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Hooray for What!

A Glimpse into the Golden Age of Sexual Harassment

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Hooray for What!

A Glimpse into the Golden Age of Sexual Harassment

In one office, the agent came sidling out from behind his desk with a silly smirk on his face. He took my hand and hinted that if I would be “nice” to him, he could make contacts in Hollywood that would open doors for me. All the agents had rather creepy hands making me cringe and pull away. I was frightened at the prospect of the price I would have to pay to get work, and I made it clear I was just not that interested in a career.¹

Dorothy Bird, *Bird's Eye View: Dancing with Martha Graham and on Broadway*

Throughout the ages, the theater has been a particularly fertile site for sexual harassment, so much so, that the theatrical term “casting couch” has entered the lexicon as a euphemism for the trading of/demand for sexual favors in return for career advancement—regardless of the career itself. The scene that dancer Dorothy Bird describes above would clearly constitute quid pro quo sexual harassment as it is understood by the courts today, but the year was 1936, and this kind of exploitation was simply business as usual on the Great White Way. In the 1930s, women, particularly chorus women in the musical theater, had come to expect that negotiating the sexual advances of the men they worked for was part and parcel of their job. Scenes in movies from the era, such as *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933*, play these “flirtations” for comic effect, and the showgirl with her sugar daddy became stock characters in many

¹ Dorothy Bird, *Bird's Eye View: Dancing with Martha Graham and on Broadway* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 160.

screwball comedies of the era. But off the screen, in the rehearsal room, the situation was hardly funny.

Throughout theater history, actresses have been expected to provide extra sexual titillation for wealthy men; the backstage “viewing” of Restoration and Spanish Golden Age actresses by wealthy patrons is well documented. In *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, Tracy Davis analyzes the blurred distinction between prostitutes and actresses in 19th century theater. She writes that both were “types of women whose public lives, financial fragility, and independence signaled vulnerability and the likelihood of successful, undetected exploitation.”² Ballet dancers, chorus girls and other “auxiliaries” have been particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation due to the overtly sexual display of their bodies attired in tights, shortened skirts and lowered necklines. In addition, the precariousness of their finances as well their ability to be easily replaced has made them even more susceptible to the advances of those who have power over their employment. In *How to Get on the Stage and How to Succeed There*, an 1899 guide for those seeking work on the stage, Leopold Wagner wrote:

With ‘ladies of the ballet’; and the ‘show girls’ [chorus line] in a burlesque the conditions are by no means favorable. Actors of the lower order do unfortunately expect to ‘have a good time’ with these auxiliaries, because they are drawn from an inferior class of society and rarely possess the firmness to sedulously shun their advances. Even the scene-shifters and the property men look forward to the

² Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 92.

pantomime season as a period of license, during which they may play havoc among girls who do not stand on their moral dignity.³

In *Actresses and Whores* Kirsten Pullen argues that “at particular historical moments, the body of the actress (assumed to be an object onto which male desires were projected) and the body of the prostitute (assumed to be an object onto which male desires were enacted) slipped discursively into one: whore/actress;”⁴ the so called Golden Age of the American Musical Theater was definitely one of those historical moments. Directors and producers created extravagant spectacles so that men in the audience could project their desires onto the clearly sexualized bodies of the chorus women, while at the same time women of the chorus were expected to fulfill the off stage desires of the men who had employed them.

This essay examines the quid pro quo sexual economy that flourished under the Shubert Brothers management in the first half of the twentieth century, particularly in the realm of musical theater. Its purpose is two-fold: 1) to expand the history of American musical theater by giving voice to the stories of chorus women who have been silent and silenced in the traditional narrative; and 2) to apply what is now known about the impact of sexual harassment on women’s careers and life choices to the women who worked under the Shubert management, in order to understand what kinds of limitations were put upon their creativity and career aspirations. This involves applying contemporary legal terminology such as “sexual harassment”, “quid pro quo”, and “hostile environment” to a period when the legal categories had not yet been created. Though some might view this as rhetorically suspect, I would argue that contemporary scholars of sexual harassment

³ Leopold Wagner, *How to Get on the Stage and How to Succeed There* qtd. in Davis, 93.

⁴ Kristen Pullen, *Actresses and Whores on Stage and in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

can help theater historians to understand why so few women were able to exercise artistic control in the musical theater, and why the Broadway chorus girl came to be thought of as a “rollicking, laughing, careless child”⁵ rather than a serious artist in her own right.

Today sexual harassment is prosecuted under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission:

Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitutes sexual harassment when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.⁶

However in the 1930s there were no legal remedies for this behavior and neither women nor men had reason to view sexual harassment as a crime. “It is not surprising”, writes Catherine MacKinnon, “that women would not complain of an experience for which there has been no name. Until 1976, lacking a term to express it, sexual harassment was literally unspeakable.”⁷ In the absence of a cultural and linguistic context to identify sexually harassing behavior as distasteful or harmful, the behavior becomes simply a part

⁵ Angela Latham, *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 113-114.

