

FOLLOW ME!
ANNA HELD, LILLIAN RUSSELL, AND ALICE NIELSEN
AS NEW WOMEN OF THE STAGE
AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A THESIS IN
Musicology

Presented to the Faculty of the University of Missouri-Kansas City
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ABSTRACT

At the turn of the twentieth century, singing actresses Anna Held (1872-1918), Lillian Russell (1861-1922), and Alice Nielsen (1873-1943) were conquering the stages of musical comedy and opera. Using their pre-existing biographies and multiple primary sources, this thesis reexamines these women's lives through the lens of the New Woman, highlighting their activism and entrepreneurship. These women were financially independent, outspoken in their beliefs, and focused strictly on their careers.

Anna Held, considered the first Ziegfeld girl, was a highly savvy marketing genius, using her beauty, provocative songs, and French connections to draw in a crowd. As a result, she assembled a troupe of actors and brought supplies and entertainment to the front-line hospitals in Belgium during World War II. Lillian Russell became known as "America's Beauty" as a famous soprano on the operetta stage. Among her contributions was her role in transforming the idea of the unfeminine suffragist into the ideal modern woman. For Kansas Citian, Alice Nielsen founded and produced two successful opera companies. During World War I, her tenacity would lead her to raise funds for the Red Cross and later establish a scholarship to promote further study for female singers.

Each of these women exhibited characteristics that made them fascinating on stage, but it was their feminist ideals that exemplified what it means to be a New Woman. Consequently, Anna Held, Lillian Russell, and Alice Nielsen made it possible for women in the theater to speak out against injustice and take charge of their careers.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of The UMKC Conservatory, have examined a thesis titled “Follow Me!: An exploration of the biographies of Anna Held, Lillian Russell, and Alice as New Women at the turn of the Twentieth Century,” presented by Erin Gilmore, candidate for the Master of Musicology degree and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Standing on the shores of New York City in 1910, Sarah Bernhardt, the most prominent actress in the world, embarked on her Farewell America tour. Greeting her arrival were “a thousand stern-looking women” waving yellow banners and carrying bouquets shouting for her to speak on the suffrage movement. The Joan of Arc Suffrage League members looked to Bernhardt, known for playing the French heroine, as the symbol for their movement. Though initially hesitant, Bernhardt readily assumed the banner of suffragist and spoke out about equality, and cried out, “I believe in the independence of women. I am the vote!”¹

Bernhardt was already an internationally revered actress. One of the last romantic tragediennes, she bridged the traditions of nineteenth century and early twentieth-century theater.² She was a study in dualities—feminine and masculine, dramatic and playful. Bernhardt’s performances were so influential that women flocked to the theater to see her. In doing so, she inspired the next generation of female performers who expanded the range of roles and shows for women.³

Outside the theater, Bernhardt embodied the idea of The New Woman. The New Woman was a young idealist, educated above what was considered appropriate for their

¹ Susan Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 133-134.

² Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 11.

³ Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 15.

gender.⁴ The New Woman contrasted with the Victorian ideals of modesty, motherhood, and respectability.⁵ In the United States, the New Woman was financially independent, free of domesticity, outspoken, wild, untamed and considered highly unfeminine.⁶ In addition, The New Woman was self-reliant and fearless. For the female stage performer, this meant self-made success, and as Bernhardt once referred to herself as “The Most Self-Advertised Woman in the World,” the term clearly applies to her.⁷

The sense of ownership of their careers and self-awareness is something that Anna Held (1872-1918), Lillian Russell (1861-1922), and Alice Nielsen (1873 -1943) all share. Each took the mantle of the New Woman and applied it to their role on stage: Held would be the driving force behind the Ziegfeld Follies and a self-made millionaire. Russell achieved the nickname “America’s Beauty,” but would endorse and embody the ideas of the suffragette; Nielsen would seek her own opportunities and become an extremely popular soprano who would go on to found opera companies. These three women followed Bernhardt’s footsteps by using their fame for something greater than themselves and modeled the ideals of the modern, or New Woman, throughout their lives.

Theater and the New Woman at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

The idea of the New Woman at the turn of the twentieth century was about challenging the status quo by toeing the line on what was considered appropriate. The

⁴ Viv Gardner, “Introduction,” in *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), 4.

⁵ Gardner, “Introduction,” 6.

⁶ Gardner, 4.

⁷ Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 15.

women in this thesis were considered standards of Victorian beauty and knew the power that they had in the attractiveness of their form. They realized that in order to achieve success on stage, they had to play to the perceptions that the audience wanted. Much like today, they realized that sex sells. Anna Held, for example, became known for her tiny waist and suggestive songs, creating her whole persona around the identity that her wild eyes couldn't behave.⁸

While the target audience for the women in this thesis was men, women's clubs, such as the Gamut Club, set itself apart as a theatrical group whose premise was to highlight new works—often political in nature. Founded by popular actress Mary Shaw, the Gamut Club boasted an impressive roster of two hundred and fifty members during its heyday.⁹ One of its early members was Lillian Russell. The Gamut Club was also unusual in that it recognized that actresses were in a unique position to use their status as actresses as a political tool and strived to encourage other women to follow suit.

Challenging the status quo was seen in the world of the singing actress as well. In opera, the *prima donna* embodied many of the same ideals as the New Woman but took it a step further by often having financial independence and were held in the same esteem as men.¹⁰ The freedom that celebrities allowed also came with a cost. The *prima donna* had to be full of emotion in her singing, but also be disciplined, clear of voice, and infallible.¹¹

⁸ Michael Owen Hoffman, "Anna Held, a Biography" (dissertation, Portland State University, 1981), 10.

⁹ Pamela Corbin, "Mary Shaw's Gamut Club: An Experiment in American Women's Activism," in *From Winning the Vote to Directing on Broadway: The Emergence of Women on the New York Stage, 1880-1927* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 63.

¹⁰ Susan Rutherford, "The Voice of Freedom: Images of the Prima Donna" *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), 96.

¹¹ Rutherford, "The Voice of Freedom," 97.

However, feminist writers took this personification and turned the *prima donna* into a heroine. They claimed her voice was part of her power and her artistry. She was dedicated to her art, independent, and highly intelligent. All three of the women in this thesis embodied these traits.¹² Due to the rise of feminism, the suffrage movement, the emergence of the New Woman, and the changing status of the *prima donna*, women in the theatre were able to take their place at the table in the early twentieth century. Additionally, they could use their name and celebrity status to elevate their position further and use their intelligence to advocate for social change. An exploration into the lives and careers of Anna Held, Lillian Russell, and Alice Nielsen reveals how they embodied the characteristics of the New Woman in the early twentieth century that allowed them to advocate for social change as well as inspire future generations.

Review of Literature: Women in Theater

Much of the classical music canon places importance on men. As a result, women's contributions to music and theater have frequently been overshadowed. Pedagogically speaking, in a typical college music history review course, the classic composers such as Ludwig van Beethoven, Johann Sebastian Bach, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, would comprise the bulk of the class. Though their contributions were extremely important to the history of western music, women like Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), Barbara Strozzi (1619-1677), and Clara Schumann (1819-1896) also played an important part in developing the musical canon. The oversight of women in music history parallel issues that suffragists and New Women were facing. Society expected men to be geniuses as they had more

¹² Rutherford, "The Voice of Freedom," 98.

resources available for preserving their works and greater access to education.¹³ Women, however, were pigeon-holed into titles such as mother, wife, or courtesan, and did not have the same resources available to them. These women were talented composers, performers, artists, and teachers themselves and some would publish under a male name in order to disseminate their art. Often, these women would also be the teachers and influencers of the men that so heavily influences today's textbooks.

Held, Russell, and Nielsen were all celebrities modeled the ideals of the New Woman but as it stands, these ideals would go on to become the definition of a feminist. As the term evolved, so did the definition and what it meant to be an outspoken, driven, woman in theater. Popular books such as *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* by Stacy Wolf, and *Her Turn on Stage: The Role of Women in Musical Theatre* by Grace Barnes highlight the role that women have had in musical theatre since the 1950s. Other studies begin the timeline for female influence in the history of theater starting in the 1960s.¹⁴

As my thesis shows, and as other scholars have noted, feminism in the theater has a longer history. Tracy C. Davis's book, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, tells how women's lives were centered around a male-based society and it was not any different in theater; however, due to the rich diversity found in the theater, women could achieve equality in regards to compensation with their male counterparts.¹⁵

¹³ Ellen Koskoff, *A Feminist Ethnomusicology: Writings on Music and Gender* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 25.

¹⁴ Michelene Wandor, "The Impact of Feminism on the Theatre," *Feminist Review*, no. 18 (November 1984): 76. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1394862.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A261ecbaeb2fc82b3f3496ca065de65a9>.

¹⁵ Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991,) 3.

Davis writes that educated, respectable, and independent performers contributed to the rise of the middle to the upper class and in doing so, women performers found themselves in a unique position to break the mold of the wife and mother.¹⁶

The idea of the New Woman emerged from the growing prominence and burgeoning socioeconomic statuses of women in the theater. In the book, *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre in 1850-1914* multiple contributors outline ways that the New Woman was emerging on stage and affecting their society. Actresses at the end of the nineteenth century became a shining beacon for the new independent role that was already taking the world by storm, especially regarding equality. For the singing actress, this also allowed for new ways to express themselves. Previously marginalized as an ingénue or a witch in terms of the types of roles women played on the stage, singing actresses such as Alice Nielsen were able to express themselves in roles outside their gender.

Furthermore, the singing actress began to reclaim the word *prima donna*, a term that normally described the leading lady, to one that expanded the role that women had taken in theatre. The new *prima donna*, or leading lady, was a woman who radiated confidence, independence, and range. They could be a Mozart ingénue, or they might have played a seductive murderer such as in Richard Strauss's *Salomé*. Due to this, popular actresses, especially in opera, were instrumental in the changing societal constructs of Victorian women. Susan Rutherford explains that while musical women in the pre-Victorian era came from musical families, Victorian women were inspired by this new *prima donna* and flocked to music schools across the world.¹⁷ Because of this rise in the independence of women in

¹⁶ Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, 38

¹⁷ Susan Rutherford, "The Voice of Freedom: Images of the *Prima Donna*," *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theater 1850-1914* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 105.

music and theater, Susan Glenn states that the “groundbreaking work of feminism started in the 1880s and 1890’s theatre.”¹⁸ Taking inspiration from their off-stage compatriots, theatrical women were able to use their celebrity to express their social and political ideologies to a larger audience.

As the role of feminism became popular outside the theater, women onstage felt empowered to enact change themselves. Thus, the first feminist movement would begin, and Anna Held, Lillian Russell, and Alice Nielsen would share a common bond: the radical change that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. When World War I began, composers, performers, and musicians took up the cause to inspire nationalistic pride in their country. John Jones, the author of *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, concludes that Broadway at the time was actually the heartbeat of America and created the pathos of the “American Dream.”¹⁹ He applauds the works of producers such as George M. Cohan and Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr. for their use of patriotic pride to help garner favoritism for the war effort as well as help with recruitment.²⁰ However, theater leagues and performances such as Anna Held’s All-Star Variety Jubilee were performing to raise money and garner support for the troops overseas as well.

Women’s theater performances, such as suffrage parades and Held’s Variety Jubilee, inspired other men and women to bring attention to their cause via performance art. Pamela Corbin discusses the intersection of theatre and activism, observing that “the feminist

¹⁸ Susan Glenn, A, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 4.

¹⁹John Bush Jones. *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Brandeis University Press, 2011), 20.

²⁰ Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, 38.

performance aesthetic resulting from women's confrontation with the political and theatrical flux embodied a tension between the fiction part of the theater performance and the reality of political activist goals."²¹ The inspiration was not for the performers on stage, but Corbin argues it allowed for the emergence of the female director to address political issues, especially in the realm of commercial theater.

Building a Celebrity Persona

As stated above, women in the theater are not a new concept. The concept of building a celebrity persona intertwines with the performer as with performing comes the ability to observe, reflect and/or model human characteristics back to an audience. The relationship that many of the women in this thesis had with the media helped to develop their celebrity persona. Berta Jocus investigates the role that the media have played in the rise of celebrity development, primarily looking at the eighteenth century, however, her research resonates across time. In her research on performer Catherine (Kitty) Clive, Jocus dives into what makes a celebrity and how similar it is throughout the ages.²² Much like the media did for Held, Russell and Nielsen, societal interests would also influence how celebrity is built and on what would impact the entertainment and sale of papers, ephemera, playbooks etc.

Mary Luckhurst and Sandra Mayer expound on the idea that the celebrity persona as a mask to hide the performance personality or genius.²³ It is a simple guise in which one can

²¹ Pamela Corbin, "Introduction: Dangerous Dramas," in *From Winning the Vote to Directing on Broadway: The Emergence of Women on the New York Stage, 1880-1927* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 17.

²² Berta Jocus, "A Star is Born: Kitty Clive and Female Representation in Eighteenth-Century English Musical Theater" (thesis, University of Oxford, 2004).

²³ Mary Luckhurst and Sandra Mayer, "Theatre and Persona: Celebrity and Transgression," *Persona Studies* vol. 5, no. 2 (2019): 2.

adapt to societal standards, or in some cases, rebel against them. Along those lines, much like Jocus points out, society and audiences dictates what will build the celebrity. Francesco Alberoni highlights the audience role in his article, “The Powerless Elite: Theory and Sociological Research on the Phenomena of Stars.”²⁴ The tastes and interests of the audiences is what helps to peak interests and build people into the realm of god-like worship. They rely on technology of the time to feed their infatuation, thus developing a codependent relationship with mediums such as print or film.

These codependent fans would become associated with the transformation that was happening in theater at the turn of the twentieth century and their attributes mirror those of the New Woman. In her article, Agata Łuksza, states that female fans that were attending performances were beginning to affect the overall audience draw with their influence and money.²⁵ These female fans were young, affluent middle-class individuals who challenged the idea of domestication and feminization by attending these performances unchaperoned. Łuksza also states that fans would often aim for stardom herself and “represented a prototype of burgeoning female agency and professional drive tinted with erotic self-awareness and conscious self-worth.”²⁶ These “fangirls” as she referred to them, became a driving force in the rise of theater and Broadway in America as well as around the world.²⁷

²⁴ Francesco Alberoni, "The Powerless 'Elite': Theory and Sociological Research on the Phenomenon of the Stars," In *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007), 65-77 <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446269534.n8>.

²⁵ Agata Łuksza, “Being a Modrzejewksa’s Fangirl: Female Fandom and Celebrity in Nineteenth-Century Polish Theatre,” *Theatre Journal* 74(1), 17-40, [doi:10.1353/tj.2022.0002](https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2022.0002).

²⁶ Łuksza, “Being a Modrzejewksa’s Fangirl,” 23.

²⁷ Łuksza, 23.

Anna Held

In pictures, Anna Held was portrayed as a beautiful woman with extravagant, form-flattering costumes and large eyes; as a star, she was the original Ziegfeld Girl. Stories about her life mention her as a myth: how she bathed only in milk to help her complexion, the infamous rumor she had a rib removed to achieve her tiny waist, and the exorbitant way she spent money.²⁸ However, that is how Held intended to be perceived on stage. Offstage, her life was quite different; she maintained a sense of responsibility to her fellow castmates and a fierce devotion to her people during World War I.

Michael Hoffman mentions in his dissertation on Held that she wrote an autobiography, though it was never published, it is held in the archives of the Billy Rose Theater Division at the New York Public Library.²⁹ He suspects that Held's daughter, Liane Carrera to have changed some of the entries of her mother in her own book about her mother's life, *Anna Held and Flo Ziegfeld: The Private Sorrow Behind the Public Acclaim*.³⁰ Though Hoffman did have personal interviews with Carrera, Hoffman states that the accounts Carrera wrote in her book coincide with his interviews.³¹

Although Hoffman's dissertation focused on the overall biography of Held, it still highlighted her celebrity status and not her involvement in World War I. Yet so much of

²⁸ Florenz Ziegfeld Jr. started the removed ribbed story to help publicize Held's arrival to the United States. The rumor has since permeated culture from Cher to Marilyn Manson. Thoracic surgery is only done in necessary and lifesaving medical procedures-not as body modification.

²⁹ "Anna Held biographical Manuscript b.2f. 12-17," The New York City Public Library Billy Rose Theater Division, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://archives.nypl.org/the/21243#c290906>.

³⁰ Liane Carrera, *Anna Held and Flo Ziegfeld: The Private Sorrow Behind the Public Acclaim* (Pompano Beach: Exposition Press of Florida, 1979).

³¹ Michael Owen Hoffman, "Anna Held, a Biography" (dissertation, Portland State University, 1981).

Held's later life focused on her involvement in the war effort; this prompted Eve Golden to dedicate a chapter on Held's life and work in France during World War I in her book *Anna Held and The Birth of Ziegfeld's Broadway*. Golden makes the point that although Held insisted she was not interested in politics, she was never shy of making her opinion known.³² She became an avid promoter of getting the United States involved in the war in Europe, she was an outspoken member of the Boys Scouts, and she voraciously raised funds for different charitable causes.

In Held's adopted homeland of France, *Belle Époque* cultural movement celebrated beauty, peace and prosperity through all aspects of society.³³ Held's embodiment of *Belle Époque* even inspired Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr. to create his famous Follies.³⁴ Linda Mizejewski looks more deeply at the culture that inspired Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr.³⁵ The rise of Broadway and his marketing strategies made him and his girls famous. Though Held would become synonymous with Ziegfeld, it was, however, who was his muse for the endeavor would be the primary backer for his success.

