

MAKING ENTERTAINMENT AMERICAN: FLORENZ ZIEGFELD JR.

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Florenz Ziegfeld Jr. is recognized as an “American” icon who fundamentally changed show business in the United States. He established the modern Broadway show, used standardized beauty as an integrative marker of a rapidly changing immigrant society, and was fundamental for building American global leadership in entertainment. Beginning as a middle-class entertainment manager of German heritage, he combined the allure of fin-de-siècle European metropolitan culture with the needs and desires of the multicultural American nation. His shows mixed the popular appeal of vaudeville with seductive nudity while asserting an artistic appeal that made them acceptable to growing middle-class audiences. Despite drawing on various European theatrical traditions and frequently employing European talents, he produced an increasingly standardized “American” product that, in some ways, prefigured the Hollywood stars of the interwar period.

As such, Ziegfeld became a “glorifier of the American girl,”¹ who set show business trends for over three decades. He was among the impresarios who made the early twentieth-century Broadway theatre industry; his shows and publicity stunts challenged the moral code of late-Victorian era America, and toward the end of his career, he helped pave the way for the musical film as a Hollywood genre. His “Ziegfeld girls,” sophisticated though somewhat naughty showgirl beauties with ornate costumes and lavish headdress became American cultural icons of the early twentieth century, embodying at once consumerist desires for commodified femininity and the bold independence of the emerging New Woman.

As a producer, Ziegfeld was highly successful. His fortune of millions allowed for a legendarily extravagant lifestyle, which proved opportune for his business. Praised for his ability to find new talent, to produce stars, and market dream worlds for the masses, his career is an example of the rising American culture industry that had global impact: “Mr. Ziegfeld, in the course of any year, sees and appraises the beauty of the most beautiful girls of America, for the same reasons that Mr. Heinz views and chooses America’s most nearly perfect pickles.”²

1 “Florenz Ziegfeld Dies in Hollywood After Long Illness,” *Associated Press*, July 23, 1932.

2 James Whittaker, “Extra! A Ziegfeld Follies Girl Need Not Be a Raving Beauty,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 26, 1922.

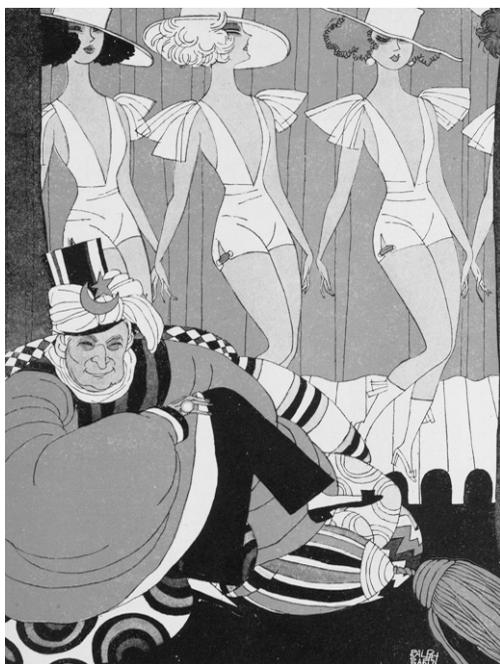


Figure 1: Caricature of Ziegfeld as “Florenzo the Magnificent,” 1923. From *Judge*, June 2, 1923. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Family and Ethnic Background

Florenz “Flo” Ziegfeld Jr. was born in Chicago in 1867, March 21, to Dr. Florenz [Florence] Ziegfeld Sr. (1841–1923) and Rosalie de Hez (1850–1932). The father of the future famed producer was a native of Jever in the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg, Germany. After earning a degree at the Leipzig Conservatory of Music, Ziegfeld Sr. felt that his skills would be better utilized in America, where fewer music institutions had been established. In November of 1863, he immigrated to United States and made his home in Chicago, with its thriving German-American community. There he began his career as a music instructor.³ The demand for his skillful instruction was high, and he soon saw the need for other accommodations and additional resources for his students.⁴ By 1867, he had founded the

Chicago Musical Academy, renamed the Chicago Musical College in 1872. Originally housed in the Crosby Opera House, it was an internationally acclaimed institute of music over which Dr. Ziegfeld presided until 1916. After Chicago’s Great Fire of 1871 destroyed the establishment, it was reopened in the Central Music Hall.⁵ During his career, Dr. Ziegfeld brought many famous European masters to the U.S., among them Johann Strauss, Emile Suaret, and William Castle. In 1872, one year after the Franco-German war, he assembled the world’s most famous military bands from France, Germany, and Britain at the Boston peace jubilee.⁶

In 1865, Dr. Florence Ziegfeld, a burgher in Germany, met and soon married Rosalie de Hez, a French immigrant of a slightly higher station than her betrothed; she “claimed a most distinguished grand-uncle, the count Étienne-Maurice Gérard, one of Napoleon’s

3 Passport Application, 1871, roll 171, and Passport Application, 1899, roll 535, in Passport Applications, 1795–1905, ARC Identifier 566612 / MLR #A1 508, NARA Series M1372, available online through Ancestry.com (accessed May 18, 2011); Ethan Mordden, *Ziegfeld: The Man Who Invented Show Business* (New York, 2008), 7; W.S.B. Mathews, ed., *A Hundred Years of Music in America: An Account of Musical Effort in America* (Chicago, 1889), 482; “Florenz Ziegfeld Is Dead In Chicago,” *Washington Post*, May 21, 1923.

4 Mordden, *Ziegfeld*, 8; U.S. Federal Census, 1880, Census Place: Chicago, Cook, Illinois; Roll: 193; Family History Film: 1254193; Page: 643D; Enumeration District: 109; Image: 0209; copy

on <http://www.ancestry.com> (accessed May 18, 2011).

5 Mordden, *Ziegfeld*, 11; Robert McColley, “Classical Music in Chicago and the Founding of the

Symphony, 1850–1905,” Illinois Historical Journal 78:4 (1985): 289–302, 291.

6 “Florenz Ziegfeld, Master of Music. Claimed by Death,” *Bridgeport Telegram*, May 21, 1932.

generals.” In two years’ time, Florence and Rosalie welcomed their first-born child, Florenz Edward Ziegfeld Jr.⁷ Carl, who would remain more loyal to his role in the Musical College than his elder brother, was the next born (1869-1921), followed by William (1872-1927), then daughter Louise (1875-1940) — each approximately three years apart in age.⁸ Raised in Chicago, the booming American metropolis in the late nineteenth century, the young Florenz Ziegfeld was at no loss for German influence. The family was among “the largest ethnic group in the city,” and very nearby Milwaukee was “a German colony in all but name.”⁹ Perhaps most consequential though, was the German influence of his father and his family. According to the U.S. Federal Census of 1880, the Ziegfeld household became home to extended German family, namely the paternal grandparents, Florence (1808-1882) and Louisa Ziegfeld (1810-1896), who had followed their son to his newfound homeland.¹⁰

Father Florence, in addition to his musical college, was, in 1872, at the forefront of the pursuit to establish Chicago’s Wagner Verein and reportedly had been a student of Richard Wagner himself.¹¹ Ziegfeld Sr. worked closely with German Chicago Symphony Orchestra director, Theodore Thomas (1835-1905), and had a deep appreciation of German composition, which he extended to his children. He educated Flo and his siblings in the music of “Beethoven, Schumann and Bach.”¹² Taught to play the piano and trained in the musical arts, however, it is said of Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr. that for “all the Beethoven and Schubert that filled his ears in youth, he developed no interest in classical music.”¹³ Instead, it was popular variety shows such as Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, where he worked during the mid-1880s, which captured the imagination of young Ziegfeld.

