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THE RISE AND FALL OF THE THEATRICAL SYNDICATE IN AMERICA

by

LeAnn Horn Greer

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF DRAMA

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis was to study the detrimental and beneficial effects of the Theatrical Syndicate which existed in America from 1896 to 1916. Little was done previously in the way of investigating the merits of the Syndicate.

Developed because of a need for structuring booking activities, the Syndicate enlarged itself and enveloped the theatre just as big business in other areas extended itself and swallowed up independents.

The Syndicate's usefulness was over in 1916 and it died for many reasons but there had been a positive influence on American theatre because of the organization.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The American Theatrical Syndicate existed from 1896-1916. Because of the Trust, as it was also called, the American theatre became organized. During the twenty years of its operation, its influence was exerted over actors, managers, producers, playwrights, and the theatre audience throughout the United States. Even though it was a major factor in the development of American theatre, standard histories on the subject have devoted relatively little space to the Syndicate. No book has been written that is devoted solely to the subject of the Trust. The most comprehensive study of the Syndicate is Monroe Lippman's doctoral dissertation from the University of Michigan. It, however, is essentially a historical study.

Most often when the Syndicate is mentioned, it is spoken of in uncomplimentary terms. Being a commercially oriented organization, it has been accused of denying theatrical "art" in preference to box-office success. Claims have been leveled against its denial of production of worthy American drama. Writers have accused the Trust of prohibiting talented actors to appear. That the

Syndicate held a strangling control on managers and their theatres is another objection. It is further asserted that competition was stifled by the monopoly and that the Syndicate dictated what the audience could and could not see.

While the Trust had some detrimental effects on theatre, it is not guilty of all the accusations made against it. Artistic productions were done if they could be successful at the box office. American dramatists did receive production of their plays and became more financially successful than they had been in the past. Actors were able to enjoy more security in knowing that they could work steadily and for better wages. Theatre buildings became safer, cleaner, and more modern. Theatre managers enjoyed respectability and prosperity. Although competition was certainly not encouraged, it did exist. The biggest competitor of all, the Shubert Brothers, "arrived" on Broadway during the existence of the monopolistic Trust and eventually superceded the Syndicate in importance and number of theatres controlled. The American audience got to see anything it was willing to pay for and was as much an influence on what the Syndicate produced as the members of the organization themselves were.

This thesis will study the Syndicate's operations. It will show that the Trust was a natural outgrowth of the

theatrical conditions of the time, that it paralleled the growth of big business in other areas, and that its death was as natural as its birth. Begun because of a need for organization in 1896, it was disbanded because it had outlived its usefulness in 1916. This study will show that during its years of operation the Syndicate was more beneficial than harmful to American theatre.

CHAPTER II

THE RISE OF THE SYNDICATE

The idea of a theatrical syndicate was a natural outgrowth of the chaotic theatrical conditions that existed in America during the 1890's. The resident stock company (1752-1820) had been replaced by the visiting star system (1820-1868) which had been replaced by the combination or traveling company. A traveling company required centralized booking and theatre managers were required to come to New York to negotiate dates for their respective theatres. Company managers often double-booked attractions; theatre managers did likewise in order to insure at least one attraction on a particular date. Actors could not depend on beneficial routes or even that they would be able to get back to New York should the company close. Their salaries were unstable, and their working conditions were undesirable. A state of chaos generally existed in all phases of theatrical activities. Writing about the country's economic conditions, Jack Poggi states, "there was an obvious need for a more centralized system of booking. Soon after the combination system was established, theater managers in certain areas began grouping their houses into

circuits, so that they could send one representative to New York to do the booking for a string of theaters" (1966:10). The managers were then able to get better productions for their theatres.

The Idea of a Trust

Just where the idea of a trust originated cannot be stated with any degree of accuracy. Although there were earlier monopolies, historians George Freedley and John A. Reeves state that "it is not until the reign of the Theatrical Syndicate that we find anything comparable" to the management of Thomas Killigrew and William D'Avenant in England between 1682 and 1695 (1955:162). Tom Davey, who managed theatres in New Orleans, is sometimes credited with the idea as far back as 1865. Theatre manager Robert Grau states the first important effort to create a trust was made by Joseph Brooks, James B. Dickson, and Silvester M. Hickey, three well-schooled managers who had begun to attract attention individually and who together brought out many of the important productions and stars of the 1870's. Nat Goodwin, a famous actor of the era, feels that Jack Haverly of minstrel fame was the originator of the scheme and that his idea was used by Charles Frohman when Haverly did not live to see it through (Goodwin 1914:101). Still another attempt was headed by Joseph Brooks in 1895 when he, James H. McVicker, and Henry Clay Miner, all theatre

owners and managers, "signed an agreement to establish a theatrical syndicate, its object being the presentation of the attractions of all three managers in their own theatres (upon an interchange basis) when the houses were not occupied by other shows" (Leavitt 1912:99). However, the first successful organization was directed by Stephen Price, the manager of the Park Theatre during the first decades of the nineteenth century. "That Price was the forerunner of the Theatrical Syndicate there can be no doubt" (Lippman 1937:12).

Regardless of where the idea originated and which of the founders of the Trust should be credited with its conception, there is no doubt that it paralleled what was happening in other big business in the country at the time:

> First, a centralized production system replaced many local, isolated units. Second, there was a division of labor, as theater managing became separate from play producing. Third, there was a standardization of product, as each play was represented by only one company or by a number of duplicate companies. Fourth, there was a growth of control by big business (Poggi 1966:26).

The formal existence of the Theatrical Syndicate began on August 31, 1896, when the first agreement was signed by Marc Klaw, Abraham Lincoln Erlanger, Al Hayman, Charles Frohman, Samuel F. Nixon, and J. Frederick Zimmerman.

Backgrounds and Contributions of the Syndicate Members

Marc Klaw was born in Padukah, Kentucky, May 29, 1858. He studied law and was admitted to the bar. His chief function was as the legal brains of the Trust. At one time he was the dramatic editor for the Louisville Commercial, and in 1881 he was engaged as a theatre manager. It was through his ability as a press agent that he first attracted attention. Gustave Frohman, the manager of the number one company of Hazel Kirke, came to Louisville. Frohman was looking for a lawyer who could investigate and prosecute for piracy those persons who were reproducing plays done at the Madison Square Theatre (Marcosson and Frohman 1916:73). The name of Marc Klaw was given to Frohman as a lawyer who could handle the situation. Characterized as suave, self-effacing, conservative, and resourceful, Klaw joined Abraham Lincoln Erlanger in 1888. David Bidwell, a New Orleans theatre manager, gave Klaw and Erlanger the financial backing they needed to purchase the Taylor exchange, a booking agency. The new owners developed the Taylor exchange into a theatrical circuit (Leavitt 1912:266).

Born in Buffalo, May 4, 1860, Abraham Lincoln Erlanger began his theatrical career at the age of fifteen doing odd jobs for "Uncle John" Ellsler at the Academy of

Music in Cleveland. Eventually he became a theatre manager and began an aggressive policy of advertising copied by other amusement managers across the country (Grau 1910: 288). He moved to New York and became an advance agent for Joseph Jefferson, the famous character actor. For a period of five years he earned a salary of three hundred dollars a week, the largest salary paid up to that day to any agent (Grau 1910:290). After opening the tour with Jefferson, Erlanger entered an agreement with Marc Klaw who was managing actress Effie Ellsler. Erlanger took over her management and made her a star in the South where she was previously unknown, after which Klaw offered Erlanger a partnership. "Honest Abe," as he was facetiously called, was also known as the "Czar" of the Trust and the "Napoleon" of the theatre. The latter nickname so impressed him that he began a collection of "Napoleona" that was a lucrative addition to his personal assets in later years. "He cowed almost every manager in the country with his bullying threats, and forced them to accede to his wishes at all times" (Blumenthal 1936:56). Unlike the suave Klaw, Erlanger was a crude person who at one time resorted to street brawling with Harrison Grey Fiske, editor of the New York Dramatic Mirror and bitter enemy of the Syndicate (Binns 1955:81).

Al Hayman, whose real name was Raphael Heyman, was the richest manager in America. His main contribution to the Syndicate was money and the theatres that he controlled. His theatres provided a guaranteed route from Kansas City or Omaha to the west coast. The Baldwin and California Theatres in San Francisco were Hayman's. According to Robert Grau, Hayman was not a great factor toward decision making in the Syndicate despite the fact that he was in control of some important theatres (1909: 64).