⁶ Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, “Facts about Sexual Harassment,” <http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/fs-sex.html>. (Accessed May 10, 2008)

⁷ Catherine MacKinnon, *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 28.

of our daily experience. Or more simply put, as Gloria Steinem wrote” prior to 1964 sexual harassment was just called “life.”⁸

Though many chorus women were expected to submit to sexual advances or lose their job, few documented their experiences because “unwelcome sexual advances and requests for sexual favors” were seen as a natural part of a working woman’s life, particularly a woman working in the theater. Legal scholar Raymond Gregory explains that one reason we have so little documentation regarding sexually harassing behavior prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 people have viewed a man’s “verbal and physical conduct of a sexual nature” towards a female subordinate as socially acceptable and part of an expected expression of masculinity.⁹

The historian looking for documentation of what today would be considered sexual harassment in this period is hampered by a lack of any legal records, since no crime had been committed, as well as by a dearth of anecdotal evidence—why make a note of something that was so commonplace as to be “routine”? When anecdotal evidence is found, it is usually in biographies and autobiographies of powerful men and comes in the form of a boys-will-be-boys and can-you-believe-the-good-times-we-had type of recollections. Women’s voices are absent in the male accounts and so they appear to have been willing participants; their historical silence implies consent. But as Sheila Rowbotham writes in *Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World*:

⁸ Gloria Steinem, qtd. by Leigh Kimmel, “The Boundaries of Sexual Harassment: Their Development from the Sixties to the Nineties.” (<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/3682/sexualharassment.html>)

⁹ Raymond F. Gregory, *Unwelcome and Unlawful: Sexual Harassment in the Workplace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 10.

When the conception of change is beyond the limits of the possible, there are no words to articulate discontent, so it is sometimes held not to exist. This mistaken belief arises because we can only grasp silence in the moment in which it is breaking. The sound of silence breaking makes us understand what we could not hear before. But the fact that we could not hear does not prove that no pain existed.¹⁰

Musical theater historians have rarely noticed, much less analyzed the few accounts of sexual harassment that have been left to us. One particularly rich source of first hand documentation is the 1937 Shubert production of *Hooray for What!* With music by Harold Arlen, book by Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse, and lyrics by Yip Harburg, the production was directed by Vincent Minnelli and choreographed, at least for a while, by Agnes de Mille. In memoirs written years after the production, several of the key players left detailed accounts of their experiences including Agnes de Mille, Vincent Minnelli, Harold Arlen and Dorothy Bird, a former Martha Graham dancer and member of the chorus. While Minnelli and Arlen recall a somewhat stressful but ultimately pleasant experience, both de Mille and Bird recall a consistently hostile environment in which chorus women were subjected to sexual demands from management and, through them, the production's investors. Reading Minnelli's and Arlen's accounts against de Mille's and Bird's reveals just how vulnerable the women in the production were to sexually predatory behavior and just how unmindful most of the men involved were of the women's feelings of violation and fear.

¹⁰ Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (London: Penguin Press, 1973), 29-30.

In *Portrait Gallery: Artists, Impresarios, Intimates* (1990) Agnes de Mille reflects on her work during rehearsals for *Hooray for What!*¹¹ Because she spent her career working in the margins of the musical theater with dancers, arrangers and rehearsal pianists, de Mille's memoirs provide the theater historian with detailed information about the work and working conditions of many women whose contributions have gone undocumented in the traditional histories. Her meticulous accounts of behind the scenes power struggles document the day-to-day pressures, compromises and conflicts that regularly occurred in rehearsal.

Dorothy Bird was one of de Mille's principle dancers in *Hooray for What!* A disciple of Martha Graham, Bird spent seven years studying with the legendary dancer before testing the waters on Broadway. As a featured dancer on Broadway she worked with most of the major choreographers, including Agnes de Mille, Jack Cole, Helen Tamiris and Jerome Robbins, eventually leaving the theater to teach dance. Her memoir *Bird's Eye View: Dancing with Martha Graham and on Broadway* (1997), written with Joyce Greenberg, offers a surprisingly frank account of life as a chorus woman in the 1930s and 1940s. Like de Mille, she also found the experience traumatic, though she reports the sexual harassment almost offhandedly as if it is common knowledge and therefore needs no explanation. As a chorus dancer, Bird is also on the margins of theater history. Very little has been written about choruses in general, and virtually nothing has been written about individual chorus performers unless they later went on to leading

¹¹ If one looks at the Internet Broadway Database, de Mille does not appear anywhere in the production's cast or crew, nor is the show listed on her credits in the same database. She was fired from the production after the out of town opening in Boston, which explains her absence from the "historical record". Yet while history wrote her out of the show's original production, she recorded her own experience in several memoirs.

roles. Because sexual harassers have historically relied on the institutional and interpersonal silencing of sexual harassment narratives Bird's first hand account is an extraordinary artifact.

What Agnes de Mille and Dorothy Bird record in great detail offers disturbing evidence of the ways in which the Shuberts and their business manager, Harry Kaufman, reduced the women of *Hooray for What!*'s chorus to sexual objects and created a consistently hostile environment that cost several women their jobs, prevented de Mille from fulfilling her vision, and ultimately destroyed Bird's confidence and with it her desire to perform in the musical theater.

