Tainted Money?

Nineteenth-Century Charity Theatricals

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In the latter half of the nineteenth century, treading onto a public stage in New York City was still seen as an immoral choice for a woman of society, and the occasional amateur who "went pro" was roundly criticized and often disowned by her family. Yet as amateur theatricals grew in popularity and the performers and audiences outgrew parlors, some aspiring actors found a way to exploit social constructions of gender roles and gain public performance opportunities under the guise of propriety: the charity theatrical. Theatricals, like charity concerts and readings, quickly became a fashionable way to raise money not only for the financially or morally bereft but for military units, collegiate athletic teams, churches, the Statue of Liberty, and an endless variety of clubs. The events were purported to be an evening dedicated to some good fun for the sake of a deserving charity. Beneath the surface, however, the import of these productions appears significantly less simplistic or easily resolved.

Charity theatricals, as one segment of postwar benevolent activity, were simply one of many ways that women were able to use their revered and cultivated parlor skills to display their talents outside of the living room. Theatre, however, has historically maintained a morally ambiguous place in society, and theatricals have historically been the most problematic of women's living-room entertainments; therefore, theatricals were burdened with an extra layer of moral ambiguity from which singing and handiwork seemed immune, even when those talents were displayed publicly in concerts and fairs. By performing charity theatricals in rented halls and public theatres, the social elite managed to engage

in morally questionable behavior while maintaining an outward display of propriety. In a society that associated charity work with middle- and upper-middle-class femininity and public performance with the morally questionable acting profession, a charity theatrical, for women, became a moral display of femininity via a potentially immoral act. No longer safely ensconced in the parlors of their fathers and husbands, women subjected themselves to public scrutiny by both the audience and newspaper reviewers. Yet the widespread advertising and puffing of some theatricals suggest that a condoned display of self was now expanding beyond parlors, society balls, and the society pages. Clearly, charity theatricals provided a sanctioned way for dramatically inclined members of the middle and upper class to display their talents on a public stage, but could simply sending the proceeds of the event to a charity protect the participants from being tainted by their activities?

The history of charity theatricals in the United States is difficult to chart. In New York, at least, a dearth of public notices about charity theatricals before the Civil War seems to support an 1855 *New York Times* observation that Americans had yet to widely adopt the British fashion of charity theatricals. "It is rather remarkable, that with our aptitude for imitating our trans-Atlantic neighbors, we have never followed the fashion which has prevailed in England the past ten years, of giving private theatricals for the benefit of charitable institutions." The article goes on to credit Charles Dickens with "converting these harmless recreations to benevolent purposes," and it suggests that the popularity of his charity theatricals created something of a fad for them in England.[1]

This growth in charity theatricals necessarily requires a private theatrical infrastructure, so it is not surprising that England came to charity theatricals before the United States did. Private theatricals have a long history as entertainment for the upper classes in England, but the first widespread evidence of their popularity in the United States emerges in the middle years of the nineteenth century. While it appears that private theatricals were growing in popularity prior to the Civil War, these events were largely confined to spaces with restricted access and appear to have been held for charitable benefit only rarely.[2] Two different but closely related postwar performance trends developed slowly—charity theatricals and public presentations of theatricals—and the popularity of the one seems to have fed that of the other.[3] As such, a marked increase in charity theatricals occurs slightly before the new trend for public presentations of theatricals, the latter certainly driven by the novelty of charity theatricals, the need for fund-raising in the postwar economy, and the availability of performance spaces, such as club

theatres, outside of the family parlor. By the 1870s, "charity" became an excuse to stage a "private" theatrical in a rented public hall or commercial theatre, as well as in more selective club theatres.[4]