A product of Sandusky, Ohio, Charles Frohman was a successful booking agent at age twenty-five in 1885. With William W. Randall he opened a theatrical bureau in that year which was the first agency of its kind (Leavitt 1912: 267). Frohman owned theatres in New York and provided the majority of the important dramatic attractions presented by the Syndicate. He had become an important theatrical figure with the production of Shenandoah in collaboration with Al Hayman. Daniel Frohman and Issac Marcosson, his biographers, characterized Frohman as quick, nervous, impulsive, and bubbling with optimism. He was the most beloved member of the Syndicate:

> He has always been strictly "on the job" and no man, in any business is more considerate of his employees and certainly none in the theatrical field is so beloved by the artists he has created. His word is always accepted in preference to a contract (Grau 1909:60).

Frohman's talent for publicity earned him the reputation of being the father of elaborate bill posting with pictures. His eye on the needs of the public led him to make new stars--popular young people whom the public could adore for their personalities. He was known as the "star maker," and among his proteges were Maude Adams and Ethel Barrymore. He was a gambler whose primary interest was not in making money but his bold experimentation with such plays as Chantecler and Peter Pan led him to box office success on many occasions. His accomplishments included four hundred productions in America and one hundred twenty-five in London. When he died on the Lusitania in 1915, the Syndicate lost its main supply of attractions.

Samuel F. Nixon was born "Nirdlinger" in Fort Wayne, Indiana, October 13, 1848. Because his mother objected to his connection with show business, he dropped his surname and legally changed it to Nixon. His family was in the clothing business but he became interested in theatre and took his first job in that area as a poster sticker for the Forepaugh Circus. Later he became an advance agent and moved to Philadelphia in 1879. When George K. Goodwin, owner of the Chestnut Street Opera House in Philadelphia, died in 1882, Nixon and J. Fred Zimmerman bought the theatre and entered into partnership.

These two men grew with Philadelphia to become two of the richest businessmen in the theatre.

J. Frederick Zimmerman, before he went to Philadelphia, was considered the best advance agent in the country. In 1869, he earned a salary of one hundred fifty dollars a week from Parepa Rosa and other attractions (Grau 1909:63). In 1872, his salary was up to one thousand dollars a month (Grau 1909:129). He had begun his career as treasurer of the National Theatre in Washington in 1864, later acted as an advance agent, and had been treasurer of the Olympic Theatre in New York before entering partnership with Nixon. The firm of Nixon and Zimmerman was of comparatively little importance to the Syndicate but was included because of the theatres they controlled in Pennsylvania and Ohio (Lippman 1937:54).

The six men who formed the Syndicate brought not only their theatrical knowledge and their money but they also contributed circuits of theatres that allowed continuous booking from New York to all parts of the country. The only way a company could operate profitably on the road was through the use of one-night stands between big cities. The Syndicate could advantageously book because of its control of these smaller theatres throughout the country. Klaw and Erlanger contributed the southern circuits; Frohman and Hayman contributed the western route; Nixon and Zimmerman brought Pennsylvania and Ohio to the

Trust. Charles Frohman furnished the majority of its attractions as well as the theatres he controlled in New York. With the formation of the Syndicate "it now became possible for the manager of a traveling company to book a consecutive tour at the least possible expense. In a word, booking suddenly became standardized" (Marcosson and Frohman 1916:187).

The Syndicate Agreement

An analysis of the first Syndicate agreement shows that its aim was to monopolize the booking business in the United States:

> The Syndicate did not seek to gain direct control over all theatres in the country; rather, it concentrated on key routes between large cities, for unless productions could play along the way, touring was financially impossible. Where it could not gain control over key theatres, the Syndicate built rival houses and booked the finest productions at reduced prices until the competing theatres were bankrupt. New York producers who refused to cooperate were denied bookings and many actors were "blackballed," since the Syndicate would not send on tour any production in which they appeared (Brockett 1968:511).

The Syndicate agreement stated that without the written consent of the Trust, there would be no booking of amusements by Syndicate theatres of attractions that played in opposition theatres. The agreement further provided that attractions would play in Syndicate theatres or would remain outside those cities in which the Syndicate had the theatrical control (Hapgood 1901:36-37).

Because of its explicit intent to control theatres and productions, the Syndicate was not anxious for the agreement to be published for public perusal. However, the first agreement, made for a period of five years, did become public information during a trial concerning Harrison Grey Fiske and the Trust in 1898. George Blumenthal, a manager during the years of the Syndicate, later wrote:

> The plan was to tie up theaters all over the country with contracts to be booked only by the Syndicate, then to tie up as many attractions as possible. That would force both ends; without Syndicate booking a theater could get no attractions to fill the time, and attractions could not get in a theater unless they signed with the Syndicate (1936:55).

The Growth of the Syndicate

The rapid growth of the Syndicate is evident in the number of theatres it controlled in big cities. When the Syndicate was formed, the sixteen theatres directly owned or leased by the three partnerships, plus seventeen independent theatres for which Frohman and Klaw and Erlanger held exclusive booking rights were pooled. In 1896 the Syndicate controlled all thirty-three of these theatres located in big cities. In March 1898, fifty-three theatres comprised that list, and in 1903 there were seventy theatres included, not counting the one-night stands.

At the inception of the Trust, the number of theatres controlled by the Syndicate was impressive. Besides the thirty-three theatres in big cities, the Trust controlled the important one-night stands needed for profitable road tours. By the 1890's, Klaw and Erlanger had exclusive booking rights to about two hundred theatres besides the ones they owned or leased and they controlled most of the one-night stands in the southeast. Charles Frohman owned several theatres and had an informal partnership with Hayman running a booking agency that controlled about three hundred theatres in the west (Poggi 1966:11). The importance of the number of theatres controlled by the Syndicate is self-evident but that they were primarily first-class houses is equally important. Poggi (1966:13) points out:

> It is certain that before 1903 the organization controlled all but two or three first-class houses in New York City and all but one each in Boston and Chicago. Other cities--Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, New Orleans, St. Louis, San Francisco, not to speak of hundreds of smaller communities--were completely in its hands.

The Syndicate and the Fiskes

Minnie Maddern Fiske, one of the most popular actresses of her time and wife of Harrison Grey Fiske, waged the longest struggle against the Syndicate of any of its foes. The fight between the Trust and the Fiskes

actually began before the first Syndicate agreement was signed. Klaw and Erlanger had approached Mrs. Fiske about six months before the signing in reference to booking her next season's tour in Syndicate-controlled theatres. Having been perfectly satisfied with her non-Syndicate bookings from the previous season, Mrs. Fiske refused. She preferred to make her own arrangements, and the actress was harassed because of that decision. During the 1899-1900 season Mrs. Fiske appeared in Langdon Mitchell's first play, Becky Sharp. Not only was she rudely evicted in the midst of a profitable engagement at the Fifth Avenue Theatre because she was on Klaw and Erlanger's black list but the Syndicate opened their version of the play at the same time in Syracuse, New York (Atkinson 1970:5). The Trust version was judged to be a plagarism (Binns 1955:112). When Mrs. Fiske wanted to play Denver, the Trust threatened the theatre owner that they would bar from the Colorado theatres every attraction that appeared at the Denver Theatre. A court injunction was obtained to keep the Trust from interfering. A week before Mrs. Fiske appeared, a minstrel had played at the third-rate house with seats going for ten cents and Uncle Tom's Cabin had charged the same admission. With Becky Sharp and Tess of the D'Urbervilles prices were raised to one dollar and fifty cents and two dollars in January 1901 (Binns 1955:115).

The Syndicate barred Mrs. Fiske from their Los Angeles theatres, but the Old California Theatre was still independent and Mrs. Fiske opened there in January 1901, with Becky Sharp. Anti-Trust excursions were arranged from San Jose and other outlying towns via Southern Pacific Railroad so that the performance could be seen by people in those areas. In search of theatres to do The New York Idea, Mrs. Fiske was able to get a week at the Colonial Motion Picture House in San Francisco. Charles Frohman sent Maude Adams, another popular actress of the time, with Peter Pan to provide competition. In Seattle Mrs. Fiske played at the old First Methodist Church while the Trust's Grand Theatre was dark (Binns 1955:184). Endeared to the public by her natural style of acting, she fought for "modern drama." With her husband she produced and starred in Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House in 1894, Hedda Gabler in 1903, and Rosmersholm in 1907. Despite Syndicate opposition, Mrs. Fiske proved that modern drama could be profitable:

> Ibsen was supposed to spell box-office failure. "Our Ibsen seasons have invariably been profitable," she reported, and pointed out that Rosmersholm, "the most somber and complex tragedy of its period," ran for one hundred ninety-nine consecutive performances at a profit of $40,000 (Morris 1953:302).

