

Sean Holmes

## All Work or No Play: Key Themes in the History of the American Stage Actor as Worker

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### Electronic reference

Sean Holmes, « All Work or No Play: Key Themes in the History of the American Stage Actor as Worker », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Vol 3, No 3 | 2008, document 6, Online since 02 December 2008, connection on 27 April 2015. URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/5673> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.5673

Publisher: European Association for American Studies  
<http://ejas.revues.org>  
<http://www.revues.org>

Document available online on:  
<http://ejas.revues.org/5673>  
Document automatically generated on 27 April 2015.  
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# All Work or No Play: Key Themes in the History of the American Stage Actor as Worker

## 1. Introduction

1 When stage actors in the United States walked off the job in the summer of 1919 in protest at the persistent refusal of the major theatrical producers to recognize their union, most commentators were unwilling to take the strike seriously, preferring instead to exploit the moment for cheap laughs. “Perhaps we soon shall see . . . [actor] DeWolf Hopper . . . in front of some Broadway theater, banner on shoulder, aided and supported by the dapper but militant [musical-comedy star] Francis Wilson,” joked one reporter, playing upon the apparent incongruity of prominent stage performers engaging in actions more closely associated with the industrial working class. “Tottie Tootles and her thirty-five beautiful charm cavorters might refuse to cherry their lips or paint their eyebrows . . . and thereby destroy the illusion of the stage for a century,” suggested another newsman, casting chorus girls not as exploited wage earners but as temperamental bundles of commodified sexuality.<sup>1</sup> More than eighty years on and little had changed. In October 2000, when actress Elizabeth Hurley was barracked by pickets from the Screen Actors’ Guild (SAG) at the premiere of her movie *Bedazzled* for breaking a strike over payments for commercials, the international press paid far more attention to the protestors’ placards—most memorably the one that read “Liz Scabley You Make Me Hurl”—than to what was at stake in the dispute.<sup>2</sup>

2 Historically, the problem that has confronted actors whenever they have engaged in struggles for workplace justice is that acting, whether on stage or in front of a movie camera, is rarely perceived as work. The reasons for this are rooted firmly in the way that the commercial entertainment industry in the United States operates. As film theorists have pointed out, performance is an unusual commodity in that it is a labor process exhibited before and consumed by an audience. As the key component in this process, the actor is both the producer of the commodity and its embodiment. Yet the system of production in the commercial entertainment industry masks this duality. In transforming actors into fetishized objects of consumption, it detaches them from the industrial workplace and defines their calling almost entirely in terms of the rewards that accrue to it, with the consequence that their collective grievances have rarely elicited much in the way of public sympathy.<sup>3</sup> To quote one recent commentator,

[w]e’re not about to wear ribbons of solidarity with Tom Cruise because he’s down to his last \$50 million with no prospect of immediate employment. And the only scabs worth worrying about in Hollywood, surely, are the ones picked up from a working girl on the corner of Sunset and Vine.<sup>4</sup>

3 Even academics have found it difficult to take actors and their working lives seriously. Until recently, the experience of work and the character of labor relations in the commercial entertainment industry remained largely unexamined outside the pages of official trade-union histories and a handful of rather dated industrial relations studies.<sup>5</sup> For the generation of labor historians who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, actors were a frivolous bunch and somehow less worthy of scholarly attention than the craft workers, machine operatives, and unskilled laborers who were the primary focus of both the “old” labor history and the “new.” Over the last two decades, however, scholars have finally acknowledged that actors are significant not simply as cultural commodities but also as key players in the process of cultural production. Working from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, they have begun to explore the nature of work in the commercial entertainment industry; the constantly shifting economic and cultural contexts in which actors have sold their labor; and the ongoing efforts of actors to construct a coherent occupational identity.<sup>6</sup> The aim of this article is to make use of this growing body

of literature, along with material gathered from archives, to illustrate the key themes in the history of actors as workers. Focusing on the legitimate theatre in the opening decades of the twentieth century, the goal is to establish what it meant to work as a stage performer in an era of unprecedented economic and technological change. In the process, I have done my best to restore voices to a group of workers whom scholars have too often assumed were silent about their experiences on the theatrical shop floor.