Setting the Scene: Third Girl from the Left

A young woman wishing to perform on Broadway in the 1930s had her best chances for employment as a chorus girl in the musical theater. Though the chorus woman or "chorine" was alternately envied by the public and caricatured by the press, chorus positions were the single largest employment opportunity for women wishing to have a career in the theater. Despite their importance to the commercial theater, chorus women's experiences have been ignored in the historical record. In *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls and other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s*, Angela Latham writes:

Theatrical choruses constituted the largest single category of regular employment for women in the industry in the 1920s. Female choruses were indispensable to several theatrical genres, including musical comedies, revues, vaudeville, burlesque and movies. Notwithstanding their inevitable presence in the theater

and the in the press, the individual women of the chorus were, and remain, in many respects invisible.¹²

Overt displays of the female body had become routine on the Broadway stage by the 1930s, and while burlesque remained popular, Broadway producers had adapted the bump and grind of the striptease circuit into the more refined Broadway revue. Both featured large choruses of beautiful women often clad in as little as the law would allow. The twenties and thirties were the heyday of Florence Ziegfeld, Earl Carroll and the Shubert brothers, all experts at displaying female flesh for profit. In the 1930s the Shuberts dominated the commercial theater not only because of the number of theaters they managed and shows they produced, but because they established a mindset that became the norm for business as usual on Broadway and beyond. Agnes de Mille wrote, “The Shubert brothers were a legend while they lived. They were also a power and a point of view.”¹³ This point of view included a belief that profitability was the most important quality in a production and that the control and display of the sexualized female body was a key to that profitability.

The Shuberts hired thousands of chorus women over the course of their careers, and though they were known for being very loyal to their favorite chorines, often hiring them as ushers after their looks had faded and their dancing days had passed, employment with the Shuberts came with particular strings attached. There is no question in Shubert biographer Jerry Stagg’s mind that the producers had frequent sexual

¹² Latham, 113.

¹³ Agnes de Mille, *Portrait Gallery: Artists, Impresarios and Intimates* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), 95.

encounters with their employees. Even the geography of their theaters and offices were designed to facilitate the men's sexual activity.

Jake was the cruder of the two, and legion are the tales of his assignations—in dressing rooms, in telephone booths, in corridors, behind scenery flats, and of course, in hotel rooms and apartments. Lee...made his office a convenient place. To the side of it he had an apartment, complete with bedroom. To the other side of his office was a small, meagerly furnished room which, to be sure, also contained a bed. A former secretary of Lee Shubert's remarked, "It was a traffic problem. You see the bedroom was for stars and important people. The room—well that was just for girls." He paused thoughtfully "The room got most of the action."¹⁴ Stagg even invokes a contemporary metaphor for quid pro quo sexual harassment, "the casting couch" in his description of the Shubert brothers' management practices.

Although they did not invent the casting couch, it is believed that the Shuberts developed its functions. Lee would trot into the back of his theater, call an usher and say in a high whisper, "The third girl from the left—what's her name—tell her I would like to see her in my office after the show." The girls came, they saw, and they never talked about it.¹⁵

Though Stagg documents the Shuberts' sexual escapades he does not appear to judge them, nor to consider the "sexual summons" as anything but a perk at best, a slight inconvenience at worst for the women involved. There is a certain prurient quality to the reporting, and an unspoken assumption that the women were willing participants. This is

¹⁴ Jerry Stagg, *The Brothers Shubert* (New York: Random House, 1968), 90-91.

¹⁵ Stagg, 46.

reinforced by his observation that the women never talked about their sexual encounters with the powerful producer. Throughout his biography of the Shuberts, Stagg regales the reader with many stories of their sexual escapades, but any sense of the women's experience is left out, they are invisible, interchangeable bodies, not actual working women who had rent to pay, families to support or career aspirations beyond the chorus line. Though some of the women may have sought out or even enjoyed the sexual encounter, some certainly did not. Far from proving their consent, their "silence" may have several explanations. Legal scholar Raymond Gregory writes in *Unwelcome and Unlawful: Sexual Harassment in the Workplace*:

Silence does not necessarily mean she welcomed the conduct...She may have feared the loss of her job, or other act of retaliation...She may also have remained silent out of a feeling of shame, guilt, humiliation, or embarrassment.¹⁶

Regardless of its motivation in fear or in consent, this silence further complicates the historian's task of documenting the effect of sexually harassing behavior on the women who worked in the Shubert choruses. Yet there is at least some evidence that sex was not always welcome on the part of the Shubert chorus women. In 1925 Lee Shubert was accused of "violent assaults" on a chorus girl "as a result thereof, the plaintiff became pregnant with child."¹⁷ He was ordered to pay child support as well as seventy-five dollars a month to Evelyn T. Lindley until she married 17 years later.¹⁸ Jake, known for his violent temper, was accused on several occasions of physically assaulting chorus women, but the Shubert lawyer, Willie Klein, was masterful at settling these cases out of

¹⁶ Gregory, 37.

¹⁷ Stagg., 244.

¹⁸ "Shubert Loses Appeal," *New York Times*, July 2, 1942, 24.

court. One of the few cases that made it to the newspapers involved a woman named Peggy Forbes (a stage name, her real name was Mary Taylor Burnett) who sued Jake Shubert for striking her after firing her.¹⁹ Jake and Lee were the producers of *Hooray for What!* and Agnes de Mille and Dorothy Bird were soon to learn what it meant to work for the Shuberts.

Hooray for What!

The plot of *Hooray for What!* centers around an orchard owner (played by Ed Wynn) who experiments with chemicals that repel but do not kill insects. He accidentally creates a powerful explosive and becomes a pawn in an international power struggle. The musical was originally conceived as an anti-war piece, but it became a star vehicle for Wynn's comic talents. The book also left ample room for elaborate chorus numbers, comic turns and specialty acts. Though this was technically a book musical, it contained many elements of the revue form for which the Shuberts were famous. There were over thirty chorus women, divided into a singing and a dancing chorus, several specialty acts and even a team of performing dogs.