Mrs. Fiske was joined in her fight against the Trust by her husband and manager, Harrison Grey Fiske,

editor of the New York Dramatic Mirror. Mr. Fiske began publishing a supplement to the paper on November 13, 1897, devoted entirely to exposing the Syndicate (Binns 1955:79). A one hundred thousand dollar libel suit was filed by the Syndicate against Fiske and because of the suit, the Trust agreement was made public knowledge. Harrison Grey Fiske was instrumental in seeing that the complete text was printed in his supplement. Theatrical people were aroused to rebel against the Syndicate and the first stirrings of rebellion came from the actors.

The First Revolt

The first revolt against the Syndicate was organized by actors. Among those who dared to speak out against the Syndicate were: actors Joseph Jefferson, Richard Mansfield, Mrs. Fiske, Fanny Davenport, Nat Goodwin, James O'Neill, and Francis Wilson; playwright James A. Herne; and producer David Belasco. In 1898 they got together and swore not to book through the Syndicate for the 1898-1899 season, each member putting up a five thousand dollar forfeit.

The Syndicate characteristically bought its opposition and thus ended the first revolt. Francis Wilson made a special anti-Trust tour of New England. Traveling on a train complete with the Second Regimental

Band, Wilson made speeches against the Syndicate. While on tour, Wilson was offered fifty thousand dollars for a one-half interest in his business by one of the firms comprising the Syndicate, Nixon and Zimmerman (Binns 1955: 81). After deliberating one night, he accepted the terms (Hapgood 1901:26). Richard Mansfield, appearing at the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, controlled by Nixon, made fiery curtain speeches against the Syndicate nightly. Once the asbestos curtain was dropped over him, the audience was so enraged that he was allowed to speak freely thereafter (Binns 1955:81). However, the Trust, appealing to his massive ego, made him an offer he could not refuse and he left the rebels for guaranteed New York bookings. The New York World told about Nat Goodwin's going over to the Syndicate:

> The Trust settled this opposition characteristically and in short order. Knowing Goodwin to be the head and front, the life of this effort [actors' combine to fight for independent theatre], they tackled him with the promise of giving him dates where and when he wanted them, and of a long engagement at the Trust's Knickerbocker Theatre. Goodwin's weakness for New York engagements being well known to them, they induced him to desert the embryonic alliance of stars and join issue with the Trust (Hapgood 1901:15).

Davenport simply stated that her every wish had been granted by the Syndicate. Joseph Jefferson and James A. Herne were allowed to remain independent and yet produce most of their plays in Syndicate theatres due to their

popularity (Lippman 1937:343-351). Only the Fiskes and Belasco remained outside the Trust when the rebellion was over. As dramatic critic Norman Hapgood wrote: "most of the trouble between the actors and the Syndicate has been over terms, and, in most cases, when the players who talked most about intelligence and freedom were offered more money, they became silent" (1901:6).

The Syndicate Deals with the Press

The Syndicate maintained a continual struggle with newspapers throughout its existence. Five days after the first supplement to the New York Dramatic Mirror was printed, Joseph Pulitzer's New York World joined the fight against the Syndicate with an editorial that stated: "the Theatre Trust is a peculiar abomination. It aims not only to compel the public to pay what price the Trust pleases for its entertainment, but to decide arbitrarily what plays and what actors the public shall see" (Binns 1955:80). On November 14, 1897, the Washington, D.C., Post attacked the Trust as follows:

> That this organization is beginning to adopt a high-handed style of dealing with the opposition is proved by its treatment of the New York Dramatic Mirror. In Philadelphia this paper has been barred from all hotel news-stands that sell tickets to Syndicate theatres, and for some time past the Mirror has been forbidden even to mention the firm name of Klaw and Erlanger on penalty of exclusion from the news companies. Moreover, a reputable theatrical manager told the Post yesterday that he

had been ordered to take his advertisement out of the Mirror if he wished to book his attractions in Syndicate houses (Binns 1955:37-38).

The Syndicate tried to control newspapers by aiming at their pocketbooks. At the Hollis Street Theatre in Boston a notice was posted: "notice is hereby given that, under pain of dismissal, members of the cast are forbidden to advertise in, buy or read the New York Dramatic Mirror" (Binns 1955:77). Maurice Barrymore, after reading the notice posted by the business manager of the Klaw and Erlanger Traveling Company, telegraphed Fiske: "have rarely read a dramatic newspaper but will read the Mirror regularly hereafter" (Binns 1955:77). The notice was removed when the theatre manager found it constituted a breach of criminal law. "The Syndicate bought so much advertising that it influenced newspaper coverage. It sometimes succeeded in getting critics dismissed if their reviews were negative" (Atkinson 1970:14). In 1909 the New York Tribune made life so intolerable for William Winter, their critic, that he resigned. It was presumed that the Syndicate had arranged his dismissal but the Tribune may have used the situation to their advantage in dismissing the irascible Winter. The Trust was not always successful in its attempts at dismissal, as in the case of Norman Hapgood, critic for the New York Commercial Advertiser and The Bookman from 1897-1902. After Hapgood

wrote some well-documented stories about the infamy of the Trust, they were unsuccessful in getting him fired.

In 1914, Marc Klaw, a former newspaper critic, declared that four of the newspaper drama critics were dishonest but he would not name them. Billboard agreed with Klaw and even stated that dramatic critics did not belong in the twentieth century, that ninety percent of them were discreditable. A reporter from the New York Herald tried to interview the whole corps of theatrical writers but none would comment unless Klaw named the four in question (Atkinson 1970:158). The Syndicate's power was ever present and there is no doubt that the Syndicate used the press in every way it could. A non-Syndicate production might have to wait a year or more before it could get into New York, whereas Charles Frohman could produce something and get the benefit of wide advertising--thus wooing the theatregoer who preferred to spend his money on a show that had already made its reputation (Hapgood 1901:31).

The Syndicate Deals with Managers

Klaw and Erlanger functioned as a booking agency located in New York. Managers could book complete tours through the Syndicate by making one contact. "The basic charge for this service was five percent of the gross receipts" (Travis 1958:36). There were complaints from

managers that the charge was actually much more. "In actual practice the Syndicate sometimes charged both the theatre and the production . . . and the charge, instead of being standard, varied considerably, running sometimes as high as one third to one half of the net profits" (Bricker 1936:116). Poggi (1966:14) states:

> It seems likely that they [the Syndicate] demanded a third of the theater's share of the profits in the larger cities (the manager was allowed to deduct first his expenses and a salary for himself) and five to ten percent (with no deductions) in small towns.

Poggi further asserts:

> In addition, the Syndicate frequently demanded a percentage of the producer's share--as a "gratuity" for arranging a good route. J. J. Shubert claimed that the producer usually paid fifteen to fifty percent to get a good route, and David Belasco, in a once famous law suit, claimed he was forced to pay half of the profits of The Auctioneer to Erlanger (1966:14).

Sometimes a flat fee was charged, as in the case of The Heart of Maryland for which Belasco paid a booking fee of three hundred thousand dollars in 1900 (Lippman 1937:84). The next organized revolt logically came from the managers.

The Second Revolt

The second revolt, in 1902, was a managers' revolt headed by the Fiskes. Joined by manager Maurice Campbell and his actress-wife Henrietta Crosman, and actor-manager James K. Hackett, they called themselves the Independent Booking Office. They announced that they were organizing

solely for the purpose of booking independently and were not in competition with the Syndicate ("Managers Announce" 1919:144). They announced they could deliver five hundred theatres. Even though they planned no booking fees, managers still would not join them because they did not have enough attractions or first-class houses. The strongest factor in the group's favor was a chain of popular-price theatres operated by Edward D. Stair and John H. Havlin. In true Syndicate fashion, the Trust went about trying to buy their competition. The Syndicate announced it would invade the popular price field then dominated by Stair and Havlin. A deal was made that the Syndicate would not do so if Stair and Havlin would not open their theatres to non-Syndicate dramatic productions (Lippman 1937:98). By 1904-1905 all except the Fiskes were back in the fold (Bricker 1936:117).