Florenz Ziegfeld’s name was quite possibly the part of his persona which most closely resembled his father, as they differed in all matters of behavior and business; yet surely some credit is due Florence Ziegfeld Sr. — “regarded as one of the greatest contributors to the development of art in America,” according to one obituary — for the career of Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr., “the man who invented show business.”¹⁴ Both men were deeply invested in music and musical performance, but where Florence Sr. championed the bourgeois ideal of classical music education, his son would use musical performance to challenge such Victorian culture.

Still, his father also introduced Florence, Jr. to the world of commercial musical entertainment — if perhaps unwittingly. Named

7 Ibid.

8 “Carl Ziegfeld, Head of Musical School, Is Dead,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 8, 1921; US Federal Census, 1880.

9 Mordden, *Ziegfeld*, 7-8.

10 US Federal Census, 1880.

11 “The Wagner Verein,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 29, 1872; “Florenz Ziegfeld [Sr.] Is Dead In Chicago.”

12 “Florenz Ziegfeld Dies in Hollywood.”

13 Mordden, *Ziegfeld*, 9.

14 “Florenz Ziegfeld [Sr.] Is Dead in Chicago”; Mordden, *Ziegfeld*.

musical director of the 1893 Columbian Exposition, Florence Sr. put his son in charge of finding European musical acts for the struggling Trocadero theatre he had established on the fair site. Instead of the desired classical performers, however, Florence, Jr. focused on low-brow vaudeville and circus acts.¹⁵ As discussed below, this family business helped launch his career as a musical impresario.

Florence soon left the confines of his Chicago family, and it would be a few prominent women in his life that would significantly shape the course of his career. On his journey from a young, middle-class Chicago talent promoter to a famous Broadway producer, Ziegfeld discovered the talented and beautiful vocal actress Anna Held (1872–1918) in London in 1896 while searching for a Parisian beauty to fill a role in one of his upcoming plays. While “Flo” (as he was known to friends) seduced Anna with promises of Broadway fame, she seduced him with her feminine Parisian charm.¹⁶ Though she had been born in Warsaw and raised as Jewish by her French Jewish father and Polish Catholic mother, neither she nor Ziegfeld advertised those particulars when she immigrated to the United States to become a *Parisian* star and Mrs. Florenz Ziegfeld.¹⁷

Held was central to Ziegfeld’s rise as a stage producer. She had already had a successful career in Europe, performing at Berlin’s Wintergarten and headlining shows in Paris and London.¹⁸ In the United States she would become a big star. After rising to fame over the next ten years, then growing weary of life in the limelight, and evermore so of her husband’s more managerial, less companionship role, Held divorced Ziegfeld in 1912.¹⁹ Curiously enough, and despite reports that the two had been married in Paris, it was discovered that in fact Anna Held and Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr. had maintained a fifteen-year companionship — constituting a common-law marriage — but had never in fact wed in an officiated ceremony.²⁰

Ziegfeld’s later expansion from the Broadway stage to the Hollywood movie set was closely intertwined with his relationship to his second wife. Two years after his separation from Held, in April of 1914, Ziegfeld married the much younger Ethelbert Appleton Burke (1885–1970), better known to the public as actress Billie Burke (famous for her role as Glinda, the Good Witch, in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*). Burke, who had studied in London and France and performed in Great Britain and New York, transitioned, like her

15 “Florence Ziegfeld Jr.,” in Jan Pinkerton and Randolph Hudson (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Chicago Literary Renaissance* (New York, 2004), 390.

16 Charles Higham, *Ziegfeld* (Chicago, 1972), 23, 29.

17 Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* (Durham, 1999), 55.

18 Eve Golden, *Anna Held and the Birth of Ziegfeld’s Broadway* (Lexington, 2000), 17.

19 “Anna Held Warns Her Husband,” *Boston Daily Globe*, June 26, 1910; “Anna Held Gets Divorce,” *New York Times*, August 22, 1912.

20 “Divorce for Anna Held,” *Boston Daily Globe*, August 22, 1912; Higham, *Ziegfeld*, 44.

newlywed husband, from a theatre career to working in the movie business.²¹ On October 23, 1916, their only child, daughter Florenz Patricia “Patty” Burke-Ziegfeld (1916–2008), was born. Initially announced in the papers before having been named, she was simply called the “newest Ziegfeld beauty.”²² By then, Ziegfeld’s career and personal life were closely enmeshed with the emergence of the early-twentieth-century American entertainment industry, its culture of “stars,” and Broadway or Hollywood productions that would redefine “American” culture by challenging the strictures and stuffiness of the Victorian era. The beginnings of his career, however, were very much steeped in the German-American communities of his Chicago hometown.



Figure 2: Florenz Ziegfeld with his wife Billie Burke (right) and their daughter Patricia Ziegfeld (center). New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Immigrant Entrepreneurship

Refinement, his father would have argued, was not Ziegfeld Jr.’s forte, but when it came to his renowned — and marketable — eye for entertainment, he was undeniably a virtuoso. Ziegfeld Sr. provided him the first opportunity to prove just that during the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair when Flo took over his father’s private enterprise, The International Temple of Music, located near the family’s entertainment theatre, the Trocadero. The venue originally featured classical performances and ensembles geared to a Victorian middle-class audience. Ziegfeld Sr. booked as entertainment for the World Fair the German-American Women’s Chorus, the German *Liederkrantz*, and the *Junger Männerchor*, and sent his son to find additional talent in New York and Europe. Ziegfeld Jr. scouted the talent scene of his World’s Fair competitors and opted for the more popular appeal of vaudeville and variety acts.

Ziegfeld thus began as a sort of scout or talent agent for his father’s entertainment house. Given a chance to draw larger crowds, Ziegfeld Jr. proved quite quickly that his entertainers could bring great revenue. His first big success was the discovery of German muscle man, Eugene Sandow (1867–1925) in New York. Ziegfeld Jr. convinced Sandow to change managers and they created an immensely popular show to huge crowds of spectators awed by his strength.²³ In 1893, he put the statuesque German model, a native of East Prussia (born Friedrich Wilhelm Müller in Königsberg) on display for audiences, coaching

21 “Billie Burke Weds,” *New York Times*, April 13, 1914; John William Leonard, ed., *Woman’s Who’s Who of America: A Biographical Dictionary of Contemporary Women of the United States and Canada, 1914–1915* (New York, 1914), 147.

22 “Daughter Is Born to ‘Billie Burke,’” *Boston Daily Globe*, Oct. 24, 1916.

23 Richard Ziegfeld and Paulette Ziegfeld, *The Ziegfeld Touch: The Life and Times of Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr.* (New York, 1993), 21–23.

him to strike classical Greek and Roman poses designed to imitate up-market entertainment. According to Sandow, the theatre could hold six thousand spectators, and the house was sold out every night of his performance. He was of slightly over-average stature with a muscular physique of massive proportions, which appealed to the ladies who would pay extra to admire him in his dressing chamber.²⁴

The two having hit it off, “Ziegfeld and Sandow enjoyed the food, the beer, the pretty girls, and the endless evenings in an atmosphere utterly and completely German.”²⁵ After a great success with the Chicago World’s Fair patrons, earning \$30,000 (or \$750,000 in 2010 dollars) within six weeks, the two took the show on the road, with Ziegfeld booking the strong man in major cities nationwide.²⁶ Under Flo Ziegfeld’s management, Sandow’s frequent publicity stunt was to offer \$10,000 (\$250,000) to any member of the audience who could match his strength, naturally unrivaled, and the finale of a performance was often Sandow lifting a dumbbell-shaped pair of baskets, each containing an adult man. Though impressive, this was incomparable to the attraction to which crowds were drawn in San Francisco: a wrestling match between a mitted and muzzled lion and an unarmed Sandow. After two years of these dazzling performances, Ziegfeld had earned a spectacularly impressive name for himself and a quarter of a million dollars (or \$6,700,000 in 2010 dollars).²⁷

Sandow was more than a popular circus act, however, and his success reveals much about Ziegfeld’s sensibility regarding audience desires at the time. Sandow’s act combined physical prowess with the refinement of classical art. His poses recalled those of Greek statues, but his near nudity was always an important part of his attractiveness to audiences. In a way, Ziegfeld began to learn how to sell “sex” to a Victorian era audience, pushing boundaries of the accepted yet legitimizing possible transgressions with references to classical style, artistic refinement, or European extravagance.