Lillian Russell

While there is little written about Anna Held in the past fifty years, writings on Lillian Russell span the gamut from the mid-twentieth century to the present day.³⁶ Armond Fields's

³² Eve Golden, *Anna Held and the Birth of Ziegfeld's Broadway* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2000,) 180.

³³Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. "belle époque , n. and adj.," accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www-oed-com.proxy.library.umkc.edu/view/Entry/251366?redirectedFrom=Belle+Epoque&>.

³⁴ Hoffman, 67.

³⁵ Golden, 11.

³⁶Armond Fields, *Lillian Russell: a Biography of "America's Beauty"* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008).

biography of Russell tells of her life as a singing actress and as an activist.³⁷ A star of the stage and inspiration to many singing actresses of her time, Russell was raised to be independent and was aware of the fight for equality from a young age. Her mother was actively involved in the suffrage movement, so it is no surprise that the same vigor and passion for equality influenced her throughout life.

With 2019 being the 100th year anniversary of the woman's right to vote, countless books, articles, and podcasts have been devoted to the time where women assumed the mantle of equality and brought it to a global stage. In addition to academic writings, many books were geared toward the general reader such as *Suffrage: Women's Long Battle for the Vote* by Ellen Carol Dubois which details the story of the suffrage movement while highlighting and humanizing key players in the movement.³⁸ *Roses and Radicals: The Epic Story of How American Women Won the Right to Vote* by Susan Zimmerman was written for a young adult audience and even has a highly accessible audiobook version.³⁹

Though the books above featured the main leaders of the suffrage movement and give an extended background of its origins, they do not thoroughly discuss the singing actress's involvement in the movement. However, an article from the June 2002 issue of *Theatre History Studies* highlights the work of Lillian Russell as a suffragette. Leslie Goddard, author of the article "Women know her to be a Real Woman: Femininity, Nationalism and the Suffrage Activism of Lillian Russell," argues that while most scholarly writings portray

³⁷ Fields, *Lillian Russell*, 7.

³⁸ Ellen Carol Dubois, *Suffrage: Women's Long Battle for the Vote* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc, 2020).

³⁹ Susan Zimmerman, *Roses and Radicals: The Epic Story of How American Woman Won the Right to Vote* (New York: Puffin Books, 2020).

Russell as active at the end of the movement, she was in fact integral to its success and growth.⁴⁰

Regarding her upbringing and the period in which she lived, it would make sense that she would have been involved during World War I. Peg Sullivan's article "Tabasco, Gunpowder, and TNT: America's Beauty Lillian Russell and the Marine Corp" from the *Journal of the Company of Military Historians*, tells a fascinating side of popular performers during the time of war. Much of the article uses autobiographical quotes from Russell's time and accounts from American newspapers detailing her unfailing support of the war effort.⁴¹ Along with her work during the suffrage movement, her involvement in recruitment for the war effort achieved her a military rank.

Alice Nielsen

While Held and Russell were performers of musical drama and opera, The New Woman had more than one characteristic. Enter Alice Nielsen, soubrette (a lighter soprano voice with a strong middle voice whose range is from C4-C6) and opera theater owner. Katherine Preston expands on the role of the female opera theater owners and managers in her book, *Opera for the People: English-Language Opera and Women Managers in the Late 19th Century America*.⁴² Preston begins her examination in the years following the Civil War and the rise of American opera, and thus she also covers the American *prima donna*. As foreign opera was taking the stage by storm, nationalism and the unease in Europe encouraged new

⁴⁰ Leslie Goddard, "Women Know Her to Be a Real Woman: Femininity, Nationalism and The Suffrage Activism of Lillian Russell," *Theatre History Studies* 22 (2022): 137-154.

⁴¹ Peg Sullivan, "Tabasco, Gunpowder, and TNT: America's Beauty Lillian Russell and the Marine Corps," *Military Collector & Historian* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 133.

⁴² Katherine Preston, *Opera for the People: English-Language Opera and Women Managers in Late 19th-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

composers, such as Victor Herbert, to write opera for the American audience and the all-American soprano, Alice Nielsen.⁴³ As a direct correlation of the rise in American opera, opera companies began to spring up as well, allowing for greater diversity in singers. One of the companies, The Bostonians, was a comic opera troupe that Nielsen would eventually become a part of (and leave her first self-founded company for). It would catapult her to stardom.⁴⁴

Once she had found success as a singer of operetta and musical comedy, and especially after her tenure with The Bostonians, a large part of Nielsen's career connected with Victor Herbert, who wrote two famous works. *The Singing Girl* and *The Fortune Teller* catapulted Nielsen to international fame and Neil Gould's book, *Victor Herbert: A Theatrical Life*, breaks down how the operettas impact the composer's career as well.⁴⁵ Not only does it allow for a systematic approach to Herbert's life, but it also gives a fascinating look at performing and writing for specific performers, primarily Nielsen, at the turn of the twentieth century.

Beyond Preston, scholarly writings on Nielsen are limited. The only complete biography of her and her rise to fame, *Alice Nielsen and the Gayety of Nations* by Dall Wilson is an extraordinarily dense and hard-to-find read; it takes Alice Nielsen's life year by year, accounting for all events in life and as well as the family and friends around her.⁴⁶ Dall is very thorough in his examination of the period and what she was doing throughout her career, and it gives us fascinating insight into her life, especially her ties to Kansas City theatre.

⁴³ Neil Gould, *Victor Herbert: A Theatrical Life*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 285.

⁴⁴ Lewis Clinton Strang, "Alice Nielsen," *Prima Donnas and Soubrettes of Light Opera and Musical Comedy in America* (L.C. Page and Company: Boston, 1900), 18.

⁴⁵ Neil Gould, *Victor Herbert: A Theatrical Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

⁴⁶ Dall Wilson, *Alice Nielsen and The Gayety of Nations* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu Press, 2017).

Kansas City's rich musical and theatrical tradition ties directly to the emergence of the railway and stockyards in what is now the West Bottoms. The Coates Opera House, founded by Colonel Kersey and Sarah Coates, became a destination venue for those coming through Kansas City.⁴⁷ Up until that period, the Coates had provided their own house as a space for entertainment, but as their influence and demand grew, they realized the need for a proper performance venue.⁴⁸ Felicia Londré examines theater history in Kansas City with the conjunction of the rail system into the 1930s. In her chapter on The Coates Opera House, Londré gives a detailed history of the rise of the first opera house in Kansas City.⁴⁹ Though music halls were already in existence, they pandered to the working class and often sold refreshments at their shows. The Coates Opera House, however, was for the higher class. Reserved for opera and balls, it drew in the largest names in entertainment. It was also where Nielsen got her first stage experience, standing nightly outside the theatre to get a glimpse of that talent who had come to town.⁵⁰ Eventually, her persistence, as well as ingenuity, will get her a spot on that very stage.

Methodology

Since resources available about these women are scarce and the secondary sources favored more toward their beauty and careers, I had to rely heavily on newspapers as a primary source for argument. Having purchased a subscription to Newspapers.com, an online digital

⁴⁷ Felicia Hardison Londré and David Austin Latchaw, *The Enchanted Years of the Stage: Kansas City at the Crossroads of American Theater, 1870-1930* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 34.

⁴⁸ Londré and Latchaw, 34.

⁴⁹ Londré and Latchaw, 32.

⁵⁰ Alice Nielsen, "Born to Sing," *Collier's*, June 18, 1932, 9.

archive, I was able to access newspapers from across the country.⁵¹ What was supremely helpful was the ability to sort by year and region, allowing me to narrow my focus for specific articles regarding their activist and war work. My digital research inspired me to use the increasing availability of digital collections and online platforms, allowing me to access secondary and tertiary sources that I would not be able to access otherwise. Looking solely at the history of Broadway led to research on Anna Held at The Billy Rose Theater Library in New York City. The Billy Rose Theater Library has an extensive collection of pictures, artifacts, and writings from Anna Held's life, including her autobiography. Many were digitized, and since travel was limited, it allowed me to access a substantial portion of primary sources from across the country.⁵²

As stated, my work in the digital archives of newspapers around the country influenced my research. These were primary sources that focused on celebrity gossip and Held's engagements. It was fascinating to follow the Anna Held All-Star Variety Jubilee as she toured the East Coast and a good portion of the Midwest. While the periodicals were extremely helpful, the dissertation by Michael Hoffman and the biography by Eve Golden allowed for a complete picture of the life of Held.⁵³ While Hoffman focused primarily on her performance career, Golden delved into her work as an advocate for WWI involvement and fundraising.

⁵¹ *Newspapers.com by Ancestry, "Home," accessed March 23, 2022. <https://www.newspapers.com>.*

⁵² During the time of my research, the COVID-19 pandemic had hit, and I quarantined in my house. Theaters, libraries, and schools shut their doors. This made research difficult, but possible. Thus, many of these sources came from digital collections.

⁵³ Golden; Michael Owen Hoffman, "Anna Held, a Biography" (Ph.D. diss., Portland State University, 1981).

While researching Lillian Russell, I found that she has a plethora of books that have been written about her, though most are before the 1940s. For about fifty years, it appears there has been extraordinarily little new research regarding Russell. Most studies of Russell published in the mid-twentieth century focused on her as a performer and an icon.⁵⁴ There are also movies and dramatizations made about her life in which the Library of Congress had digitized, and its radio plays were available via download.⁵⁵ As mentioned, these are dramatizations of her life, so they are not accurate, but listening and watching allows for an understanding of how she was directed toward the events and people who influenced her.

The suffrage movement is a popular topic, and there are numerous books and podcasts that give insight into the inner workings of the movement. The year 2019 was the hundredth anniversary of the ratification of the 19th amendment, so the popularity of research regarding women's suffrage was plentiful. Websites, articles, and documentaries were instrumental in understanding the movement and its impact in both the US and the United Kingdom.⁵⁶ These sources also showed the political and social climate that would have affected these women at that time. Russell's response to social change was an essential part of who she was as a person and performer.

⁵⁴ James Brough, *Miss Lillian Russell: A Novel Memoir* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978); John Burke, *A Duet in Diamonds*, (New York: Manor Books, 1972).

⁵⁵ *Lillian Russell*, directed by Irvin Cummings (20th Century Fox, 1940), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gh8EINL6IU8>; Lux Radio Theater, *Lillian Russell*, recorded October 21, 1940, 20th Century Fox, 1940, radio play.

⁵⁶ Barbara Winslow, "Sisters of Suffrage: British and American Women Fight for the Vote," The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed March 24, 2022, <http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/politics-reform/essays/sisters-suffrage-british-and-american-women-fight-for-vote>; Naomi Paxton, *Stage Rights! The Actresses' Franchise League, Activism and Politics, 1908-58*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

Alice Nielsen's life and her early career centered on Kansas City. Because of this, I could utilize the online archives at the Kansas City Public Library. The digitization of the archives allowed access to primary sources from a distance. Nielsen was a prolific writer, especially during her international travels. She spoke highly of her time in Japan, and the culture would influence her for the remainder of her life.

In her series autobiography in the *Colliers Magazine* in June and July of 1932, titled "Born to Sing," Nielsen reflects on the start of her career and how she marketed herself as the soubrette soprano since she was the producer and forerunner of her theatres.⁵⁷ The article discusses her life; it also was accompanied by ads and additional pieces that influenced daily life at the time. This article set the scene for writing how her work influenced her desires and the desires of society.

Connections and Introductions

Anna Held, Lillian Russell, and Alice Nielsen were friends. Though their ages ranged, they ran in the same theatrical circles and often attended the same events. On New Years' Eve 1899, they were all performing in New York City: Lillian Russell was singing in *Whirl-i-gig* at Weber and Fields New Music Hall, Alice Nielsen was performing *The Singing Girl* at The Casino, and Anna Held was dazzling audiences in *Papa's Wife* at The Manhattan Theatre.⁵⁸ Outside of the theater these women used their status of celebrity to advocate for societal change and gender equality in their fields.

⁵⁷ Alice Nielsen, "Born to Sing," *Collier's*, June 18, 1932, 9.

⁵⁸ John Bush Jones. *Our Musicals, Ourselves: a Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Brandeis University Press, 2011), 12.

A self-proclaimed Parisian citizen, Anna Held's life was full of mystery, and it was one of the draws for audiences. When she arrived from France, Ziegfeld touted her as a *Belle Époque* beauty and crafted extravagant rumors about her to gain media coverage. While Ziegfeld was busy crafting the image that was Held, Held truly controlled how the public viewed her. She knew her draw was exoticism, her "naughty songs," and her womanly form but her private life was focused on more intellectual matters.⁵⁹ She taught herself English in preparation for *Papa's Wife*, she enjoyed speaking to acting classes about what the life of an actress was really like, and she was savvy regarding financial matters.⁶⁰

So, when it would come time for her to speak out about the horrors of war in Europe, Held took all her appeal and fame to advocate for a worthy cause. She stipulated in her contracts that she should be allowed to speak at town halls and meetings as she toured.⁶¹ Using theater and performance as an avenue to reach a large audience, her self-produced show, *Follow Me!* was a fundraising effort and a rallying cry for the United States to take up arms and join the fight.⁶²

Growing up as the daughter of a suffragist, Lillian Russell was not shy about going after what she wanted. Cynthia, Russell's mother, was insistent that her daughter study with the best voice teachers, moving her family to New York City to do so, in addition to advancing her own political career.⁶³ While Cynthia focused on her career, Russell had time

⁵⁹ Hoffman, 42.

⁶⁰ Golden, 119.

⁶¹ Golden, 103.

⁶² Golden, 207.

⁶³ Fields, 9.

to audition at the theatres around the area, eventually leading to an encounter with producer Tony Pastor.⁶⁴ Once associated with Pastor, Russell would become known as “The Great English Ballad Singer” and Pastor would coach Russell into the performer she would become.⁶⁵ Much like Held, Russell's image was carefully crafted to have appeared in a feminine light. Outside of the time on stage, Russell was a prolific author and enthusiastic about beauty and women’s fitness.⁶⁶

In her later years, she had a column in the *Chicago Tribune* giving tips on her beauty regime as well as advice to women seeking help regarding their own wellness and challenging the views that unmarried women were considered “old maids.”⁶⁷ Holding fast to the ideals of a New Woman and activist in the suffrage movement, Russell told women that their appeal was more than just beauty: “Remember, True Beauty is an incalculable force and should be used by the brainy woman as are all other of their forces to make the world better.”⁶⁸

Alice Nielsen was everything that Russell described as the ideal modern woman in her articles. She was beautiful, highly intelligent, and incredibly driven to achieve success. Nielsen’s roots start in Kansas City, advocating for herself as a singer and actress. She would stand outside The Coates Opera House and sing for the patrons coming in and out of the

⁶⁴ Fields,18.

⁶⁵ Lillian Russell, “Beginning-Lillian Russell’s Reminiscences,” *The Cosmopolitan*, February 24, 1922, 14.

⁶⁶ Fields,180.

⁶⁷ Lillian Russell, “No Old Maids,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 26, 1912, 18.

⁶⁸ Lillian Russell, “As a Man Thinketh,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, 1911, 8.

theatre.⁶⁹ She even would sneak in and perform on stage, to the detriment of the house manager, who eventually took notice and got her in touch with a local Congressman's wife who needed singers for a party.⁷⁰

She took the idea of the New Woman and ran with it. She was not afraid of "pants roles" and frequently memorized all male and female parts in operas. When she realized she was not getting fulfillment from her career, she started her own company. The Alice Nielsen Comic Opera Company employed their own singers, composers, and orchestra.⁷¹ Nielsen assumed the producer role, assisting with the costuming, set design, and business matters attaining to the company, all while performing two of her most well-known shows, *The Singing Girl* and *The Fortune Teller*.⁷² Though this would not be the only company that she would be a part of, it was the starting point on her successful journey in the world of music theatre and opera.

These three women embody the ideals of the New Woman; they were all independent, strong-willed, financially independent, outspoken, and feminine. As a result, they were able to use their celebrity, personality, and drive to collaborate with famous names in opera and music theatre to create their own success as well as to advocate for societal change in and out of the theater. In doing so, they cemented the way for the singing actress to influence society regarding gender equality in the music and the theatrical world.

⁶⁹ Nielsen, "Born to Sing," 9.

⁷⁰ Dall Wilson, *Alice Nielsen*, 31.

⁷¹ Wilson, 149.

⁷² Alice Nielsen, "Born to Sing," *Collier's*, June 25, 1932, 15.

CHAPTER 2
ANNA HELD:
FROM *FEMME FATALE* TO TRAILBLAZING NEW WOMAN

Anna Held's influence and contribution to the beginning of Broadway are often overlooked. Mentioned as the companion of Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr, history forgets that she was a feminist who worked tirelessly in her career and helped to inspire the legendary Ziegfeld Follies. Her life was full of rumors and speculation, but she would draw in a crowd with her beauty and audience interaction when she was on stage. Her ability to connect with people would serve her in more ways than just being a famous figure of the musical comedy and vaudeville stage. Early in her life, she would become an orphan and would market herself to the *café chantant* of Paris to make a living. Once in America, she had to make a name for herself and set herself apart from other professional beauties by diversifying her image and associating with everyday household items. Finally, when the world went to war, she would drudge through the desolated front lines of France and Belgium in World War I to personally deliver supplies to hospitals and help raise morale for the wounded soldiers. Much of what is written neglects the philanthropy of Held, instead focusing solely on her contributions to Broadway and her physical beauty, however; even though she never identified as a feminist, her life tells another story—one of a financially independent woman, a brilliant marketer, and a caring and compassionate colleague and employer.⁷³ In addition, she was a passionate advocate who was not afraid to make sacrifices in order to protect the people and country that she loved.