There still seemed to be a glimmer of hope for the Fiskes at this point. Archie Binns states (1955:143):

> After six years of warfare with the Theatrical Trust, Minnie was buoyed up by a new tang in the American air. Theodore Roosevelt in the White House was thundering against "malefactors of great wealth" and trusts in particular. More usefully for the stage, the Theatrical Trust was sagging in the middle. Theatre owners had flocked to it for protection, only to find that the Trust protected its own interests at the expense of its satellites. When new theatres were built, their owners kept clear of the Trust.

Meanwhile, the second Syndicate agreement, written in 1900, became effective on August 31, 1901, for another five years. Although profits of the first agreement were divided equally, in the second agreement Hayman and Frohman, Klaw and Erlanger were to receive seventy-five percent of the profits, while Nixon and Zimmerman were to receive only twenty-five percent (Lippman 1937:72).

The Second Syndicate Agreement 1901-1906

The year 1900 saw the formation of the United Booking Office, a combination of vaudeville managers which exerted a monopolistic control over that portion of the theatre (Hughes 1951:320). Also by 1900 the Shubert brothers, Lee, Sam, and Jacob J., had established themselves as producers, managers, and theatre owners. They began to invade New York in 1900 by taking over the Herald Square Theatre. Until they began building theatres, the Syndicate was not afraid of their competition. When the Trust indicated the Shuberts should not build any more theatres, the brothers retaliated by building the Garrick Theatre in St. Louis in 1904, and the long war between the two organizations was begun (Bricker 1936:118). In 1905 Sam Shubert was on his way to make a business alliance with the Syndicate and was killed in a train wreck. The tragedy was significant in the future relationship between the

Shuberts and the Syndicate:

> It has always been understood that his brothers held the Syndicate responsible for it [Sam Shubert's death], and no small part of the bitterness and relentlessness with which that warfare was waged was credited to that feeling (Bricker 1936:119).

When the two groups met after the accident, Erlanger stated that he kept no contracts with dead men (Stagg 1968:71). The war was on again, and the Shuberts pushed through an alliance with Belasco and the Fiskes. Paralleling political policy, they called their informal agreement the "open door." They agreed to mutually book each other's productions.

The Klaw and Erlanger Syndicate was organized without any capital, but in September 1905, Lee and Jacob J. Shubert incorporated with capital of one million four hundred thousand dollars (Poggi 1966:17). The theatre now had three syndicated operations: the United Booking Office of vaudeville headed by Benjamin Franklin Keith and Edward F. Albee, the Theatrical Syndicate headed by Klaw and Erlanger, and the Shuberts headed by Lee and "J.J." It was only natural that the next opposition came from the vaudeville company.

The United States Amusement Company

The Syndicate and the Shuberts never explained why, in the heat of their battle, they joined forces in 1907 to

incorporate and present "Advanced Vaudeville" under the name of the United States Amusement Company. Officers of the corporation were: President, Erlanger; Vice President, Lee Shubert; and Treasurer, Klaw. Vaudeville was highly organized and administered by Benjamin F. Keith and Edward F. Albee. In October 1907, the United States Amusement Company agreed to dissolve when the United Booking Office announced the organization of a circuit of thirty theatres for the Keith-Orpheum interests. The United Booking Office handed over two hundred fifty thousand dollars and took over all current contracts (Bricker 1936:123). It dropped all plans for a legitimate circuit (having used the same tactics as the Trust had used previously with Stair and Havlin). Advanced Vaudeville was finished in January 1908. The Shuberts' agreement with the United States Amusement Company was not terminated until May 1, 1909, and the quarrel with the Syndicate resumed then. The Shuberts, still handicapped by their lack of one-night stands, shifted emphasis from theatres to attractions so that the Syndicate could not adequately supply one-night stands. By 1910 the exodus had begun and "by the middle of that season a considerable number of them [stars] singly and in groups, slid from the Syndicate's ranks and disappeared over the horizon in the direction of the Open Door" (Bricker 1936:125).

Syndicate agreements continued for five year periods until the last agreement ended August 31, 1916. By 1910, having conquered the revolt of the actors and the revolt of the managers, the Syndicate had reached its height. It had continued to battle the press and the Fiskes; but the Trust's biggest competitors, the Shuberts and the movies, were soon to shake its power. In the meantime, the Syndicate exerted a tremendous influence over all aspects of the theatre in the United States.

CHAPTER III

THE EFFECTS OF THE SYNDICATE

The American theatre became commercialized under the influence of the Theatrical Syndicate during the years 1896 to 1916. All aspects of theatre became oriented toward box-office receipts: the making of stars became big business, plays were chosen for their ability to draw the audience, and producers became increasingly aware of what the public wanted to see. With rising competition from the Shuberts and the movies, the Trust sought to improve its theatres in an effort to maintain its position.

The Making of Stars

Charles Frohman earned a reputation for being a star maker. His list of stars included Maude Adams, William Gillette, Nat Goodwin, John Drew, Julia Marlowe, Edward H. Sothern, and Ethel Barrymore.

Maude Adams became a star in her own right as Lady Babbie in Frohman's production of James Barrie's The Little Minister. The play ran in New York for three hundred performances of which two hundred eighty-nine were standing room only. The long run was becoming prevalent and

profitable, and Miss Adams recorded the longest single engagement in the history of show business with James Barrie's Peter Pan, running from November 6, 1905, until June 9, 1906 (Marcosson and Frohman 1916:163). Records were again broken when Edmond Rostand's Chantecler opened on January 23, 1911. The line at the box office began to form at four o'clock p.m. the day before the ticket sales began. "Within twenty-four hours after the window was raised at the box office as high as two hundred dollars was offered in vain for a seat on the opening night production at the Knickerbocker Theater" (Marcosson and Frohman 1916:181). Other Maude Adams successes under the direction of Charles Frohman included Quality Street and What Every Woman Knows, both by James Barrie.

After William Gillette joined the Syndicate and Charles Frohman began producing his plays, the actor-playwright became a leading figure in the American theatre. One of the most important openings of the 1896 theatrical season occurred at the Garrick Theatre when Charles Frohman presented William Gillette in Gillette's own drama, Secret Service (Chapman and Sherwood 1955:33). The play ran one hundred seventy-six performances. Known for his "illusion of the first time" style of acting, Gillette became an even greater success under the direction of Frohman. Gillette's Sherlock Holmes, managed by Frohman, ran two

hundred fifty-six performances at the Garrick Theatre in 1899. Later the actor starred in two Barrie plays, The Admirable Crichton in 1903 and Dear Brutus in 1918. His association with Frohman caused Gillette to become a key figure in American theatre, and his name became synonymous with Sherlock Holmes.

Nat Goodwin began to be recognized as a leading comedian as early as 1877 in a revival of Edward E. Rice and John C. Goodwin's Evangeline. After he joined the Syndicate and Charles Frohman, however, he became a star. In 1898 he played the title role in Clyde Fitch's Nathan Hale under the direction of Frohman. Later he was primarily known as one of the leading comedians on the stage (Hewitt 1959:233).

John Drew joined Charles Frohman's Empire Stock Company in 1892 and remained with him for many years. As a Frohman star Drew enjoyed popularity and became an idol of the public. Playing light comedy, he was teamed successfully with Maude Adams in Molly Kazan's Rosemary, which enjoyed a profitable run of one hundred thirty-six performances.