## 2. Establishing ‘Legitimate Theatre’

- 4 In the context of the commercial entertainment industry in the United States in the early twentieth century, the term “legitimate theatre” carried considerable ideological baggage. As a straightforward descriptor, it differentiated full-length plays and musicals from vaudeville, burlesque and musical revues and it was expansive enough to incorporate not only the metropolitan theatre but also the resident stock companies and travelling shows that catered to the audiences of small-town America. As theatre historian Mark Hodin has demonstrated, however, it was also used to structure the market for theatrical entertainment hierarchically by marking out conventionally staged drama as “the best occasion and opportunity for acquiring cultural prestige . . . commercially.” For its middle- and upper-class devotees, theatrical legitimacy was a bulwark against mass culture and a vehicle for reasserting hierarchies of race and class in the face of the corrupting effects of immigration. For the men and women who earned their living on the legitimate stage, it was a source of status, something that set them apart from other supposedly lesser performers and played a key role in defining their view of the work in which they were engaged. As far as they were concerned, they were the elite of the American stage.<sup>7</sup>
- 5 Like other branches of the commercial entertainment industry in the United States, the so-called legitimate theatre underwent a radical restructuring at the end of the nineteenth century. Following the economic downturn of the early 1870s, “combination” companies, groups of actors touring the country in productions designed to showcase the talents of a single star performer, began to displace the resident stock companies that had hitherto been the principal source of theatrical entertainment in the United States. Stripped of their role as producers, theatre managers had to reinvent themselves as theatrical shopkeepers, travelling each summer to New York City, the emergent capital of the entertainment industry, to book shows for the upcoming season. In its early years, the so-called combination system was characterized by intense and unrestricted competition. In an effort to combat the problems that this raised, theatre managers began to group their theatres into circuits, a strategy that strengthened their bargaining position immeasurably because it made it possible for them to offer touring companies the opportunity to book several weeks of business in a single transaction. In the wake of this shift, enterprising businessmen in New York City set themselves up as booking agents. As their businesses prospered, they expanded their operations, investing in theatres of their own and gradually building up regional distribution networks. In 1896, the most successful of these entrepreneurs—Abraham Erlanger and Marc Klaw, Samuel Nixon and J. Fred Zimmerman, Charles Frohman, and Al Hayman—agreed to pool their resources. Of the seven, only Charles Frohman was directly engaged in the creative process and their agreement marks the moment at which the theatrical middleman emerged as the lynchpin of the system of production in the American theatre. What contemporary commentators referred to as the Theatrical Syndicate rapidly came to exercise an iron grip over the theatre industry, compelling both theatre managers and independent producers to work through it and freezing out anyone who refused to do so. At the height of its power, it was responsible for booking more than seven hundred theatres across the country.<sup>8</sup>
- 6 However, this dominance over the U.S. theatre industry did not last for long. After the turn of the century, the Shuberts, three brothers with a chain of theatres in upstate New York, challenged the Syndicate’s virtual monopoly by buying up theatrical real estate across the country and offering their services to theatre managers and producers who had fallen victim to its exclusionary practices. In 1905, Sam Shubert, the eldest of the Shubert brothers and the driving force behind their business operations, was killed in a railroad accident but his

younger siblings, Lee and J.J., proved capable executors of his vision. Masquerading as advocates of fair play and a free market for theatrical entertainment, they adopted what they termed an “open door” policy, opening their theatres to any production regardless of whether it had played in a Syndicate house. No sooner had they achieved their objectives, however, than they slammed shut the open door, embracing with enthusiasm the type of restrictive practices that had been pioneered by their rivals in the Syndicate. By 1910, they had achieved parity with the Theatrical Syndicate in terms of the booking and routing of attractions. In the subsequent struggle for market dominance, they took advantage of recently developed corporate techniques of capitalization, management, and strategy to establish themselves as the preeminent purveyors of theatrical entertainment in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

7 Seduced perhaps by the anti-monopoly rhetoric of Progressive-era commentators on the entertainment business, historians have tended to overplay the parallels between the so-called theatre trusts and the oligopolies that came to dominate other sectors of the American economy in the early twentieth century. In terms of the scale of their operations, the levels of capitalization that underpinned their businesses, and the number of workers they employed, even the most powerful theatrical producers were small-time operators by comparison with the mighty corporations that had emerged out of the second industrial revolution. Nor was their control of the market for theatrical entertainment entirely unchallenged. Though the Theatrical Syndicate and the Shuberts exercised a very tight grip over the metropolitan market, resident stock companies offering cut-price versions of Broadway hits and repertory companies performing on the small-time circuits of the rural hinterland continued to account for some four-fifths of theatrical production in the United States. The managerial revolution that underpinned the rise of the modern business enterprise, moreover, left the business of the theatre largely untouched. Even the most cursory trawl through the Shubert Archives reveals that it was Lee and J.J. Shubert, and not salaried managers, who remained the key decision-makers within the Shubert Organization through the 1920s. Such qualifications should not obscure what the new-style businessmen of the theatre achieved, however. By creating national entertainment networks that integrated the processes of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception, they transformed American show business and, by extension, the conditions under which theatrical workers sold their labor.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. The Production of Theatre

