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A SPECULATIVE STUDY OF THE MIDDLESEX THEATER

Bernard Pitterman  
May 18, 1981

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul... A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain expectations for the future.

What happens to people when they do not feel a part of a community? How do people preserve a past when they are confronted with abrupt changes and extreme contrasts? How do they gain a sense of their space, their things, or a rhythm that is theirs? Put differently, how do uprooted people become rooted in a community? And conversely, how do rooted people deal with the uprooted who can alter the dynamics of a community?

In order to examine these questions, both the uprooted or immigrant peoples' needs and the natives' concerns must be considered. According to Robert Coles: "We hunger after certainty. We want 'orientations' and 'conceptual frameworks'... We want things 'clarified'; we want a 'theoretical structure', so that life's inconsistencies and paradoxes will somehow yield to man's need for a scrupulous kind of order."<sup>2</sup> People need a definite orientation amid the world's confusion so that this demand for security can dull their driving force of fear.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, when the European immigrants entered the city, they were confronted with a new economic and social order,

stressing the pursuit of leisure and material well-being and facing a mechanized and over-populated environment.

These realities are evident in Middletown (1900) when the order of procession for the grand parade for her two hundred and fiftieth anniversary celebration is examined. The parade consisted of seven divisions:<sup>4</sup>

First Division

Military companies and their respective officers

Second Division

Hook and ladder companies and their officers

Third Division

Various Middletown societies. Some were Catholic Protective Band of New York; Ancient Order of Hibernians; Knights of Columbus; Diego Council.

Fourth Division

Local and state bands; A number of other societies

Fifth Division

Large floats representing manufacturing and agricultural interests of Middletown and Middlefield

Sixth Division

Floats of traders and mercantile interests generally of Middletown

Seventh Division

Floats of the following:  
Arawana Mills; L.D. Brown & Sons, Factory; Keating Automobile Company; Russell Manufacturing Company; W & B Douglas Company; Broderick Carriage Company; Kirby Manufacturing Company; Wilcox Crittenden Company

However, when the native Americans were confronted with the European immigrants, their reality was also abruptly altered. According to Stephan Thernstrom, the stability and unity of cities had disappeared because new problems appeared for which past solutions provided no guide. With the advent of the immigrant, population greatly increased. With the closing of the west, America's "great safety valve," the cities would become the place for these new immigrants. A class war was then not only anticipated but also feared. But these perplexing social problems could be dealt with by a new social creed. According to this new belief, American society was in a state of constant flux because the divisions between rich and poor were not permanent. Since every person had an opportunity to become wealthy, all would be well.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, since the immigrants felt uprooted and dislocated, their orientation was to gain a sense of control. Since the native Americans perceived a threat to their leadership and position, their orientation was to Americanize the newcomers. These divergent orientations produced reciprocal needs which seemed to be satisfied with the ideology of success.

The Myth of Success was both an escape from the moment and a tangible promise for the future. Its glittering promises of pleasure and fulfillment, its easy answers for immediate problems, its roots in middle class values, and its cheerful materialism--all served to make it the primary myth celebrated by the New Folk.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, how was this myth communicated? "Vaudeville was one means--a primary one--by which disruptive experience of migration and acclimatization was objectified and accepted."<sup>7</sup> Vaudeville

then became a significant social institution of the underlying aspirations of the American people. For the immigrant, it provided an intimate encounter with the urban civilization that was absorbing them. For the native American, it reinforced their cherished beliefs.

Vaudeville then had to be "...a mythic enactment--through ritual--..."<sup>8</sup> of these aspirations. To examine this thesis, I researched the bookings at the Middlesex Theater by examining The Penny Press from 1892 to 1900 and the theater's architecture from material obtained at the Greater Middletown Preservation Trust. I then analyzed this data and derived five themes that tended to support the thesis that vaudeville was a mythic enactment of the aspirations of the American people.

The first theme, the myth of success, epitomizes what success was to be like in American society. "The two story theater's entrance, presented the largest facade in an area of small nineteenth century commercial buildings."<sup>9</sup> Constructed by the Middlesex Mutual Assurance Company in 1892, the theater was lavishly decorated. "It contained a balcony and gallery, two tiers of box seats and was decorated with plaster relief work--mural paintings and artistic design work on panels; the overall affect displayed the exuberant color and lavish detail typical of the late Victorian era."<sup>10</sup> The structure seemed to symbolize wealth, power and prestige; yet, it also suggested a secular church in which the ritual of amusement could occur.

This ritual was composed of many factors. On opening night, the patrons would dress in their finest clothes.