English-born Julia Marlowe first became a star in the Frohman production of Countess Valeska, an adaptation of The Tall Prussian by Rudolph Stratz. In Clyde Fitch's Barbara Frietchie in 1899 she enjoyed her second

successful association with Charles Frohman. He used his talent for publicity during the rehearsals in Philadelphia. The assistant stage manager was to go to Miss Marlowe's hotel room to teach her to use a musket which was to be shot during the play. Frohman notified the hotel management that Miss Marlowe had received a threatening letter and that her life might be in danger. When Byron Ongley entered the hotel with the musket, four porters grabbed him, and the police were summoned. The Philadelphia press made a sensational story of the attempted crime, and all tickets to the play were quickly sold. Miss Marlowe, again with Frohman's knack for starmaking and successful productions, enjoyed an immense popularity. In 1904 Frohman brought Miss Marlowe and Edward H. Sothern, a popular actor of the day, together for a repertory tour of Shakespeare and guaranteed each of them one hundred thousand dollars for a forty week season (Morris 1953:287). Unfortunately, the Syndicate lost Sothern and Marlowe because of crude business methods. "When Miss Marlowe sprained her ankle on tour, the Syndicate applied the penalties it invariably held in reserve for any actor who was not earning money for them. Sothern and Marlowe then went over to the Shuberts, who increased their income by paying them a percentage of the gross" (Atkinson 1970:31).

Ethel Barrymore may have been Frohman's greatest star. In 1901 as Madame Trentoni in Fitch's Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines, she began a long and successful career. Later she starred in Sir Arthur Wing Pinero's Mid-Channel, James Barrie's Alice-Sit-By-the-Fire, and Somerset Maugham's Lady Frederick and The Constant Wife. Under the management of Charles Frohman, Miss Barrymore went on to become one of the foremost actresses of her day.

The stars who worked with Charles Frohman were content to trust their careers to him and they benefited handsomely from his patronage. In his book, Curtain Time, Lloyd Morris (1953:277) writes in connection with Frohman's business arrangement with John Drew: "there were seldom any formal contracts; often, not even a memorandum." Author Montrose J. Moses reflects about the life of Charles Frohman:

> It may be safely claimed that he brought system and stability into the theatre, helping to turn actors from vagabonds into professional beings. Frohman helped to make it possible for the playhouse to be run on legitimate lines of accounting. Out of this condition there followed more prosperous times for the actor, who had larger salaries and who became a business asset to be exploited as a "star" (1934: 214).

Nat Goodwin, once a foe of the Syndicate, wrote about Charles Frohman, "he has done more to increase actors' salaries, he has produced more plays and received less reward than any manager in the world" (1914:105). Maude

Adams felt Frohman made the theatre a respected institution, honest as a business and honest as an art (Robbins 1956:82). Although Frohman had little influence on the development of an acting style, he did pay his actors regularly, and they were assured of work for an entire season. He endeared himself to his actors and was undoubtedly the most popular member of the Syndicate.

The Encouragement of Playwriting

That the Syndicate influenced the kind of drama presented is evident. Since Charles Frohman supplied the Trust with most of its productions, it was his choices that became the popular touring attractions. "Frohman did much to raise the producing standards in America, but within the commercial limitations of giving the public what it wanted" (Anderson 1938:62). His anti-Ibsen approach to drama was diametrically opposed to Mrs. Fiske's fondness for thoughtful plays. Frohman announced that the theatre was primarily for the amusement of the "tired businessman," a phrase still in existence today:

> It was said Frohman never read books unless he thought they might become plays. He detested what was becoming to be called the "highbrow drama." The influence of Ibsen, where he was aware of it, repelled him. His personal preference was for melodrama and light comedy. His favorite drama was Sardou's Diplomacy, which he often revived with all-star casts (Morris 1953:285).

However, in all fairness, it must be admitted that Frohman

did produce "problem plays," those of Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones. These plays received American productions only after demonstrating a popular appeal in England. Because of Frohman's insistence, James Barrie began writing plays instead of novels. Frohman introduced Barrie to the American stage, and they enjoyed many successful productions together.

During the control of the theatre by the Syndicate, American drama was produced, and the first glimmerings of outstanding native drama appeared:

> The decade between 1905 and 1915 brought a decided shift among commercial managers to the American play. With the advent of the Shuberts and the warfare with the Syndicate, the theatre began a forced expansion, dictated largely by its financial interests, and we have the period of the "well-made play," most of them mediocre, but native--if that was any consolation (Anderson 1938:66).

Examples of superior native drama were William Vaughn Moody's The Great Divide and The Faith Healer. Critic Howard Taubman (1965:134) found the former particularly impressive:

> A step forward in the development of a responsible school of American dramatic writing was the appearance of William Vaughn Moody. Some students of the American theatre hold that The Great Divide, presented on October 3, 1906, with Henry Miller and Margaret Anglin at the Princess Theatre in New York, marked our dramatic coming of age.

The only other American plays of 1906 with any claim to attention were The New York Idea by Langdon Mitchell,

starring Mrs. Fiske and George Arliss, and George M. Cohan's Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway. In 1908 Mrs. Fiske's production of Edward Sheldon's Salvation Nell provided worthwhile native drama. By 1910 the American drama was no longer a myth. "However much certain individuals may decry the capitalistic [the Syndicate] management of the theatre, nevertheless American drama developed under capital control in a way that it never did previously" (Mayorga 1932:175).

Not all writers were as complimentary toward the Syndicate. The New York Times printed an article stating that the Syndicate fostered neither native drama nor histrionic improvement, but that it wanted ready-made stars ("The Trust" 1902:21). The Syndicate was also accused of presenting sentimental melodrama:

> Glance at some Broadway hits of the first two decades of the century. As 1900 dawned Ben Hur was the show of the hour, and an actor named William S. Hart was in it. Another costume dramatization, Quo Vadis, turned up in the spring in two different productions. The novel David Harum became a play and vied with Herne's Sag Harbor for suffrage of those who like rusticity on the stage. Mrs. Carter in Zaza was a Belasco special, and Floradora with its storied sextette led the musical stage. In the next two decades many great successes leaned heavily on charm, sentimentality, melodrama, and corn. Among them were The Wizard of Oz, Babes in Toyland, The Squaw Man, The Warrens of Virginia, Alias Jimmy Valentine, Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, Kismet, Potash and Perlmutter, a typical A.H. Woods-produced bedroom farce, Up in Mabel's Room, and Frank Bacon's sentimental Lightnin' which set a record for its

time with a New York run of 1291 performances (Taubman 1965:132).

In spite of adverse criticism, the Syndicate produced some of the best plays of its time, always with the expectation that there would be success at the box office. Writing in Scribner's magazine, Edward H. Sothern stated (1916:341):

> The amusement-loving public demands many kinds of entertainment. It can be said of Charles Frohman that he never on any single occasion offered anything below the standard of cleanliness and good manners, and that, on the other hand, he provided his patrons with the very best plays by the very best dramatists of his time, interpreted by the most capable actors procurable. The salaries of players and the royalties of playwrights increased by leaps and bounds under his generous direction for he was ever ready to pay for the best. Masterpieces are not written frequently; if Mr. Frohman overlooked any in his generation they are yet to be discovered.

During the twenty years of its existence the Syndicate presented plays by the following American playwrights: James A. Herne, William Gillette, Clyde Fitch, David Belasco, Augustus Thomas, Charles Klein, Eugene Walter, and Edward Sheldon. No other outstanding native authors have been discovered from the period.

Historian Margaret Mayorga believes that the period from 1870 to 1910 may be considered a "period of play-nationalization." "During these years a group of men arose who made playwriting their vocation and were enabled through new and increasingly more satisfactory copyright

laws to enjoy an adequate living through the remuneration returned to them" (1932:175). According to playwright Hartley Davis, in 1909 the usual royalty was five percent of the first four thousand dollars received each week, seven and one-half percent of the next two thousand dollars, and ten percent on receipts totaling six thousand dollars or more during a week. James Barrie and Arthur Wing Pinero received as high as twenty-five percent of the gross receipts, while Clyde Fitch, Augustus Thomas, Charles Klein, and Eugene Walters received ten percent (Lippman 1937:174). Because the Syndicate was willing to pay for the best possible drama available, playwrights enjoyed a new prosperity.

The Trust was willing to spend money on a production felt to be commercially successful. A reviewer for the Theatre magazine wrote of Humpty Dumpty:

> One must give Klaw and Erlanger credit for doing things liberally. It is clear that they are not afraid to spend money. Sometimes a lavish expenditure of dollars is resorted to in order to cover up deficiences in art and taste, but in Humpty Dumpty one finds present all three--unparalled stage settings, excellent art, unquestionable taste (Humpty Dumpty 1904:298).

In an article entitled "Our Leading Theatre Managers" the Theatre magazine also stated (1904:228):

> Nothing is too lofty or too little for them [Klaw and Erlanger]. They will spend on Shakespeare as much as they would on McNally, and Midsummer Night's Dream glows under the Midas touch with as much brilliancy as Rogers Brothers in Paris.