Although the audiences for charity theatricals were likely self-selecting, the performers had significantly less control over their audiences than in a truly "private" theatrical. Tickets were often publicly advertised as being on sale at bookstores, hotels, and the private residences of patronesses—and while the patronesses in particular might have limited their sales to respectable audience members, the public sale of tickets necessarily opened the events to audiences beyond the performer's regular social circle. Even the patroness system resulted in audience members who were unknown to the performers, as Rita Lawrence explains in her recounting of a charity event: "the tickets had only been sent to people of good standing, though many (as usual in these charity affairs) not known to us or our friends."[5] Anyone could, in theory, attend a publicly advertised charity theatrical, provided they could afford the ticket and were willing to watch amateur performers. Even as early as 1855, the *New York Times* acknowledged that "private theatricals . . . is not the proper name for them, as they are open to the public" when staged for charity.[6] While charity theatricals did occur in private homes, and while the reporting of such events was likely limited, as Lawrence suggests,[7] hundreds of charity events in the period bore a closer resemblance to a public commercial theatre production than their parlor counterparts simply because of their performance for a general paying audience. As such, charity theatricals represent an uneven demarcation line in the history of amateur theatre in the United States. This gradual shift out of parlors and into public spaces was at once enabled by and intertwined with developments in benevolent activity, and these developments shared many of the same implications for postwar ideas of femininity. By granting women the power to reform society through benevolent causes, society also permitted, and indeed encouraged, female activity beyond the spheres of life normally permissible by social constructions of femininity.

Charity theatricals, as one of numerous postwar charitable activities, were part of a larger tradition of philanthropic behavior in the United States, and even though neither the tradition nor the theatricals were uniquely associated with women, gender played a large role in the development of both. Although modern scholarship has done much to disprove the actual legitimacy of the "cult of true womanhood," the society that created that cultural myth was, in fact, the same society that permitted and, indeed, encouraged women to participate in benevolent activities by linking those events so clearly with ideals of femi-

ninity. Women, in addition to being considered more sensitive and emotive than their male counterparts, were generally believed to possess a greater capacity for moral and religious behavior and, in turn, were charged with protecting the morality of society. Theoretically, as women were naturally inclined to be morally upright caretakers who were resistant to the evils of the world, they could be natural reformers who could model proper behavior and lead others to a virtuous life.

G. J. Barker-Benfield successfully illuminates the philosophical and theoretical groundwork that underlies the association of philanthropy, gender, and sensibility in the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States. Sensibility became particularly associated with women because of their perceived biological weaknesses, but it is the growth of the culture of sensibility alongside the growth of consumer culture that enables Barker-Benfield to link female sensibility with philanthropic giving in this period. The growth of consumer culture allowed "[b]ourgeois Anglo-American white women . . . to enter a new public world of formal visits, pleasure gardens, shopping parades, assembly rooms, and theaters of the 'urban renaissance'—spaces intended for the enjoyment and cultivation of new heterosocial manners, including their tasteful expressions of sensibility."[8] Yet this very wealth and freedom came at the expense of the workers, whose labor permitted the industrial revolution and slave trade to turn a profit. "In short, as commercial capitalists and then industrial capitalists helped to create prosperity by immiserating millions, they also helped to elaborate a consumer society nourishing the possibilities for the aggrandizement of the interior life, the elevation of feelings."[9] For women, their increased capacity for sensibility and their central presence in the domestic sphere, which existed in large part as a result of the consumer revolution, made them logically empowered philanthropists; they had the free time and empathetic capacity to feel the pain of others and to act on it. "Middle class women exerted social power for themselves and their male collaborators, helping to generate their own collectivity, as it were, in dispensing tea and sympathy, whence they brought criticism to bear on the world of unfeeling men."[10] It was, of course, that "world of unfeeling men" that simultaneously permitted women the economic position to help and yet refused them the power to prevent the social ills from existing in the first place. Indeed, women of this period can be read either as social pawns who attempted to clean up after the male establishment's industrial messes or as a subversive force that sought to undermine established authority by using the fruits of its labor to help those in need and by using the assumptions of gendered sensibility to gain a public voice through philanthropic giving.