⁷³Oliver Pallack, “Anna Held,” The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women, last modified December 31, 1999, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/held-anna>; John Kenrick, “Ziegfeld 101: Anna Held,” Musicals 101.com, accessed March 13, 2022, <https://www.musicals101.com/ziegheld.htm>; David Soren, “Anna Held: The Trend-Setting Star of Paris,” The American Vaudeville, accessed March 13, 2022, <https://vaudeville.sites.arizona.edu/node/67.k.l>.

From a Humble Beginnings to Darling of Paris

Mystery and rumor were central to Held's early career, so it should be no surprise that Held's date of birth is unknown, however; most historians speculate her birth on March 18th, 1873, in Warsaw, Poland. This was partly due to her vanity and the fact that Held considered that her life began when she arrived in Paris around 1876 and her refusal to be seen as anything but Parisian.⁷⁴ It was no secret that Held was beautiful. She was a petite, buxom woman whose high cheekbones and almond shaped eyes were captivating to her audience (fig. 2.1).

In 1893, she was performing at popular houses such as the musical hall Théâtre de l'Eldorado and was quickly developing her own style of performing. Audiences were, in fact, mixed on her appeal. A critic writing in the *Topeka State Journal* said "audiences were disappointed in the idea that Anna Held can sing. She can't and no one realizes it more than Mlle. Held."⁷⁵ This harsh review could be due to the fact that Held wanted to model herself after the biggest star in the world at the time, Sarah Bernhardt. Bernhardt, who also was French, was a famous tragedienne, so one could speculate that comparisons were made between the two.⁷⁶ Banking on her beauty, singing, enchanting and whimsical costumes, she entranced audiences with her sophisticated takes on "naughty songs." The most famous of these songs, "Won't you Come and Play with Me?" would become her trademark and would

⁷⁴ Eve Golden, *Anna Held and the Birth of Ziegfeld's Broadway* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 4.

⁷⁵ "Topeka 'All Went,'" *The Topeka State Journal*, May 3, 1898, 6.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Silverthorne, *Women in the Arts: Sarah Bernhardt*, (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), 13.

catch the attention of future famous Broadway producer Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr. Ziegfeld would take Held from moderate notoriety as a Parisian singer to an international sensation.



Fig. 2.1. Autographed Portrait of Anna Held c. 1908 highlighting her features by Léopold-Émile Reutlinger. From The Sayre (J. Willis) Collection of Theatrical Photographs, *Stage Actresses*, <https://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/digital/collection/sayre/id/3648/rec/7>

Ziegfeld and the Creation of “The Anna Held”

Anna Held met Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr. in 1896 while he was looking for a great act to bring back to New York.⁷⁷ Ziegfeld, entranced by Held, promised her a career if she were to come with him back to the US. To entice her, he paid out her seasonal contract at the Folies-Bergère.⁷⁸ Ziegfeld was determined to make her a star of the American stage. Held would become Ziegfeld's muse—and eventually his wife—and he began promoting her fame before she had even stepped foot onto the shores of the United States. He paid reporters and newspapers to sell her pictures and billed her show, *A Parlor Match*, as a call to action to the

⁷⁷ Golden, 23.

⁷⁸ Golden, 23.

public with the headline of “GO TO HELD.”⁷⁹ He encouraged her to be photographed in her negligee and touted her as a beauty from Paris. Before she ever uttered a single word, Anna Held was a variety star.

To create a frenzy for Held's premiere performance, Ziegfeld would not have her perform on opening night, instead giving top billing to comedians.⁸⁰ When Held did open, her charming French songs received a lukewarm reception, but it was Ziegfeld's use of audience plants, or clagues (a trend that is immensely popular in nineteenth-century French theater), that managed to raise the audience into begging for an encore.⁸¹ Held would play to her strength in winning the crowd, Held obliged with a famous naughty song, “Come Play with Me.”

The song and lyrics of “Come Play with Me,” in conjunction with vocal range of the verses, were suggestive and presented the untamed flirtatiousness that Held was looking to convey. Presented in her middle range, this gave the audiences the feeling that she was speaking directly to them as individuals and not as an audience. In the second and third verses of the piece, she tells a story of a gentleman who is interested in her, and though she is a stranger, she can be brave knowing that she has many new friends to cheer her on.

He promised he'd be in his place
He promised too, to cheer me;
He said that I should kiss his face, and that he was near me
But courage he is not there, There is not any danger.

⁷⁹ Golden, 24.

⁸⁰ Hoffman, 40.

⁸¹ Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. "claque, n.," accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www-oed-com.proxy.library.umkc.edu/view/Entry/33796?rskey=28UvxL&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

You are my friends, I need not fear, Although I am a stranger.⁸²

The image shows a page of sheet music for the song "Come Play with Me." The title is centered at the top, followed by the subtitle "(I Have Such A Nice Little Way With Me.)". Below the title, it credits "Words by G. P. Hawtrey." and "Music by Alfred Plumptre." The tempo is marked "Allegro." The music is in 2/4 time. The piano accompaniment starts with a forte (f) dynamic. The vocal line begins with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The lyrics are: "1. I have not been here very long, As yet I'm quite a stranger, And 2. I have a friend, a nice young man, Who likes to linger near me; And 3. He promised he'd be in his place, He promised too, to cheer me; He so to try an English song May seem, perhaps, a danger. One when I told him of my plan, He said he'd come and hear me. He said that I should see his face, And know that he was near me. But". The page number "3" is visible in the bottom left corner. At the bottom center, it says "Copyright MCMXXVI by Francis, Day, & Hunter. English Copyright Secured".

Fig. 2.2 Intro and Verses-Sheet Music of “Come Play with Me.”
Billy Rose Theatre Collections, New York Public Library.

The chorus would juxtapose a sense of innocence and sensuality, as the vocal range moves into the upper register and the rhythm skips along in both the voice and piano. The lyrics, again, play to Held’s strengths and right into what the audience wanted to hear—an

⁸² Music Division, The New York Public Library, “Come Play with me or I have such a nice little way with me,” New York Public Library Digital Collections, accessed May 5, 2022, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-fc2d-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

invitation to “Come and play” with her. Unlike the verses, the chorus plays right into sexual innuendo with a line “For I have such a nice little way with me, do not think it wrong?”⁸³ As Held was coming into her own celebrity, the traits of the wild, untamed New Woman can be seen in how this song is presented. Though the lyrics and melody were suggestive, Held was not.⁸⁴ She knew exactly what her audience wanted and that was to be seduced by a Parisian beauty. Her unique intuition of what the public needed would serve her well in her career allowing her to build her celebrity and later advocate for those who needed help in World War I.

⁸³ Music Division, “Come and play with me,” 5.

⁸⁴ *Ziegfeld, the man and his woman*, directed by Buzz Kulik (1978, Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. 1978), VHS.

had a custom outfit, a long-split skirt and leggings, made specifically for the activity.⁸⁵ This stance was in stark contrast to her feelings of the popular Gibson Girl trend of the time; she found that the shorter skirts and athletic aesthetic were “not sensible.”⁸⁶

Though Held’s senses on fashion aligned with the more traditional tastes of the day, it was the provocative and captivating Parisian stunner that audiences wanted. Held embodied everything exotic about Paris and the *Folie Bergère*. This was a comparison that critics could not help but make to *The Parisian Model* as well. In fact, one critic said, “Why go to Paris when Mr. Florenz Ziegfeld will bring Paris to you?”⁸⁷ Though the glory of Held’s success and his future endeavors would be attributed to Ziegfeld, it was Held who created the famous *Ziegfeld’s Follies*. She mentioned to Ziegfeld, “Your American girls are the most beautiful in the world, if you could only dress them up chic and ‘Charmant.’ You could do much better than the *Folie Bergères* in this country.”⁸⁸ So influential Held was in development of the *Follies*, she became the primary financial backer and casting agent for the chorus girls.

⁸⁵ Golden, 27.

⁸⁶ Golden, 27.

⁸⁷ Golden, 98.

⁸⁸ Hoffman, 67.

A Star is Born

Held had found moderate success with Ziegfeld on the American stage; she took it upon herself to begin her own self-promotion and advancement. This time the publicity would be for her new upcoming role in *Papa's Wife*, one that would require her to speak and perform only in English. Wanting to improve on acting and delivery, Held had immersed herself in the English language, going as far as hiring only English speakers for her staff.⁸⁹ This was her last shot to make it in America. Her future success would ride on this production. She was determined not to leave anything to chance.

Papa's Wife (1899), composed by Hervé (né Louis Auguste Florimond Roger, 1825-1892), was a collaboration between Ziegfeld and Held; in fact, it was her idea to bring this popular French operetta to the United States.⁹⁰ This role was perfect for Held's comeback, because it portrayed her as "the harlot with a heart of gold," who is redeemed when she falls in love. This completely reshaped her image from vaudevillian songstress to leading lady.⁹¹ Opening September 3, 1899, the show was a success. Critics were stunned by Held's grasp of the English language and the vast improvement in her acting. Octavus Cohen of the *Fort Wayne News* even exclaimed that "Anna Held is an actress, an excellent actress!"⁹² The three-act show ran for two years and one hundred and twenty-seven performances.⁹³ This

⁸⁹ Hoffman, 42.

⁹⁰ Ethan Mordden, *Ziegfeld The Man Who Invented Show Business* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 59.

⁹¹ Mordden, 61.

⁹² Octavus Cohen, "Anna Held in *Papa's Wife*," *Fort Wayne News* (December 25th, 1899): 3.

⁹³ "Papa's Wife," *Internet Broadway Database*, accessed April 16th, 2021, <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/papas-wife-5271>.

was an impressive achievement for Held and one that would launch her from the vaudeville circuit on to Broadway.⁹⁴

Held's success was Ziegfeld's triumph, and he was determined to let the nation know. He took *Papa Wife's* on the road, which quickly exhausted Held and the cast. Her ability to connect with people didn't stop with the audience, she connected with everyone she worked with. She took it upon herself to remember every person she met as well as little facts about them.⁹⁵ Though she was the star of the show, this individualized touch poured over into the touring troupe as she made herself a mother figure and model of professionalism to even the lowest troupe member.⁹⁶ This diligence and kindness would follow Held throughout her career.

The duos next show, *The Parisian Model* (1906) featured everything that the *Follies* would later be known for: beautiful women in an erotic setting.⁹⁷ Held was not exempt from this display; she would change on stage and be briefly seen in nude-colored stockings and corsets.⁹⁸ In addition, a song written for this show ("I Can't Make My Eyes Behave") was inspired by her own sensual gaze. *The San Francisco Bulletin* reported that:

Despite the fact that Miss Held is the most photographed woman in the world, nobody can tell the color of her eyes. Miss Held has demonstrated that it really does not matter what their color may be. It all depends on how she uses them.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Hoffman, 60.

⁹⁵ Golden, 58.

⁹⁶ Golden, 59.

⁹⁷ Hoffman, 64.

⁹⁸ Hoffman, 65.

⁹⁹ Hoffman, 65.

The Parisian Model was heralded as an “immoral display,” by modern standards, which played right into the persona that Held had cultivated. This of course helped in the overall attendance and success of the show.¹⁰⁰ More than that, it secured Ziegfeld’s place as a successful manager to his star, Anna Held. Ziegfeld succeeded in appearing to be controlling Held’s career and success. It was Held, however, who was in control. Her diligence in learning English as well as her financial savvy made it, so she was the one with money. This caused Ziegfeld to cling to Held for his ensured success.

The Anna Held Brand and Entrepreneurial Pursuit

Looking to build her fortune, individual celebrity and independence, Held focused on marketing herself outside of theater by selling her name to the Anna Held Beautifier Company, who made face cream, and E.G. Murray and Co., which wanted to make Anna Held petticoats.¹⁰¹ She was easily the most advertised woman in America, with her face on “cigar boxes, billboards ... magazines ... from cold cream to silver polish.”¹⁰² These entrepreneurial pursuits would be followed by rumors that Held’s purse strings were becoming tight, and that she was selling her name and other possessions to bring in money.¹⁰³ She dismissed these rumors as she did most rumors, laughing it off and telling the press of the new furs she had acquired.¹⁰⁴ The truth was her finances were in better shape

¹⁰⁰ Mordden, 89.

¹⁰¹ Golden, 119.

¹⁰² Mordden, 132.

¹⁰³ Golden, 119

¹⁰⁴ “Fashionable Woman as ‘Nature Faker,’” *Chicago Tribune*, November 22, 1908, 38.

than that of Ziegfeld's, who was prone to gambling.¹⁰⁵ Held, having business acumen and having learned from her past endeavors, kept her finances private from Ziegfeld.

The gambling rumors were the beginning of the end between Ziegfeld and Held. In order to help patch their failing relationship, Ziegfeld and Held escaped to Paris. The infidelity of Ziegfeld with a chorus girl, the estrangement from her own daughter Liane, and the trip to Paris itself prompted Held to think of retiring.¹⁰⁶ Held was financially independent and had saved a million dollars from her investments and was becoming jaded with the life of an actress.¹⁰⁷ She was tired of the politics and the chauvinism. In addition, the style that she had been known for had begun to fall out of fashion. She disliked this modern style of bright colors and flattened corsets, which did nothing for her signature hourglass shape.¹⁰⁸

Once separated from Ziegfeld, Held collaborated with a new manager who did nothing for her celebrity and publicity, so she had to take it upon herself to maintain her presence in the public eye. Once again, relying on the traits of self-reliance and self-promotion that were attributed to the New Woman. Between the limited shows that Held was appearing in, she was heading her own vaudeville troupe, Anna Held's All-Star Variety Jubilee. Traveling in September of 1913, Held's Variety Jubilee would tour the country, but it would be a different experience than what she was used to.¹⁰⁹ Previously she had Ziegfeld to organize her travels, utilizing his connections with the best houses and the best costumes.

¹⁰⁵ Hoffman, 70.

¹⁰⁶ Hoffman, 75.

¹⁰⁷ Golden, 137.

¹⁰⁸ Golden, 138.

¹⁰⁹ "Plays and Players," *The Railroad Reporter and Traveler's News* 8, no. 9 (September 1913): 18.

That would not keep her from putting on a new show. She played to her strengths, displaying her "eye songs," her silhouette, and of course her show-stopping, though sometimes risqué staging.¹¹⁰ As well-received as the initial performances were, the troupe, including Held, were beginning to tire of the trip. Shows were not drawing the crowds that she had hoped for, and reviewers were just not as interested in what she was presenting.¹¹¹ So she decided to turn her attention to more important matters: the growing danger of World War I.

Advocacy and Politics

Along with performing and producing Anna Held's All-Star Variety Jubilee, she had begun working with the Red Cross, selling seals (stamps) that benefited tuberculosis research.¹¹² While traveling the country, her troupe would raise money for various children's charities and the Good Fellowship fund.¹¹³ Although the work for charity was good for the soul, it was positive publicity that ran in the newspaper, and unlike the stories earlier, were mostly true charity work. She had always been invested in speaking out about the realities of issues surrounding theater.

Held was passionate about class equality and safety of the theater, especially concerning the dangers for women. The atmosphere for working actresses in the early 1900's was often a place of contradictions. Much like the societal view of Victorian women, actresses were the object of male desire but were shunned by the public for that portrayal and

¹¹⁰ Golden, 170.

¹¹¹ Golden, 172.

¹¹² "1913 American Red Cross Christmas Seal - Type III, Perf 12," Mystic Stamp Company - America's Leading Stamp Company, accessed January 19th, 2021, <https://www.mysticstamp.com/Products/United-States/WX13/USA/>.

¹¹³ Golden, 173.

taken advantage of by the male owners of the companies.¹¹⁴ They were seen as property and their bodies were at the whims of the men who "owned them" in their contracts. Held was familiar with this, as she had been attached to one of the most successful men in Broadway. Audiences and critics prized beauty, and they often called her performances and costumes vulgar, yet her physical appearance sold tickets. As pornography became more readily available for mass consumption, the chorus girl became an ideal fantasy that could be presented in real life.¹¹⁵ Women on the stage would have to show their legs, and costumes conveyed nakedness.¹¹⁶ Because of this, young and naive girls were taken advantage of, in both professional and non-consensual ways. A notable example would be when *Parisian Model* was running in Chicago, she had the opportunity to lecture to a group of acting students at the Chicago Musical College.¹¹⁷ She took this position very seriously, speaking to the students of the realities of stage life and professionalism in the workplace.

With the conclusion of the All-Star Variety Jubilee Held returned to Paris briefly before Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, and although she was not immediately concerned, it would not be long before the effects of war would reach her. France and England declared war on Germany on August 12, 1914, turning Held and all the world upside down. Actors and actresses, such as Maxine Elliot, and Mata Hari, launched themselves into the war effort. People who Held considered friends—dancer Vernon Castle, female impersonator Teddie Woodhouse, and actress Bradda Athleta, among others—and

¹¹⁴ Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 106.