The show was a box office success, primarily because of the extraordinary talents of its star Ed Wynn. This was director Vincent Minnelli's first book show, but he recalls: "I approached the show as if it were a revue. The only difference to me was that one set of characters carried through from beginning to end."²⁰ Minnelli was well versed in the business of revues and show girls. Before establishing himself as director of Hollywood musicals, he worked as a designer for Earl Carroll's *Vanities* and for Radio City Musical Hall "spectaculars." In the 1930s he began directing, as well as designing these shows,

¹⁹ "Court Holds J.J. Shubert," *New York Times*, May 4, 1911, 7.

²⁰ Vincent Minnelli, *I Remember it Well* (Hollywood: Samuel French, 1990), 100.

cementing his theatrical reputation with the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1936*. In his autobiography, Minnelli implies that partying with showgirls was considered to be a perk for the male production staff, though he cleverly positions himself as a bemused observer. Former producer of the Johnny Carson show, Fred de Cordova, worked under Eddie Dowling and Vincent Minnelli in the Shuberts' *Ziegfeld Follies of 1936*. He recalls:

[Eddie] set up a rule that we couldn't fool around with the girls while in rehearsal. He said it was bad business. Eddie also felt that being remote lent a fellow a great air of mystery. But now the show was open and it was New Year's Eve. We subtly let it drop to several of the girls that we were finally going to be available to them. Eddie and I stocked up on booze and food in our hotel suite, and left the door ajar. No one showed up. Shortly after midnight the doorbell rang. In walked Minnelli. He knew we'd be alone, and he didn't hide his amusement at our naiveté.²¹

De Cordova's anecdote reveals that the male production staff assumed they had the right to "fool around" with the girls once a show opened. It also suggests that Dowling's "rule" was not the usual practice in the business and that Dowling held the men on his staff to stricter standards by asking them to wait until after the rehearsals were over before having sex with the chorus women. Dowling's advice to "be remote" also seems to imply that the chorus women, or "girls", are waiting for their chance to "fool around" and that the men's distance during rehearsal will only increase the women's

²¹ Minnelli, 79.

desire. The fact that no one shows up to the men's party reveals that, at least in this case, the chorus women were not interested in a relationship outside of the rehearsal hall.

In 1937 Minnelli was hired by the Shuberts to direct and design *Hooray for What!* and apparently he did not pass on Eddie Dowling's rule that "fooling around with the girls" while in rehearsal was bad for business. Dorothy Bird, performing in her first Broadway show soon learned that when you auditioned for the Shuberts your dancing talent mattered far less than your willingness to entertain important men both on and off the stage. Casting was a sexual transaction and those unwilling to pay the price of entry could take their tap shoes elsewhere.

Bird had been working in the world of modern dance and was first introduced to the Broadway musical world when she auditioned for George M. Cohan's *I'd Rather Be Right*. She attended the audition in the dance outfit she usually wore, an "old washed-out, homemade, beige wool leotard, the long wrap-around beige skirt, and, of course, no shoes."²² She didn't get the part. The choreographer, Charles Weidman, told her "'Don't you ever go to another Broadway audition wearing a modern dance leotard with bare feet!'"²³ When she attended her next audition for *Hooray for What!* she was prepared. She wore a low cut blue bathing suit and scarlet sandals with four inch heels. She recalls her audition:

Inside was a scene I will never forget...Girls talking as if they knew each other, were standing around more or less in a semi-circle. Some wore black satin

²² Bird, 135.

²³ Ibid., 136.

swimming suits with silver slippers, and a few even had on silver fox furs. Several sported mink coats draped over their shoulders.²⁴

At this Broadway dance audition the choreographer was nowhere in sight. In fact Agnes de Mille had been forbidden to attend the casting session for chorus women by the Shubert's business manager, Harry Kaufman. No one was asked to dance a step, instead the chorus would be cast by three men who sat behind a table on stage, work light behind them and hats pulled low over their eyes.²⁵ Bird recalls that the men would beckon the women, one by one, to approach, "The theater was quiet and it was an agonizing time while the men assayed each girl, made comments, and sometimes joked with her...As each girl turned away from the table and walked back to her friends in the semicircle, the men debated back and forth as they made their decision. It was quite a bit like an auction; at least they did not ask to see anyone's teeth."²⁶ Bird describes her own "interview" as consisting of one question: "Have you ever worked for us before?" After responding "No," she realized the interview was over, but she had one last chance.

As I turned and walked back to my place, I felt I was walking the plank in *Peter Pan*. I could feel their eyes staring at my miniscule, tightly wrapped blue behind, wagging a bit as I staggered on my high heel, ankle strap sandals. This must be Sugar Daddy Land, and those men with the hats must be the sugar daddies.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., 137.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

The imagery of walking the plank is suggestive and Bird would soon discover that the sharks at the table behind her had a voracious appetite for the women of the chorus, and the Shuberts found it good business to feed their desires.

Agnes de Mille was finally allowed to attend the dance call back and was shocked to find that very few of the women who had made it past the interview stage had any dance training at all. Bird wrote,

Mostly they seemed a happy-go-lucky bunch and had been chosen because they acted as if they relished a good time. Among the girls chosen for Agnes was one who was a ball of fire and could dance up a storm and two who could tap dance adequately. Most, however, had obviously never seen the inside of a ballet studio.²⁸

De Mille writes of the resistance she encountered in casting two principle dancers with whom she had worked in the past, one was Bird and the other was Mary Meyer. Despite what de Mille perceived as the women's statuesque beauty, Harry Kaufman "thought they were hideous" and "not his type."²⁹ "It was almost as if a state of war had been declared between the business managers, who felt they had a perfect right to choose the girls they wanted, and Agnes, who naturally expected she would be the one to select the dancers."³⁰ Though de Mille was ultimately able to cast both Bird and Meyer, it would be the last battle she would win with the Shubert management.