Prior to the Civil War this link between gender roles and benevolence

existed within a philanthropic tradition that was, Wendy Gamber argues, as much about self-reform as about reforming others. She suggests that "almost all antebellum reformers shared certain fundamental beliefs: Almost all believed that it was possible not only to change the world, but also to perfect it."[11] Thus, despite wide-ranging ideals that produced temperance societies, abolitionist groups, and utopian communities, these reformers sought to improve their world and themselves according to their ideals, and they saw little difference between reforming themselves and philanthropic giving to another.[12] Reformers, more often than not, took their own advice and sought to better their own lives by, for example, giving up drinking or joining utopian communities. Gamber suggests that the vibrancy of many of the antebellum movements began to wane by the 1850s, and these idealistic dreams were often replaced with a focus on more practical social troubles and an accompanying split between reformer and recipient.[13]

Philanthropy in the postwar era, when charity theatricals became popular, was largely marked by this concern with helping others without necessarily improving oneself in the process. The differences between benefactor and beneficiary became more clearly delineated, and the social ills to which postwar women devoted their time were more likely to be social ills that they, the benefactors, did not encounter in their own upper- or middle-class lives. For theatricals, in particular, this separation between self and method of reform reduced the potential that the charity theatricals might have been seen as providing the performers with, such as an opportunity to reform their elocutionary skills or public presence. This self-improvement through performance, a common refrain in guidebooks which sought to ameliorate concern over the morality of theatricals, rarely appears in reference to charity theatricals, except insofar as talented amateurs used these performances as a stepping stone to an even more immoral act: going pro.

Indeed, early charity theatricals are marked instead by the latter component of Gamber's observation: a clear differentiation between those who are economically positioned to help and those who need their assistance. Charity theatricals also provided participants with the ability to assist the impoverished without necessarily having to physically encounter the orphaned children or working girls whose lives the performers sought to improve. Women were able to continue to hold their roles as moral guardians by helping those who were less fortunate through fund-raising activities that never took them beyond their own social spheres or comfort zones.

In addition to reaffirming social class barriers while underscoring the economic differences between the participants and those in need, charity

theatricals appear to have served a dual purpose for the participants—fund-raising and leisure entertainment. Middle- and upper-class women had a unique combination of leisure time and financial capital that allowed them time to stage elaborate theatricals and to perform charity work simultaneously. Concurrently, through theatricals society granted women the permission to act out of bounds while still acting well within accepted power structures and cultural norms. While living-room theatricals appear to have had fairly short rehearsal periods, extant records of charity theatricals, particularly the well-advertised ones for flashier causes, suggest a much greater attention to rehearsal and production. These extensive preparations also imply a greater focus on aesthetic quality than might be the object of a parlor performance, but this focus on producing a quality performance also aligns the charity theatrical more closely with commercial theatre. Good intentions did not always lead to success, however, and this dual purpose of leisure and fund-raising left the performers open to multiple conflicting interpretations of their public behavior.

Indeed, charity theatricals presented direct counterpoints to the nineteenth-century ideologies that linked women with benevolence and presumed that women were natural caretakers who lived to do little else. Lori Ginzberg argues that "[t]he success of charitable and benevolent endeavors depended on this belief in women's invisibility and lack of self-interest."[14] Just as the amateurs sought to distance themselves from commercial theatre by creating carefully nuanced distinctions between the two sets of activities, so did charitable organizations rely on public perceptions to influence the direction of society's moral compass. Groups with the financial and societal power to assist the morally or financially impoverished did so in part to shape the course of society, but Ginzberg argues that women's key role in benevolent giving permitted the appearance of unselfish action while simultaneously allowing for public recognition of the results of those actions:

> Charity cannot be wholly invisible if it is to make these lessons clear. Women or, more accurately, the belief in women's moral superiority perfectly fit the requirement that charitable endeavors appear unmotivated by self- or class interest. As members of a group that seemed to be defined exclusively by gender, women could have no interest other than to fulfill their benevolent destiny; they could be applauded and recognized without calling into question the purity of their motives.[15]

Within such a public-relations framework charity theatricals might have been much like any other charitable event wherein women would work

together solely for the sake of the poor. In reality, however, we have far too many references to women's love of acting and performing to maintain such a naive outlook on the supposedly pure motives of the performers. Charity theatricals, particularly those with extravagant financial outlays and extensive rehearsals, advertising, and puffing, hardly permitted the women to remain even metaphorically invisible. Rather, their angelic selves appeared onstage before thousands of potentially unknown audience members who had paid to see the performance. The associations between charity and commercial performers were underscored by the performance of popular plays, in full costume, with rented or custom sets (occasionally those used in commercial performances) in commercial theatres.