¹¹⁵ Davis, 131.

¹¹⁶ Davis, 132.

¹¹⁷ Golden, 103.

colleagues joined the ranks of the military, often being put on the front lines.¹¹⁸ As happens with war, too many of them never returned. This would empower Held to do something for the war effort.

Her initial action was a telegram to President Woodrow Wilson urging him to join the war effort.¹¹⁹ Receiving no reply, in August of 1914, she gathered a small troupe of actors and actresses, and nurses into her personal train cars heading to the front lines of Belgium. Part of the supplies that she took with her were her Renault Town Car, which famously had an icebox and fold-down table, as a stage and distribution center. She stocked her car full of cigarettes, medical supplies, candy, food, and staples from home. Her troupe traveled from hospital to hospital, entertaining the soldiers and delivering much-needed morale to those on the front. She even donated her car to General Joseph Jeffree for use on the battlefield.¹²⁰ In fact, Held said that she would be willing to donate a “dozen cars to be in service to France.”¹²¹ With her car given to the war effort, Held’s troupe continued to travel throughout France and Belgium doing what they did best: entertaining. This was not always legal or encouraged as France outlawed women on the front.¹²² Held, however, paid little attention to the law and continued her important work.

As the war dragged on, so did Held and her troupe. Morale was running low as the war continued and conditions were far from ideal. Trenches and battlefields were constantly

¹¹⁸ Golden, 182.

¹¹⁹ Golden, 183.

¹²⁰ Hoffman, 93.

¹²¹ Golden, 183.

¹²² Margaret H. Darrow, “French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I,” *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 1 (1996): 81.

saturated with rain and mud. Sanitation was poor, with many soldiers succumbing to disease as well as battle wounds.¹²³ Hospitals were poorly run, understaffed with physicians to treat the patients, and supplies were limited.¹²⁴ Held brought much-needed supplies to these makeshift hospitals, which was appreciated more than her troupe's performances. To Held, nurses at the front were the ones who should be admired. She had always been the beautiful ideal of what a woman should be; now she was seeing these real women, doing messy and dangerous work:

Nobody who has not seen the thing can imagine the horrors of a base hospital. It is there that you realize what a frightening thing, a wicked thing, a basely inhuman thing, is war. I am no suffragette, but let me say here and now, women are facing the ordeal magnificently...I have seen these lovely women, most sweet and kind, taking care of these poor men in the trenches. You know these wounded would sometimes lie many days in the trenches before they could be moved...I have seen these women wash and cleanse these poor men, so full of dirt and vermin, they are like angels of the battlefield.¹²⁵

Held saw what the world would come to see; nurses had changed the idea of what it meant to be a woman in the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Socially, war was seen as masculine, but nursing was a delicate profession.¹²⁶ Women worked long hours, in sometimes desolate conditions, to heal the wounded and the sick, countless dying from disease themselves.¹²⁷

¹²³ "Trench Warfare Life in the Trenches 1914-1919," *The National World War I Museum and Memorial*, accessed December 20th, 2021, <https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/wwi/trenches>.

¹²⁴ There are countless articles, websites and books written on the atrocities of World War I and specifically trench warfare. Kansas City, Missouri is home to the National World War I Museum and Memorial (www.theworldwar.org), which has an exhibit solely focusing on trench warfare and nursing.

¹²⁵ Golden, 185.

¹²⁶ Darrow, 83.

¹²⁷ Caroline Todd, "Nurses in World War 1 Helped Changed the Idea of What Women Could Accomplish," *Time*, November 11th, 2018.

Amid the horror, Held realized that gaiety brought relief from the war. She would travel to hospitals and trenches, bringing happy and upbeat music to help the soldiers to forget, for a moment, that they were a long way from home. She handed out sheet music, encouraging the audience to sing along to the popular tunes and often ending with “The Laughing Song” as her performance got everyone rolling in laughter.¹²⁸ Soldiers would beg the nurses to move them where they could see the performance. Held recalled once a man was just coming from surgery and insisted that he be taken to where he could see her perform.¹²⁹

All the good that Held did on the front did not keep her safe from the horrors of war that she encountered daily. She would travel down heavily destroyed roads, through villages in ruins, with enemy soldiers around every corner. Her status as a performer and supplier did not help keep her safe. Once when traveling to the front line, she was captured by German soldiers who accused her of being a spy.¹³⁰ Her saving grace was when one of the soldiers recognized her and, as a fan, swore that she was, in fact, who she said she was. Her own celebrity saved her, and she made sure to get a picture with them to make light of the harrowing experience as a “prisoner.”¹³¹

One of the benefits of not being specifically assigned to the military is that Held could return to her home in Paris to rest and recharge. That said, Paris had its fair share of war dangers as well. Zeppelins would fly through, and air raids were becoming increasingly

¹²⁸ Golden, 186.

¹²⁹ Golden, 187.

¹³⁰ Golden, 187.

¹³¹ Golden, 188.

frequent. Held recalled that she heard “bugle calls and instantly every light in Paris was extinguished.”¹³² Despite the constant fear, Held helped to organize charity events and theater events whose ticket sales went to war relief.¹³³ Although the Paris theater would not allow somber plays during the war, again, Held ignored this rule. Her goal was to keep the actors and playwrights in business, and she advocated for the arts surviving the war.¹³⁴

All her campaigning and advocating was leading to a decline in her health, although people in France and the United States were taking notice of what she was doing. The French referred to her as a “Jeanne d’Arc” for her acts of service on the front line and at home.¹³⁵ She was instrumental in the French Ministry of Foreign affairs accepting the help of the United States and would head back shortly to advocate for France on its behalf.¹³⁶ War changed Held. After the conflict, she became a more serious and mature woman than she was pre-war, and her friends took notice. They insisted that she return to the United States where she could do just as much, if not more, good for the war effort.

¹³² Golden, 189.

¹³³ J. Keeley, “Now She Can Make Her Eyes Behave,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 31st, 1916, 5, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/27532350>

¹³⁴ Golden, 189.

¹³⁵ “Musical Comedy,” *The Spokesman-Review*, December 23rd, 1917, 51, <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/91545902/>.

¹³⁶ Hoffman, 86.

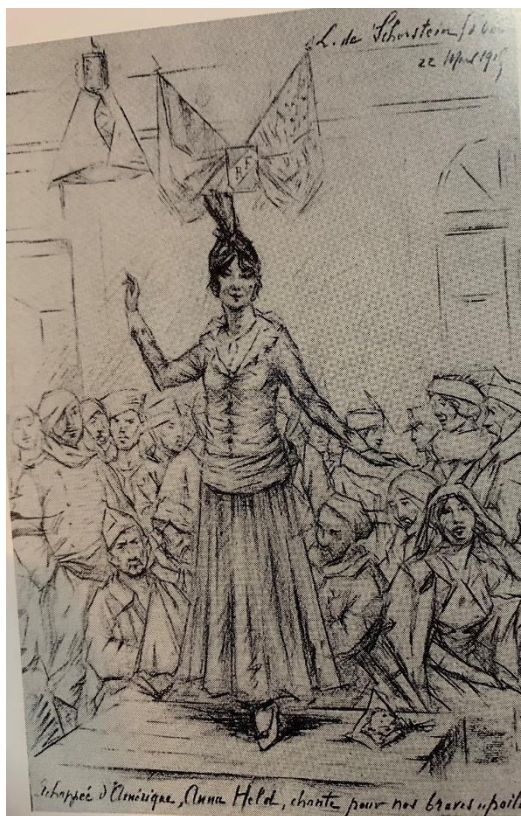


Fig. 2.4. Ink and Pen Drawing of Anna Held Singing in a French Hospital. Anna Held and the Birth of Ziegfeld's Broadway.

In 1916, Held booked passage back to New York. She settled into what would be her final residence, at the Savoy Hotel, and entertained many producers who were eager to collaborate with her. According to her, each producer offered more than the previous one and she finally decided to take an offer from H.B. Marinelli for a vaudeville movie and tour.¹³⁷ The city was in constant flux of renovation for the time, and people were oblivious to the horrors that Europeans were experiencing by the Germans.

When she was resettled, she dove back into society. The young vivacious woman who stole hearts now had become a middle-aged woman; although still beautiful and

¹³⁷ Golden, 192.

captivating, she was wiser. She told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that she was not "the same Anna Held of old."¹³⁸ Her motivations were not to get herself back on stage, but instead to rally Americans to the cause. The New Woman characteristics that had been seen throughout her life culminated in her need to get aid to Europe. Using the rallying cry of "Follow Me!" (which would later become a show) she scheduled engagements and performances of some of the songs she performed for the French soldiers on the front lines and hospitals, as well as a few new numbers.¹³⁹

From there, she traveled to Los Angeles to shoot her first film *Madame La Presidente*, a French farce, which was well received. Despite the movie's success, Held was not a fan of working in front of the camera, claiming that it made her look old.¹⁴⁰ This would be her one and only film. Held donated her entire salary from the movie to the Allied Relief Fund and used her platform to speak of how theaters were the only places that the Europeans could find amusement and relief from the oppression of everyday life.¹⁴¹

After wrapping *Madame la Presidente*, Held went on a four-month tour that would take her through the middle of the United States. Along with performing, she stipulated in her contract that she would be allowed to speak at clubs, town meetings, and charity events between performances.¹⁴² As important as the performances were, these talks became the real driving force behind Held's passion. In New Orleans, she spoke to the New Orleans Press

¹³⁸ Keeley, 5.

¹³⁹ Golden, 194.

¹⁴⁰ Hoffman, 87.

¹⁴¹ Golden, 194.

¹⁴² Keeley, 5.

club and played “newsie” by selling papers for the Belgian Relief Fund.¹⁴³ She spoke throughout the Midwest with a passion about her experiences in France, raising money with publicity stunts, and advocating for the United States to aid the Allies in their effort against Germany. Even though she shared her own horror stories, she urged the people to take the war seriously:

Life has changed me, but it has changed the whole world too. Although you may not realize it in America as yet, you will in time. What has already happened, puts a new face on civilization, creates new ideals for all humanity...In the meantime, let us all do our duty toward humanity. I am trying to do mine.¹⁴⁴

Follow Me and Beyond

Throughout the charity fundraising and speaking engagements, Anna Held knew that her real draw was her own fame and notoriety. She was a Parisian star of vaudeville, ex-wife to famed Broadway producer, Florenz Ziegfeld, and now a war hero and activist in her own right. People flocked to see her, and she in turn wanted to give them a performance tied to her war efforts. She decided to compose a show around her rallying cry of *Follow me!* (1916).¹⁴⁵

The show was picked up by the Shubert brothers and would involve Held as not only the star but also the major investor, under the guise of The Anna Held Production Company.¹⁴⁶ The script was simple: she would play the lead, Claire La Tour, a stereotypical

¹⁴³ “Anna Held, Famous French Actress to Become ‘Newsie’ for the Gazette Next Thursday,” *The Champaign Daily Gazette*, September 28th, 1917, 1.

¹⁴⁴ Keeley, 5.

¹⁴⁵ Golden, 201.

¹⁴⁶ Golden, 200.

French actress who is having an affair with Marquis de Lunay. Like most popular farces at the time, this show would also include a case of mistaken identity as Claire tries to fix the relationship that she has broken.¹⁴⁷ The show was in three acts with new songs by popular composer Sigmund Romberg as well as her staple hits from past shows. New to this performance was a touching call to arms poem that she presented in the second act in which she relayed the horrors that she had seen and faced while on the front lines in France.¹⁴⁸

Using the approach that made her famous and Ziegfeld a household name, Held marketed the production's extravagance. She spent thousands of dollars on her gowns, and she hired nine of her namesake chorus girls plus an additional thirty-four performers to round out the cast.¹⁴⁹ It would be the perfect recipe for success when it opened its doors November 29th, 1916. People craved to see Held back on stage in all her glory, and critics were of equal minds. "Her voice is as peculiar as ever, and her eyes still misbehave as she complains in a new song. The first night audience was immensely pleased."¹⁵⁰ The *Toledo Times* critic wrote:

There is no one today, and there never has been anyone who can do the sort of thing Anna Held does with half the snap, a third the "chic" or a tenth the interest she manages to crowd into the moments on stage.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ Golden, 200.

¹⁴⁸ Hoffman, 98.

¹⁴⁹ Golden, 201.

¹⁵⁰ Golden, 202.

¹⁵¹ Golden, 202.

The show's success was beginning to wane in the beginning of 1917, so Held convinced the Shubert's to allow her to tour *Follow Me!* for as long as she desired and purchased the rights as sole producer.¹⁵² The Anna Held Production Company took to the road, but like any production, it ran into its fair share of financial trouble. Held was paying for this tour out of her own pocket and one of the first big expenses was renting a train to take her company to Milwaukee after a snowstorm waylaid them in the Midwest.¹⁵³ Additionally, she was still heavily invested in wartime relief. After hearing of her car being destroyed overseas, she purchased twenty-four ambulances and sent them to France for aid.¹⁵⁴ Again, all of this was coming out of her own generous pockets.

By April of 1917, the United States finally decided to join the war that had been raging the last three years in Europe, and although Held was critical of President Woodrow Wilson's slow response, she was quoted as saying that "none other has ever been placed in such a position as he is in."¹⁵⁵ With the US finally engaged in the war, Held redoubled her efforts on entertaining and raising money, though at a personal cost to her health. She visited hospitals throughout the country, held charity engagements, and started speaking out about the American duty of the women in wartime, saying they were stronger than European women and thus could contribute more.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Golden, 204.

¹⁵³ Hoffman, 91.

¹⁵⁴ "Anna Held, Famous French Actress," 1.

¹⁵⁵ Golden, 206.

¹⁵⁶ Golden, 207.

Sadly, Held would not see the end of the war; on August 12, 1918, she died of complications from myeloma.¹⁵⁷ The tragedy of her loss was felt by all who admired and loved her. Held always considered herself to be French and she would want to help her people and was even awarded a bronze star weeks before her death from the Serbian Government for all that she had done.¹⁵⁸ To add to the heartache all the work she accomplished to make herself into “The Anna Held” would start to fade not more than two years after her passing.

The effects of her legacy on theater are still seen today but are overshadowed by the success of the man she was associated with, Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr. In fact, *Ziegfeld's Follies* are staple of the musical theater canon and when an image of a chorus girls comes to mind it usually manifests beautiful girls in extravagant outfits. This was Held’s influence, not Ziegfeld. If it were not for her, or her idea to bring a *Folies Bergères* style show to the American audience, one could speculate that Las Vegas Showgirls would be a little more boring. Still, modern audiences know little of how influential Held was on Broadway. There was a brief revival of her impact in the 1970's when MGM released *Ziegfeld, The Man and His Women* (1978), but it told nothing of the important work that she did and spoke only of her beauty and performance.¹⁵⁹

While her work as a producer and entrepreneur was seen in other performers of her time, (notably the women in this thesis, Lillian Russell, and Alice Nielsen), and Held would

¹⁵⁷ “Anna Held Dead of Rare Malady,” *Fall River Daily Evening News*, August 13th, 1918, 9.

¹⁵⁸ “Anna Held Dead,” 9.

¹⁵⁹ *Ziegfeld, The Man and His Women*, directed by Buzz Kulik, featuring Samantha Eggar and Paul Shanar, (NBC, 1978), VHS (1978).

inspire the next generation of singers to assume the mantle for a cause—a model that has reverberated throughout and is especially prevalent in modern times. Held always knew it was her beauty that caught the crowd's attention, but it is her acute ability to connect with people, devotion to charity and dedication to her adopted country that should constitute the person who she was, not just a singer and wife of Ziegfeld. Held was a bridge between the old idea of musical comedy and vaudeville. She was a bridge between the traditional idea of what a woman was supposed to be and what a woman was. She was the bridge to the modern woman: philanthropic, savvy, and talented. All of this could be seen throughout her life and career—especially after her separation from Ziegfeld. She was an absolute model of the New Woman which would inspire others of the time to adopt similar stances in their own life and careers thus inspiring future women in theater to do the same.

CHAPTER 3
LILLIAN RUSSELL:
FROM QUEEN TO SERGEANT

Remembered in history as "America's Beauty," Lillian Russell rose to fame throughout a time of transition. A daughter of a feminist who strove to break gender boundaries, Russell would find success as "The Queen of Comic Opera" repertoire, performing in such classics as Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* (1881) and *Princess Ida* (1884). Though her stunning figure and magnificent voice helped her achieve early success, scandal-making headlines gave her a reputation that kept the public interested. The media was obsessed with Russell, and even when the publicity was unflattering, the name Lillian Russell was in every newspaper in the country. Russell craved the spotlight, and when she retired from the operatic stage, she turned to the media to fill a missing piece of herself. The *Chicago Tribune* gave her a column, which would become syndicated, advising women regarding love, beauty, health, and philosophy. The popularity of her column would launch her on a wildly successful lecture tour. It also allowed her to turn back to her childhood influences and pick up the mantle of activist for gender equality and social reform. When America entered World War I in 1917, Russell did not shy away from her role as an experienced lecturer and writer. She would become a sergeant recruiter for the United States Marine Corps. This work would change the face of the suffrage movement and influence feminist movements for decades to come.