In the 1930s, producers regularly hired more chorus women than they would eventually need since chorus members were rarely paid for the first few weeks of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁹ De Mille, *Portrait Gallery*, 99-100.

³⁰ Bird, 138

rehearsal. Several dancers were usually cut in the first few weeks of rehearsal usually at the discretion of the management.³¹ Though lack of skill or talent might have been the reason for their release, it was also possible that their refusal to engage in sexual activity off stage may have led to their dismissal. The chorus women in *Hooray for What!* were hired and their salary set by Harry Kaufmann, the Shubert's business manager. Bird described him as, "about four feet high and four feet wide and [he] was known as "the Hirer and Firer."³² In discussing the contracting of the chorus women's services de Mille reveals that Kaufman had attached expectations of sexual availability to their salaries.

The Business Manager, since deceased, I did not care for. It is the custom to speak kindly of the dead but having entertained nothing except loathing for him when he was alive, I see no reason now to veil my opinion. He it was who set the dancers' salaries: "thirty-five dollars a week and a little loving on the side." Plain and frank like that.³³

Legal scholar Lea Vander Velde writes "what makes workplace harassment so toxic is that it is backed by the latent threat of firing for no reason at all."³⁴ Though de Mille was eventually allowed to cast several other dancers she wanted, she found that they were gradually replaced by women the management found to be more sexually attractive and accessible. De Mille describes the general attrition of her dance corps in the face of the new hires.

³¹ Untitled, undated, uncredited article, in New York Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theater Collection "Chorus clippings ca. 1929."

³² Bird, 142.

³³ Agnes de Mille, *Dance to the Piper* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), 181.

³⁴ Lea Vander Velde, "Coercion in At-Will Employment and Sexual Harassment," in *Directions in Sexual Harassment Law*, ed. by Catherine A. MacKinnon and Reva B. Siegel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 503.

The Business Manager's type, or the type of the men who put up the money, or their henchmen's type, I was to learn well as time passed. They did not assemble all at once; they drifted in day by day, faded, jaded, raddled with drink, hawk-eyed, hard mouthed and insolent, as rehearsals progressed. For every one of these chorus girls I had to let a trained dancer go. I had to take them, and I couldn't fire them, not if they fell down dead drunk at my feet, not if they were three hours late.³⁵

These two anecdotes record the expectation of sexual availability that came with a chorus contract; they also convey de Mille's sense of powerlessness to control the working conditions of the dance rehearsals. The ways in which the inherent sexism in the Shubert management's style stripped her of artistic control over the show's choreography becomes a persistent theme in de Mille's account of the *Hooray For What!* rehearsals. It is important to note de Mille's own bias against the women who were forced upon her by the management. She, like the Shubert biographer Stagg, seems to assume that these women (the Business Manager's type) willingly participated in, or even sought out sex with the Shubert management and backers. Though some may have, Dorothy Bird's memoirs leave ample evidence that many of the Shubert regulars knew very well that their jobs depended on their sexual availability. Bird roomed with two of the other dancers and recalls that each night her roommates would "kneel and pray aloud, asking for protection. I was too embarrassed to kneel beside them, but I found myself soundlessly

³⁵ De Mille, *Portrait Gallery*, 100.

saying my prayers, too. I knew by now that I had embarked upon a distinctly dangerous adventure.”³⁶

Minnelli’s memoirs make no mention of the sex for employment pay scale arranged by Kaufman; in fact, he mentions neither Bird nor Agnes de Mille. Either Minnelli didn’t know it was happening or, didn’t find it noteworthy enough to mention in his own account of the show’s rehearsals. Kaufman clearly plays the villain’s role in both de Mille’s and Bird’s recollections of their experiences during *Hooray for What!*, but Minnelli barely mentions him at all. When he does, he actually emphasizes Kaufman’s lack of substantive influence, painting him as a kind of comic cheerleader.

Lee Shubert’s associate Harry Kaufman acted like an evangelist, and with his celluloid collars and conservative suits, he also looked like one. Everything to him was beautiful and wonderful...He was generally considered a figure of fun.³⁷

Though Minnelli believed Harry Kaufman was “generally considered a figure of fun”, Agnes de Mille and Dorothy Bird clearly saw Kaufman as a threat to their own artistic integrity and even their physical safety. During one rehearsal Dorothy Bird recalls a veteran chorus woman looking out into the audience, seeing Kaufman and announcing in a stage whisper, “He’s sitting in his seat playing pocket polo while we dance!”³⁸ In other words, while the women were working onstage, the man who signed their checks was watching them from the house, masturbating. The disconnect between Minnelli’s perception of Kaufman and that of de Mille’s and Bird’s suggests how little the sex for salary expectation registered as unusual, or objectionable, to the show’s director.

³⁶ Bird, 140.

³⁷ Minnelli, 84.

³⁸ Bird, 142.

It was not long before de Mille realized that her dancers were to be on display not only to the paying public but also to the investors, and their lawyers, and their friends as well. She describes the rehearsals as “after-dinner fun” for the men who put money into the show and chronicles the anger and paranoia she felt due to the constant presence of these male voyeurs in the dance rehearsal.