The potentially problematic public display of self on the stage appears to have been tempered somewhat by the mechanisms of charitable organizations, as well as by the production traditions of the amateur companies. Much of the early movement out of parlors and into public spaces was aided by the growth and development of dramatic and nondramatic clubs and organizations. Theatricals staged by a club or group became a reflection on the entity, much as parlor theatricals were seen as a reflection on the family (or the father figure). In all but a few notable cases it appears that the primary focus of theatricals remained squarely on the charity or the organization that produced the event, not on any individual stars. Amateur performers, then, were not often subjected to the acclaim or the notoriety of professional actors within the star system.[16] This seemingly minor distinction between amateur and professional performer parallels and reflects the at best contradictory nature of women's power in benevolent giving as well.

Public perceptions of acting also serve to differentiate the amateurs from their professional counterparts. Socially, amateur performers believed that they occupied the moral high ground when compared to professional actors, much as they occupied the financial and moral high ground when compared to the beneficiaries that they assisted through theatricals.[17] Theatrically, training and talent served to differentiate even the most renowned amateur from a professional counterpart. Authors of guidebooks for amateur theatricals routinely reminded their readers that not everyone could act well and that amateurs should not strive to perform above their talent level. The guides' discussions about acting seemed intended to keep the amateur's focus on the communal fun that might be had through theatricals and, perhaps more important, to reinforce that it took talent and training to be treated as a professional actor and to stage aesthetically successful productions that could compare with the commercial stage the amateurs sought to emulate. Hence,

the guidebooks, with their insistence on acting as a learned skill and not solely as a naturally occurring talent, seem to release the amateurs from any taint of professionalism while centering the focus of the events on the charitable action and not the aesthetic quality of the performance.[18]

The coverage of charity theatricals in the newspapers of the day responded to their growth in popularity, resulting in the growth of actual performance reviews. Amateur actors appear to have been tolerated by most reviewers, who seemed capable of recognizing the place that amateur theatricals held in society. Weaknesses in shows were expected, further reinforcing the differences between the amateurs' and professionals' skills: "Like most amateur efforts, however, they are deficient in the very points that make the difference between the effort and the accomplishment."[19] Hence, while many felt that "[t]he ordinary amateur actor is a nuisance and a useless vanity, and when seen in public he cuts a sorry figure,"[20] they kept critiques of such poor performances sufficiently vague as to keep their readership pleased. The argument that "[s]tringent criticism would . . . be out of place" held sway for quite some time, as did the notion that "the efforts of unprofessional actors rarely are interesting except to their prejudiced friends."[21] As amateur theatricals became more common, reviewers often did single out performers, and would note which members of the cast were frequent performers or routinely successful, but would usually refrain from offering criticisms of a named performer. Some truly horrid productions were not even listed by club name or performance name on occasion, instead left to pass on into the ephemeral history of amateur theatre, hopefully to be soon forgotten by all involved.

Commentary on the appropriateness of a particular play chosen for amateur representation occasionally appears in reviews, but theatricals were not often publicly judged on their play selection. A review of the February 7, 1872, production of *All That Glitters Is Not Gold,* by the Murray Hill Amateur Dramatic Association, notes that it is a play "with a fine, wholesome moral,"[22] but the reviewer's discussion focused, as was typical, on the performance itself and not on the plot of the play. Thus it stands to reason that while the selection of the play might have been seen as important for the guidebook authors who routinely emphasized the selection of "appropriate" plays, it seldom seemed to matter to the reviewers.[23] The extent to which the amateurs took the advice of the guides and hence were spared harsh commentary will never be truly known, although amateurs did show a propensity for performing comedies, gentlemanly melodramas, and musicals. Despite these tendencies, little was seen as off-limits to amateurs, who performed minstrel