Brought up on Suffrage Milk

Lillian Russell was the daughter of widely known activist Cynthia Van Name Hicks and newspaperman Charles Leonard. As a teenager Cynthia defined the New Woman as she sought her own financial independence in a male dominated world becoming the first woman salesperson in Buffalo, New York.¹⁶⁰ She was outspoken and passionate about injustice, attending gatherings and meetings about inequality throughout her community. At a gathering regarding American Indian lands, she met her husband, Charles Leonard, who shared the opinion that the Native Americans should be able to keep their land, a radical viewpoint in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁶¹ Cynthia would continue her passion for helping others by helping found the first soldiers' home in Iowa for those discharged or injured during the Civil War.¹⁶² Though valued, Cynthia was vocal about her anti-slavery beliefs and highly invested in the suffrage movement beginning to take root in the United States. So naturally, this made the townspeople uncomfortable and refer to her as a "social reformer," a badge she wore with pride.¹⁶³ Cynthia and Charles welcomed little Helen Louise (later Lillian Russell)" December 4, 1861, in Clinton, Iowa– shortly before moving to Illinois.¹⁶⁴ When the Leonard family moved to Chicago, Cynthia continued with the suffrage movement. She organized benefits and helped found the Chicago branch of the Sorosis, a women's club

¹⁶⁰ Armond Fields, *Lillian Russell: Biography of "America's Beauty"* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1999), 7.

¹⁶¹ Fields, 8.

¹⁶² Fields, 8.

¹⁶³ Fields, 9.

¹⁶⁴ Lewis Clinton Strang, "Lillian Russell," *Prima Donnas and Soubrettes of Light Opera and Musical Comedy in America* (Boston: L.C. Page and Company, 1900), 33.

dedicated to civic matters and literature and the first women's organization to bring up the topic of suffrage as one of interest for the city.¹⁶⁵ Though her focus on equality was righteous, it was detrimental to her family. So focused Cynthia was on her projects, she often neglected her children and was driving a wedge in her relationship with her husband.¹⁶⁶

After the Great Chicago Fire in 1871, the Leonards relocated to New York City. While there, Cynthia had begun correspondence with famed suffragette Susan B. Anthony and was intent on pursuing her passion for the suffrage movement.¹⁶⁷ There does not seem to be any direct references to Russell or her sisters participating in Cynthia's activities, but it did put a strain on their family. The strain caused by Cynthia's involvement created a rift between Charles and left him with much of the childrearing.¹⁶⁸ At that time, Russell began singing in the choir at church and was discovered to have a beautiful voice. Hoping to encourage that talent and keep Russell out of trouble while at rallies and meetings, Cynthia sought lessons for her daughter with teacher Dr. Leopold Damrosch, a celebrated violinist and founder of the New York Symphony Society.¹⁶⁹ Damrosch took on voice students selectively and accepted Russell as a favor to her mother.¹⁷⁰ Damrosch's studio was located near many local theaters and clubs, and Russell, discovering her own independence, would begin to explore them while working on auditioning.

¹⁶⁵ Maureen A. Flanagan, "Suffrage," *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, accessed January 11, 2022, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1217.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Fields, 11.

¹⁶⁷ Fields, 11.

¹⁶⁸ Fields, 10.

¹⁶⁹ Strang, "Lillian Russell," 37.

¹⁷⁰ Fields, 13.

Though Cynthia's political views were extremely liberal, she was very conservative in her religious beliefs.¹⁷¹ This militance led to Cynthia finding a home in the more aggressive parts of the suffrage movement. Her discipline carried over to her daughters' lives as well. Cynthia controlled everything in their lives, from lessons to relationships. She took a "spare the rod, spoil the child approach," often taking Russell's shoes as a punishment and giving them to poor children.¹⁷² These punishments greatly affected Russell, whose behavior would be disruptive, canceling shows last minute, lashing out at managers, or befriending castmates just too late to have them fired.¹⁷³ One could speculate that these outbursts were a cry for freedom and the need for control, though she testifies in her biography with *The Cosmopolitan* magazine that she grew up with an air of freedom, as long as it was not disruptive.¹⁷⁴

Russell sought to gain a sense of control and freedom by pursuing a life made of her own choices. Cynthia, now separated from her husband, did not hold a job, as work with the suffrage movement kept her busy.¹⁷⁵ In order to afford the life she wanted she had to achieve some financial independence, so Russell had to work. She balanced her job as a candy store worker with auditioning; however, Russell's auditions happened in secret. According to her mother, the places that paid performers were considered "dens of depravity," and were not appropriate for a young lady.

¹⁷¹ Lillian Russell, "Beginning-Lillian Russell's Reminisces," *The Cosmopolitan*, February 24, 1922, 23.

¹⁷² Russell, "Reminisces," 23.

¹⁷³ Fields, 22.

¹⁷⁴ Russell, 25.

¹⁷⁵ Fields, 14.

**There is No Such Thing as Bad Press:
The Media and the Making of Lillian Russell**

Russell was always a pretty girl and only grew in loveliness, physically and vocally. She was "buxom" and reflected contemporary tastes of the day. (fig. 3.1) ¹⁷⁶ When Russell had a chance to sing for legendary impresario Tony Pastor (1837-1908), he quickly realized he had a star on his hands and immediately began to build influence for Russell. He had her sing songs that required audience participation, paid plants (clagues) in the audience to encourage encores and distributed her picture at every performance.¹⁷⁷ He also insisted that she learn a new song for every performance and gave her an in-theater rival to increase her allure.¹⁷⁸

In 1880, Russell found success with Pastor, and she quickly realized that she no longer needed a maternal figure. Pastor gave her the stage name of Lillian Russell and added "the English Ballad Singer" to feed on the audience's love of English and European culture.¹⁷⁹ She performed nightly at Pastor's theater, hiding all her activities from her mother. Her new freedom also came when theater roles were changing, especially regarding gender. Through the help of the media and the public's admiration, Russell would become independent, both financially and creatively.

¹⁷⁶ Russell, 92.

¹⁷⁷ Fields, 24.

¹⁷⁸ Fields, 24.

¹⁷⁹ Russell, 14.



Fig. 3.1 Lillian Russell in a costume from *The Brigands* highlighting her “buxom” figure. From her autobiography “Reminiscences” from *The Cosmopolitan*, March 1922.

Russell received great acclaim from reviewers, including one from the *New York Times*, explaining the quality of her voice: "Her style of singing is somewhat too explosive, and she is overfond of vibrato. But one must not expect a Schumann singer in operetta."¹⁸⁰ With the overwhelming success of *Patience* (1882), Lillian brought the idea to Pastor that an opera company could be founded around her. He enthusiastically agreed, and on April 10, 1883, the Lillian Russell Opera Company opened its debut season.¹⁸¹

As successful as Russell was becoming, she was still at the whims of the many men around her. When she wanted to renegotiate her contract with Pastor for her namesake

¹⁸⁰ W.J. Henderson, “Music,” *The New York Times*, January 3, 1897, 31.

¹⁸¹ Fields, 32.

company, he was not interested. The disagreement ended two weeks into the company's premiere and its debut show, *Billee Taylor* (1883) by Edward Solomon.¹⁸² Pastor refused to draft a new contract for Russell, so Russell left the company and Pastor behind. This financial revolution was beginning to gain traction with other female workers of the time as women were gaining more socio-economic standing.¹⁸³ Hand-in-hand with the suffrage movement and as well as the first wave of feminism, women were realizing the income disparity they had in the job market.¹⁸⁴ For Russell—a New Woman from birth—to take control of her career, demand to be paid what she was worth, and ultimately choose to pursue other avenues was not just revolutionary but a true example of the changing times. She would use her freedom to pursue different theatrical avenues away from Pastor, but with her freedom, other male managers whom she had worked for were scrambling to claim her career and success as their doing.¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the public was on her side. The local newspaper came to her defense, stating that she was smart enough to make decisions for herself but to make sure to get a man who could negotiate contracts for her.¹⁸⁶

Even though the press appeared confident in Russell's ability to manage her own career (except for contracts), they were eager to circulate any scandal that could be attributed to her. Once the dispute with Pastor had blown over, the press waited anxiously for the next

¹⁸² Fields, 33.

¹⁸³ Claudia Goldin, "The Quiet Revolution That Transformed Women's Employment, Education and Family," *Richard T. Ely Lecture* 96, No. 2 (May 2006): 4, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/goldin/files/the_quiet_revolution_that_transformed_womens_employment_education_and_family.pdf

¹⁸⁴ Goldin, 2.

¹⁸⁵ Fields, 34.

¹⁸⁶ Fields, 34.

tidbit they could get about this rising star of the opera world. Unfortunately, she ran into legal trouble with her new theater manager, Colonel John McCaul, who sued her for breach of contract. The press ate up the drama, especially with news of her impending nuptials to the *Billee Taylor* composer, Edward Solomon, and the rumor they were fleeing to England to be together.¹⁸⁷ Even though these accounts painted an unflattering portrayal of Russell, it did keep her in the papers and as such, in the public eye. When Russell did leave for Europe the media was heartbroken, but it allowed Russell to create a clean start, rediscover her passion, and ignite her international career.

Russell returned to New York in 1885, hoping to re-establish herself as a force in the comic opera world.¹⁸⁸ Unfortunately, due to her growing reputation of being "Airy Fairy Lillian" for breaking her contracts, she was met with numerous closed doors. Russell's name was back in the papers, not for performing, but for her associations with the men in her life. This was not the publicity that she was seeking but again, there is no such thing as bad press. The public was again enthralled with Russell, and when yet another scandal broke, the papers and the public took her side. The media saw Russell as the scorned woman, trapped in a toxic marriage, who finally would be free to pursue her theatrical goals on her terms.¹⁸⁹ The positivity in the media would allow her to defy the bonds of her station and gender, being invited to elite parties with families such as the Vanderbilts, both as a performer and an attendee. She recalls an early experience,

¹⁸⁷ Though this is partially true, they were also looking to escape the reputation of managers and theatres. Solomon was under fire for criticizing the actors of his shows, and Russell wanted to flee from the troubles, lawsuits, and her mother. Fields, 37.

¹⁸⁸ Fields, 44.

¹⁸⁹ "The Modern Solomon," *The Boston Globe*, September 24, 1886, 2.

I was engaged professionally to sing at a beautiful residence in Newport. It caused an interruption in my holiday, but I had double interest in accepting the engagement. I could make use of the money and I could get a glimpse of social life which might be of use to me in my profession.¹⁹⁰

Being recognized was only one of Russell's career aspirations; she wanted to be the best. She started curating her image, ensuring she was in the right places—restaurants were her favorite place to be seen—and employing expert opera teachers to keep her voice in shape.¹⁹¹ Working with a publicist, she pandered to her growing demographic, young and middle-aged women, who were coming to the theater more. She had her picture taken in costume and distributed across the city. She was featured in magazines, such as *The Cosmopolitan*, and her shows became known as social events where women could be unescorted.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Russell, 94.

¹⁹¹ Fields, 50.

¹⁹² Fields, 60.



Fig. 3.2 Lillian Russell as the Baroness in *The Grand Duchess* (1890). Here she is seen in her magnificent sleigh that was pulled on stage during a paper snowstorm. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library

Her stardom was secured when she opened Offenbach's *opera-bouffe*, *The Grand Duchess of Gerlostein* (1890) at the Casino Theater. Her role as the Baroness highlighted her voice, her beauty, and her celebrity by staging grand entrances, including arriving on stage in a sleigh surrounded by paper snow.¹⁹³ Again, the public and the press were enthralled. *The New York Dramatic Mirror* raved saying, "Everybody looked forward to something astonishing in the way of scenic effects, but very few persons if any, expected Lillian Russell

¹⁹³ Morrell, 96.

to burst forth as a regular royal queen of the operatic stage...but not one of the French Women ever sang as well or looked as handsome as our own Lillian.”¹⁹⁴

Russell’s most famous aria entitled, “Here is my blessed father’s sword” was also known to American audiences as the saber song. In this aria, Russell’s character, the Duchess, gives her father’s saber to a handsome soldier, Fritz, who she becomes enamored with. In doing so, she raises him to the rank of sergeant, lieutenant and finally, captain before sending him off to war.¹⁹⁵ The war, however, is a false war, made up to entertain the Duchess and her court chamberlain. It is fitting that Russell’s best loved song is about inspiring young men during war time as she would go on to that very thing twenty-seven years later.

The aria is triumphant in nature, featuring a military march of staccato eighth notes in the accompaniment to mimic a snare drum. The vocal line, in the verses, sits in the mid voice recitative style while the Duchess explains to Fritz about her gift.

¹⁹⁴ Morrell, 97.

¹⁹⁵ Jaques Offenbach, *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein*, English Lyrics by Adrian Ross, vocal score (London: Boosey & Co, LTD, 1897), i.

Moderato. S GRAND DUCHESS.

1st VERSE. Here is my bles - sed fa - ther's
2nd VERSE. Here is my bles - sed fa - ther's

NO. *p.*

sword. Take it and wear it at your side! Strong is your arm to strike or
sword, Take it and wear it at your side! And when the vic - to - ry is

pp

The image shows a musical score for the aria 'Grand Duchess'. It features a vocal line at the top and a piano accompaniment below. The tempo is marked 'Moderato.' and the key signature has one sharp (F#). The piano part includes a snare drum-like accompaniment in the right hand, marked with a piano (*p.*) dynamic. The lyrics are: '1st VERSE. Here is my bles - sed fa - ther's' and '2nd VERSE. Here is my bles - sed fa - ther's'. Below the piano part, there are two lines of lyrics: 'sword. Take it and wear it at your side! Strong is your arm to strike or' and 'sword, Take it and wear it at your side! And when the vic - to - ry is'. There is a small musical inset for the piano part showing a triplet of eighth notes marked with a piano-piano (*pp*) dynamic.

Fig. 3.3 The opening of “Here is my blessed father’s sword”, from the *Grand Duchess*. The score highlights the military march in the piano that is notated to mimic a snare drum. From the International Music Score Library Project.

For as whimsical as this aria is, the lyrics are very sentimental, with The Duchess giving the gift to a stranger with her blessing. She tells of the time that her mother would bless this saber in the hopes that her father would return home with the final verse saying,

And when the victory is scor’d, safe
and uninjur’d homeward ride!
Were you brutal bullets bored
or should a sword your life divide,
My peace could never be restored,
sorrow would be over by my side.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ Offenbach, *The Grand Duchess*, 93-94.

Little did Russell know how true these words would echo into a time when she herself would prepare to recruit and send hundreds of young men off to war.

With the success of the *The Grand Duchess*, Russell became the “Queen of Comic Opera” and it had its perks, as she signed a contract with T. Henry French, who offered her an opportunity that Russell could not refuse: the revitalization of The Lillian Russell Opera Company.¹⁹⁷ In addition to bringing the company back to life, he guaranteed that Russell would be the only star, and she would get fifteen cents from every sale.¹⁹⁸ This arrangement would feed the New Woman part of Russell and set her up to become financially and creatively independent, thus allowing her the luxury to pursue other passions.

Suffragist, Progressive, and Marine Corps Sergeant

Russell was drawn to the political arena—an unconscious holdover from her childhood. Her fourth husband, Alexander P. Moore, had direct ties to Theodore Roosevelt. So, when Roosevelt was campaigning for election against William Taft of the Progressive Party, Moore and Russell were active supporters.¹⁹⁹ An already progressive Russell combined her passion for Roosevelt with her interest in the suffrage movement saying, "election of Theodore Roosevelt means an advancement of one hundred years for women in this country and the world. It will mean there will be legislation for women."²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Morell, 108.

¹⁹⁸ Morell, 108.

¹⁹⁹ Morrell, 280.

²⁰⁰ Morrell, 281.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, Russell's mother was heavily involved in the women's rights movement in the early twentieth century. This movement was much more than a fight to vote. It was a fight for equality in the workplace, pay, and, of course, theater. Elizabeth Cady Stanton started the movement in 1848 but found new life with Susan B. Anthony in the 1850s.²⁰¹ By 1907 the suffragette movement had changed from focusing on feminine equality and a progressive agenda to including socialism and racial equality. Still, the most critical factors were equal rights for women, voting, and earning a living wage.²⁰² Many women accepted this cause, but celebrities like Russell, who used her fame to advance the cause, would be an essential part of the movement's success.

Raised with the ideals of the New Woman and social equality, it is no surprise that Russell became an active player in the movement. She believed that if women could pay taxes, they should be allowed the same privileges as men who do the same.²⁰³ She also believed that women should be given the chance to hold office, stating, "If it be charged that we are not competent to hold office and to govern our fellows, I only refer you to the great women in history who have succeeded in positions of trust and power, even sovereignty of nations."²⁰⁴

Her reputation as an authority on health and beauty would serve her well as she picked up the mantle of the suffragette. Russell was seen as the standard of the turn of the

²⁰¹ Ellen Carol Dubois, *Suffrage* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc, 2020), 34.

²⁰² Dubois, *Suffrage*, 167.

²⁰³ "Lillian Russell Is A Champion of Suffrage," *The Pittsburgh Press*, May 5, 1911, 8.