Ziegfeld looked repeatedly to Europe for new talent as his career progressed. Sandow parted ways with him after the national tour. The two had tired of one another, Ziegfeld lost his performer, and, as was to be his habit throughout his career, he gambled away much of his fortune. In 1896 Ziegfeld found himself in New York in search of a new show and met comedian Charles E. Evans (1846-1945), whom he convinced to revive his formerly popular and somewhat risqué play, *Parlor Match*. Searching for a female lead, they immediately turned to London where Ziegfeld would find “Parisian” performer Anna Held.

24 Ziegfeld and Ziegfeld, *The Ziegfeld Touch*, 21-23; Eugen Sandow, *Strength and How to Obtain It* (London, 1897), 130-138.

25 Higham, *Ziegfeld*, 15.

26 All financial comparisons are made using the U.S. Purchasing Power Calculator, available at <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/>.

27 John Springhall, *The Genesis of Mass Culture: Show Business Live in America 1840 to 1940* (New York, 2008), 159; Higham, *Ziegfeld*, 14-18; Ziegfeld and Ziegfeld, *The Ziegfeld Touch*, 28.

Anna Held (1873?-1918), who was then approximately twenty-three years old, was the kind of European star Ziegfeld believed Broadway needed. She had begun her career at sixteen as a chorus girl and broke out as a multi-lingual soloist and actress in Paris and London. Persuaded perhaps by more than her talents, Ziegfeld foresaw great success for her so he named the terms: “\$1,500 (\$36,000) a week for five months in New York and on tour in *A Parlor Match* and \$1,000 (\$26,800) to bring her to America.”²⁸ She could not turn down such an exuberant offer, considerably more appealing than her current salary. Held left her life in Europe — and her husband — and followed Ziegfeld to Broadway.

Ziegfeld touted Held’s sex appeal, telling the press and public that she bathed her beautiful skin daily in milk, inviting attention to her allure as an extravagant European lady.²⁹ As one of his obituaries noted, one of Ziegfeld’s most habitual tactics, dating back to his promotion of Sandow, was that of “exhibiting something so nearly perfect that people were attracted by their own desire to admire.”³⁰ Just like Sandow, Held became a new “product” for which Ziegfeld created high demand: “Anna Held’s identity as a European ‘lady’ was the key to marketing her as the secret of white sexuality and to marketing attractive female sexuality as white.”³¹

Anna Held was more than a commodity, to be sure, but had shaped her persona, originally developed in Paris, in her own way. She was a woman who boldly challenged Victorian era gender roles, riding horses astride and bicycles, and was one of the first women to drive and own her own automobile. At the same time, she conveyed sophisticated European naughtiness and flirtation — all of which Ziegfeld cleverly marketed. Thus, a Polish-born Jewish woman from Paris became an idealized figure to appeal to the tastes of a new, emerging American middle-class.

As business developed, Ziegfeld time and again drew on European elements in an effort to find a medium between the opera and the playhouse and to combine the popular appeal of new commercial entertainment such as vaudeville or the nickelodeon with middle-class respectability. His ventures embodied a desire to “elevate the ‘lowly’ Broadway chorus into the realm of upper-class gentility.”³² Much like his father, Florenz Ziegfeld wanted to introduce Europe’s musical culture to the United States, yet he did so in a very different way that drew on the more libertine aspects of the continent’s fin-de-siècle artistic life. His strategy was to package romantic, European

28 “Anna Held Dies After Gallant Fight for Life,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 13, 1918; Higham, *Ziegfeld*, 19–20, 23, 29.

29 Springhall, *The Genesis of Mass Culture*, 160; Louis Pizzitola, *Hearst Over Hollywood: Power, Passion, and Propaganda in the Movies* (New York, 2002), 186.

30 “Florenz Ziegfeld Dies In Hollywood.”

31 Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl*, 55.

32 Springhall, *The Genesis of Mass Culture*, 159.

appeal into innovative American stage productions. As late as 1904, the *Washington Post* reported that “Mr. Ziegfeld has gone to Europe, where he will keep his eyes open for any novelties that may add to the gayety of New Yorkers during the coming season.”³³ Such nods to European culture — advertising Anna Held, a woman of Jewish and working-class origin, as the “star of Paris” — were ambiguous, however, as they did not imply traditional bourgeois high culture, but rather a more undefined allure of metropolitan refinement. This amalgamation of cultural traditions had been key to his success since his business beginnings as a young talent scout, proving he himself possessed talent — and a well of multi-cultural knowledge from which to draw — that could refashion “European” artistry into an “American” commodity.

The definition of what exactly was “*American*” was by no means clear at the turn of the century and cultural entrepreneurs like Ziegfeld did their part in shaping popular definitions of the term: “During the period 1890–1920, the concept of Americanism was threatened less by foreign wars than by European immigration to this country,” and “new immigrants challenged the problem of what ‘an American’ could be and what this American *looked* like.”³⁴ Ziegfeld, himself of immigrant background, on the one hand imported European talent and borrowed from European entertainment models such as the *Folies Bergère*, the Parisian musical show. On the other hand he catered to a middle-class audience that was highly sensitive to “foreign” influences in various aspects of society. The result, as in other areas of the growing commercial entertainment industry of the early twentieth century, was a product designed to appeal to both “old-stock” and “new” Americans.

33 “Florenz Ziegfeld Joins Weber,” *Washington Post*, July 3, 1904.

34 Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl*, 115.

35 Jennifer L. Bishop, “Working Women and Dance in Progressive Era New York City,” M.A. thesis (Tallahassee, 2003), 76.

36 “Ziegfeld Now to Glorify Native American Humor,” *New York Times*, Dec. 7, 1924.

37 “What Makes a Woman Beautiful?” *Washington Post*, Feb. 21, 1932.

Ziegfeld was regularly producing popular Broadway shows in New York by the early 1900s, the most famous of which were his *Follies*, discussed in more detail below. The show illustrates how “the Ziegfeld aesthetic evolved concurrently with American political and cultural superiority.”³⁵ An example of this was Ziegfeld’s announcement in 1924 of his new interest in American realism in the arts — productions to find the humor in familiar Americanisms, the “genus *Americanus*.”³⁶ From then until his final year, Ziegfeld maintained that whatever the definition of beauty would be, he would glorify it, declaring “American women are the most beautiful in the world”; and whatever the definition of *American* was, he would promote it through his productions.³⁷ Ziegfeld, once the importer of

foreign talent, developed a new, truly “American” enterprise — an institution glorifying the “American” girl, with Ziegfeld as the great glorifier — and projected an image of exactly what the American looked like — standardizing beauty and branding it a dominantly *American* good.³⁸ In this, perhaps, his success mirrors the success of American commercial entertainment more broadly which thrived through a vibrant transnational culture with its ability to fuse aspects of different cultures into standardized products with a broad appeal, cutting across ethnic and class boundaries.

Business Development

The “American” legend, the so-called great Ziegfeld of Broadway, was making headway in Broadway business by the turn of the century as a self-made theatre impresario. Show business was already highly specialized, as were most of the smaller firms in the pre-World War I period. Ziegfeld’s firms were financed with his own money and venture capital offered by private investors, frequently other Broadway producers. He, himself, was the driving force of business; his shows were not shaped and directed by growing bureaucracies as in many other industries at the time. He focused on one particular branch, though he later did experiment with the new media of radio and films to reach broader audiences — and customers. While, in most of the big trusts of the era, managers represented the abstract and rational tone of efficient business, Ziegfeld was still able to contribute a highly personal note, the Ziegfeld touch. His relations to his employees remained personal and he shared close, even intimate, relationships with his stars, paying salaries that raised new standards for the cultural industry.