The Syndicate spent one hundred thousand dollars on the Shakespearean production, starring Nat Goodwin as "Bottom," and with Victor Herbert's arrangement of Mendelssohn's music. The play ran three weeks in New York and two weeks in Boston (Lippman 1940:279).

A look at some of the productions done by the Syndicate disproves the theory that the Trust produced only sentimental melodrama or inferior plays. Besides A Midsummer Night's Dream, the Syndicate sponsored the Shakespearean tour of Edward H. Sothern and Julia Marlowe. The Trust introduced the plays of Sir James Barrie and Somerset Maugham to the American stage. It produced the works of Sir Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones. "Art was not excluded, but for admission it had to show a profit" (Hewitt 1959:278).

Neither can the Syndicate be accused of preventing productions by other important authors. During the years of the Trust audiences were able to see the plays of Henrik Ibsen, Gerhart Hauptmann, George Bernard Shaw, and John Galsworthy.

The Construction and Improvement of Theatre Buildings

The war between the Syndicate and the Shuberts led to a surplus of theatres. "Towns that in reality could

support one first-class playhouse were compelled to have a 'regular' and an 'independent' theater" (Marcosson and Frohman 1916:190). It has been estimated that the Shuberts' campaign to control theatres led them to build two for every one of Erlanger's, having the desired effect of eating into the Syndicate's hold on the theatre but also causing a dangerous state of saturation (Anderson 1929:23). Eventually this surplus of theatres contributed to the death of the Syndicate because there simply were not enough good productions to fill all the theatres:

> With all those theatres and all those actors running around on the perpetually expanding frontiers of railroad mileage, no one had done anything about the essential product the Big Business gentlemen were so ardently exploiting. No one had increased the output of even passable actors, and no one had done anything about providing the theatre with authors (Anderson 1938:26).

The Syndicate was forced to remodel their houses in an effort to compete with the Shuberts who were building new theatres in towns where they could not obtain control of first-class houses. Consequently, theatres became comfortable, safe, and beautiful. John Drew, playing in one of the Syndicate-controlled houses in Rochester, complained of unsanitary conditions in the theatre. The local health officer (one of the now famous Mayo brothers) was called in to investigate. The theatre was found to be

detrimental to health; the Syndicate withdrew its productions from the theatre and commended Drew for his action (Lippman 1937:179-80).

During a performance on December 30, 1903, the Syndicate's Iroquois Theatre in Chicago caught fire and more than five hundred lives were lost in eight minutes (Hewitt 1959:288). "As a result of the Iroquois fire, building and operating codes requiring by law proper protection and precaution were adopted by most cities, with the result that there has been no such disaster since" (Hewitt 1959:289). In 1904 an article appeared in the Theatre magazine ("Leading Managers" 1904:226) stating that nowhere is the auditorium as comfortable or as safe as in the United States.

The Cultivation of the Audience

Due to the industrial revolution, there was a new middle-class audience who had money to spend and who went to the theatre, but they had not grown up with "culture." They were inclined to talk during performances. On several occasions Richard Mansfield, Margaret Anglin, and Eleanor Robson stopped their performances and refused to continue until the audience was quiet (Atkinson 1970:7).

> The new element in the theatregoing population is too often composed of the devotees of the "lobster palaces" who delight in the risque or vulgar, the member of the "smart" society who desires only the

> flippant and inconsequential, and the ignorant nouveau riche who often is a better judge of whiskey than of Shakespeare and the classics (Calder 1913:75).

The Syndicate's policy was one of absolute commercialism where a good play was one that made box-office success. In order to show a profit, the public must be pleased with the performance. Consequently, the Trust presented what the public would buy and what would bring a profit. To determine whether the audience caused the Syndicate's choices is a moot question. Certainly both were dependent upon each other as can be seen during the decline of the Trust.

The audience reflected a change in the morality of the nation. Although it may have been shocked at some of the Syndicate productions, nevertheless, performances were widely attended. When Clyde Fitch's Sapho was presented at Wallack's Theatre, the audience was shocked. At the end of the second act a manly actor named Hamilton Revelle carried the voluptuous Olga Nethersole upstairs to an unseen bedroom where, many people thought, "a terrible sin occurred at every performance" (Atkinson 1970:6). The show enjoyed success. Viewing Fitch's The City in 1909, "audiences gasped in the last act when the rebellious daughter of the family found that she had married her half brother. Women in the audience shrieked; men shouted with horror, or so it

was reported" (Atkinson 1970:57). Again, the production was good box office. Some critics reflected the old Puritanical background of the country in decrying that the 1909 production of Eugene Walter's The Easiest Way was not a play for young people. The Belasco production enjoyed success and earned a fine reputation:

> Moralists were disturbed by its [The Easiest Way] daring treatment of sex. Impressed by its unhappy ending, but ignoring its inconsistencies and sentimentality, most of the critics and many playgoers praised it as an important American drama. The last line of the play became famous, "Dress up my body and paint my face. I'm going to Rector's to make a hit--and to hell with the rest!" (Morris 1953:300).

About 1910 the first organized audiences began to appear (Mayorga 1932:175). The good Syndicate productions had caused the audience to expect better than the second-rate companies that were so prevalent on the road. For this reason and others that will be discussed below, the Syndicate began losing some of its audience.

The Stimulation of the American Economy

The organization of the theatre by the Syndicate promoted the American economy. Theatre became profitable.

> Matters had improved since 1896 when Charles Frohman and others formed the much-abused Theatrical Syndicate. Before this there was such confusion in booking tours that a company might have to start out on the road with the route arranged for only part of the season; or two equally important companies might find themselves in opposition in a certain town, which could

> support only one play at a time. When they moved on, the theatres would be dark. The companies would lose money, so would the town. Its theatres, with poorly paid, temporary staffs, would be ill-kept (Robbins 1956:81).

With efficient booking practices instituted by the Trust, theatre people began earning regular wages. "In general the business side of the theatre was placed on a better basis" (Bricker 1936:115).

Box office receipts were the primary concern of the Syndicate, and their productions were profitable. At the height of his career, Charles Frohman is reported to have paid thirty-five million dollars annually in salaries, and ten thousand people were on his payroll (Hughes 1951: 239). His production of The Little Minister starring Maude Adams ran for three hundred consecutive performances and grossed three hundred seventy thousand dollars, a financial record at that time (Morris 1953:282). Another record was set by the Frohman-Adams-Barrie combination in 1901:

> By 1901, when Miss Adams appeared in Quality Street her second Barrie play, she had become the most potent box office attraction in the American theatre. Her name was a magnet that drew crowds, and Frohman, reporting gleefully on her immense success, was able to make such typical observations, as Miss Adams' receipts last week in Boston were the largest in the history of Boston theaters or anywhere--$23,000 (Morris 1953:282).

The Syndicate was able to hurt its opponent's box-office profits. For example, the Trust prevented the Belasco production of Adrea from using any Syndicate

theatre. Undaunted, Belasco rebuilt the interior of Convention Hall to resemble the interior of a theatre. In spite of the seven performances of Adrea grossing over fifteen thousand dollars, Belasco suffered the loss of a little more than twenty-five thousand dollars due to the expenditure necessary for the remodeling (Winter 1918:184). In the meantime, the cost of the production put money into the economy.

Although appearing to have little effect upon developing a style of acting, the Syndicate did affect actors' salaries and working conditions in a positive manner. Actors were paid a living wage and were assured of continuing work. Many actors were elevated to star status by the Trust, primarily because the public supported the matinee idol. Stars became associated with certain roles and toured in one show for a long time. The Syndicate advertised its products and its stars and promoted the long run both on Broadway and on tour.

The Trust not only produced sentimental melodrama to entertain audiences but it encouraged the writing of native drama as well. The American playwright enjoyed a better financial existence during the time of the Syndicate than he had previously. Paying better royalties and offering more opportunities for production, the Syndicate produced most of the important playwrights of the day.

The audiences and the Syndicate were mutually dependent upon each other in dictating what would be seen on the legitimate stage. The Syndicate chose plays especially for their box-office appeal, and in turn the public chose to attend the Syndicate attractions. The Trust cultivated its audiences who came to expect first-rate attractions. Artistic productions were only attempted by the Syndicate when they were felt to be potential commercial successes.