shows, vaudeville shows, operas, burlesques, and occasionally Shakespeare. As the *New York Times* noted in 1886, as theatricals became more acceptable and more amateurs began acting in public, their choices of plays drifted further and further away from those suggested by the guidebooks: "The number of amateur actors is constantly increasing; in the neighboring town of Brooklyn, there are a dozen dramatic societies, we believe, the members of which tackle the blank verse drama, prose comedy, romantic and sensational drama, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, scene individable [*sic*] or poem unlimited to their own satisfaction and the delight of their relatives and friends."[24] This particular review goes on to note that many performers were less than successful, aesthetically, in their theatricals. Hence, while the amateurs certainly observed few limits when choosing plays, they might have been well served to avoid some plays or perhaps to avoid acting altogether. Yet the guise of charity again seems to have negated or at least excused poor productions, be they due to acting or play selection.

Poor reviews and the guidebooks' suggestions to "be appropriate" did little to dampen the enthusiasm for amateur theatricals in the period. If anything, it seems that subpar performances were to be expected, and good acting was often singled out with astonishment, at least in the early years. Some troupes of amateur performers, like the Strollers or the Amaranth, became known for producing quality amateur productions for charity and hence were able to raise more money through multiple-night shows than other groups, but these groups represented the upper echelon of the amateur acting pool and often produced amateurs who turned professional because, in part, of their successes on the amateur stage. If anything, the success of these well-regarded societies seems to have inspired other groups, some of whom went so far as to borrow journeyman amateur actors for performances. A lack of aesthetic success, however, did not seem to matter much for the smaller groups, as the focus of those events was never clearly placed on theatrical skill. For better or worse the charity would benefit from the efforts of the amateurs, and the countless slights about amateur acting that pervade the newspapers of the time seem to suggest that watching poor performances was the price one paid for performing a charitable deed.

Positive reviews, on the contrary, presented the largest danger to an amateur's moral and social standing, not because of the praise itself but because of the feared potential outcome that it might produce. Amateurs in charity events were expected to remain largely anonymous parts of the entire performance event. It was feared that when reviewers singled out an amateur for praise, that solo recognition for a talented,

albeit amateur, performance would lead the amateur to become indecorously vain. Vanity, in turn, might lead the amateur to attempt to turn professional, thereby causing the performer to potentially damage her reputation by taking to the commercial stage. Hence, when the focus of the charity theatrical was placed on the aesthetics of the event and not on the charitable aspects of it, the danger posed to the morality of the participants was greater, in part because of the potential that amateur performance had, at least in the eyes of fearful parents and husbands, to inspire women to forgo their place in society and turn professional.

Yet the structures of charitable organizations and the postwar trends in benevolence served to protect or restrict women from acquiring the solo public voice that seems to be one of the minute points that protected amateurs from the taint of public performance. Despite being a socially sanctioned part of nineteenth-century femininity, benevolent activity allowed women of the upper and middle classes to assume a power and authority that normally would not have been extended to them. Socially, this power was not granted to the individual woman but rather to a group or charitable organization.[25] Kathleen McCarthy traces the development of such groups between 1790 and 1860, noting that the growth during this period provides the foundation for postwar charitable giving. She argues that "once they gathered together to form a legally chartered charitable corporation, even married women assumed a part of a collective identity that imbued them with legal prerogatives that they lacked as individuals, including the right to buy, sell, and invest [in] property and to sign binding contracts."[26] By working in groups to fund organizations that set about to reform society, these women could work to reform social ills, and in doing so, the women's groups gained political and societal power.[27] By choosing which charities to support, the women could determine which problems received attention and thereby influence public policy through their work at a time when they could not do so through the ballot box.

The women's power was also derived from their social class. Charity theatricals, like much postwar benevolent activity, were marked by a clear differentiation between those with economic positions of power and those who needed their assistance. In the case of theatricals, however, women transgressed acceptable theatrical boundaries while fulfilling their roles as moral caretakers.

Groups of middle- and upper-class women did much of the organizing and patronizing of charity theatricals, reflecting the postwar organization-based approach to philanthropy. Amateur dramatic societies appear and disappear with great regularity in the late nineteenth century, yet most

early groups appear to either be wholly devoted to charity, as in the case of the Charity Amateur Dramatic Association and the Ladies Dramatic Union, or at least regularly involved in charitable events. In the 1860s, while individual families or groups of friends would often stage theatricals in their homes and send a notice of the event to the society pages, it was rare to find a named organization staging a theatrical in a public venue for anything other than charitable purposes. Likewise, when friends grouped together to stage a theatrical in a public venue, there was almost always a beneficiary, at least in the 1860s and 1870s.

