives at many places. It appeals to the business man, tired and worn, who drops in for half an hour on his way home; to the person who has an hour or two before a train goes, or before a business appointment; to the woman who is weary of shopping; to the children who love animals and acrobats; to the man with his sweetheart or sister; to the individual who wants to be diverted but doesn’t want to think or feel; to the American of all grades and kinds who wants a great deal for his money. The vaudeville theater belongs to the era of the department store and the short story. It may be a kind of lunch-counter art, but then art is so vague and lunch is so real.”\textsuperscript{35}