In 1898 Ziegfeld was named co-proprietor, along with William A. Brady (1863-1950), “prize fight promoter and theatrical hustler,” of the Manhattan Theatre. However, because of bickering, partially over the booking of Held, the two parted ways in 1901.³⁹ When he partnered with Joseph “Joe” Weber (1867-1942) in 1904 to present burlesque performances, Held was named as a main attraction.⁴⁰ The image of feminine desirability was being sold as innocence and a touch of European misbehaving intrigue. Held’s draw was that of a Parisian with misbehaving eyes, a sweet singing voice with a French accent, and overt sex appeal.⁴¹ One article declared:

Mr. Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr., is to be congratulated for his excellent judgment. In his latest offering to Washington, “The

38 “Florenz Ziegfeld Dies in Hollywood”; Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl*, 116.

39 “Theatrical Gossip,” *New York Times*, Jan. 26, 1898; quotation from “Theatrical Gossip,” *New York Times*, April 8, 1901.

40 “Florenz Ziegfeld Joins Weber,” *The Washington Post*, July 3, 1904; “Ziegfeld Joins Weber: Partnership Formed to Continue Broadway Music Hall,” *New York Times*, June 21, 1904.

41 Mordden, *Ziegfeld*, 42-44.

Parisian Model,' he has gone as near the limit of indecency as a theatrical manager can go, without precipitating police intervention. Which means, of course, that the entertainment at the National Theater this week will play to capacity business. The artistic mélange, which serves to exploit the talents of Anna Held, is chiefly remarkable for its novel schemes to display the female form only more or less adorned.⁴²

As audiences responded, Ziegfeld's female forms became less and less adorned. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported: "It is burlesque of the better class, and the female form adorned with as scant covering as the law allows is one of its features."⁴³ In 1906, Ziegfeld joined the Theatrical Syndicate and, in 1907, introduced his first of the Ziegfeld *Follies* with the help of Abraham Erlanger (1859-1930), who paid him \$200 (\$5,000 in 2010 dollars) weekly. The production, whose name suggested a debt to the Parisian shows of the *Folies Bergère*, was a vaudeville-style show, with actors, comedians, singers, dancers, and, of course, chorus girls providing aesthetically spectacular entertainment. It required a \$16,800 (\$400,000) investment and returned a profit of \$120,000 (\$3,000,000).⁴⁴

The *Follies* were Ziegfeld's most significant production, running from 1907 until his final year, 1932. The *Follies* most clearly presented his ideal type of the "Ziegfeld Girl" whose appeal went beyond respectable nudity, but had aspirational qualities as well. The Ziegfeld Girls were supposedly characterized by grace and beauty in face, form, and manners, but also possessed talent and an industrious work ethic. They were "busy as bees" and striving for perfection, but they could come from all rungs of the social ladder — whether socialite or school teacher, stenographer or waitress, everyone could be a Ziegfeld girl.⁴⁵ From its beginnings, the *Follies* was innovative entertainment, the first Broadway production to present nudity. Yet, Ziegfeld managed to recreate the image of the chorus girl as one deserving of appreciation and respect. "The chorus girls, as a class, are just as good as girls in any other occupation I know. Seventy-five per cent of the girls who begin in that humble vocation — girls who are the singing, dancing background of an opera or a musical comedy — are good girls. . . . Her looks plus her intelligence are her capital."⁴⁶

The image of naughtiness as respectable art gave his shows a broader appeal. Ziegfeld did not just intend to draw men to gawk at girls, but

42 F. P. Morse, "National — Anna Held in 'The Parisian Model,'" *Washington Post*, Dec. 3, 1907.

43 W. L. Hubbard, "News of the Theaters," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 23, 1908.

44 Anthony Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street: A History of America's Most Infamous Block* (New York, 2004), 68.

45 Florence Ziegfeld, "What Truth About a 'Ziegfeld Girl,'" *New York Morning Telegraph*, 1925.

46 Florenz Ziegfeld Jr., "The Truth About the Chorus Girl," *Washington Post*, Sep. 10, 1916.

both men and women from all social spheres to appreciate form, and he did so by gracefully introducing the display of nudity, and even the persona of the chorus girl herself, as glamorous art. Presenting the *Follies* ladies as works of art, Ziegfeld found a loophole in New York law that allowed the exhibition of nude art so long as the *subjects of art* were still, creating a business strategy that was widely reproduced and proved wildly popular among the middle class masses and wealthy elite alike.⁴⁷ With this, he drew on ideas from the *Lebensreform* movement and the Art Nouveau style, both prominent in Europe from the late 1890s. However, he utilized and commercialized these ideas in a particularly American fashion: “Ziegfeld glamorized the chorus girl and made her a symbol of the modern, independent woman. Her status, as well as her salary, increased, and she even became a suitable mate for the wealthy.”⁴⁸

Much like Hollywood by the 1920s, Ziegfeld created glamorous stars that could defy and contradict the gender norms of their time, inspiring emulation and adoration at the same time. Pushing the allure of the *Follies* beauty, the sex appeal of his wife and main star Anna Held remained key to exploiting the market during his first years. Even after he and Held separated, Ziegfeld remained the authority in marketing, and even defining, attractive as well as humorous femininity. From the beginning he used images and started advertisement campaigns to promote his shows — learning from circus guru P. T. Barnum’s example of employing promotional hype and extravagant stunts, but avoiding all disgrace. Ziegfeld also became a celebrity himself.

Newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst (1863–1951) played no small role in Ziegfeld’s success. “Hearst was more than a financial supporter and friend to Broadway’s famous impresario: if Ziegfeld can be credited with ‘Glorifying the American Girl,’ then Hearst deserves credit for glorifying Ziegfeld’s *Follies* . . . The Hearst press was “unquestionably the chief publicist for the *Follies* throughout their lifetime.”⁴⁹ From the outset, Ziegfeld’s stunts and Held’s appeal had helped the publisher sell papers. Critics, meanwhile, lauded Ziegfeld for the artistic qualities of his shows. Already gaining acclaim for his work, he was praised in that while the technical aspects of his shows were comparable to those put on by competitors and imitators such as John Murray Anderson, “the touch of Ziegfeld is the touch of an artist, whereas the touch of such a man as Anderson is the touch of a showman.”⁵⁰ Most critical to his success, however, was that the

47 Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street*, 68; Stephen M. Vallillo, “Broadway Revues in the Teens and Twenties: Smut and Slime?” *The Drama Review* 25:1 (1981): 25–34, here 25.

48 Ziegfeld and Ziegfeld, *The Ziegfeld Touch*, 179.

49 Pizzitola, *Hearst Over Hollywood*, 186.

50 George Jean Nathan, *The Theatre: The Drama; The Girls* (New York, 1921), 145.

theatre, or better, Ziegfeld's productions managed to succeed on two fronts. First, they never failed to adapt and keep up with changing times: with the elections of 1908, the *Follies* of that year had "more or less to do with the candidates," poking particular fun at Taft; second, they consistently outdid themselves, making each show better than the previous one.⁵¹ When the burlesque show returned to New York in 1912, on the roof of the newly purchased New York Theatre — renamed the Moulin Rouge to reinforce, again, its European appeal — it was reported of the *Follies* that "the chorus wears less and the comedians fall harder."⁵²

By 1913, the *Follies* had become too large, both figuratively and literally, for its venue and made its first debut in the New Amsterdam theatre, "signaling its arrival as a big-time Broadway Franchise," and giving rise to Ziegfeld Follies Inc.⁵³ The *Midnight Frolic*, a midnight cabaret performance, was introduced in 1914, opening on the rooftop of the New Amsterdam, and the following year's review of the show described it as featuring "ravishing orgies of color," "stunningly gowned girls," and comedian Will Rogers (1879-1935), one of many stars produced and promoted by Ziegfeld in the following decades.⁵⁴ Broadway shows like the *Follies* had increasingly become big business as the New York theatre industry grew during the first decades of the twentieth century through imported continental popular operettas and vaudeville shows.