The Murray Hill Amateur Dramatic Association, active in theatricals in the early 1870s, routinely held benefit performances, but reports of its 1872 performance for the New York Infant Asylum are particularly reflective of many trends in postwar charitable giving. The *New York Times* preview article about the March 21 performance "earnestly entreat[s] our theatre-going readers" to purchase tickets for the production for the sake of the children and to help the organizers achieve their goal:

> The immediate object of the benevolent ladies who manage the charity is to raise a sum of money sufficient to build a suitable edifice in the country to which the children, or a part of them, may be removed. . . . [A]s soon as the weather gets warm, a large fraction of their number, we are assured, are certain to die. . . . Two dollars is no great sum to part with; yet it may, at this juncture, be the means of saving a human life. We beg all who can [to] make this trifling outlay for the sake of the poor little waifs who are so unhappily abandoned, and for that of the noble-hearted women to whom the success of the charity is very dear.

Herein, the idealistic association of women as caregivers to young, helpless children is more than evident. The melodramatic positioning of the children in death's grip enables the Murray Hill Amateur Dramatic Association managers to be clearly differentiated from the scalawag parents of the orphans. The ladies are "noble-hearted women" whose hard work for the pitiful children should be supported and idealized, much as the women themselves are idealized in this article. The extensive discussion of the children clearly places the focus of the event on the fund-raising and the beneficiaries, not on the acting or the performance. Indeed, the play title appears in none of the articles about this event. Even the remark that people should "buy a ticket, whether able to go to the Thursday performance or not," suggests that the focus of the event is, above all, on raising money for the children.[28]

The exact system through which a benefactor was chosen for indi-

vidual events remains unclear. Certainly, the choice of beneficiary reflected on the participants, and occasionally there were clear links between the benefactors and the beneficiaries. The Ladies Dramatic Union tended to assist charities devoted to helping those of the Jewish faith, and numerous individual churches or church groups held theatricals for the benefit of either their own institution or the poor in their neighborhood. Homes for newsboys, working girls, and orphans were popular beneficiaries, as were churches and hospitals. It seems, however, that sometimes a beneficiary could apply for assistance from a dramatic club. This approach, presumably, is why the Students' Dramatic Club advertised for "applications from charitable organizations for benefit performances" at the end of a review of their May 1894 performances of *The Organist* and *Nita's First*.[29]

Fashionable causes also provided performance opportunities, and the exhortations for financial support for public artworks such as the fund for the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty served as the cause célèbre for numerous theatricals in the mid-1880s. In the late nineteenth century, many public monuments were erected to glorify and embody the ideals of the newly reunited country. "Champions of the republican ideals of liberty and equality looked on public monuments as a vital means of communicating the values of a popular government to large numbers of people."[30] By joining in the fund-raising for public artworks, the participants clearly aligned themselves with the ideologies associated with the particular artworks. This transference of meaning from the beneficiary to the benefactor in the case of public art creates a subtly different relationship between the charity performer and the object of the efforts. The women who organized the charity theatricals to raise money for the Pedestal Fund were raising funds for a statue that represented liberties that they did not themselves possess. Babcock and Macaloon's description of the Statue of Liberty's dedication ceremony reinforces the ironically complicated positioning of the women who performed for the sake of the statue: "As the suffragettes who circled Bedloe's Island in a boat at the dedication announced on a megaphone, if Liberty got down off her pedestal, she would not have been allowed to vote in either France or America—let alone attend her own unveiling ceremony."[31] Charitable activities and amateur performances certainly granted the women some transgressive liberties, but here again we have another example of women who worked within the cultural system of charity theatricals to exploit their own gender roles and significance while simultaneously reinforcing the very foundational support for their subjugation.