8 Like other culture industries in the United States, the theatre industry in the early twentieth century was geared towards the production of a standardized commodity.<sup>11</sup> Though the need to differentiate one show from another fostered some degree of experimentation and left space for theatrical innovators to work, the general tendency was towards imitation and repetition, and the main drive for the biggest theatrical producers was the desire to identify a successful formula and then replicate it. The Shuberts were untypical of the businessmen who controlled the commercial theatre in that, unlike all but Charles Frohman among their rivals in the Theatrical Syndicate, they were actively involved in the process of theatrical production. The business over which they presided, however, both exemplified the trend towards mass production in the commercial entertainment industry and took it to its logical extreme. Recognizing the importance of establishing clear lines of authority within their theatrical empire, the brothers divided producing responsibilities between them, with Lee Shubert supervising dramas and comedies and J.J. Shubert overseeing musical offerings. Lee Shubert was not directly involved in the task of putting together shows, preferring to delegate creative authority to theatre professionals and comparing his role to that of a newspaper magnate directing the activities of a team of editors and writers. J.J. Shubert, by contrast, took a hands-on approach, running what theatre historian Foster Hirsch has termed “a theatrical sweatshop” in which a team of largely uncredited writer-lyricists, directors, and choreographers working to his specifications put together the operettas and musical revues that came to define the Shubert brand. Though titles, settings, routines, and casts changed, the content of the shows varied very little from one theatrical season to the next. The Shuberts’ Winter Garden revues, for example, followed a format—elaborate sets, comic sketches, and

big production numbers performed by scantily-clad chorus girls—that guaranteed commercial success but, as contemporary critics frequently pointed out, left little space for innovation. “For the twentieth time, the Shuberts have changed the show or at least the title of the show at the Winter Garden,” began one review of the Shuberts’ *Show of Wonders* in December 1916, continuing “You would scarcely realize that anything is new, however.”<sup>12</sup>

9 In the reconfigured theatrical economy of the early twentieth century, the market for actors’ labor was highly segmented. Even in an era of expanding opportunities, the majority of the 30,000 or so professional performers in the United States never made it on to the New York stage or toured with a first-class combination company.<sup>13</sup> The minority that did had to negotiate the vagaries of an occupational hierarchy—the so-called star system—that afforded vast salaries to the handful of players that occupied its upper strata but meager rewards to the far greater number of performers that eked out a living at its base. If the often rather sensationalistic reports that appeared in popular periodicals during the period have any basis in fact, the stars of the legitimate stage were astonishingly well rewarded for their labor. Well-placed by virtue of their perceived exchange value to negotiate lucrative deals with the production managers who employed them, they were often paid both a fixed weekly salary and a percentage of the profits from the show in which they were performing. For a forty-week national tour in 1911, for example, John Drew, the senior member of the Drew-Barrymore acting family, was reportedly able to command a salary of \$500 a week and a cut of the box office takings that ultimately amounted to \$85,000.

10 For the great majority of actors, however, the fruits of theatrical success were more elusive. At the turn of the century, the average performer earned an annual salary of \$875 for a typical season of twenty-five weeks—\$328 more than the average salary of a public school teacher but \$44 less than the average salary of a postal worker. With the supply of labor always far exceeding the number of available parts, moreover, unemployment rates among actors in the early twentieth century were perennially high, with about one-third of stage performers in the United States out of work at any given time.<sup>14</sup> Even moderately successful performers routinely experienced marked fluctuations in their fortunes from one year to the next. Looking back on her childhood in the early 1900s, actress Margalo Gillmore, daughter of one-time leading man Frank Gillmore, recalled the degree to which her family’s standard of living went up and down according to the vicissitudes of her father’s stage career:

Whenever we had a maid, it was a sign that Daddy was in a successful play. Whenever Dad opened in a new play, [my sister] Ruth and I . . . used to add to our nightly prayers not only a petition for our father’s personal triumph but a strong hint that the play should be a rousing success so that we could go to [the Long Island resort of] Sconset for the summer.<sup>15</sup>

11 Further down the occupational ladder, few performers could hope to emulate the lifestyle of a Frank Gillmore, much less that of a John Drew. As one observer put it in 1908, the “second-rate” actor was more likely to talk about “rent, the leak in the gas range, the cost of storing furniture, the best place to buy colored shirts, [and] the advantages of home laundry” than “the flavor of champagne, the rise in the cost of diamonds, [and] the favorites at the race track.”<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Gender and Discrimination

12 Gender shaped the experience of actors as workers in ways that both reflected broader patterns in American society and marked acting out from other lines of work. An aversion to cross-gender casting meant that in the commercial theatre, as in other occupations where men and women worked together (office work and social work, for example), two distinct career ladders existed, one male and one female. What made theatrical work unusual and possibly even unique was that the process of segmentation did not always work to the disadvantage of women.<sup>17</sup> Prior to the 1850s, the star as a cultural construct was inextricably bound up with prevailing notions of masculinity. Leading actresses, usually restricted to roles as virtuous heroines in domestic melodramas, received neither the acclaim nor the rewards that were accorded to leading male performers like Edmund Kean and Edwin Forrest. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, the way in which stardom was defined became less explicitly gendered, a cultural shift that opened up the show-business firmament to women,

and by the early twentieth century, female stars were at least as well rewarded as their male counterparts.<sup>18</sup> For a forty-week run in *What Every Woman Knows* in 1909, for instance, the actress Maude Adams received \$1000 a week and a share in the show's profits that ultimately amounted to over \$200,000.<sup>19</sup> Not all female performers were so fortunate, however. Closer to the base of the occupational hierarchy, the young women of the Broadway chorus lines, for example, lived a far more precarious existence. Segregated on the basis of their sex, they earned wages that were only marginally higher than those available to other groups of "unskilled" female workers.<sup>20</sup>