Rehearsals were a horror and we never had ten minutes of privacy or quiet. When I sat onstage I knew that the bosses had sneaked in and were prowling the aisles, whispering. I developed a tic from snapping my head to see who was spying behind me. When I sat out front I knew by the sudden inattention and chattering and giggling that you-know-who had entered through the stage door and was sitting just out of sight in the wings teasing and snooping. I pleaded for privacy. I denounced. I warned. No use.³⁹

The Shuberts were not alone in their use of the show-girls’ bodies to attract investment dollars. Director and producer Earl Carroll, best known for his *Earl Carroll's Vanities* (1922–48), was rumored to have an inner sanctum in his office where “backers could look into the show-girls’ dressing room.”⁴⁰ What the Kaufmanns and the Shuberts were doing by inviting their “associates” into the casting and rehearsal process was a new twist on an old practice. The “peeping privilege” was now part of a business plan, an incentive to draw financial backers into the risky world of Broadway speculation. In the movie *Gold Diggers of 1933*, two chorus girls are sent in search of wealthy men in order to secure financial backing for a producer’s troubled production. In *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* Mark Franco reads this film as a

³⁹ De Mille, *Portrait Gallery*, 101.

⁴⁰ Minnelli, 59.

depiction of the multiple ways in which the chorus woman's body becomes capital that circulates between powerful men. "These two women ... circulate as capital in three ways: on the stage, in the millionaires' bedrooms, and ultimately in the bargain necessary to make funds flow between wealthy capitalists and Broadway producers."⁴¹

The Parties

In addition to their onstage work, the chorus women were expected to be available for parties at night. The Shuberts would invite their lawyers and business associates as well as wealthy investors and their friends to "party" with the chorus women in hotel rooms paid for by the management. This practice was not uncommon nor was it unique to the Shuberts. Actress Vivian Vance began as a chorus woman in the *Hooray For What!* but eventually took over the role of Stephanie Stephanovich when Kay Thomson was fired by Kaufman in Boston. In Vance's biography actress Anne Farleigh recalls a time the two were touring in *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* when Vivian told Anne that she needed to accompany her to a penthouse to entertain some important "business associates."

Vivian turned to me and said, "Anne you've got to go." I didn't know whether they slept with them or what they did. Vivian assured [me] that the party involved a few men who liked having pretty girls around to help them relax. "Not only that, when you leave, they'll press a hundred-dollar bill in your hand."⁴²

⁴¹ Mark Franco, *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 134.

⁴² Frank Castelluccio and Alvin Walker, *The Other Side of Ethel Mertz: The Life Story of Vivian Vance* (Berkley Boulevard Books: New York, 2000), 95-96.

Though some of the women, like Vance may have gone willingly to these parties in hopes of supplementing their small salaries, Dorothy Bird, worn out by sixteen hour rehearsal days declined each invitation proffered by the managers until a cast mate warned her, “Dorothy you will have to go if you don’t want to get your notice before we return to New York.”⁴³ Bird accepted the next invitation (to a party given in honor of Boss Curley’s release from prison) and recalls that she was sipping a glass of champagne when one of the more experienced women whispered to her that she had better leave the party. “It’s urgent that you go at once. Very soon we will probably be getting undressed. Ask someone, anyone, to take you back to the hotel.”⁴⁴ Bird asked a “well known composer” to take her back to her hotel but in the taxi cab he tried to molest her. “I had to battle like a whirling dervish as his hands crept here there and everywhere.”⁴⁵

While her dancers were fighting to keep hands off their bodies, de Mille was fighting to keep the Shuberts’ hands off her choreography. In choreographing “Under the Shade of the Apple Tree” de Mille found herself caught between the director’s vision and the Shubert brothers’ sex sells philosophy. The number was intended to be an antiwar satire in which a row of chorus women in wide brimmed hats danced with their backs to the audience and at the last moment turned to reveal they were wearing gas masks and barbed wire. De Mille recalls,

Right off I got into trouble. The management wanted the girls exposed as much as possible, face front always, bosom bared, legs just visible to the waist. Minnelli had planned all sorts of trick costumes that almost totally concealed their

⁴³ Bird, 141.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

bodies—gas masks on their face, barbed wire on their torso...he was stressing irony. Business Manager was more interested in sex.⁴⁶

A tug of war ensued with de Mille caught between Minnelli and Kaufman. Lee Shubert “cornered” her back stage, complaining that the choreography was not displaying the chorus women in the way he expected it to. “He whimpered, ‘In five weeks, couldn’t you do better? Those gorgeous, beautiful girls! Those gorgeous, beautiful girls!’”⁴⁷ Eventually the Shuberts won and the military gear was replaced with evening gowns. Soon after that, choreographer Robert Alton joined the company. De Mille’s unwillingness to compromise had cost her artistic control over the show’s choreography. “I was told that [Alton] would divide the work with me. I had no agent. I accepted this without a word, but I was chilled to the last nerve. Thereafter I got the troupe for rehearsal only now and then.”⁴⁸

It is not surprising that the Shubert decision to undermine de Mille’s authority came from an argument over costumes. The Shuberts were known for pushing the limits when it came to costuming their chorus women. Their revues had been famous for featuring at least one production number, often referred to as “the harem number”, that required the women to be partially nude, or at the least clad in the most transparent of costumes. A willingness to expose herself on stage was a requirement for employment as a chorus woman in a Shubert production, as was made abundantly clear in a 1923 rehearsal for the Shubert revue *Artists and Models*. Jake Shubert, objecting to the staging of a number in which the women were fully clothed, interrupted the rehearsal, walked up