The Trust put money into the economy by improving its theatre buildings. Theatres became cleaner and safer because of competition for audiences. The economy was further stimulated by the construction of new playhouses and the fact that job opportunities in all areas of theatrical activity increased because of the Syndicate. The Trust was willing to spend a great deal of money on a lavish production, as in the case of A Midsummer Night's Dream. The spending of large sums of money promotes the general economic condition of a country.

The Syndicate contributed to its own decline. As the number of theatres became proportionately greater than the number of good attractions, and as audiences cultivated by the Trust became more selective and critical, the power of the Syndicate began to crumble.

CHAPTER IV

THE DECLINE OF THE SYNDICATE

As an institution the Trust served a need, that of organizing the theatre. The booking situation prior to 1896 was in a state of chaos. Theatre managers came to New York to arrange bookings for their theatres, and business was transacted on the street corners of the rialto. As a result, actors never knew exactly when or where they would work or if they would be paid regularly. Managers of attractions could not be assured that theatres would be available when they arrived at a particular city, and theatre owners might be left with dark houses during their busiest seasons. None of the parties involved could rely on each other and they consequently double-booked theatres and attractions so that there might be some guarantee of at least one show's appearance.

When the Syndicate went beyond structuring and promoting theatre to exploiting it for its own financial interests, the Trust began to decline. The last Trust agreement, signed in February 1910, went into effect August 31, 1911, for a period of another five years. As

the signing took place, the power of the Syndicate was slipping; the road was declining, and the Shuberts were rising.

The Rise of the Shuberts

By its own admission the Syndicate had controlled more than ninety percent of the better class theatres for the fifteen years between 1896 and 1911 ("Overthrow . . . Syndicate" 1910:551). Since the Syndicate held most of the theatres, the Shuberts could not compete in number of theatres controlled. Their strategy was to collect so many acts that the Trust's theatres would suffer from a lack of attractions. "The Shuberts acquired so many productions that local managers found it unprofitable to maintain their exclusive booking contracts with the Syndicate" (Poggi 1966:19). The Brothers were joined by George W. Tyler in 1909; and in April 1910, Julius Cahn, who controlled about two hundred theatres, one-night stands throughout Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York state, left the Syndicate for the Shuberts. Later that month William A. Brady, who managed such stars as Grace George, Louis Mann, Robert Mantell, and Otis Harlan, deserted the Trust for the Shuberts. Mose Reis brought his seventy-five theatres in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, and New Jersey to the

to the Shuberts, and John Cort came out for the "open door" with one hundred fifty theatres in the west and northwest (Lippman 1937:147-8). By May 1910, twelve hundred small town theatres declared their right to play what they wanted and organized themselves into a group known as the National Theatre Owners' Association ("Overthrow Syndicate" 1910: 551-2). The purpose of the organization was to promote the "open door" policy. "It was the formation of this association, more than any other single fact, that broke the Syndicate's monopoly, for its membership included managers of nearly all of the theatres in the important one-night stands" (Lippman 1937:150). One-night stands were necessary in order to book a successful tour, and now the Shuberts, rather than the Syndicate controlled them. Because the Shuberts got control of so many attractions, managers could not continue to book exclusively with the Syndicate. The theatre owners then went over to the Shuberts, thus giving them control of the theatres as well. The power of the Syndicate over theatre managers was decreasing.

The Collapse of the Road

There were many reasons for the decline of the road. One was the dissatisfaction of the audience with the available productions. The rise of road companies had

occurred between 1870-1910 because of the desire of the audience outside New York to see famous productions and stars. However, second-rate companies in productions billed as original New York versions began to appear throughout the country. David Belasco (1969:199) wrote that inferior productions had become "so innocent of all artistic purpose" that, with a few exceptions, they could not be considered stock companies at all.

Adding to the difficulties of the Syndicate in holding its road audience was a lack of new American plays. The prolific Clyde Fitch had died in 1909, and William Vaughn Moody had died a year later. According to historian Arthur Hobson Quinn, both men died at the height of their creativity (1927:159). Other leading dramatists such as Augustus Thomas, William Gillette, and David Belasco had done their best work by 1911 (Quinn 1927:169). The Syndicate was badly in need of new plays, and the best writers of the day were silent. There were more than two thousand first-class theatres to fill and not enough good plays to go around (Eaton 1910:837).

"The main reason for the decline of the road was that movies were consistently able to provide famous stars and polished productions at lower prices" (Poggi 1966:87). The movie industry attracted actors from the legitimate stage, leaving fewer good performers available for the road

and presenting an even greater opportunity for inferior touring attractions:

> The new field which motion-picture shows have opened has attracted great numbers of our actors, who find that by capitalizing the prestige they have won on the dramatic stage, they can earn in the studios, in a few weeks, more money than they could command in the theatre in an entire season (Belasco 1969:210).

By 1912 people could see a full-length story at a comfortable movie theatre for a small admission charge at a time when legitimate theatre costs were rising (Poggi 1966:39). The movies could, by that time, deliver what the audience previously wanted from the legitimate stage. The movies were providing escapism, and the legitimate theatre was presenting realism.

Rising costs contributed to the death of the road and consequently, the death of the Syndicate. Realistic productions were costly and added to the financial burdens of mounting a play. For the Belasco production of Eugene Walter's <u>The Easiest Way</u> in 1909, actual furniture from the slums of New York was brought to the stage:

> I went to the meanest theatrical boarding house I could find in the Tenderloin district and bought the entire interior of one of its most dilapidated rooms--patched furniture, threadbare carpet, tarnished and broken gas fixtures, tumbledown cupboards, dingy doors and window casings, and even the faded paper on the walls (Belasco 1969:77).

Not only was the cost of creating authentic sets expensive but the price of transporting them had risen. "An eighty

percent increase in transportation costs between 1913-1928 created special difficulties for the road" (Poggi 1966:36). Audiences were fascinated by realistic productions, and the Syndicate had to produce them in order to be competitive.

In addition, stars were demanding more money. "In 1911 the Mahauve Theatre in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, charged a top price of $1.50 but could gross only $800 a performance; stars like Mrs. Fiske and John Barrymore, and the original companies of The Great Divide and The Boss demanded a guarantee of $800" (Poggi 1966:37). Syndicate producers tried to combat their rising costs by asking a greater profit from the local theatres:

> The standard sharing terms on the road were about the same as they were on Broadway; for dramatic productions, 60% of the gross receipts to the productions and 40% to the theater; for musicals 70% to the former and 30% to the latter (Poggi 1966:26).

Costs went up even from those figures. Producers began asking eighty percent of the gross for musicals and sixty-five to seventy percent of the gross for drama. It is not surprising that the number of plays on tour declined. According to the Dramatic Mirror, the number of plays on the road between 1900-1904 averaged three hundred eight; between 1925-1927 only sixty-eight companies were touring (Anderson 1938:66).

Whereas the Syndicate previously had been able to tour small towns, the population was shifting from rural to urban, and this meant a change in the audience. In 1910 the majority of people lived in small towns with populations under twenty-five hundred, but by 1920, the majority of the people lived in urban areas with populations over that figure (Poggi 1966:39). The necessity for road productions in the smaller towns was also lessened because of the invention of the automobile which allowed the public to travel further to a big city to see a legitimate production.

By 1913 Erlanger and the Shuberts realized that the road was causing them both losses in profits. They agreed to regulate competition in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and St. Louis so that first-class productions would be limited to certain houses in those cities (Poggi 1966:19). Too many theatres had caused both the Syndicate and the Shuberts to collect inferior productions, and the public would not support them. With the new agreement they could use discrimination in producing plays in order to alleviate the competition for audiences (Lippman 1937:158).

In June 1914, representatives of all phases of theatrical production--legitimate and vaudeville, banned together in an effort to save the road. The United Managers' Protective Association of Amusements Interests of

the United States and Canada was formed with Klaw as President and Lee Shubert as Vice President. The Board of Directors included: Abraham Erlanger, Charles Frohman, John Cort, David Belasco, and William A. Brady (Lippman 1937:164). This merger signalled the dissolution of the Syndicate and the end of the road.