Reviews of many plays told about the rich costumes, elegant dressing, beautiful scenery, fantastic mechanical effects and tremendous hilarity of the plays. Pictures about the stars were placed in the paper, and stories about their successes were part of this process. Also reviews from other cities, touting the greatness of the plays, were constantly seen in The Penny Press. One review even discussed the playwright, James Herne, who owned "...the finest summer home of any actor in America."<sup>11</sup> These factors give evidence of an aura of opulence and unconsciously suggested that success was available to all people.

The content of the plays mirrored these values. For example, in the melodrama, A Nutmeg Match, "a young woman whose lack of polite accomplishments is made up by her wit, vivacity and goodness of heart."<sup>12</sup> The implication was clear that even those who are not born to the middle or upper classes can still succeed and their future can be filled with promise. The Little Host "...gives a glimpse of the gilded after midnight life in gay New York and the frivolous, rapid existence of the metropolitan young men of the period...There are catchy songs, pretty young women,...comical complications...and jolly good times."<sup>13</sup> "The fantasy on the stage was a glorified and idealized version of the life toward which all aspired..."<sup>14</sup> Thus, there was an underlying belief that one's present reality could be altered and could be bettered. It seems reasonable to assume that these beliefs gave the immigrants a sense of control over their new surroundings by suggesting that through hard work and accumulating wealth, they could better themselves.

A second theme presented the immigrants with a code of behaviors that were vital ~~to be adapted~~ in order to become a part of this urbanized world. A sense of order and self-discipline were valued: "...well disciplined ushers and attendants are employed and the affairs of the house are well regulated."<sup>15</sup> This belief in stability was intimated in the review of Zola's Theresa: "The question was raised in Boston "Shall it (Theresa) be withdrawn?"<sup>16</sup> The plot dealt with the "...workings of the mind, first, in love that leads to crime; then revulsion of feeling when the end has been obtained through murder."<sup>17</sup> The implication was not only that crimes of passion were not appropriate subjects for vaudeville, but also that adaptation to the city meant repressing antisocial feelings.

In Souring the Wind, the idealized image of femininity and the belief that "good" always triumphs were projected. Ned Aunesley, the adopted son of a rich widower, is in love with Rosamond. His father, however, wishes him to marry a pretty, young woman, but Ned refuses. Before the climax, the widower discovers that Rosamond is his daughter, born out of wedlock. She also discovers this fact, and to save Ned embarrassment, she refuses to marry him. "Her pure womanliness finally brings its own reward when her father asks for her forgiveness. Then the two lovers are married."<sup>18</sup>

This value that good triumphs was clearly seen in the Derby Mascot. Andrew Knight murders Mr. Cheneworth and blames Jack Marston for this deed. Jack, Knight's rival for the



affections of Nelle Cheneworth, is then convicted of the crime. In the climax, evidence is presented that frees Marston and "...Knight meets a just retribution by being crushed to death in the coils of a serpent."<sup>19</sup>

Shore Acres "...teaches many a lesson if a perverse mankind would only stop to listen."<sup>20</sup> Dear old Uncle Nathaniel brings a whole cartload of toys for the children with his last pension money that he needed for a new overcoat. Mankind then needed to be kind, generous, thoughtful, and caring. These values were emphasized in B.F. Keith's notice to performers:

Don't say "slob" or "son of a gun" or "Holly gee" on stage unless you want to be cancelled peremptorily. Do not address anyone in the audience in any manner... Lack of talent will be less open to censure than would an insult to a patron...for if you are guilty of uttering anything sacrilegious or even suggestive, you will be immediately closed and will never again be allowed in a theater where Mr. Keith is in authority,<sup>21</sup>

In other words, the values of purity, gentility and goodness were constantly projected in vaudeville. It seems reasonable to assume that these codes of conduct, imparted to patrons the message that if they adopted these beliefs, they would not only be happy, but also become Americanized.

Another theme, the response to technology, symbolized the immigrants' need to master his technological environment. This suggested a shift from "...the conquest of Nature (to) the mastery of the machine only serves to testify to the unbounded resources of the human consciousness."<sup>22</sup> This mastery represented the limitless possibilities for human beings to progress.

Consequently, not only their spiritual but also their physical world could be brought under control.

Reviews for the following plays support this theme. In A Nutmeg Match, "its great scenic feature is a practical pile driver, which is made to perform service in the plot by furnishing a means of placing the hero's life in jeopardy."<sup>23</sup> In A Dark Secret, a regatta scene was replicated, "... the entire stage is covered with 50,000 gallons of water and the race takes place between two celebrated oarsmen in real racing shells, the river banks being lined with spectators in all kinds of river flotilla, from rowboats to the steam excursion boat."<sup>24</sup> In Jack and the Beanstalk, "A sensational electrical effect is introduced in the last act. Fairies appear dancing and suddenly the stage is darkened. From beneath their gauzy skirts, in their hair,... and on their finger tips, myraids of tiny incandescent lamps appear."<sup>25</sup>