⁴⁶ De Mille, *Portrait Gallery*, 101.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

on stage, went to the first chorus woman “grabbed her dress by the bodice, and ripped it down to her waist. The girl screamed and covered her bare breasts with her hand... ‘No broad who won’t show her tits can work this show, and that’s final.’ A number of girls quit and were quickly replaced by more flexible thinkers.”⁴⁹

Though there was no overt nudity in *Hooray for What!*, Bird soon found out that the tradition of “the harem number” would be honored. Though the new costumes for “In the Shade of the New Apple Tree” were designed to be beautiful full length dresses with a wide, low, sweetheart neckline and a soft full skirt, they were also transparent under lights. Bird writes:

It puzzled me to hear that under the costume, we would be wearing only the briefest, flesh colored, net G-string panty, and no brassiere...The dresser for the show casually remarked to me, “This dance has been chosen as the display case for the harem. It’s a long standing tradition you know.” I didn’t know what she was talking about.⁵⁰

She adds that a number of the chorus women didn’t seem to mind wearing the revealing costume, explaining to her that the showcase number often involved big tips. It isn’t clear if the tips came from theater patrons or management, but once again economics was a considerable factor in the women’s apparent willingness to “show their tits”. The chorus women were paid thirty-five dollars a week for performances. The show’s star Ed Wynn was making fifteen hundred dollars a week.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Stagg, 214.

⁵⁰ Bird, 139.

⁵¹ Salaries on record at the Shubert Archives.

Tearing it to Pieces

The dress rehearsal in Boston lasted two days and three nights without a break; the company literally entered the theater on Tuesday morning and didn't come out until noon on Thursday. Tempers flared, dances were cut, and after forty-eight straight hours in the theater, the cast was naturally exhausted. Harry Kaufmann, infuriated by the fact that de Mille's choreography did not present the usual Shubert display of female breasts and legs, rushed onto the stage "eyes bulging out of his face like a bull frog"⁵² screaming at her. Bird recalls that Kaufmann and his colleagues surrounded de Mille, trying to intimidate her while Shubert representatives, who de Mille called "the henchmen",

...arrived in a real body together with the backers and the agents and walked up and down the aisles and selected what girls they wanted and gave advice indiscriminately to everyone about whom to fire and what to cut, a very handsome, upright group of men, as helpful at this time of stress as they were entertaining and refreshing.⁵³

De Mille called for a representative from Actor's Equity to come from New York and witness the abuses first hand. Bird recalls, "The representative talked quietly with almost all the performers. When a cast member asked if Equity could step in to protect us from this kind of abusive treatment, the representative replied, 'We cannot do one thing for you, except get you your fare home if you are fired.'"⁵⁴ When one of the chorus women told the Equity representative about the parties and how they had been told they would be given notice if they didn't attend, the representative said "I can do nothing to

⁵² Ibid., 142.

⁵³ Agnes de Mille, *Dance to the Piper*, 182.

⁵⁴ Bird, 143.

protect you from any kind of harassment.”⁵⁵ For many years Bird continued to resent the fact that Equity took dues from her salary after offering “so little in return.”⁵⁶

Eventually the show opened and ran a staggering six hours. There was obviously a great deal of work to be done, but the management had a different kind of company meeting in mind. De Mille recalls:

That night after the performance my girls were called on the phone and ordered up to a party. Mary and Dorothy refused to go. Mary was fired at the first pretext later. Two of the singers they were rooming with did go and came back very soon weeping. The hospitality upstairs was of the real old-fashioned kind.⁵⁷

After being fired from *Hooray for What!* Mary Meyer never worked on Broadway again. The quid pro quo equation of sex for employment with the Shuberts is clearly established in both the Bird and de Mille memoirs and both women record that women who would not attend the producers’ parties and make themselves open to sexual advances to the male guests “got their notice.”

Beyond the quid pro quo harassment, it is equally evident from the women’s memoirs that the Shuberts created a hostile workplace environment for de Mille and her dancers, an environment that severely limited de Mille’s ability to realize her artistic vision and to succeed professionally. While Agnes tried to assert her control in the workplace through casting, choreography, and rehearsal, the male directors/producers

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid. In the Minutes for the Chorus Equity Annual Meetings of 1936 and 1937 there is no mention of required after rehearsal socializing or the sexual harassment of chorus women as an item of concern. Almost all discussion is related to salary and rehearsal issues.

⁵⁷ De Mille, *Portrait Gallery*, 103.

were asserting their dominance and right to control the standards of conduct and aesthetics. Agnes de Mille was ostensibly in a position of power as choreographer to the production and yet her memoirs reveal that she had virtually no power over the very things that were essential to her creative success—casting, rehearsal hours and protocol, and aesthetic vision. Legal scholar Raymond Gregory writes, “Sexually harassing conduct reduces the workplace roles of women to objects of male desire...that conduct, based on traditional conceptions of legitimate sexual behavior, tends to fortify and bolster male control of the workplace.”⁵⁸ The Shuberts had shown time and again that anyone who challenged their right to control the women in the workplace would be fired, and indeed, after the opening performance in Boston, Agnes de Mille was fired by Kaufman in the middle of the lobby. She had been forbidden to enter the theater to speak to her dancers but Mary Meyer, tears streaming down her face, met de Mille at the station on her way out of town. “They’re tearing your work to pieces...Every lovely thing you did. I couldn’t save one thing.”⁵⁹ Agnes de Mille would not work on Broadway again until 1943 when her groundbreaking choreography for Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* would change Broadway dance forever. Because of her experience with *Hooray for What!*, de Mille insisted on final say for the casting of dancers in *Oklahoma!* She wanted only trained dancers whose muscular bodies were a far cry from the voluptuous chorine of bygone days. Elaine Anderson Steinbeck, stage manager of *Oklahoma!* recalled:

Dick and Oscar and Rouben Mamoulian [the director] were terrified they weren’t going to get pretty girls. It was “Who cares about how they move their legs, we

⁵⁸ Gregory, 2.