²⁰⁴ "A Champion of Suffrage," 8.

twentieth-century woman.²⁰⁵ Early suffragettes were labeled as old and ugly by the media, and those who took up the mantle were seen as unfeminine and trying to take away the social role that women had always upheld.²⁰⁶ For Russell to become a face of the movement, it reassured the public that femininity was not in danger.²⁰⁷ *The Suffragist*, a newspaper written by the National Women's Party, backed her opinion and her participation, saying "if there was any doubt that the movement was feminine as well as feminist, it vanished the day Lillian Russell joined up."²⁰⁸

Her appearance in the dramatic comedy, *In Search of a Sinner* (1910) only solidified her role as a suffragette and New Woman. In this role, Russell, who played Georgina Chadbourne, searched out a more sinful life than her domesticated one at home. She cheated, lied, and stole her way to an eventual happy ending. The play was never intended to be a slapstick type comedy, but instead a more tongue-in-cheek approach to the male-female relationship at the turn of the twentieth century as well as poking fun at the Victorian standards for women of the time.²⁰⁹ Russell made a speech, as Georgina, that would not have been out of place at the convention and rallies held by suffragette sisters and would solidify her to the public on the side of equality and change. The primary quote to take away from her soliloquy would be, "Women were born to fight and win and glory in winning."²¹⁰ This

²⁰⁵ "Actress in Tights," *The Boston Globe*, October 15, 1893, 16.

²⁰⁶ Winifred Conkling, *Votes for Women! American Suffragist and the Battle for the Vote* (New York: Algonquin, 2018), 144.

²⁰⁷ Leslie Goddard, "Women Know Her to Be a Real Woman: Femininity, Nationalism and The Suffrage Activism of Lillian Russell," *Theatre History Studies* 22 (2022): 142.

²⁰⁸ "New Members of the Advisory Council," *The Suffragist*, February 27, 1915, 3.

²⁰⁹ Fields, 167.

²¹⁰ Fields, 167.

statement would launch her into a whole new arena in the public eye—one which would take on the injustice of inequality.

Russell's new public role as suffragette had her participating in fundraising events to raise money for the cause and other social reform movements. She was asked to speak at suffrage meetings and participated in demonstrations such as a “Suffrage Day” voting exhibition.²¹¹ The exhibition, which allowed men and women to vote together, demonstrated how women voting would not cut into their other household duties as “it only took Lillian Russell one and a half minutes on the opening night” to cast her vote.²¹² Her activities eventually began to extend outside the realm of suffrage.

In 1912 she began her tenure as a columnist for *The Chicago Tribune*, where she offered beauty advice, but she also used her platform to convey her views on the New Woman. In one of her most popular articles “As a Man Thinketh,” she spoke to the fears that women had of not being physically attractive enough for their husbands. She wrote that men often prefer beauty over brains as “beauty need not tire them and brains always keep them up to the mark.”²¹³ She reminded women that true beauty is a combination of both beauty and brains, and that it is a failing to not encourage them both. She ended her article with an empowering quote: “True Beauty is an incalculable force and should be used by the brainy woman as are all others for her forces, to make the world better.”²¹⁴

²¹¹ “Long Island Women Active at 'Made in the U.S.A. Exhibit,'” *Times Union*, March 9, 1915, 7.

²¹² “Long Island Women,” 7.

²¹³ Lillian Russell, “As a Man Thinketh,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, 1911, 8.

²¹⁴ Russell, 8.

By this time, Russell's ideology was about more than just campaigning for the right to vote; it was a campaign for fundamental human rights. Her lectures included what her audience wanted to hear, tips on beauty and staying young, but more, she used her lectures as a platform for her politics.²¹⁵ She was a progressive humanitarian who entertained the idea of running for mayor of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Once again, she would be following the New Woman footsteps of her mother, who had run for mayor of New York City in 1888.²¹⁶ She did not shy away from these rumors, outlining the platforms she would endorse in *The Boston Post*.

1. She advocated for abolishing children's labor and increasing access to universal education.
2. She strove to help teach women how to select nutritious meals and establish a market where food could be affordable for poorer mothers.
3. She spoke of societal reforms, starting with Pittsburgh. She wanted employment for all, including women.
4. She wanted to implement a program to help women in prison.
5. She focused on cleaning up the city's streets.²¹⁷

When America entered World War I in 1917, Russell decided to become a fundraiser and recruiter for the United States Marine Corps. America officially entered World War I on April 2, 1917, and a few weeks later, Russell was approached by Navy recruiters asking for her help. They needed someone to perform and speak on the Navy's behalf and help sign up young men as recruits.²¹⁸ She enthusiastically agreed to a two-year term of service as

²¹⁵ Morrell, 291.

²¹⁶ Alan Dale, "Lillian Russell for Mayor? If She Ran for Office, She would Follow Her Mother's Example" *Boston Sunday Post*, April 2, 1916, 51.

²¹⁷ "Lillian Russel for Mayor," 51.

²¹⁸ Peg Sullivan, "Tabasco, Gunpowder, and T.N.T.: America's Beauty Lillian Russell and the Marine Corp," *Military Collector & Historian* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 133.

recruiting sergeant.²¹⁹ Russell went to McKeesport, Pennsylvania, where she reported they had enlisted 250 men in one of her first events.

As I stepped upon the platform, which was built in the middle of a public square, I saw before me about ten thousand people. It had started to rain and umbrellas were raised. I shouted, "Men and women-our boys are knee-deep in mud in the trenches in France, fighting for you and me. It's raining there. Do those boys have umbrellas?" In five seconds every umbrella was down, and in less than five minutes, the rain had stopped.²²⁰

Her fame and performance background served her well in her recruiting. She made impassioned pleas after performances for men to come and enlist for their country, crying, "come to the call of Uncle Sam and enlist to fight for their old fathers, their mothers, sisters, and sweethearts and save them from the atrocious Germans."²²¹ She reported that thousands of men would rush the stage to be signed up. She appreciated everyone who she recruited, and when raising money by selling liberty bonds, Russell ensured that she bought a bond for every soldier that she helped.²²²

Though her role as recruiter was public and highlighted her outspoken support for the need for soldiers, she still wanted to nurture her maternal side in regard to the war effort. In November 1917, Russell created the War Mothers Council and converted her home into shops and schools.²²³ There she and her friends would "foster" regiments that were stationed

²¹⁹ She is the only woman in history to hold this title. Sullivan, 134.

²²⁰ Russell, 108.

²²¹ Russell, 108.

²²² Russell, 108.

²²³ J. Keeley, "Beauty is as Beauty Does," *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*, November 25, 1917, 21.

in Pittsburgh, giving the French lessons to prepare them for camps in Paris.²²⁴ She constructed her curriculum in a way that would be most beneficial to them, forgoing grammar and formality. What was important was the ability to communicate. It was reported that after two months of French lessons, the boys could express "every possible want that may confront him while he is 'over there.'"²²⁵ When it came time for the regiments to ship out, she gifted each soldier a book of French lessons to stay up on what they had learned. In addition, she gave them comfort kits that included tobacco, cigarette paper, pipe, and "tidy boxes" for the soldier's belongings.²²⁶ Each of these gifts and preparations were received in the front yard of Russell's Pittsburgh home.²²⁷

²²⁴ Keeley, "Beauty is as Beauty Does," 21.

²²⁵ Keely, 21.

²²⁶ Keeley, 21.

²²⁷ Keeley, 21.



Fig. 3.3. Advertisement in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Nov. 10, 1918, advertising her traveling vaudeville show that would raise money for bonds and wounded soldiers.

Throughout 1918, Russell focused on her patriotic duty as a recruiter. She traveled the country wearing her military uniform, encouraging men to enlist and women to volunteer. In an appearance in Buffalo, New York, in July, she was quoted as saying, "the draft is wonderful, but to go out as a volunteer is a greater honor, and now boys come on, I want you in the game...I want you to claim the greatest title after the war, that of being a volunteer."²²⁸ Eventually, her work got the attention of the Vaudeville Keith Circuit, and a show was put together to help spread the word about the need for bonds and bring attention to the war effort. Though she would be performing, she referred to this tour as "strictly patriotic."²²⁹ She needed to press upon people that the war was not over and that more would need to be done,

²²⁸ "Lillian Russell Puts Punch into Marine's Drive," *The Buffalo Times*, July 30, 1918, 3.

²²⁹ "Punch into Marine's Drive," 3.

especially for those soldiers returning home wounded. She made sure to be good as her word, and she generously donated her salary to wounded soldiers in rehabilitation centers.²³⁰

Russell's Final Bow and Legacy

Russell's patriotic tour saw standing room only for every performance.²³¹ Audiences recognized what Russell had accomplished during the war and respected her for it. For her final performance, she was met with a five-minute standing ovation, which started before she stepped foot on stage, stopped briefly in awe of the star when she stepped on stage, and then began again.²³² When she retired from performing, she wanted to settle down with her husband and participate in a slower lifestyle.

Her role as an outspoken advocate for inequality called her back to the theater world as she was summoned to New York to help advocate on behalf of her colleagues. Actors' Equity was formed to protect actor rights and when it was time for contracts to be renewed by theaters and actors, the two groups could not reach an agreement.²³³ The actors wanted to be paid for holiday performances as well as any additional performances that were outside their contract, but producers fought against these demands.²³⁴ Three major contributors to the theater world were selected to represent the Actors' Equity: Francis Wilson, Eddie Foy, and

²³⁰ Fields, 195.

²³¹ Fields, 195.

²³² Fields, 195.

²³³ Robert Simonson, "When Actors' Equity Staged Its First Strike," *American Theatre* March 1, 2013, Accessed January 27, 2022, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2013/03/01/when-actors-equity-staged-its-first-strike/>.

²³⁴ "Broadway Dark as Actors' Strike Closes 12 Theatres," *Daily News*, August 8, 1919, 4.

Lillian Russell.²³⁵ By September, the strike was resolved, and Russell returned to a life of domestic bliss.

Though the time following the strike was slower for Russell, she was still active in politics, campaigning for Warren Harding and exposing the “falsity and misrepresentation of the League of Nations.”²³⁶ Russell and Moore were in Harding’s social circle and after a year of Harding’s presidency, he offered Russell a position as special commissioner on immigration in 1922.²³⁷ Russell’s career gave her a special interest in immigration. At the beginning, Russell adopted a more liberal stance since she performed frequently for diverse audiences and she thought it her job to bring cheer and elegance to poverty-stricken people who would come to see her.²³⁸ Throughout her rise to fame, she would see the struggle of those newly arrived in America and her heart went out to them, especially for the children.²³⁹

Upon return from an extensive European tour, Russell expressed her shock at the conditions of those seeking refuge in America, saying that they arrive “heartsick, despondent, ignorant as animals to what will be done with them, how after their poor pennies saved up to get them here...to be sent back to their old time European squalor.”²⁴⁰ Her new perspective would evolve into a radically conservative viewpoint that echoes modern political talking-

²³⁵ Fields, 196.

²³⁶ “Lillian Russell to Go on Anti-League Tour,” *Daily News*, September 16, 1920, 3.

²³⁷ Fields, 199.

²³⁸ “What will the Stage Star do with So Many Children,” *The New York Herald*, January 29, 1922, 74.

²³⁹ “What will the Stage Star do,” 74.

²⁴⁰ “What will the Stage Star do,” 74.

points about—overcrowding, crime, and job security.²⁴¹ Russell felt that prior to World War I much of the people immigrating to the United States were under duress and hoping to escape persecution and war. She states that “that stage has long passed, and it is a fact that immigration of recent years has been from the class of people which arrests rather than aide the development of any nation.”²⁴²

Her solution to the perceived issue would be to enact a five-year ban on immigrants and then put in place an examination the party would have to pass before entry. She would also have the sponsoring relative submit any and all police records dating to their first arrival in the United States. She also called for a law to make it a felony for any resident to falsely sponsor an immigrant who was not of blood relation.²⁴³ Her controversial ideas were based on her opinion that America had entered a new age; one where it was a world power and that it needed intelligent, hard working people on its shores, not those who would bring difficulties. She was quoted as saying, “The melting pot has been overcrowded. It has boiled too quickly and is running over. It would be better to put out the fires under it and allow its contents to solidify before adding more raw material.”²⁴⁴ Russell’s plan would never be put into action and the appointment would be short lived as Russell died from an injury sustained that same year.²⁴⁵

²⁴¹ Harry Ward, “Lillian Russell Finds Immigrant Horde is Menace to United States,” *The Springfield News-Leader*, April 23, 1922, 15.

²⁴² Ward, “Menace to United States,” 15.

²⁴³ Ward, 15.

²⁴⁴ Ward, 15.

²⁴⁵ “Songster is Dead,” *The Topeka State Journal*, June 6, 1922, 1.

While her final act of political involvement is seen as conservative and a hot topic of discussion in today's political climate, her views while growing up were extremely liberal and forward-thinking. As much as Russell adored the limelight, she longed for a platform where she could shine outside the stage. She received requests for engagements from women's groups to speak to them about health, beauty, relationships, and philosophy, thanks in part to her popular column. In March 1915, for example, she made an appearance at Grand Central Station in New York and spoke to a group of women who called themselves "The Twilight Sleep Association."²⁴⁶ This group was focused on women's rights in childbirth and advocating for the use of drugs during the process. Twilight sleep referred to women choosing to be drugged so much that they slept through labor and waking with no memory of it taking place.²⁴⁷ That might be appealing to some; but it was about more than the mere use of drugs, it was a fight for a woman's right to bodily autonomy—a right that women continue to strive for even 115 years later.

Just as the fight for bodily autonomy continues into the present day, a great deal of Russell's other ideals holds fast. The contemporary ideas of universal healthcare and education are consistently being argued among American political leaders and are often polarizing campaign promises from elected officials. She believed strongly in helping the poor and advocating for affordable food options. Not only does access to food correlate to the poverty level in areas, but it can also determine the quality of education, climate,

²⁴⁶ Morrell, 289.

²⁴⁷ Sarah Laskow, "In 1914, Feminists Fought for the Right to Forget Childbirth," *Atlas Obscura*, February 23, 2017, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/twilight-sleep-childbirth-1910s-feminists>.

incarceration, and more.²⁴⁸ She knew that women, especially those in poorer areas, needed access to these fundamental rights just to survive, let alone thrive.

She also realized the need to empower other women. Her articles, though in the guise of womanly advice, were savvy reads that gave insight into the worlds of both health and beauty and strove to defy traditional gender norms. In her article “No Old Maids,” she calls for the abolishment of the term old maid.²⁴⁹ “Just because a woman is unmarried does not make her an old maid,” Russell stated, “she is still a person and very capable of generosity and good spirit.” She ended the article with a warning “self-reliance is very praiseworthy, but it is very lonesome.”²⁵⁰

She realized that everything that men could do, she could do just as well, in heels, and a fantastic costume. In her lecture tour “How to Live to 100 years and Still Die Young,” she spoke of how important fitness was to overall health and then proceeded to demonstrate her punching bag routine in a velvet gown and pearls.²⁵¹ She is still the only woman to hold the official rank of sergeant recruiter and her work was so respected that she was given full military honors when she died.²⁵² She gave everything that she had to her recruitment efforts, relying on her strength as a performer to inspire the public to her causes, and the public loved her for it.

²⁴⁸ Hunt Allcott, et al., “Food Deserts and the Causes of Nutritional Inequality,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol.134 (November 2019): 1793, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjz015>.

²⁴⁹ Lillian Russell, “No Old Maids,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 26, 1912, 19.

²⁵⁰ Russell, “Old Maids,” 19.

²⁵¹ Fields, 180.

²⁵² “Lillian Russell Laid at Rest with Military Honors,” *The Evening World*, June 8, 1922, 2.

From her beginnings as “Airy Fairy Lillian” to the “Queen of Comic Opera” to a decorated officer in the military, Lillian Russell was an inspiration. She was the standard for women performers in the early days of Broadway and women in theater still look to her for inspiration. In 1940 there was a movie musical made about her life entitled *Lillian Russell*, and Marilyn Monroe famously posed as Russell in the December 1958 volume of *Life* magazine.²⁵³ Today, Russell’s influence can be seen throughout the theater world. Female Broadway and opera singers have found their voices to speak up about inequality and gender rights as well as their own right regarding their contracts. Russell embodied the outspoken New Woman while modeling the standards of Victorian society. Though Russell will always be known as “America’s Beauty,” her work as an advocate for inequality and for women in general echoes into our modern day, especially regarding bodily autonomy. Russell, as a fully realized New Woman, left a legacy that still resonates through theater history.

²⁵³ *Lillian Russell*, directed by Irvin Cummings (20th Century Fox, 1940), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gh8EINL6IU8>; Richard Avedon, “Fabled Enchantresses,” *Life*, December 22, 1958, 139.

CHAPTER 4
ALICE NIELSEN:
A NEW WOMAN OF OPERA

The influence of Alice Nielsen (1872-1943) on comic opera and professional advancement can be seen today owing to her popularity and reputation at the beginning of the twentieth century. She started as a young girl roaming downtown Kansas City, Missouri singing on the streets, and quickly grew a following that allowed her to move from musical comedy to grand opera. While never calling herself a feminist, Nielsen inherently embodied the ideals of the New Woman; independent and driven, yet also caring and feminine. Throughout her life she advocated for the advancement of her career by lingering near music hall doors, demanding auditions, and developing working relationships with the biggest names in the industry. Due to her tenacity, Nielsen became a primary producer and founder of two opera companies. Her successes allowed her to travel to Japan and befriend geisha, to use her celebrity to highlight female composers in her recitals, and to encourage the development of young talent by establishing a scholarship for female singers. As the United States entered World War I in 1916, she used her fame and talent to raise funds for The American Red Cross. It was these ideals that, as a New Woman in the opera world, helped to open doors for more future female opera and theater professionals.