13 What complicated the picture still further was that the career earnings of the vast majority of women in show business, as in other occupations that commodified female sexuality, generally lagged behind those of men because the shelf lives of female performers, regardless of their status, tended to be shorter. Chorus girls in the early twentieth century, for example, rarely lasted more than four or five seasons on the Broadway stage. According to Florenz Ziegfeld, theatrical impresario and self-styled "Glorifier of the American Girl," he and his fellow producers had little use for them once they hit their early twenties. Beyond that age, he explained in a 1919 magazine article that made explicit the connection between age, attractiveness, and the employability of women in show business, "the eyes grow a little less clear, the cheeks sag just a trifle, and the chin shows a fatal inclination to become a pair."<sup>21</sup>

With a few notable exceptions of whom Lillian Russell and Marie Dressler are probably the most celebrated, few chorus girls graduated to more important theatrical roles. Most simply left the stage and got married. Census statistics also suggest that most female performers had to trade on their youthful beauty and few were able to continue working beyond their early forties. Of the 4000 female performers working in Manhattan in 1920, almost forty percent were under twenty-four as compared with only twelve percent of male performers, while less than eight percent were over forty-five.<sup>22</sup>

14 Female sexuality entered into the exchange process in other ways as well. Anecdotal evidence suggests that female performers routinely encountered sexual harassment at the hands of their male employers and that the myth of the casting couch is firmly rooted in the historical realities of a labor market in which supply consistently outstripped demand. According to their most recent biographer, Lee and J. J. Shubert, the most powerful theatrical producers of the first half of the twentieth century, were incorrigible womanizers who had no qualms whatsoever about using their position to get chorus girls into bed. "What they did to those girls wasn't fair," observed one former Shubert employee in hindsight. "If you didn't sleep with them, you didn't get the part."<sup>23</sup>

15 We ought perhaps to be wary of assuming that stage and screen performers who trade sexual favors for career advancement were always innocent victims. In an interview with theatre historian Foster Hirsch, Anna Terolow Reissman, an actress who worked on Shubert road shows in the early 1940s, denied that the chorus girls who slept with her bosses were being taken advantage of in any way. "They were hard-bitten bitches, for the most part," she insisted, "and going on the casting couch was nothing to them."<sup>24</sup> Even so, there is ample evidence in the archives to suggest that the unwanted attentions of predatory employers were a perennial source of resentment for women in American show business. A complaint submitted to the Actors' Equity Association in 1921 by an actress who had been importuned for sex by her employer while lying sick in a railroad sleeping car provides a graphic illustration of how traumatic such an experience could be:

[H]e came into the stateroom and turned out the light. Then he came over to my bed and began feeling all over my body and he asked me if I would be his "friend" and [said] that if I *would*, he would sure put me up in the swellest hotel, and buy me nice dresses and clothes. He then asked me if I would not do business with him and *screw him*.

16 Though the woman, whose husband was also employed in the company, succeeded in defusing the situation by threatening to call for assistance, the incident left her feeling deeply aggrieved, not least because of her assailant's subsequent lack of remorse. According to her statement, when she informed him the next day of her intention to leave the show on account of his

outrageous behavior, his only response was to tell her that “he always did like blondes and that he sure hated to see ‘his little blonde’ leave him.”<sup>25</sup>

## 5. Race and Discrimination

17 If the variable of race is factored into the occupational equation, it quickly becomes apparent that non-white performers in the American theatre in the early twentieth century fared considerably less well than performers who succeeded in laying claim to whiteness. The experience of African Americans in the theatre industry, for example, was defined by limited opportunities and a lengthy struggle to escape the constraints imposed by images of blackness that sprang from the collective consciousness of whites. Though blackface was a staple of theatrical entertainment (and a fast track to the cultural mainstream for performers from immigrant backgrounds) from the 1820s onwards, African-American performers remained a rarity on the American stage for most of the nineteenth century. Ira Aldridge, a black tragedian who made his debut in New York in 1821, had to leave the United States, where stardom as a cultural construct was highly racialized and Shakespeare was the exclusive preserve of whites, for Europe in order to establish himself as a major star. When African Americans finally began to make their way into the theatrical mainstream in the 1870s, they did so via the minstrel show, a cultural form that was, to quote theatre historian Thomas Postlewaite, “both an avenue to professional opportunity and the dead-end of professional development” for black performers. On the one hand, it gave them access to white theatres in the major cities of the Northeast and Midwest. On the other, it required them to conform to a set of racial stereotypes that were always limiting and often deeply demeaning.<sup>26</sup>