⁵⁹ De Mille, *Dance to the Piper*, 183.

care how they look!” They fought for good lookin’ girls with good lookin’ legs and pretty faces, and Agnes fought for the good dancers.⁶⁰

Though de Mille’s choreography in *Oklahoma!* is considered a turning point in the integration of dance into the American musical, it should be noted that it was her insistence on the control of casting the chorus women that was her first truly revolutionary act. She had learned from working with the Shuberts that without authority over the casting process, whatever aesthetic innovation she might have brought to the production would be unrealizable.

Dorothy Bird stayed with *Hooray for What!* until it closed, but that experience did not mark the end of the sexual intimidation Dorothy Bird experienced as a Broadway dancer. In 1939 she was performing in the Shuberts’ *Straw Hat Review* under choreographer Jerome Robbins. She had been enjoying rehearsals until one day when Robbins “honored” her by doing an imitation of one of her featured dance numbers, “Hometown” for the company. In her book *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* Catherine MacKinnon suggested that “Trivialization of sexual harassment has been a major means through which its invisibility has been enforced. Humor, which may reflect unconscious hostility, has been a major form of that trivialization.”⁶¹ Bird’s description of Jerome Robbins’ imitation of her clearly connects the way in which sexual humor at her expense not only drained all the enjoyment she had taken in her job, but actually created a sense of shame and fear that prevented her from being able to perform at all. I quote it here at length.

⁶⁰ Carol Easton, *No Intermissions: The Life of Agnes de Mille* (Cambridge: De Capo Press, 2000), 203.

⁶¹ MacKinnon, 52.

In his satire Jerry entered wearing a special wrap and he added a slither to the walk as he twinkled knowingly. He had captured just enough of my qualities— juxtaposed with insinuating, earthy ingredients—and the audience recognized that it was me. They laughed uproariously. Before this, I had never for a moment thought of my walk as sensuous. The slow smooth, deliberate walk that I had practiced under Mum’s guidance ... was still sacred to me...This walk, that I had later perfected with Martha [Graham], had been turned by Jerry into the stylized strutting of a stripper. As the audience howled and screamed for him to “take it off” I realized I had unconsciously fallen into the trap of the sexy orientation. Instead of feeling flattered that Jerry would choose to imitate me, I felt cheapened and distinctly soiled. He could not possibly have known how his imitation would inhibit me, causing me to shrink back into my shell. From then on, the walking I had done so lightheartedly in “Hometown” became an ordeal.⁶²

She knew that Robbins had not meant to hurt her or inhibit her, but as Raymond Gregory writes, “Irrespective of the harasser’s motivation, workplace sexual harassment always culminates in the diminution of a woman’s humanity and her status as a worker.”⁶³

To make matters worse the final run through of *Straw Hat Review* was supervised by Agnes de Mille’s old nemesis, Harry Kaufman who was there representing the Shuberts. He made Bird repeat her entrance over and over again all the while glaring at her with his “ball bearing eyes;”⁶⁴ in the wings her fellow actors hissed “Take it off Bird! Take it off!” The cumulative effect was crippling. “What I had been able to do so simply

⁶² Bird, 159.

⁶³ Gregory, 2.

⁶⁴ Bird, 159.

before now became torture. I did not understand why Jerry did not stand up to defend me and his choreography. Self-conscious and confused, I began to feel that the stage was no longer a safe place for me to be.”⁶⁵ Soon after Dorothy left the theater and decided to and began teaching. At the time she quit, Bird was one of the most sought after dance soloists on Broadway but we will never know what kind of dancer or choreographer Bird may have become had she not chose to end her career rather than endure the sexual harassment that was the daily lot of a chorus woman.

At the end of her account in *Dance to the Piper* de Mille makes sure we understand that the abuses perpetrated on the chorus women of *Hooray for What!* were not an anomaly. “This was typical for its time,” she writes, and adds with famous de Mille sarcasm. “This is what musical theater was like, full of glamour and things.”⁶⁶ Once finished performing on stage chorus women were expected to perform sexually at the management’s command. Those that refused were fired. One could not write a more explicit sexual harassment scenario and de Mille and Bird’s straightforward recording of the events speaks to the widespread nature of the abuse. The abuse was old-fashioned; it was embedded in the culture—so “normal” that it hardly bore noticing. Except that Agnes de Mille and Dorothy Bird did notice it and recorded it and it behooves theater historians to acknowledge these stories and integrate them into our own history of the American Musical Theater. As we celebrate the creative achievements of the Golden Age of Musical Theater, let us not forget the battles women like Agnes de Mille fought, nor the women who, like Dorothy Bird, choose to abandon their artistic dreams because the price was just too high to pay.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ De Mille, *Dance to the Piper*, 183.

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