Excess was indispensable to such productions, but in 1915, Ziegfeld apologized for one invention for which he could not give any excuse — the Show Girl, who, he agreed with critics, was of no other use than as decorative art to set the stage. The Show Girl, unlike the Chorus Girl who sang and danced, possessed no talent and contributed nothing other than presence to the performances.⁵⁵ "I felt that the time had come for a novelty, and I was convinced that my new Show Girl was the innovation to fill the bill. . . . The Show Girl, like that other well-known bird, the dodo, is extinct. The new 1915 model is not a show girl — 'she fills space' of course, but she can also sing, dance and talk . . ."⁵⁶

And, the "new" show girl could ride a bicycle as well. Theater historian Rachel Shteir asserts "Ziegfeld also used the language of suffragism to lure in audiences. He capitalized on the appeal of bicycling [. . . which] by the turn of the century had become an acceptable fad for women. When Ziegfeld allowed his young wife to ride a bicycle, it projected a healthful modernity and a girlish hint of suffragism."⁵⁷

51 Hubbard, "News of the Theaters."

52 Burns Mantle, "'Follies' 1912 Series Returns to Burlesque," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 27, 1912; quotation from "Week's Plays On Broadway," *Washington Post*, Jan. 28, 1912.

53 Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street*, 68.

54 "'Midnight Frolic' Again," *New York Times*, August 24, 1915.

55 "What Earthly Use Is A Show Girl?" *Washington Post*, March 21, 1915.

56 Florenz Ziegfeld Jr., "Ziegfeld Tells Why He Did It," *Washington Post*, March 21, 1915.

57 Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (New York, 2004), 50.

In 1915, Ziegfeld argued, “I have tried at least a hundred suffragist scenes on the stage and never got a laugh or an effect out of any of them. The women don’t like to see this subject ridiculed and they don’t like to see it treated seriously. The subject is a bad one for theatrical purposes;”⁵⁸ but it seems that Ziegfeld found a way, projecting the image of a woman of — or slightly ahead of — her time, whatever the audience desired that to be.

Inevitably, the Ziegfeld productions were contextualized comedies that had to confront many social issues of the early twentieth century, such as the suffragist movement. While he may have at times challenged existing gender norms, he did not escape the prevailing racism and Jim Crow *comedy* of his time. Before his production of *Show Boat* much later in his life, Ziegfeld was, in his early years, at best defensive of individual black performers who adhered to desirable racial norms. Of Bert Williams (1874-1922), his performer in 1915, Ziegfeld said, “Williams is black but he’s the whitest man I’ve ever had any dealings with. I gave him his first opportunity for playing outside of a colored show and have had him with me now for some years. . . . Williams’ color doesn’t seem to count against him with the public,” but noted that he was not included in tours in the South.⁵⁹ Ziegfeld was an opportunist, profiting from the racist humor popular at the time, presenting coon shouting, trick puppetry, and blackface skits of song and dance.⁶⁰

In the end, it was the bottom line that concerned Ziegfeld more than social issues. His entertainment business was highly dependent not only on ticket sales but also on bar and restaurant sales. Therefore, Prohibition affected Ziegfeld’s business. The performances, for better or worse, were in demand and things were going well when, in 1916, Ziegfeld and Charles Dillingham (1868-1934) became co-managers of the Century Theatre, featuring “dancing on the roof between acts.”⁶¹ Liquor sales were responsible for a good deal of the rooftop revenue, so when a local court enforcing the encroaching liquor laws that preceded Prohibition prohibited liquor sales at the theater, Ziegfeld had to find a way around the rule, and applied for a separate liquor license exclusively for the roof top.⁶² Despite such roadblocks, Ziegfeld’s business thrived. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported, stressing the success of the show, seats for the *Midnight Frolic* were being sold for \$3 (\$50) each, and by speculators for up to \$5 (\$85). For the *Follies* of 1917, ticket prices had generally risen to \$5 (\$85), a sign of great success for Ziegfeld as his shows were expensive pleasures.⁶³

58 Florenz Ziegfeld Jr., “The Gambol of the Follies,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 14, 1915.

59 Ibid.

60 Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl*, 57-58.

61 “Dillingham Gets Century Theatre,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1916.

62 “Forbids Liquor Sale At Century Theatre,” *New York Times*, May 31, 1917.

63 “Activities of the Gotham Theatians,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 15, 1916; “Between Seasons,” *New York Times*, June 17, 1917.

After the American entrance into World War I, however, the theatrical scene changed: Just shy of a month after entry, Ziegfeld hit the news, hosting, with fellow managers, a benefit of the Patriotic League of the United States Marine Corps Recruiting Service.⁶⁴ The producer was not affected by anti-German-American sentiment and backed the U.S. war efforts. In the summer of 1917, plans were announced for Red Cross Theatrical Day by which the proceeds for a day's performances were to be donated in entirety to the Red Cross; this effort was, however, postponed due to an unpaid war loan, having pledged over one and one-half million dollars in war bonds.⁶⁵ In 1919, he donated his performers for the cause of blinded soldiers, a ball held at the Ritz-Carlton for the Permanent Blind Relief War Fund.⁶⁶

Shortly before America's entrance into the war, Ziegfeld had announced his intention to produce more dramas, offering more serious performances to an expectedly more somber public: "I intend to produce every play that appeals to me as desirable of public interest."⁶⁷ Yet, many of his wartime shows were lighter fare, featuring stars like Will Rogers (1879-1935), Lillian Lorraine (1892-1955), and comic Lew Fields (1867-1941). His wife, Billie Burke, headlined the 1917 comedy *Rescuing Angel*, while war-themed shows such as the 1918 *By Pigeon Post* did poorly. Public interest alone did not suffice either, because throughout the war and immediately following it, theater shows' ticket sales suffered. Theater ticket sales were also hit with a war tax. When the tax was to be raised from ten percent to twenty percent, Ziegfeld sent a cablegram protesting the increase to President Woodrow Wilson and noted the contributions the entertainment business had made to the war effort.⁶⁸ In 1920, notwithstanding his desire to cater to public demand, Ziegfeld reported a noticeable "slump" in sales, particularly while touring.⁶⁹

The postwar recession hit his business hard. On top of this crisis, Ziegfeld had been dealt several business blows, among them the defection of one of his main performers, comedian Eddie Cantor (1892-1964). The independence of stars could affect producers as well, the negative side of Ziegfeld's business model. In demanding Cantor's "exclusive services," he lost management of the performer altogether.⁷⁰ Cantor was not alone in his displeasure with contract terms; unions also restricted Ziegfeld's control of his entertainers. The Actors' Equity Association began a strike in 1919, and Ziegfeld attempted to prepare himself: "On August 11, four days into the strike, Florenz Ziegfeld obtained an injunction restraining the AEA

64 "Benefit for U.S. Marine Corps," *New York Times*, May 1, 1917.

65 "Theaters Plan to Give One Day to Red Cross," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 1, 1917; "Theater Day for Red Cross Aid Delayed by Loan," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 17, 1917; "Stage Money for War Loan," *Washington Post*, Oct. 14, 1917.

66 "Ball for Blinded Heroes," *New York Times*, Feb. 16, 1919.

67 "Ziegfeld to Produce Dramas," *New York Times*, Feb. 22, 1917; Quotation from "Ziegfeld Yields to Drama's Lure," *Washington Post*, Feb. 25, 1917.

68 "Send Theatre Tax Appeal to Wilson," *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 1919.