Born in Nashville in the mid-1870s, the accounts of Nielsen's early life do not start until her arrival in the Kansas City area in the late 1870s.²⁵⁴ The family settled in the Quality

²⁵⁴ Dall Wilson, *Alice Nielsen and The Gayety of Nations* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu Press, 2017), 21.

Hill District of Kansas City, near the stockyards that had seen an explosion of growth due to the railroad.

While her siblings attended school, Nielsen preferred to spend her time wandering downtown Kansas City outside the saloons, theaters, and clubs, singing as she went. Since it was a major stop on the Missouri Railroad, Kansas City saw its share of theater troupes and stars and Nielsen was determined to join them.²⁵⁵ Her favorite haunt was the famous Coates Opera House near what is now Broadway and 10th.²⁵⁶ Nielsen would often try to sneak through the backstage door into the theater productions at Coates Opera House, though she was often forced out by the theater owner.²⁵⁷ The time that she was able to successfully sneak on stage gave her an unintentional theatrical debut.

Even though her debut was to an empty house, her singing was already giving her a bit of celebrity as “That Nielsen Girl,” but she had her first big break when meat-packing tycoon Jacob Dold first discovered her in 1886. Upon exiting a saloon, he heard her singing outside and hired her to sing for his daughter's birthday party.²⁵⁸ The experience was a bit of a surreal adventure for her. The Dolds sent a carriage for her and delivered her to the birthday party at their mansion.

²⁵⁵ Felicia Hardison Londré, *The Enchanted Years of the Stage: Kansas City at the Crossroads of American Theater, 1970-1930* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 3.

²⁵⁶ Wilson, 14.

²⁵⁷ Alice Nielsen, “Born to Sing,” *Collier's*, June 18, 1932, 9.

²⁵⁸ Nielsen, 9.

I had my first carriage ride behind proper horses. That, believe me, was a day of days. [Mrs. Frances Dold] led me upstairs and put a muslin dress on me. Then downstairs again, they huddled around to listen to the ‘child who sings in the streets.’²⁵⁹

Nielsen’s performance at the Dolds’ allowed her to become more than just a singing bystander. While Mr. Dold discovered her, Mrs. Dold became her unofficial promoter and manager for Nielsen and thus gave her the confidence she needed to pursue larger roles. This would be the jumping off point for her career and would be her first encounter with women who influenced her career independence and would likewise influence the lives of other young singing women.

Advocating for Her Own Success

Though Nielsen had begun to achieve success as a professional singer, she had yet to have the opportunity to find herself on stage. She would soon get her chance in the year’s most popular show, thanks in part to her preparation and tenacity. This debut would jump start her career as well as set her up for future success as the owner of the Alice Nielsen Opera Company. When Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Mikado* premiered in New York in 1885, it was exceptionally popular. Mikado-mania swept the nation, influencing everything from interior design to fashion.²⁶⁰ To capitalize on the show’s success, every company, professional or not, programmed *The Mikado*, and people were chomping at the bit to play the lead roles of Nanki-poo (tenor) and Yum-Yum (soprano).²⁶¹ Nielsen had memorized *The*

²⁵⁹ Wilson, 31.

²⁶⁰ Warren Clements, “Mikado-mania: Two films inspired by a comic libretto that took the world by storm,” *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), March 31, 2011, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/mikado-mania-two-films-inspired-by-a-comic-libretto-that-took-the-world-by-storm/article623895/>.

²⁶¹ “The Mikado!” *Salina Daily Republican-Journal*, May 29, 1896, 4; “At the Theaters,” *The Topeka Daily Press*, February 13, 1896, 1; “The Mikado,” *The Tuskaloosa Gazette*, January 9, 1985, 3.

Mikado and was ready at a moment's notice to fill in for any role if the occasion should arise.²⁶² Her ambition and preparation paid off when one morning she arrived at the Gillis Opera House to wait by the doors for any opportunities that might arise. That day, she learned that the actor playing Nanki-Poo had died. She jumped at the chance to play the role, as the producer was casting a female as a pants role and ran to the stage manager for an audition.²⁶³ By her own account, the director swore he needed to sign her to the company before anyone else found her.²⁶⁴ Had she not been ready to play Nanki-Poo, her break into the world of opera would not have happened. It was her preparation as well as her resolve that would lead her to further operatic success.

Her successful debut as Lucia in Donizetti's *Lucia Di Lamamoor* in 1885 at the Tivoli Theatre garnered the attention of Henry Barnabee, the bass-baritone of the famed traveling opera group, The Bostonians.²⁶⁵ Again, Nielsen as an independent woman, took her career aspirations in her own hands. After The Bostonians finished a performance at The Baldwin Theatre in San Francisco, Nielsen grabbed Barnabee at the stage door and asked to sing for him. He invited her into the theater where she sang for him and his colleagues, William MacDonald, and Marie Stone.²⁶⁶ At the end of the audition they simply rose and left the

²⁶² Nielsen, 19.

²⁶³ Nielsen, 19.

²⁶⁴ Nielsen, 36.

²⁶⁵ Wilson, 86.

²⁶⁶ Nielsen, 41.

theater. Undeterred, Nielsen returned to The Tivoli and celebrated her successful audition for The Bostonians with the chorus.²⁶⁷

Nielsen heard nothing from The Bostonians for two weeks after her audition. Finally, the Saturday before they left town, a contract was delivered to her for the salary of fifty dollars per week, a twenty-dollar raise from The Tivoli.²⁶⁸ The contract detailed that she would be hired for the performance of ingenue roles and the cover of the soprano roles.²⁶⁹ Barnabee praised her saying, “her fresh young voice, sympathetic face and vivacious personality could not long remain hidden, anywhere,” and cast her in a new show, *A Wartime Wedding* by Oscar Weil.²⁷⁰ The show was poorly received, but Nielsen received positive reviews with the press calling her:

A piquant little senorita, with mischief enough in her composition to spoil a convent full of girls. What little singing she had to do, concerted and other, was executed very nicely. She will prove an acquisition to this company.²⁷¹

Her successful engagement with the group would lead Nielsen to the acquaintance of composer Victor Herbert, and their partnership would be the downfall of the Bostonians who would disband shortly after her departure. The impending business venture would allow Nielsen the opportunity to expand her roles to producer, creative director, and performer of her own company, paving the way for future successes as a female theatrical entrepreneur.

Founder, Producer, Performer

²⁶⁷ Nielsen, 41.

²⁶⁸ “The Stage,” *Detroit Free Press*, November 5, 1885, 4.

²⁶⁹ Nielsen, 43.

²⁷⁰ Wilson, 89.

²⁷¹ Wilson, 91.

Early in Nielsen's career she realized that she was subjected to the dictates of the male dominated theater world in regard to her casting and performance choices. She was already proving to be a dynamic name in opera and her independence in regards to her career were inspiring her to do something new. Nielsen decided that she "knew of nothing that was preventing her from starting her own company" and so she did.²⁷² In 1891, she recruited and employed a quartet of singers which she named the Chicago Church Choir Company to capitalize on the out-of-town and marketing already associated with the popular Chicago Choir Opera Company.²⁷³ They took to the road with a variety-style show called *Penelope*.²⁷⁴

Variety shows were incredibly popular at this time and offered both comic and popular songs with disjunct plot lines.²⁷⁵ *Penelope* was no different. The company put together the show with no formal rehearsals, singing together as they traveled on the road to San Francisco making multiple stops along the way to secure performances for paying audiences to cover their travel costs.²⁷⁶ To raise funds for their journey to San Francisco, the company headed to Omaha's Eden Musée, where for a dime, audiences could watch a variety of acts for as long as they could stand. Though their run was short, an extremely useful

²⁷² Nielsen, 36

²⁷³ Wilson, 55.

²⁷⁴ Lewis Clinton Strang, "Alice Nielsen," *Prima Donnas and Soubrettes of Light Opera and Musical Comedy in America* (L.C. Page and Company: Boston, 1900), 18.

²⁷⁵ Katherine Preston, "American Musical Theatre Before the Twentieth Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Music, Third Edition*, ed. William A. Everett and Paul Laird (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 45.

²⁷⁶ Nielsen, 36

collaboration comes out of their time in Omaha with pianist and trombone player, Arthur Pryor, who joined the company as the director until reaching San Francisco.²⁷⁷

Not long after her arrival, Nielsen's talent would take center stage as the prima donna with The Bostonians. *The Serenade* (1898), by Victor Herbert, was a hit for the company and audiences loved this new star with a "round face and thoughtful eyes."²⁷⁸ Nielsen quickly found success with the group, but when differences involving pay, jealousy, and favoritism arose, Nielsen decided to separate from The Bostonians and start the Alice Nielsen Comic Opera Company.²⁷⁹ As illustrated many times throughout her life, this would be the proverbial "boot" that would spur her to rediscover her own self-reliance and make her an emerging force as a feminine leader in the well-established canon of opera.

The Alice Nielsen Comic Opera Company adopted an unconventional approach to its performances using the mantra of "new music, new singers, new ideas, new methods."²⁸⁰ This is in contrast to her previous companies, primarily The Bostonians, who traditionally relied on the same singers and shows over and over again.²⁸¹ Nielsen wanted a show that was completely new, with music written specifically for a certain voice that could act as well as sing. All new company members auditioned for company composer Victor Herbert so he would know where to write the vocal line to positively influence the sound and production.²⁸²

²⁷⁷ Nielsen, 22.

²⁷⁸ Wilson, 107.

²⁷⁹ Nielsen, 15.

²⁸⁰ Preston, 618.

²⁸¹ Preston, 618.

²⁸² Wilson, 147.

These young singers were presented unamplified thus bridging the gap between traditional opera and musical comedy.

Several of Nielsen's colleagues from The Bostonians came with her, including the bass, Eugene Cowles, and business manager, Frank Perley.²⁸³ Unlike her previous company venture, she was not leaving without a plan, but already had a show lined up for the premiere. Her success in *The Serenade* prompted Herbert to write a new operetta starring Nielsen entitled *The Fortune Teller* (1898). Nielsen headlined a star-studded cast, which featured other well-known singers and actors, a sixty-person chorus, a ballet, and full orchestra.²⁸⁴ Unlike other prima donna-named companies that were controlled by men, such as the Lillian Russell Opera Company, Nielsen's position would be three-fold: a prima donna originating a role, producer, and creative director. Her new role allowed her to be "fussed over by the librettist and the composer" as well as assisted in the costuming, staging, and casting of the performers.²⁸⁵

²⁸³ Preston, 65.

²⁸⁴ Nielsen, 142.

²⁸⁵ Wilson, 149.



Fig.4.1 Alice Nielsen in her Hussar Uniform from *The Fortune Teller* (1898). From Public Domain.

The success of this production and her company fell on her shoulders, so she made sure this show displayed her best talent and designers. She would, obviously, be the prima donna, and bass Eugene Cowles would be the love interest.²⁸⁶ The story was typical of other musical comedies at the time, semi-revue, semi-operetta. Notably, Nielsen plays three look-alike characters: Musette, a gypsy girl, Irma a ballet student, and later the twin brother of both the girls. As for the book, Herbert called it his “best music that had the worst words,” as so much of the original show was improvised.²⁸⁷

An excellent example of this would be from the first act with Irma (Nielsen) entrance. Accused of having slept through rehearsal by the other ballet students, Irma rebuts the

²⁸⁶ Wilson, 151.

²⁸⁷ Wilson, 151.

accusation stating that she “always does what she is told” and thus is a good and happy girl. Beginning with recitative Herbert highlights the first appearance of Nielsen allowing her to soar in her upper passiago.²⁸⁸ Though the music is uplifting, the lyrics allude to the roles that women of the time are forced into, that of the obedient woman.

That it doesn't matter what a girl may wear, or how she looks;
She never should be frivolous, she never should be bold.
My grandma said, “my darling always do as you are told.”²⁸⁹

The chorus shifts to four-part harmony as Irma adopts the air of a preacher speaking to the congregation that women are happy when they are obedient. The congregation responds in kind, by echoing her lesson ala church hymn style.

²⁸⁸ Victor Herbert, *The Fortune Teller* (New York, NY: M. Witmark & Sons, 1898), 29.

²⁸⁹ Herbert, *The Fortune Teller*, 30-31.

Girls

Al-ways do as peo-ple say you should, You nev-er can be hap-py child un-
 Al-ways do as peo-ple say you should, You nev-er can be hap-py child un-

Count, Fresco & Matosin.

! do as I am told, I'm just as good as gold, And I
 I did as I was told, Was just as good as gold, And it

less you're good. She does as she is told, She's just as good as gold, And we
 less you're good. She did as she was told, Was just as good as gold, And it

Fig.4.2 “Always do as people say you should,” Chorus from *The Fortune Teller* (1898).
 From the International Music Score Library Project.

The irony in this lesson is that in one song later, Irma defies her own logic to trick the army and decides to dress as her twin brother Fedor, who is thought to be a military deserter. This song seems to resonate with Nielsen’s own life and career as she grew up being told what to do and how to perform but she takes it upon herself to determine her own path both financially and in regard to her career.

All these elements and Nielsen leadership lent to the success of *The Fortune Teller* where this genuine approach and realism of the characters drew large crowds and favorable critiques including her hometown paper, *The Kansas City Star*. Nielsen was now a notably established tour de force for women in what had always been a male dominated industry.

After her successful tour of North America, rumors began to circulate about Herbert's next comic opera featuring Nielsen and her company. By July 1899, the company began planning for Herbert's newest piece entitled *The Singing Girl*.²⁹⁰ *The Fortune Teller* and *The Singing Girl* rotated performances that required Nielsen to sing two shows a day on days there was a matinee scheduled. Though the schedule was vocally tiring for her, it allowed her and the company to grow artistically with the media declaring the independently female run, Alice Nielsen Comic Opera Company had surpassed The Bostonians in fame.²⁹¹

A New Woman of the World Gives Back

While Nielsen's company was praised for its performances and success, behind the scenes, Nielsen was locked in a battle with previous backers Williams and Perely. As a result, Nielsen parted ways with Perely after performances in London. The separation led to a new career direction for Nielsen, but also saw the end of her namesake company.²⁹² Though The Alice Nielsen Comic Opera Company dissolved not long after Nielsen's departure, her popularity and influence as a New Woman would extend past the reach of opera and musical comedy. Before the premiere of *The Fortune Teller*, Perely arranged a tour of the Pacific

²⁹⁰ Wilson, 181.

²⁹¹ "Drama and Music," *Times Union* (Brooklyn), October 29, 1898, 6; "Theatrical," *The Pittsburgh Press*, February 26, 1899, 14.

²⁹²Nielsen, 49.

Islands to highlight her rising fame and get her in the papers *à la* Ziegfeld's publicity of Anna Held.²⁹³ She traveled to Hawai'i where she met and performed for the last queen, Lydia Liliuokalani, who was a talented composer herself.²⁹⁴ From there, they traveled to Japan, where Nielsen would write essays about her adventures overseas.

She grew especially fond of the Japanese way of life, especially in regards to women performers. With her essays, Nielsen provided a look at the authentic way of life in the Pacific Islands and Japan. In the December 11th, 1898 edition of *The Kansas City Journal*, Nielsen tells of her time visiting an "Oriental prima donna."²⁹⁵ Her recount gives a stark contrast to the romanticized American idea of Japan, posing the question, "Japan has no music of her own, so why have any great singers?"²⁹⁶ She asserts to the reader that Japanese music and opera are very real and worth hearing, despite how different they are from the opera she knows.

While on tour in Yokohama, she encountered a group of geishas. Both parties were enthralled with each other, as she was a "public performer in your own land, and the geisha see many foreign women in this country, we seldom meet with one who takes part in public entertainments."²⁹⁷ The women conversed and reveled in their differences, exchanged outfits, and swapped stories of their lives as performers. Nielsen's recollection of the experience avoids romanticizing or fetishizing the culture or seeing the geisha as merely an attraction,

²⁹³ Wilson, 134.

²⁹⁴ Wilson, 135.

²⁹⁵ "Alice Nielsen In Japan," *Kansas City Journal*, December 11, 1898, 16.

²⁹⁶ "Japan," 16.

²⁹⁷ "Japan," 16.

and instead represents their true nature as highly trained female entertainers who work hard at their craft:

A great portion of these girls are daughters of the samri [*sic*], the soldiers or knights who were attached to the households of the great lords under the feudal system... These soldiers' daughters are proud of their ancestry and a number of them wear on their costumes the coat of arms of the houses... Their movements are given as much prominence in Japanese periodicals as are the doings of the brightest operatic and dramatic stars in this country...²⁹⁸

She also developed a deep love and appreciation for the music, going so far as explaining how western music was trying to fit the Japanese music in the same theoretical boundaries, however; many of the songs she experienced were written in four-four time and performed so slowly to convey the emotion that it would feel if it was written in eight-eight.²⁹⁹ Nielsen would recount more of her experiences in essays entitled "Geisha Girls" and "How to brew a perfect cup of Japanese Tea," and they speak in admiration of the Japanese people and her time with them as not only a visitor but as a colleague. The experience profoundly influenced Nielsen's life and her writing on the subject showed that she could be both feminine and formidable force in the theatrical world.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ "Alice Nielsen in Japan," 16.

²⁹⁹ "Miss Nielsen Tells of Japanese Music," *The Kansas City Times*, January 29, 1899, 11.