18 With the massive growth of musical theatre and vaudeville around the turn of the century, the range of options available to African Americans in the commercial entertainment industry began to expand. Shows like *In Dahomey*, a black musical featuring the talents of vaudevillians George Walker and Bert Williams and one of the biggest hits of the 1902-03 theatrical season, helped open up Broadway to African-American talent and laid the basis for a re-imagining of stardom in less rigidly racial terms. Spoken drama, however, remained a resolutely white art form. Though all-black companies performed abridged versions of Broadway hits for black audiences in black neighborhoods in cities such as New York, Chicago, and Detroit, a color bar continued to operate on Broadway that denied black actors access to serious dramatic roles. Not until Charles Sidney Gilpin was cast in the title role in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* in 1920 did an African-American performer find acceptance at the highest level of the cultural hierarchy.<sup>27</sup> Even in the musical theatre, opportunities for black performers to display their talents in racially integrated companies remained very limited through the 1920s. In the hands of impresarios like Florenz Ziegfeld, George White, and Earl Carroll, for instance, the Broadway chorus line was an almost impregnable bastion of whiteness. “Most of the pretty girls in our companies are Americans,” explained Ziegfeld in an article that reflects a broader tendency in American culture in the early twentieth century to define not only stage beauty but also national identity in explicitly racial and ethnic terms.

By that I mean not only are they native-born, but that their parents and grandparents and remoter ancestors were also natives of this country. There are more types of beauty, more *varieties* of charm, among strictly American girls than among those of any other nationality.<sup>28</sup>

19 Only when non-white performers concealed their racial identities—as did one of the *Floradora* girls, the sextet of chorines who immortalized the “Tell Me Pretty Maiden” routine in the musical *Floradora* in 1900—were they able to infiltrate this whitest of institutions on the Great White Way.<sup>29</sup>

## 6. Theatrical Production and the Impact of Film

20 The shop-floor experience of individual performers was determined in large part by their position in the theatrical hierarchy. In a number of key respects, the position of the actors and actresses who occupied the upper rungs of the occupational ladder was analogous to that of the skilled craftsmen that David Montgomery has placed at the center of his analysis of machine

production in the late nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> Though they were engaged in a highly repetitive labor process, often having to reprise the same role eight times a week for the duration of a season, the control that they exercised over their performances permitted them a high degree of functional autonomy. The stars of the legitimate stage were able to use their elevated status to carve out what film theorist Barry King, writing on stardom in the context of the Hollywood film industry, has termed a “maneuverable space” in the workplace.<sup>31</sup> When Al Jolson was appearing on Broadway in the musical comedy *Bombo* in 1921, for example, he would often step out of character and ask the audience if they would prefer to hear him sing rather than watch the rest of the show. If they responded in the affirmative, as they invariably did, he would send the rest of the cast home early, instruct the stage manager to lower the curtain, and perform solo for the remainder of the evening.<sup>32</sup> Chorus girls, by contrast, had more in common with assembly line operatives. Interchangeable components in a complex productive process, they were subordinated to technical specialists who deployed them in highly disciplined dance routines that stripped them of their individuality and left them with little space for self-expression. As Ned Wayburn, Florenz Ziegfeld’s technical director, put it, “No-one may ever be in the wrong place. No-one may ever have a spasm of laughing hysterically. Out front are hundreds of people who have paid thousands of dollars to see real work—not monkey shines.”<sup>33</sup>

21 What it meant to work as an actor was something that had to be renegotiated in the opening decades of the twentieth century as new technologies opened up hitherto unimagined ways of packaging performance for popular consumption. Prior to the late nineteenth century, performance was only ever an ephemeral commodity, something which was indivisible from the individual performer and which, though it could be repeated, could not be duplicated. It therefore ceased to exist at the very moment of its production/consumption. With the advent of moving pictures, however, performance could be captured on celluloid and mechanically reproduced, a development that made it possible to detach the moment of consumption from the moment of production and to sever actors from the product of their labor. The effective application of film as a technology also necessitated new approaches to the processes by which performance was constructed. The so-called “primitive” cinema of the period prior to about 1909 left many of the conventions of the theatre intact, situating the spectator at a fixed distance from the action and filming each scene continuously and in sequence in a theatrical-style set. But as cinematic innovators like D. W. Griffith began to experiment with closer framings and shifting perspectives, the shot replaced the scene as the basic unit of cinematic construction, a change in practice that fragmented performance as a work process and undercut the autonomy of the individual performer.<sup>34</sup>