69 "Theatrical Slump Marked on the Road," *New York Times*, Oct. 18, 1920.

70 "Eddie Cantor Has Row with Ziegfeld and Quits Follies," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sep. 2, 1920.

from interfering with his shows at the New Amsterdam theatre and another order prohibiting individual cast members from striking.”⁷¹ The Producing Managers’ Association warned actors not to break their contracts through the strike and contended that the Actors’ Equity Association would be held responsible for any losses to the producers, but the actors had salary grievances. Chorus girls argued that they should be paid additional money for performances above and beyond the number originally agreed on and scheduled; Ziegfeld argued that because he paid much higher salaries than those demanded in the agreement between the Producing Managers’ and Actors’ Equity Associations, he was not required to pay the chorus girls for additional performances.⁷² In December of 1921, he blamed high costs and the Actors’ Equity Association for driving him to a decision to abandon the production industry in the United States, suggesting he would buy a professional football team and threatening to emigrate to London and take his star and wife Billie Burke with him: “I put \$200,000 (\$2,440,000) into a production and then the Equity tries to tell me how to run it. Not me!”⁷³

Prohibition laws similarly infuriated Ziegfeld as an infringement on his freedoms and profits. He announced the closing of the *Midnight Frolic* out of principle, proclaiming a loss of liberty in the country. Yet, no more than two months later, he reversed this decision, announcing the reopening of his theater with the installation of a soda fountain and giving credit to the restrictions placed on authorities that prevented them from conducting unwarranted searches.⁷⁴ Considering that in 1928 Ziegfeld was held at the Plattsburg, New York post on the Canadian border and fined for transporting “106 bottles of liquor and forty-two bottles of Canadian ale,” one can only speculate as to how much the producer suffered from Prohibition.⁷⁵

Simultaneously, Ziegfeld’s business model was affected by expensive lawsuits with financiers and business partners. At the beginning of the century Broadway producer Marc Klaw (1858–1936) and his long-time partner Abraham Erlanger were at the core of the Broadway “trust” of producers. By the late 1910s, however, angered by business losses, Klaw sued both Erlanger and Ziegfeld. The partners had a longstanding business relationship with Ziegfeld, but Klaw now charged “waste of corporation assets” and stated Ziegfeld’s salary of \$22,500 (\$293,000) per year was “exorbitant.”⁷⁶ In court filings, Klaw accused his former partners of “trying to squeeze him out and acquire his fourth interest in both corporations for almost nothing,”

71 Sean P. Holmes, “All the World’s a Stage! The Actors’ Strike of 1919,” *Journal of American History* 91.4 (2005): 1291–1317, here 1312.

72 “The Producing Managers’ Association,” display ad, *New York Times*, August 12, 1919; “‘The Claw’ Approaches News of the Theaters,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 20, 1922.

73 “Ziegfeld to Quit Producing Shows,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 17, 1921; “Ziegfeld to Quit Here for London,” *New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1921.

74 “London Is to Have the Midnight Frolic,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1921; “‘Midnight Frolic’ Again,” “Notes About the Players,” *Boston Daily Globe*, July 3, 1921.

75 “Ziegfeld and Two Other Fined at Border for Alleged Importation of Canadian Liquor,” *New York Times*, Sep. 13, 1928.

76 “A New Theatrical Alliance,” *Washington Post*, August 4, 1918; Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street*, 68; quotations from “Klaw Again Sues Former Partners,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1922.

demanding they present the books in court showing the misappropriation of funds.⁷⁷ Ziegfeld was protective of his right to profit, however, and, in 1923, went so far as to step out of the Producing Managers' Association with intentions of creating a new organization representing the rights of only producers against the Actors' Equity Association.⁷⁸

Despite such problems, the *Follies* continued year after year and in new venues, thanks to a deal Ziegfeld struck with William Randolph Hearst and Arthur Brisbane (1864-1936), a wealthy New York editor and journalist, who — while simultaneously building up Ziegfeld's estate — constructed a theater to be named the Ziegfeld in New York City, which Ziegfeld was to lease exclusively for his productions. This deal allowed him to bypass the theatre owners who had obtained large profits from his shows — profits that Ziegfeld would now keep for himself.⁷⁹ The New York theatre eventually opened in 1927. With this idea in mind for his on-tour performances as well, Ziegfeld expanded the plans for his profitable venture, undertaking, on his own, the \$1,000,000 (\$12,400,000 in 2010 dollars) construction of the Ziegfeld theatre in Chicago.⁸⁰

Ziegfeld's postwar slump definitively ended in May 1922, when he outdid himself once again with his production *Sally*, catering to the demands of the times, which returned to recovery, increasing wealth, and eventually extravagance in the Roaring Twenties for which his Ziegfeld Girls became symbols. His production of *Sally* was — to the outrage of his competitors — exuberantly costly and his greatest success yet, making him a millionaire. *Sally* was a satirical show about a dishwasher (named Sally) who rises to stardom as a show girl, a Ziegfeld Girl.⁸¹ In a self-referential way, the show advanced Ziegfeld's claim that his show girls were the epitome of the self-made and modern New Woman of the 1920s. When the main star of the production, Marilyn Miller (1898-1936), announced that she would marry, Ziegfeld quickly attempted to stop her (albeit unsuccessfully). Quoting three million dollars in potentially lost ticket sales and a profit of two hundred-thirty thousand dollars each for himself and his star, he argued a marriage “would injure her value as a star.”⁸²

Financial ups-and-downs did not to deter Ziegfeld from his day-to-day duty of reinventing the commodity of consumer desire. He had to keep up with the fashions of the times and change his promotions as quickly as ladies' style. Believing the thin-appearing, bob-haired,

77 “Klaw Asks Audit of ‘Frolic’ Books,” *New York Times*, Dec. 7, 1920.

78 “Ziegfeld Hastens His Resignation,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1923.

79 “Hearst and Ziegfeld in Big Theatre Deal,” *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 1925.

80 “Ziegfeld to Have Chicago Theatre,” *New York Times*, Oct. 17, 1925.

81 “Inside Facts About ‘Sally’,” *Boston Daily Globe*, May 21, 1922; Ziegfeld and Ziegfeld, *The Ziegfeld Touch*, 98.

82 “Marilyn, Wed, May Lose Stage Value — Ziegfeld,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 15, 1922.

pale, face-painted flapper of early 1920s vogue to be on her way out, Ziegfeld explained — from head to toe — what *now* constitutes a *naturally* beautiful woman — the plump girl, the “perfect beauty”: “That’s the kind the great American public — your tired business man, your matron and maid — want, and that’s the kind I comb the beauty market to find, and that, I hope, is what I will always be able to present in the Ziegfeld Follies.”⁸³ Whether as modern flapper or natural beauty, becoming a Ziegfeld girl remained desirable for many women in show business during the 1920s — and often a step towards a successful career as in the cases of Dolores Costello (1903-1979), Paulette Goddard (1910-1990), Barbara Stanwyck (1907-1990), and many others.