³⁰⁰ Wilson, 138.



Fig. 4.3 An example of a song sung at openings at schools, notated in the western style from the article “Miss Nielsen Tells of Japanese Music.” *The Kansas City Times*, January 29th, 1899.

Nielsen’s interest in people and stories had been present throughout her life. Her ability to network and advocate for herself allowed her to meet people from a variety of diverse backgrounds, and her traveling gave her access to other cultures. Her deep understanding and empathy, as well as her celebrity standing, prompted her to give back to the people that she cared so deeply about. When the United States entered World War I, Nielsen, like Lillian Russell and Anna Held, used her fame to fundraise for organizations that would help the soldiers at home and abroad. While Held entertained and aided Belgian troops and Russell worked with the Marines, Nielsen dedicated her attention to the women of The American Red Cross. Once again demonstrating the needed influences for woman helping women.

The American Red Cross, founded in 1881 by Clara Barton, saw exponential growth in the advent of World War I with the number of chapters growing from 107 to 3,864 by

1918.³⁰¹ The need for nurses and funding was desperate and Nielsen would become a major contributor to the Red Cross's \$400 million raised in funds and materials.³⁰² Nielsen felt that it was important to contribute to the war effort saying, “I am deeply interested in war work. There is so much that desperately needs to be done and I want to do my full share. I especially want to help the Red Cross. I cannot sew or knit, but I can sing and my services are to be had for asking any time I can help.”³⁰³



Fig. 4.3 Alice Nielsen in her Red Cross Costume from her performance in Glenn Falls, NY. The Charlotte News, March 31, 1918.

³⁰¹ “A Brief History of the American Red Cross,” *The American Red Cross*, accessed February 21, 2022, <https://www.redcross.org/about-us/who-we-are/history.html>.

³⁰² ” A Brief History of the American Red Cross.”

³⁰³ Wilson, 661.

In April of 1918, Nielsen would be invited to represent America at The Entente Allies' Music Festival in Charlotte, North Carolina. This two-day event was a patriotic celebration highlighting performers from allied countries, including the Russian Symphony Orchestra, and New Zealand soprano Frances Alda, with all funds benefiting The American Red Cross. Leading up to the final festival, Nielsen organized a benefit tour concert featuring her most popular numbers, with the ticket sales benefiting those local Red Cross chapters. Her first appearance, at the benefit in Glenn Falls, New York, raised \$1,600 for the chapter and was reported to be the largest and most successful patriotic affair that Glenn Falls had ever experienced.³⁰⁴

She never appeared more wonderful than that night when she danced to help the wounded. And all her company appeared to enter the spirit of the event. They were working for a cause which they felt to the depths of their hearts and they showed by every move how anxious they were to help. The Pavlowa performance netted just \$14,000 for the Red Cross fund.³⁰⁵

Each consecutive performance would raise equally impressive funds for local city chapters. The performances sold out in every city, and she radiated joy in each performance, knowing that she was truly doing her part for a noble cause.

Inspiring the Future New Women

As stated previously, Nielsen had a great compassion for people and appeared to be particularly drawn to the endeavors of women. From the geisha in Japan to the Red Cross,

³⁰⁴ "Miss Nielsen for Red Cross," *The Charlotte News*, March 31, 1918, 3.

³⁰⁵ "Artist Help Red Cross," *The Kansas City Times*, December 1, 1914, 1.

she was a proud supporter for the advancement of women. In a series of recitals, she performed pre-and post-World War I, she performed works by female composers, such as Amy Beach and Liza Lehman. In the early 1900s, women were beginning to make a name for themselves in higher education circles and their success was comparable to that of men in the same field.³⁰⁶ Regardless, men still were composers of note and frequently programmed on recitals and concerts. Nielsen understood what it took for women to get ahead in the music and theater world, and she made it a point to feature modern women composers. In a concert performance in 1918, she rearranged her concert set to have Lulu Jones-Downing join her on stage to highlight her work as one of the growing groups of women composers of the age.³⁰⁷ In her subsequent recitals, Nielsen would make a point to program, *The Weathercock* by Liza Lehman and other songs cycles by the composer as the final set in her performance.³⁰⁸

Part of Nielsen's admiration for women came from her own experiences, as she was quoted as saying "in the crucial moments of my life some woman has always played an important part. Never was a singer so fortunate than I in having huge helping hand of women."³⁰⁹ To look back at her life, this would be true. She was helped in her first professional performance by a woman, taken under the tutelage of the soprano Ida Valgera, befriend and coached by the legendary Italian actress Eleonora Duse, and would come to

³⁰⁶ Jill Halstead, *The Woman Composer: Creativity and the Gendered Politics of Musical Composition* (London: Routledge, 1997), 5.

³⁰⁷ Wilson, 660.

³⁰⁸ "Nielsen Singer in May Concert," *The Shreveport Journal*, May 3, 1916, 2.

³⁰⁹ Wilson, 683.

celebrate and cultivate the talents of other musical women.³¹⁰ Nielsen worked with Dr. Daniel Sullivan at the College of New Rochelle in New Rochelle, New York, off and on for a few years and when he mentioned wanting to set up a fund for the encouragement of young talent. Nielsen jumped at the chance to give back.³¹¹ Using her connections to papers from around the country, Nielsen would raise the necessary funds to establish The Alice Nielsen Scholarship which would pay for the tuition for one year of study with Dr. Sullivan.³¹² The first recipient would be a young soprano named Nancy O'Dell who was said to have an “unusually beautiful” voice and hand-picked as the winner by Nielsen.³¹³

Though there does not seem to be further reports of future scholarships, Nielsen continues to promote women and herself for the rest of her career. She authors a syndicated article on what it takes for a singer to become a prima donna and when an old teacher from her time in Italy decides to come out of retirement, she authors another syndicated article promoting her talent and their time together. Even now, she inspires future opera singers with her sensitive and lyrical performances in recordings as Tosca in Puccini's *Tosca* and Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto*.³¹⁴

Today, Nielsen's name might be all but forgotten, but with the recent reopening of the Kansas City Museum, the public can experience the lavish life that Nielsen led through her

³¹⁰ Nielsen, 41; Nielsen, 49.

³¹¹ “The Alice Nielsen Scholarship,” *Musical Courier*, April 17, 1924, 6.

³¹² “Scholarship,” 6

³¹³ “Nielsen Scholarship Awarded,” *Musical Courier*, August 28, 1924, 18.

³¹⁴ Daniel Melvin, “‘Vissi d’arte’ by Alice Nielsen 1910,” YouTube video, 3:21, June 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4QOuDATCcY>; Jack Stanley, “Rigoletto...E il so dell’ anima...Alice Nielsen and Florencio Constantino..1907,” YouTube video, 3:22, August 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIuPv4otQJw>.

collection of gowns and costumes. Though she did not consider herself a New Woman or a suffragist, she held to the ideals of the New Woman when it came to her career. She held fast to her independence and her drive made her extremely successful. Still, she was caring and concerned about helping other women to achieve their goals. Her trailblazing idea of being the producer, director, and prima donna was novel for her time, but can be seen much more readily today. The notion of a theater group founded, produced, and run by a woman is not as common as it should be, but it is more common than it was. Kansas City boasts several women-led companies, including Landlocked Opera, Opera Kansas, and the Lyric Opera of Kansas City. It is not limited to just Kansas and Missouri either; Opera Modo in Detroit, Winter Opera St Louis, and Portland Opera all feature a female staff.³¹⁵ These organizations also give back using outreach programs that highlight the work of composers and celebrate the joys of theater in area schools. Though they may not realize it, Nielsen helped pave the way for women to have more control of their careers and share their passion for theater and culture through the arts. Through these types of efforts as well as the exhibits, like the ones at The Kansas City Museum, a new generation will be able to be inspired by the legacy of the great soprano, Alice Nielsen.

³¹⁵ “About,” Landlocked Opera, accessed March 6, 2022, <https://www.landlockedopera.org/about/>; “Our People,” Opera Kansas, accessed March 7, 2022, <https://operakansas.org/our-people/>; “Staff,” Lyric Opera of Kansas City, accessed March 6, 2022, <https://kcopera.org/about/people/staff/>; “Modo Team,” Opera Modo, accessed March 6, 2022, <http://www.operamodo.com/new-page/>; “Contact us,” Winter Opera Saint Louis, accessed March 6, 2022, <https://www.winteroperastl.org/about-us/contact-us/>; “About,” Portland Opera, accessed March 6, 2022, <https://www.portlandopera.org/about/>.

CONCLUSION

In the United States, the beginning of the twentieth century was a period of transformation. New policies governing working conditions, a period of revival between the Civil War and the start of World War I, and the ratification of the 19th amendment were catalysts for the oppressed.³¹⁶ For women in theater, this was an ideal time to find their voice and to begin to rise from the societal gender roles to which they had been assigned. Female performers would embrace the role of the New Woman, realizing the role that society had pigeon-holed them into was ripe for liberation.

The restrictions that had been placed on theatrical women to be pretty and silent had begun to be broken. They realized they had a voice, and that voice could be used to change the world and situations around them. As public figures, theatrical women would become figureheads and role models for other New Women of the time. Lillian Russell, for example, used her celebrity as a bully pulpit regarding gender discrimination and social reforms.³¹⁷ Anna Held, passionate about her ability to help her home country, used her fame to raise funds and rally support for the war that was raging in Europe.³¹⁸ These two women knew the power that they had over the public and the influences that they placed on America's involvement in World War I. Alice Nielsen's celebrity and fame would inspire other women to take their careers into their own hands, realizing that opportunity does not always fall onto

³¹⁶ Peter F. Drucker, "The Age of Social Transformation," *The Atlantic Monthly* 274, no. 5 (1994): 53.

³¹⁷ Kevin Clarke and Kurt Gänzl, "Lillian Russell (1860-1922) Revisited: The Amazing Life of a 'Scandalous' Operetta Diva," Operetta Research Center, April 5, 2020, accessed March 27, 2022, <http://operetta-research-center.org/lillian-russell-revisited-amazing-life-19th-century-operetta-diva/>.

³¹⁸ Oliver B. Pollak, "Anna Held," *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, Jewish Women's Archive, December 31, 1999, accessed March 27, 2022, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/held-anna>.

one's lap.³¹⁹ These traits echo into the ongoing fight that women in all careers must struggle with to this day.

The idea of financially independent women was still novel at the time, with just 2.5% of women working outside the home and a gender-based wage gap of 33%.³²⁰ This wage gap, though smaller today, is something that women still experience, with a vast majority of women earning eighty-four percent of what a man would earn doing the same job.³²¹ For the women in this thesis to be able to financially provide for themselves would be impressive, but for them to thrive and to be philanthropic is extraordinary, especially in the difficult, contract-based world of theater. As the model of the New Woman, Held, Russell and Nielsen established themselves as not only powerful and popular performers, but highly intelligent businesswomen. In the current influencer culture, their ability to amass millions of dollars as well as run successful businesses is a trait that modern day performers can reflect on and be inspired by.

Nielsen's success paved the way for other women to step into the realm of the producer in the time leading up to the golden age of musical theater. Reeling from the end of World War I and the stock market crash of 1926 as well as the advent of movies, theater had begun to shift away from the vaudeville circuit in the 1930s.³²² Though economically

³¹⁹

³²⁰ Claudia Goldin, "Gender Gap," *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics*, The Library of Economics and Liberty, accessed March 26, 2022, <https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/GenderGap.html>.

³²¹ Amanda Barossa and Anna Brown, "Gender Pay Gap in U.S. held steady in 2020," Pew Research Center, May 25, 2021, accessed March 26, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/25/gender-pay-gap-facts/>.

³²² Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2007), 164.

depressed, two women—Hallie Flanagan and Cheryl Crawford—found their niche as producers on Broadway.³²³ Each of them had to face their share of setbacks and challenges, such as pushback from male playwrights and directors, but would make significant contributions to the success of theater going into the 1940s.³²⁴ These women would continue the groundbreaking work that Nielsen did in paving the way for women producers to work in theater. In fact, at the 2019 Tony Awards, three of the four top awards were given to women creative teams. What is even more, the New Woman persona is modeled in their everyday fight against the implicit biases, such as the idea that producing is not a feminine job.³²⁵

In the face of adversity often found in theater it is without a doubt that each of these women were charismatic, highly intelligent, beautiful, and socially aware. They each knew that they could help set up the future for success if they encouraged the right people. From raising funds for a noble cause, to advising other women on the ways of the New Woman, we can see the roots they planted in the performers of today. Women in theater are still marginalized and while charity events are considered normal for them to attend, not all of them use their voices to speak out about injustice. The influences of the New Women can be seen in actresses Sarah McLachlan used her famous face and popular song “Angel” as an outspoken advocate for the American Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

³²³ Barbara Means Fraser, “Hallie Flanagan and Cheryl Crawford: Women Pioneer Producers of the 1930s,” *Women in American Musical Theater: Essays on Composers, Lyricists, Librettists, Arrangers, Choreographers, Producers and Performance Artists*, ed. Bud Coleman and Judith A. Sebesta (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2008), 35.

³²⁴ Fraser, 36.

³²⁵ “On Broadway: Female Producers Making Moves,” Curmudgeon Group, November 21, 2019, accessed March 26, 2022, <https://curmudgeongroup.co/on-broadway-female-producers-making-moves/>.

(ASPCA).³²⁶ The campaign was so successful that it raised thirty million dollars in just the first two years after it was released.³²⁷ Parallels can easily be drawn between her and any of the women in this thesis, especially those of Anna Held or Lillian Russell in their ability to use their music to raise money for noble causes. In opera, mezzo-soprano J'nai Bridges, faces discrimination not only due to her gender but also do her race. The injustice she has faced inspired her to use her celebrity and voice to advocate for racial equality. Much like the suffragettes of her day, she appeals to the masses by relying on the media to help spread the message. Using social media as her tool, she holds panel discussion with her fellow Black singers about the discrimination they have faced and how they can combat it in the future.³²⁸

It is to be noted that while all three of these women created their own opera and theatrical companies, not all of them were successful. The ability to successfully create a business venture from the ground up, especially in the arts, even now is risky. Alice Nielsen's first theatrical troupe only made it halfway to their destination before disbanding due to finances and programming disputes.³²⁹ As one could guess, a blow like that to a dream could be devastating, but instead, she learned from her mistakes and made sure that all the pieces were in place with the founding of her namesake company. This experience ended up

³²⁶ Samantha Lefave, "Sarah McLachlan Reveals the Truth About Those Sad ASPCA Ads," *Redbook Magazine*, January 4, 2016, accessed March 27, 2022, <https://www.redbookmag.com/life/pets/news/a41805/sarah-mclachlan-aspca-commercial/>.

³²⁷ Lefave, "Sarah McLachlan."

³²⁸ Joshua Barone, "Opera Can No Longer Ignore Its Race Problem," *New York Times*, July 19, 2020, 8 AR.

³²⁹ Alice Nielsen, "Born to Sing," *Collier's*, June 25, 1932, 22.

shaping her into much more than just a soprano with a pretty voice, but into a full-fledged entrepreneur and producer, a role that is traditionally held by men on Broadway.³³⁰

Anna Held, Lillian Russell and Alice Nielsen, were trailblazers at the time where musical comedy and operetta were coming into their own, but it is not only for their performances that they should be remembered. The three women laid the foundation for the modern female performer of today, from the ability to negotiate their own contract, to starting their own company. For Held and Nielsen, they are associated with men who were famous for the time, but it was really these women who launched Ziegfeld and Herbert into success. For Nielsen, her association with Victor Herbert allowed him to enter fully into the operatic lexicon. As for Held, she made Ziegfeld the man that he has become in the musical theater canon. Though the concept of the New Woman was seen as off-putting and highly unfeminine, it allowed them to truly come into their own. By embracing the traits of independence, justice, and femininity, and bringing it to their careers, these women deserve to be remembered for the work they did to allow others to do the same.

³³⁰ Nielsen, "Born to Sing," 22.

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VITA

Erin Gilmore was born October 17, 1983, in Honolulu, Hawai'i. A daughter of naval parents, her family moved frequently until settling in Emporia, KS where she would grow up. She attended Emporia State University where she graduated with her Bachelor of Arts in Music in 2011 and her Master of Music in Vocal Performance in 2013.

In August 2018, she decided to follow her passion for music history and entered the Master of Music in Musicology at University of Missouri-Kansas City. Currently residing in Kansas City MO, she works for Ascend Learning in Leawood, KS and maintains an active voice studio.

Since moving to the Kansas City Area in 2013 she has been a principal artist with the American Opera Studio performing art songs and arias in the performances of *Broadway In the Garden* and *The Annual Passport Series*, as well as additional solo engagements around the Kansas City Metro. In 2019, she traveled to Spain and Portugal to perform the role of La Ciesca in *Gianni Schicchi* with The American Opera Studio. Other notable roles she has performed recently, Madame Pompous from *Too Many Sopranos* with American Opera Studio (KS), Mercedes from *Carmen* with Landlock Opera (KS), Miss Jessel from *Turn of the Screw* with Red River Lyric Opera (TX).

Ms. Gilmore is currently the soprano section leader at John Knox Kirk Presbyterian Church. Upon completion of her degree, she plans to pursue further musicology research regarding the turn of the twentieth century opera and musical theater and attending conferences. Ms. Gilmore is a member of the American Musicology Society.