22 Unlike many of the new technologies introduced in other sectors of the economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, film did not have the effect of rendering the skills associated with older modes of production obsolete. What it did instead was to create a second market for actors’ labor in which acting prowess in the traditional sense counted for little. As the film industry expanded, it quickly became apparent that the theatrical labor market and the cinematic labor market were, for all practical purposes, mutually exclusive, and though there was always movement back and forth between the two, the relationship between stage actors and screen actors became an essentially adversarial one. Denied the use of their voices and stripped of what Barry King has termed “the pacing and behavioural architecture of [their] performances”, the leading stage players of the early twentieth century failed, with a few notable exceptions, to translate their stage reputations into screen success.<sup>35</sup> They reacted not by recognizing the specificity of screen acting as a mode of artistic expression and acknowledging the achievements of its practitioners but by dismissing it as the bastard offspring of more elevated cultural forms and, as such, unworthy of comparison with the high art of the legitimate stage.

23 As long as the men and women of the silver screen had the confidence of their employers, they could afford to ignore such slights. With the advent of sound, however, their position was suddenly rendered considerably less secure. Desperate for performers with trained voices and

experience of delivering dialogue, Hollywood producers turned once again to the Broadway stage for acting talent, a shift in recruitment policy that presented the old theatrical elite with an opportunity to reassert its primacy within the acting community. Established screen performers responded angrily to the sudden influx of stage actors into the Hollywood film studios, fearful that they were about to be displaced. Their anxieties proved to be largely misplaced. Like their predecessors fifteen years earlier, the stage performers who took the motion-picture plunge in 1928 and early 1929 were unable to stamp their authority on a medium that even in the sound era continued to prioritize the visual over the aural. Even so, the uncertainties of the conversion period left a lasting legacy of bitterness on the part of the men and women of the silver screen that manifested itself in their subsequent refusal to defer to the grandees of the metropolitan theatre on any matter relating to their professional lives. “Once we of the motion picture world listened with eager ear to every piece of advice that dropped from the lips of the theatre,” wrote one screen actress in 1929. “Today, hard experience has taught us that we know more of our own work than any outsider can teach us.”<sup>36</sup>

24 As Benjamin McArthur has demonstrated, the shared experience of a life spent treading the boards gave rise to a powerful sense of group identity. Regardless of their status in the occupational hierarchy, all actors partook of a common set of behaviors, beliefs, and values that was rooted in the nature of acting as work. Whatever the work culture of actors may have done in terms of fostering worker solidarity within the acting community, however, it also did a great deal to undercut it. As leading man Howard Kyle put it in the early 1920s, “those associations imposed by the work of the stage are often more trying than those of any other occupational group.”<sup>37</sup> Stage performers resented the popular perception that they were all prone to petty squabbling, but archival evidence suggests that actors’ quarrels were a real and often very disruptive feature of the theatrical landscape. In 1923, for instance, actor John Litel, a leading man in the resident stock company at the Forsyth Theatre in Atlanta, wrote to the Actors’ Equity Association accusing his co-star, Belle Bennett, of deliberately humiliating him in front of an audience. “At today’s matinee of *Daddy Long Legs*,” he asserted in a wonderfully vivid account of a spat between actors, “Miss Bennett . . . made a statement to the audience which was untrue, hurtful to me and my reputation and unwarranted.”

On a certain speech that I had rehearsed and played last night from the left of Miss Bennett she had in her part that I should have been on her right. After the show she spoke to the director telling him that I was on the wrong side and he agreed. He however forgot to tell me and as I had rehearsed and played it from the left I naturally did so today. Miss Bennett under her breath said, “You are on the wrong side. You are very unfair. It is very unfair.” Naturally, I was puzzled and asked under my breath what was unfair. She turned and said aloud “What did you say?” I said, “I beg your pardon. I thought you spoke to me.” She said “No, I am trying to say my lines to the people on my left.” I said, “Go ahead, I won’t stop you.” Then there was a long pause. The stage manager threw Miss Bennett her line but she could not get it. I walked over to her and gave it to her. She tried to repeat it and then in a white rage turned to the audience and pointing to me said, “This is the reason I am leaving Atlanta.” After several seconds in which the audience condemned her more than praised her, she pretended to faint. . . . The story in spreading about town is distorted by her friends and followers until I figure as a heavy man.