Ziegfeld did respond to the more conservative strains of 1920s culture which famously resulted in new, more “Puritan” guidelines for both stage productions and Hollywood movies. In 1927 the New York legislature enacted the Wales Stage Regulation Bill which tightened moral censorship of theatre productions. Shortly prior, in June of 1926, Ziegfeld introduced a major shift in marketing strategy, cutting back on nudity, when he “issued a statement asking the press and the theatre-going public to support only shows that are free from broad dialogue and indecent displays,” accusing competitors of attempting to draw crowds by “pandering to the vilest tastes of playgoers”;⁸⁴ additionally, he asserted: “Nudity cannot remain a heritage of the American theatre because communities everywhere are rising against this orgy of dirt.”⁸⁵ The law initially allowing him to display nude women as still artwork held the implicit moral code which became a point of contention between Ziegfeld and other producers, namely Lee Shubert (1871-1953). Ziegfeld found the parading of nude women vulgar and both legally and morally unacceptable, while Shubert felt that ladies in the nude — even animated — were comparable to sculpture, thus never vulgar, understanding the public display as tactic.⁸⁶ Ziegfeld, himself, referred to this as a movement “back from nudity to artistry,” but while John S. Sumner (1876-1971), Secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, backed Ziegfeld’s change, even he suspected it was a “commercialization of virtue.”⁸⁷ Such moral outrage certainly stood in contrast to Ziegfeld’s own earlier work and was likely as much motivated as much by an attempt to hamper the competition as it was an expression of concern about artistic integrity and respect for women. Perhaps most perplexing was Ziegfeld’s statement — in denouncing most beauty contestants as women devoid of talent — that “Intelligence, personality and a nice

83 “Predicts the Return of the Plumper Girl,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1926; quotation from “Flappers Flying Fast Before Natural Girl,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 18, 1923.

84 “Ziegfeld Fights Nudity on Stage,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1926.

85 “Ziegfeld Proposes Sumner as Censor,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1926.

86 Angela J. Latham, “The Right to Bare: Containing and Encoding American Women in Popular Entertainments of the 1920s,” *Theatre Journal* 49:4 (1997): 455-73, here 472; “Shubert Defends Nudity,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1926.

87 “The Triumph of the Skirt,” *New York Times*, June 28, 1926.

sense of values are usually lacking in the girl who publicly parades her figure before a multitude of strangers.”⁸⁸

Had that not described his *Follies* beauties? Around the same time, indeed, in 1928, Ziegfeld declared that he was hardly profiting from the *Follies* productions and was considering their end.⁸⁹ *Whoopie*, featuring Eddie Cantor, “was Broadway’s top grossing musical throughout the 1928-29 season, with weekly ticket sales averaging in excess of \$40,000 (\$509,000).”⁹⁰

Ziegfeld was indeed an exceedingly wealthy man, and after encouragement from his attorney he invested more than two million dollars (\$25,500,000 in 2010 dollars) in the stock market. But while Ziegfeld was in the courtroom over a small legal dispute, on October 29, 1929, he was unknowingly wiped out.⁹¹ The stock market crash left him bankrupt and momentarily devastated, but it was not long until the anxious Ziegfeld was producing *Smiles, Hot Cha* — which was financed by a second-generation German-Jewish immigrant, New York gangster Arthur Flegenheimer (1902-1935), better known as Dutch Schultz — and his last *Follies*. Despite presenting the likes of Fred Astaire (1899-1987), these attempts to regain his hold on Broadway were unsuccessful.⁹² It was during this period of economic despair that Ziegfeld once again addressed an American president, now Herbert Hoover, over the “unwarranted” theatre tax, taking particular issue with the fact that cinema tickets did not have this tax burden.⁹³

The motion pictures were a particular sore point with the Broadway man. Yet once again, Ziegfeld was able to anticipate a trend. In the year before the crash, Ziegfeld had brought suit against Universal Pictures, the motion picture studio corporation (led by German immigrant Carl Laemmle (1867-1939)), over the rights to transform *Show Boat*, a dramatization based on Edna Ferber’s novel, into a motion picture show.⁹⁴ “At one point Ziegfeld launched a pugnacious ad campaign against cinema, emphasizing the value of physical presence. . . . But after his serious losses in the market crash of 1929, Ziegfeld went to Hollywood, entered a partnership with Samuel Goldwyn, and in a number of press releases explained his plans to film a series of musical revues.”⁹⁵ Ziegfeld took the opportunity to explore new media opportunities. He eased critics into the idea of a fusion of Broadway theatre and film, explaining in March 1929 that he could use film to expose a previously untouched market to the theater. In his opinion, there could be no replacement for the real theater experience, and he claimed to be unconcerned that this relatively new media would

88 Isabel Stephen, “Why Ziegfeld Opposes Beauty Contests,” *Washington Post*, July 22, 1928.

89 “Ziegfeld May End ‘Follies,’” *New York Times*, Feb. 23, 1928.

90 Henry Jenkins III, “‘Shall We Make It for New York or for Distribution?’: Eddie Cantor, ‘Whoopie’, and Regional Resistance to the Talkies,” *Cinema Journal* 29.3 (1990): 32–52, 33.

91 Higham, *Ziegfeld*, 177, 201–202.

92 Will Rogers and Arthur Frank Wertheim, *Will Rogers at the Ziegfeld Follies* (Norman, 1992), 225; Rob White and Edward Buscombe, *British Film Institute Film Classics*, Vol. 1 (London, 2003), 200.

93 “Asks Hoover’s Aid in Repealing Tax,” *New York Times*, Dec. 8, 1929.

94 “Talking Movie Plays,” *Washington Post*, May 20, 1928.

95 Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl*, 147.

dominate or extinguish his own.⁹⁶ Still, Ziegfeld and other Broadway producers could not ignore the fact that throughout the interwar years, cinema and the radio increasingly encroached on their claims that they set the standards for popular mass entertainment.

On June 14, 1929, it was announced that Ziegfeld had formed a partnership with Polish-Russian immigrant Samuel Goldwyn (1879-1974) to create “a new company which will turn out shows for the audible films,” the first venture of its kind, once again making Ziegfeld a pioneer in marketing innovative products.⁹⁷ In a 1929 interview, Goldwyn described the new partnership of film and theatre as momentous, while Ziegfeld justified his decision as realizing an opportunity to reach a wider audience.⁹⁸ Following *Showboat*, several Ziegfeld stage productions became Hollywood movies, including *Sally*, *Rio Rita* (both 1929) and — with the most direct artistic impact from Ziegfeld himself — *Whoopee!* (1930).

Of even greater influence, perhaps, was his utilization of radio media. “The Follies of the Air,” with discreet commercialism, featured, among other stars, Will Rogers, Billie Burke, and Ziegfeld himself. A *New York Times* reporter praised the producer: “Ziegfeld has contributed something to the art of broadcasting. The broadcasters say ‘we do not know just what it is.’ They will probably discover it is talent and showmanship.”⁹⁹ As unemployment was rampant, Ziegfeld gave opportune airtime to idle actors and actresses, taking part in the 1932 broadcast of the Philharmonic Benefit Concert for Unemployed Musicians.¹⁰⁰

As far-fetched as it may seem, Ziegfeld’s touch of creativity was employed even further from the stage when, in 1932, he branded his own designs for three of the Scranton Railways Co.’s trolley cars, each bearing a self-promoting advertisement of his name as designer.¹⁰¹ Ziegfeld gave the cars a touch of “color” and added dark ivory to the exterior.¹⁰² As much as he marketed himself, however, Ziegfeld was never able to regain his fortune; and he ran into critics willing to remind him of his misfortune. When Ziegfeld publicly accosted opera producer Arthur Hammerstein (1872-1955) for his intention to use mechanical music as opposed to an orchestra in the theatre, Hammerstein fired back: “Mr. Ziegfeld’s attitude is that of a man who owns a peanut stand which for years has been paying a good revenue and who objects most strenuously to the removal of the peanut stand and its displacement by a skyscraper that will make millions in values and in revenues.”¹⁰³

96 “Ziegfeld ‘Not Worried,’” *New York Times*, March 25, 1929.

97 “Ziegfeld to Join Goldwyn In Talkies,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1929. See also Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl*, 147.

98 “The Theatre,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 1929.

99 Orrin E. Dunlap Jr., “Listening-In,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1932.

100 “The Microphone Will Present,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1932.

101 “Trolley Cars ‘By Ziegfeld,’” *Wall Street Journal*, June 7, 1932.

102 “Ziegfeld Partial to Ivory Trolley,” *Pittsburgh Press*, June 5, 1932.