The Disintegration of the Syndicate Partnerships

The expiration of the Syndicate officially occurred on August 31, 1916, when its last agreement came to an end. Al Hayman had retired in 1911, but his withdrawal did not appear to be a determining factor in the Syndicate's death:

> I do not suppose that the withdrawal of Al. Hayman from the head of the Syndicate, as announced, will make any material difference to the concern, although his advice, judgment and experience had much to do with the development of the same, placing it upon a solid financial basis (Leavitt 1912:284).

Life magazine ("Looking Backward" 1912:851) considered that "the dissolution of the firm of Nixon and Zimmerman, of Philadelphia, one of the Trust's most important allies, is the latest straw on the breaking back of the camel." Many people felt that the death of Charles Frohman in 1915 was the most significant loss of the Syndicate's members. Critic Norman Hapgood (1901:37) wrote, "many say that without Charles Frohman to feed the theatres with productions, the Trust would collapse." Writing in 1925,

Montrose Moses agreed. "When the Syndicate was at its greatest power "C. F." was also at his height, and people truly said that he was the largest part of the strength of the organization--that if he withdrew, the octopus would fall asunder. And they were right" (1925:216).

Klaw and Erlanger were still active, and many managers began returning to them from the Shuberts. George Tyler, Julius Cahn, Mose Reis, and Albert Weis all returned to the Syndicate. William Savage began presenting Trust attractions, but the Syndicate could not regain its position.

The rise of the Shuberts, the loss of the road audiences, and the disintegration of the original Syndicate partnerships all contributed towards the death of the Syndicate. The Trust had outlived its usefulness. "In a sense, the entertainment industry, considered as a whole, followed the same pattern as the other major industries. It too felt the need for mass-production machinery, and the result was the motion-picture camera" (Poggi 1966:78). Indeed, the movies were a major factor in capturing the mass audience throughout the country. Audiences left the legitimate theatre for the new industry, the movies.

CHAPTER V

AN EVALUATION OF THE SYNDICATE

The Theatrical Syndicate is most often discussed in uncomplimentary terms, but the Trust actually did more good for the American theatre than it did harm. It fulfilled an existing need when it was begun in 1896, exerted an influence on theatrical activity for twenty years, and died in 1916 when that need no longer existed. Big business had become a part of the American economy, and because of the Syndicate, theatre had become big business. American theatre had to be commercially successful, when not subsidized, in order to survive.

The Case Against the Syndicate

The Syndicate was primarily concerned with box-office receipts, and the disadvantages of commercialism therefore existed. Never did the Syndicate try to establish a training center for actors, playwrights, or producers. It merely exploited what was available without a thought of replenishing the supply.

Before the advent of the Shuberts, managers were at the mercy of the Trust. They could either book with the Syndicate or have their theatres dark. If managers

attempted to play independent attractions, they would no longer be able to book any Syndicate shows. Since the Syndicate controlled most of the more popular acts, managers were under their power.

The Syndicate contributed to the death of the road by the overbuilding of theatres. Many towns that could only support one first-class house found themselves with two such theatres. Because of the overabundance of theatres, managers suffered in having to compete for audiences. Inferior shows were prevalent in an effort to fill so many playhouses, and audiences began to abandon the legitimate theatre.

Promoting the star system and the long run, the Syndicate was guilty of making New York the "mecca" for drama. An actor had to "make it" first in New York and then tour the country. The theatre today is still faced with this problem of centralization of theatrical activities.

The Syndicate spent large sums of money on single attractions to appeal to audiences. Increased production costs forced out individuals with a small amount of capital. The alarming cost of mounting a play on Broadway today is an extension of the Syndicate's policies.

The Syndicate was dishonest in its dealings. It attempted to buy off critics, have them fired when their

reviews were negative, or simply bar them from attending productions in Syndicate theatres. The Trust was not beneath threatening to remove its advertising from a newspaper if that publication would not accede to its wishes. The Syndicate sent second and third-rate companies on tour claiming that they were the original New York versions of popular plays. Trust contracts had special release clauses, always favoring the Syndicate and not the other party involved. The Trust attacked its enemies by preventing their using theatres or getting good booking routes. It forced non-Syndicate attractions to play in second-class theatres where audiences were not accustomed to seeing superior dramatic productions. In booking productions for independent producers, the Syndicate was in the habit of charging exorbitant fees for advantageous routes. If the producer refused to pay the premium for a route, he might easily find himself booked in a manner that could not prove financially successful no matter how popular a play he presented. The Trust openly competed with anti-Syndicate attractions by booking similar plays just ahead of the opposition's arrival in a town.

Thus, there was a valid case against the Syndicate. It did not replenish the supply of available theatre people; rather it only exploited the existing talent. The

Syndicate wielded its power over managers by virtue of its monopoly. Due to the saturation of the country with theatres and inferior acts, the Syndicate hastened the death of the road. The remnants of the Trust still are felt in the centralization of theatre and cost of production in New York. The Trust's policy of commercialism led to dishonesty, and all who opposed the Syndicate suffered.

The Case For the Syndicate

The Syndicate brought not only organization to the theatre but also prosperity. "The theatrical syndicate had in fifteen years made more actors and managers rich, improved the drama to a greater extent, built more theatres and increased patronage more consistently than has been accomplished by any other factor during the last century" (Goodwin 1914:107). As well as success, the theatre manager attained a more respectable position:

> Ask Pat Short who made him rich in St. Louis, and if he does not say, "Klaw and Erlanger," it will be surprising. Ask L.N. Scott of St. Paul to whom he attributes the golden era which came to him in the twin cities, and he will tell you he blesses the day that the Theatrical Syndicate regulated an almost despised calling, which only in the last decade has attained professional dignity (Grau 1910:10).

The Trust gave the public what it wanted. The purpose of their theatre was not to educate, but to

entertain. The Syndicate presented what the public would buy. If "the majority is right" philosophy of democratic societies were to be applied, it could be said that the majority of the theatregoers saw exactly what they wanted. The consumer had a decided effect on what the Syndicate selected because of the commercial aspects of theatre. The Trust may have tried to prevent the public from supporting its foes, but in the end, David Belasco and Mrs. Fiske joined the Trust at its behest because of their popularity.

The Syndicate did not deny American drama, rather it encouraged its production. Paying better royalties to playwrights, the Trust presented the plays of the leading American dramatists of the day. No other playwrights from the era have been discovered who would have been worthy of production. As well, the Trust introduced foreign playwrights to the American stage.

The Trust stimulated the American economy by its spending. Theatre building gave work to architects, construction workers, and suppliers. The purchase of real estate for the purpose of theatre building benefited cities. The remodeling of older theatres gave work to technicians in that specialty. Lavish productions caused increased spending on costumes and sets. Large sums were spent on advertising in newspapers and on posters and

billboards for attractions on the road. Tickets and programs had to be printed. Syndicate road companies increased railroad profits since actors, as well as scenery, had to be transported via rail. Small towns where the traveling companies played capitalized on tourism. Actors had to be housed and fed; scenery had to be repaired. Incidental spending by all traveling personnel boosted the economy.

The Syndicate's monopoly actually fostered competition. Because of the Trust's policies, the Shubert operation came into being. In an effort to combat the emphasis on commercialism by the Syndicate, a subsidized art theatre was built on Central Park West called the New Theatre. Its purpose was the "advancement of drama," and Winthrop Ames, an idealistic producer, was hired to direct. The New Theatre failed, but eventually, because of a continuing spirit of anti-commercialism, the Provincetown Players and the Washington Square Players were formed. For the minority, which is also important in a democracy, "artistic" theatre began to compete with commercial theatre for the audiences.

The Syndicate did more to promote the growth of the theatre than to deter its development. It structured the theatre, extended it throughout the country, and made its audience selective. They had grown selective because

of the good productions brought to them by the Trust and they rebelled against the inferior plays that came later. The mass audience chose the movies instead of the legitimate theatre because the movies could provide polished productions with original stars for a cheaper price.

The Trust's existence paralleled other business operations at the time. Production became centralized in the form of the combination system. The Trust fostered specialization with a division of labor existing between the manager and the play producer. The product became standardized. A play became a whole entity represented by one company or its duplicates. Big business (the Syndicate and the Shuberts) gained control of the whole operation. When the need for mass production was felt, the theatre gave way to the motion picture. The public had been educated to think of theatre as a big business. When the new competitor was called the motion picture <u>industry</u>, they were willing to accept it as such.

The Syndicate expired in 1916 because it was no longer useful, but during its lifetime it had been a positive influence on American theatre.

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