25 Informed of the complaint against her, Bennett hit back with a counter-charge to the effect that Litel had been conducting a concerted campaign of verbal and physical abuse against her. Over the next two weeks, Litel and Bennett, both of whom commanded large local followings in Atlanta, appealed to their respective fans for support, and the manager of the Forsyth Theatre was inundated with letters defending the professional honor of one performer or the other. The uproar only began to subside after Bennett left Atlanta to join another resident stock company in New Orleans.<sup>38</sup>

26 The way in which the theatrical labor market operated also encouraged the men and women of the legitimate stage to think in highly individualistic terms about the nature of the work in which they were engaged. As workers in an industry in which the supply of labor perennially outstripped demand, they were always in competition with one another for a limited number of parts. Like most white-collar professionals, moreover, they tended to see their occupation as a career and, as such, set apart from supposedly “lesser” jobs by the opportunities it offered for

upward mobility. Among many of the actors and actresses who scaled the heights of the star system, success gave rise to an inveterate status-consciousness that made it difficult for them to identify with the plight of performers further down the occupational ladder. Leading actor Richard Mansfield, for example, was notoriously imperious in his dealings with the actors and actresses who worked alongside him. “In rehearsal and on tour, he behaved like a member of royalty,” claims one-time theatre critic Brooks Atkinson in his classic history of the Broadway stage.

He spoke to no-one on tour; he treated all his actors as if they were serfs. On tour he played God. He lived and took his meals in his private car from which all other members of the company were excluded. . . . If members of his company got into trouble on tour or became ill, he was generous with money that he sent through an emissary. But he would not deal with them in person. When he was walking the street one day in a city outside New York, a member of his company whom he had helped stopped to thank him. Mansfield would not recognize him or speak to him. Through a secretary, he sent word to the actor that he was not to be accosted on the street.<sup>39</sup>

## 7. The Need for Unions

- 27 When stage performers finally began to seek collective solutions to the problems they encountered in the theatrical workplace at the beginning of the twentieth century, the strategies they embraced were determined, in large part, by their understanding of the work in which they were engaged. For musicians, vaudevillians, and actors employed in the thriving Yiddish theatre, their sense of themselves was closely tied to the ideal of the artisan, and as a result early twentieth-century craft unionism, with its emphasis on upholding the interests of skilled workers and maintaining occupational standards through peer discipline, held considerable appeal. For legitimate stage actors, a group of performers who saw themselves as artists and, as such, detached both from the industrial working class and from the general process of commodity production, the organized labor movement was anathema and they embraced it only as a last resort.<sup>40</sup> The growing resentment of the men and women of the legitimate stage towards the conditions under which they were employed eventually found institutional expression in the founding of the Actors’ Equity Association (AEA) in 1913. But it was not until 1919—by which time it had become abundantly clear that the producing managers had no intention of yielding any of their control over the terms under which actors were employed—that its members voted to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor (AFL).
- 28 Even after the men and women of the legitimate stage had embraced the principle of trade unionism, their cultural prejudices made it difficult for them to make common cause with performers in other branches of the commercial entertainment industry. One of the factors that delayed the entry of the AEA into the organized labor movement, for instance, was that the AFL had already issued a charter covering the entire theatre industry to the vaudeville actors’ union. Unwilling to relinquish autonomy to a group of performers who lacked their cultural legitimacy, Equity leaders refused even to consider affiliation until the AFL had revoked the vaudevillians’ charter and created a new umbrella organization, the Associated Actors and Artists of America (AAAA), in which they were the major players.<sup>41</sup> A decade later, when the AEA launched a campaign to extend its jurisdiction to the film industry, a similar set of problems surfaced. Though many lesser movie actors responded positively to the AEA’s promise of protection against unfair employment practices, most of Hollywood’s big-name performers resented what they saw as an attempt on the part of the old theatrical aristocracy to “Broadwayize” Hollywood and chose to remain loyal to the studio heads. Without their support, the efforts of the AEA to organize the motion-picture industry were doomed to failure.<sup>42</sup>
- 29 If the men and women of the legitimate stage struggled to get along with vaudevillians and movie actors, their relations with other groups of trade unionists, both inside and outside the commercial entertainment industry, were even more fraught. When members of the AEA struck for union recognition in 1919, one of the things that swung the battle decisively in their favor was the support they received from other groups of key workers—not only stagehands and musicians but also billposters, baggage handlers, and railroad switchmen.<sup>43</sup> No sooner had the AEA secured a standard contract and the right to bargain collectively on behalf of its

members, however, than its leaders moved to distance themselves from the organized labor movement by refusing financial support to striking steelworkers, an action that incensed their fellow trade unionists. “Actor folks are great little unionists, yes they are not!” ranted the editor of one labor newspaper in an article that not only condemned Equity officials for their lack of fraternal spirit but also implicitly impugned their masculinity.