103 “Ziegfeld Attacks Hammerstein’s Plan,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1929; quotation from “Defense by Hammerstein,” *New York Times*, April 5, 1929.

Yet Hammerstein's portrayal of Ziegfeld as a peanut hawker did not accurately convey Ziegfeld's reputation: "In the midst of personal bankruptcy proceedings, Ziegfeld was still respected enough to raise capital for what proved to be his theatrical swan-song — the first Broadway revival of *Show Boat* (on May 19, 1932). By Depression standards the revival was a hit."¹⁰⁴ Florenz Ziegfeld never financially recovered from his stock market losses, but he remained a legendary success.

Social Status and Personality

Florence Ziegfeld's personality complemented his colorful and exuberant stage productions. The famous cowboy comedian and movie star Will Rogers, his lifelong friend, credited Ziegfeld with having far more to do with the circus-of-entertainment's success than the performers.¹⁰⁵ He was known for favoring expensive clothing and for keeping a fresh flower in his lapel. Burkely Crest, an estate north of New York City owned by Billie Burke, became an outlet for Ziegfeld's extravagant spending, with a menagerie of animals — including buffalos and lion cubs — kept on the grounds and a child-scale model of Mount Vernon installed as a playhouse for his daughter.¹⁰⁶ Ziegfeld also loved gambling at Monte Carlo.¹⁰⁷

Ziegfeld gambled not only his fortune. Taking high risks with hopes of high returns on investment was, more often than not, worth the gamble in his business as well. A risk-taker both in business and at home, he often blurred the line between the two: "Mr. Ziegfeld is a good manager. But as a husband — O, he can think of nothing but business, business, business!" Anna Held exclaimed in a 1914 interview. "When I leave the theater and go home, it is the theater he talks of — always the theater. One wants a husband who can talk something besides business to his wife."¹⁰⁸ In 1910, while Held took a one-year leave of absence from the stage, Florenz took flying lessons, bought a small "Antoinette monoplane," and suggested he would enter amateur flying competitions.¹⁰⁹

Ziegfeld was also known to commit a few follies of his own. He was in love with Lillian Lorraine, intimate with Olive Thomas (1894-1920), and involved, to say the least, with Marilyn Miller. In 1922, when rumors of indiscretions with Miller were circulating nationwide, Billie Burke announced that she did not consider divorce an option and even attempted to dispel the rumors by publicly daring Miller to come clean — and to admit that Ziegfeld's discouragement of her

104 John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Lebanon, NH, 2003), 82.

105 Rogers and Wertheim, *Will Rogers at the Ziegfeld Follies*, 227-29.

106 Grant Hayter-Menzies, *Mrs. Ziegfeld: The Public and Private Lives of Billie Burke* (Jefferson, NC, 2009), 92-93.

107 Rogers and Wertheim, *Will Rogers at the Ziegfeld Follies*, 225.

108 "Miss Anna Held Talks of Ex-Husband's Marriage," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 14, 1914.

109 "Anna Held Is Resting," *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1910.

marriage plans had been a matter of business, not love.¹¹⁰ Despite his shortcomings, he was passionate about his career, his wife, and particularly his daughter. He was also compassionate towards his ex-wife, Anna Held, during her final months as she suffered from illness, staging a private show for her to lift her spirits. He also funded charitable contributions for washed-up performers and those whom he did not know who were enduring hardship.¹¹¹

Ziegfeld's father was a German Lutheran father and his mother was a French Catholic; he himself was baptized Catholic. However, presumably because of his name and profession, he was often mistaken for being Jewish.¹¹² This was no doubt encouraged by his efforts to support the Jewish community. Ziegfeld was a longtime benefactor of New York City's Israel Orphan Asylum, an institution for Jewish children. He also supported Zionist causes abroad; in collaboration with Abraham Erlanger, he provided his theater for free for a benefit performance that raised \$9,000 for the Palestine Relief Fund in 1929.¹¹³ His generosity towards the Jewish community may be partially explained by the fact that, in addition to his first wife Anna Held, many of his Broadway business partners and entertainers came from families of Jewish immigrants. In fact, Ziegfeld's Broadway shows stood out for helping Jewish performers such as Eddie Cantor, Nora Bayes, and Fanny Brice become accepted as mainstream entertainers.¹¹⁴

Ziegfeld thus wore many hats — philanthropist, gambler, debtor, and, of course, producer extraordinaire. Of the wealth he possessed in life, he passed little on to his heirs in death. He had been stricken with influenza in 1920, and his health, from that time onward, increasingly suffered. In 1927, he developed bronchitis and by 1930 was suffering so severely that he was sent to the Bahamas to rest. After an additional recovery period at a New Mexico sanitarium, he returned to work on a movie production in Los Angeles, but died shortly afterward, on July 22, 1932, from complications from pneumonia.¹¹⁵ In his will he left his estate entirely to his wife, Billie Burke, and their daughter, Patty, with a request that the two support his mother with at least \$500 per month; Rosalie Ziegfeld died a few months later, but, because she had been in a long-term comatose state, never knew of her son's death.¹¹⁶ It eventually emerged that Ziegfeld was bankrupt, having lost all he had in the stock market, leaving Burke to pay off his debts.¹¹⁷ However, his fortune was his tremendous legacy.

110 Higham, *Ziegfeld*, 83, 121, 125-126; "No Divorce for Billie Burke," *Washington Post*, July 28, 1922; "Marilyn Will Make Jack Wait," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 30, 1922; "Billie Burke Sails Into Miss Miller," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 17, 1922.

111 Ziegfeld and Ziegfeld, *The Ziegfeld Touch*, 182; Higham, *Ziegfeld*, 127-28.

112 Mordden, *Ziegfeld*, 8; Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl*, 56.

113 "\$9,000 For Palestine Aid," *New York Times*, Sep. 23, 1929; "Deaths," *New York Times*, July 25, 1932.

114 Steward Lane, *Jews on Broadway: An Historical Survey of Performers, Playwrights, Composers, Lyricists, and Producers* (Jefferson, NC, 2011), 38-41.

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Conclusion

Florenz Ziegfeld changed show business at the beginning of twentieth century. He helped create the classic Broadway show, transforming low-brow vaudeville and chorus line performances into a “spectacle” designed for the broad, emerging middle class. His Ziegfeld Girls contributed to the transformation of American views on femininity and helped bring about the New Woman of the Roaring Twenties. His later ventures into cinema, finally, aided the rise of the musical film as a popular Hollywood genre. In 1936, Hollywood immortalized this colorful career in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer musical film *The Great Ziegfeld*.

What added to the Ziegfeld mystique was that he made his way as an individual at a time widely regarded as the age of trusts. As big business became dominant in American economy and society, including the “entertainment industry,” Ziegfeld utilized structural changes in economies of scale, scope, and speed to his advantage as an individual impresario with a keen sense for marketing, publicity, and shifting consumer demand. Ziegfeld, moreover, was a virtuoso producer of dreams of beauty for the middle classes, pushing and at times crossing moral, cultural borders set by the Protestant majority of Victorian America. Ziegfeld’s Follies and shows represented the desires of millions of Americans of native-born and immigrant origins no longer bound to the limits of their cultural background. Ideas of beauty, of becoming a star, of a dream of rags to riches, were contributors to Ziegfeld’s success. His entrepreneurial success demonstrates how business reshaped culture and how crucial components of American identity, namely ethnicity and gender, were deeply shaped by immigrant entrepreneurs.

Ziegfeld is also a prominent example for the integrative forces of the American nation. Educated in German culture, Florenz Ziegfeld was able to transcend the boundaries of his own cultural background. With this foundation, he helped to set standards for popular entertainment which Hollywood would later spread all over the world. A story like this — of a second-generation immigrant entrepreneur creating new, but now classically “American,” forms of entertainment — suggests the astonishing openness of American culture and business and the decisive role immigrants played in creating it.

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