Since immigrants were trying to adjust to life in the city, a fourth theme was the ambiguity of this process. A number of plays presented the city as appealing and fascinating while others portrayed farm values as superior. The Old Homestead pictured the city as luring the prodigal son from the farm. The father, while visiting an old friend in the city, was surprised at its splendor. He

<sup>Tobind</sup>  
decides to try his son. He then stands in front of a church in which he hears singing as "...sweetly as (in) any city choir."<sup>26</sup> When he finally finds his son, the father persuades him to come home: "The sleigh bells jingle merrily as they bring the wanderer back--the fire blazes brightly on the hearth and the family gathers around it with grateful..."<sup>27</sup>

At the French Ball is a story of a shoemaker's wife who thinks she is not getting all the happiness from life that a pretty woman deserves. She then decides to go out into the world: "...by the time she has tried a good many things, including French balls and wine suppers, she comes to the conclusion that 'all that glitters is not gold' and she was better off in her humble home with the honest love and devotion of her husband."<sup>28</sup>

The play, The Little Host, is about "...a rollicking young man from the country who falls in love with the fast and furious set in New York and becomes unknown to his rural parents."<sup>29</sup>

These contradictory images of city life suggest that it is difficult to shed old beliefs and that new values become a fusion of the old and new. Even though the city poses a threat, it becomes the harbinger for the future, which is based on the limitless possibilities of technology and the acquisition of wealth. Put differently, the city is the epitome of the myth of success even with its contradictory images.

The last theme suggests that there is a shift in religious values. In the play, Our New Minister, the minister tries to make the people of a small town realize that religion does not need to be unyielding and inflexible. "It tells of his struggle to make them understand that he is not endeavoring to give them a new religion... He tries to make them understand that religion should make men and women happy, not miserable..."<sup>30</sup> The Parish Priest also deals with this theme. "The jolly priest is a dispenser of the smile which he utilizes as a shuttle with which he takes the tangled skeins and knotted thread of the lives of his friends and weaves them into a cloak of happiness."<sup>31</sup>

Both these plays did not portray the priest as all-knowing, but as a man who has weaknesses and who is striving for happiness. The Puritan ethic is being changed to a religion which accomodates itself to the myth of success. Religion now needs to stress happiness and goodness, but not in a dogmatic fashion. Thus, in an industrial environment, success must loose "...its last vestiges of supernatural sanction and... become...totally involved with the material forces of which the new industrial society was composed."<sup>32</sup>

To conclude, I have tried to show that vaudeville was a mythic enactment of the aspirations of American people. It served the uprooted to gain an understanding about the myth of success, to learn what were accepted codes of behavior, to

understand the idea that technology presented limitless possibilities, to see the city as a symbol for wealth and success and to present religion in a new manner. Vaudeville also served the native Americans as a process to acculturate the immigrant. As M. Wilson Disher said: "History must take heed of entertainment before our understanding of the past can be complete. In order to gain insight into the mind of another age we should not ignore ever the most trivial of amusements..."<sup>33</sup>

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, The Need for Roots (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Coles, Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers: Volume II of Children of Crisis (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1967), p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Albert F. McLean, Jr. American Vaudeville as Ritual (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 225.

<sup>4</sup> Penny Press, October 11, 1900, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Stephan Thernstrom, Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City (New York: Atheneum, 1978), pp. 55-56.

<sup>6</sup> McLean, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Middletown, Connecticut: A Survey of Historical and Architectural Resources, Volume II (Middletown: The Greater Middletown Preservation Trust, 1979), p. 102.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 103 .

<sup>11</sup> Penny Press, October 24, 1898, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Penny Press, November 15, 1892, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Penny Press, November 11, 1898, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> McLean, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup>

The Middletown Tribune Souvenir Edition: An Illustrated and Descriptive Exposition of Middletown, Portland, Cromwell, East Hampton and Higganum (Middletown: E.T. Bigelow, 1896), p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Penny Press, October 19, 1892, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Penny Press, October 19, 1892, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Penny Press, October 11, 1894, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Penny Press, November 22, 1894, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Penny Press, October 24, 1898, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup>

John E. DiMeglio, Vaudeville U.S.A. (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973), p. 50.

22 McLean, p. 52.

23 Penny Press, November 15, 1892, p. 8.

24 Penny Press, November 21, 1892, p. 8.

25 Penny Press, October 18, 1898, p. 6.

26 Penny Press, November 12, 1894, p. 7.

27 Penny Press, November 12, 1894, p. 7.

28 Penny Press, November 4, 1898, p. 6.

29 Penny Press, November 11, 1898, p. 6.

30 Penny Press, October 20, 1900, p. 7.

31 Penny Press, November 9, 1900, p. 8.

32 McLean, p. 9.

33 DiMeglio, pp. 13-14.

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