A few months ago when they were on strike for this or that thing, the proudest of their boasts was that they were “brothers” of the horny-handed sons of toil who worked in the steel mills, the coal mines and the other places where life is won by the sweat of one’s brow. But now! Mercy! The very thought of being allied to the steelworkers, the sons of labor! It is enough to make one shrink and scatter perfume over one’s silk shirt!<sup>44</sup>

30 By the mid 1920s, the stage actors had alienated their erstwhile allies in the AFL even further, largely as a consequence of an assurance they had given to the producing managers in 1924 that they would never engage in sympathy actions. When the AEA launched its abortive organizing drive in Hollywood in 1929, neither the stagehands nor the musicians, key groups of unionized workers with the collective power to shut down the film industry both at the point of production and at the point of consumption, were willing to back it.<sup>45</sup>

31 For all their ambivalence towards organized labor, however, the denizens of the legitimate stage were remarkably successful in terms of putting the principles of trade unionism into practice, in large part because the nature of their work gave them access to resources that were simply not available to other workers. When they walked off the job in the late summer of 1919 in an effort to force the producing managers to recognize the AEA and to agree to the introduction of a standard theatrical contract, the odds were heavily stacked against them. With a large and multi-talented pool of non-union labor still available to them, the producing managers were able to reopen the majority of shows that were playing on Broadway within a matter of days. But the striking actors hit back by taking their struggle out onto the streets of New York City and transforming it into an entertainment spectacle. Comedians regaled the crowds around Times Square with familiar comic monologues rewritten as attacks on their employers. Other groups of strikers acted out scenes from the shows that had not closed as a consequence of the strike, concluding each performance with a warning to would-be theatre-goers not to pay good money to see the scabs and blacklegs who had replaced them. Chorus girls got dressed up in all their stage finery to distribute pamphlets setting out the AEA’s demands in the merchant banks and brokerage houses of the financial district. Strikes in the United States had long had an important performative element, with picketing serving not only to halt production but also to dramatize workplace struggles for public consumption. What set the men and women of the stage apart from other groups of strikers, though, was that they were objects of popular fascination whose mere presence on the streets was enough to define the strike as an entertainment experience as well as an industrial dispute. Without access to detailed records of box office receipts over the course of the strike, it is difficult to measure the impact of their actions on ticket sales. But anecdotal evidence suggests that most theatre fans were happy to forgo the more conventional entertainments on offer inside the theatres in order to watch what was happening on the streets outside.<sup>46</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

32 What is immediately apparent from this overview of the American theatre industry in the early twentieth century is that for all their sense of occupational distinctiveness, stage actors had much in common with other groups of workers in industrial American, both wage laborers and salaried professionals. As in other sectors of the economy, the industry in which they worked had undergone profound changes at the end of the nineteenth century as a consequence of the dual processes of consolidation and rationalization. Though the enduring appeal of live theatre meant that they could still practice their craft in much the same way as it had always been practiced, technology had transformed the wider context in which they labored, opening up new ways of packaging their labor and undercutting their status as an occupational elite. The market for their labor, like the market for the labor of most other workers, was highly segmented and, though women and minorities generally fared better in the theatre than in other

lines of work, gender, race, and ethnicity were key determinants of individual opportunity.

Like many other groups of wage earners who aspired to middle-class status (teachers and social workers, for example), they struggled to reconcile the goal of defending their collective interests with practices that they associated with the industrial proletariat, and their relationship with organized labor was a very uneasy one.

33 It is equally clear, however, that the project of relocating actors from the sphere of consumption to the sphere of production is still far from complete. In trying to identify key themes in the history of the actor as worker, each answered question only raises new questions demanding attention. If actors in the early twentieth century were more likely to be working outside the theatre industry than in it, for instance, we need to know more about what they did to make ends meet when “resting” and what strategies they adopted to avoid remaining in the jobs they took on in order to survive. Though we have a good sense of the constraints that were placed upon African Americans by the operation of the theatrical labor market, we need to develop a better sense of what happened to them on the theatrical shop floor—in all-black companies as well as integrated ones. If we are to write a comprehensive history of actors as workers, we must also broaden the scope of our investigations in order to seek out the continuities that bind the experiences of early-twentieth-century stage actors with those of other groups of performers in other industrial contexts and at other historical moments. We need to think more carefully, for example, about the continuing impact of new technologies both on the market for actors’ labor and on the nature of performance as a work process. We need to determine whether actors’ views of the work in which they are engaged have continued to be bound up with wider notions of cultural hierarchy and whether they have always struggled to reconcile the individualism that permeates their ranks with the mutual ethics of trade unionism. We might want to look more closely at the industrial disputes in which actors have been involved to determine whether they have always been as successful in using their celebrity status against their employers as the performers who took to the streets of New York City in 1919. And in all of this, we need to finally put to rest the myth that actors have left us with little to work with in the way of primary source material. From “Tottie Tootles” in the Broadway chorus line to the biggest stars of stage and screen, actors have left us vivid accounts of their working lives. As scholars, we have a responsibility to seek them out and to pay careful attention to what they say.

Dr. Sean Holmes, School of Arts, Brunel University, England.

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Sean Holmes, « All Work or No Play: Key Themes in the History of the American Stage Actor as Worker », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Vol 3, No 3 | 2008, document 6, Online since 02 December 2008, connection on 27 April 2015. URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/5673> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.5673

## **About the author**

### **Sean Holmes**

Dr. Sean Holmes, School of Arts, Brunel University, England.

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