The amateurs who staged charity theatricals for the Bartholdi Pedestal

Fund were following in the footsteps of the commercial theatre, not simply by performing theatricals but by performing publicly advertised theatricals for the benefit of the fund. When the initial call for fund-raising went out in 1882, Wallack, Frohman, Abbey, and Palmer all volunteered to hold benefit events at their respective theatres.[32] A professional production of Miss Jean Burnside's *Was He Right?* at the Academy of Music on February 3, 1883, was organized by a group of women associated with the Bartholdi Statue Committee. Their efforts at attracting notable society members to attend the event were evidenced by long published lists of box-holders and a *New York Times* commentary that "[i]t is doubtful if the notable assemblage could have been brought together by the merits of the play."[33] Within weeks the amateurs were no longer gathering audiences for professional productions but were instead organizing the first of many amateur productions to benefit the fund.

Mrs. James Brown Potter and her cadre of loyal amateur performers staged a series of theatricals for the benefit of the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund on April 24, 25, and 26, 1883. These theatricals appear to have been akin to other highly organized events and seem to have spared no expense in detail or planning. The managers hired The Madison Square Theatre, acquired costumes used in that season's Vanderbilt Ball, and, according to Charles Crandall, "[t]he programmes, which were donated by Tiffany & Co., were neatly engraved, and bore a relief in gilt of the statue. They were tied each day with different colored ribbons." The matinee performance bills included Frank Harvey's *The Old Love and the New* and a dramatization of Tennyson's "Princess" by a Professor Shields. During the "Princess," Mrs. Brown Potter, "sitting on a throne, wearing a sleeveless, creamy-colored robe and a student's cap [delivered a] spirited declamation of Tennyson's woman's rights sentiments." Crandall notes that "[t]he managers felt sure of realizing a good sum from the performance, thus giving the fund a good start before, as Mrs. Potter says in her epilogue, 'leaving the men to do the rest.'"[34]

Indeed, her positioning as a beautiful classically inspired woman in possession of little actual worldly power allowed Mrs. Brown Potter to be a living embodiment of "Liberty Enlightening the World." Despite Crandall's assessment, the text was hardly a rallying cry for women's rights but rather a recasting of traditional gender roles that parallels Liberty's and the performer's own troubled semiotic meanings. Certainly, the women were acting outside of bounds by performing, but their true power ends before they can fully act, for the men have "to do the rest" and actually use the fruits of the fund-raising and the performing to create a truly public artwork. Women's volition and their

creative powers, as with all amateur theatricals, stop just short of providing an unhindered public opportunity for artistic creation and displays of power. Instead, the ladies must work within the frameworks of charitable organizations while performing male idealizations of their character in efforts to establish what was "the world's largest female monument"[35] and, as such, an enormous masculine appropriation of and interpretation of femininity: Bartholdi's statue of "Liberty Enlightening the World."

The spring of 1884 found Mrs. Brown Potter and her friends again planning a series of February theatricals and tableaux for the fund, but their efforts were not widely echoed by other amateur groups until after Joseph Pulitzer began his repeated badgering of the public on March 17, 1885, in the pages of his *New York World*.[36] Numerous charitable organizations and amateur performance groups answered his rallying cry with fairs, exhibits, theatricals, and donations. Fund-raisers varied in both content and participants: Company I of the Seventh Regiment of the New York State National Guard performed *Box and Cox* and a burlesque of *The Lady of Lyons* on April 13 and 14,[37] while rumors circulated that organizers of an April 26 performance of *The Romance of a Poor Young Man* for the benefit of the Boys' Club of St. George's Church should stage the production during the upcoming social season in Washington, DC, for the benefit of the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund.[38] The fund also attracted combined group efforts. As was occasionally seen in other charity theatricals for notable causes, groups of amateurs joined forces for this charity, and in doing so created more of a stir than might otherwise have occurred. By choosing a minstrel show format, the organizers of the May 8, 1885, benefit entertainment at the Academy of Music allowed for easy blending of multiple groups, ranging from members of the Columbia College and Seventh Regiment Glee Clubs to members of amateur dramatic societies. While the audiences would still necessarily be self-selecting, the breadth of participants, number of influential patronesses, and the attendance of theatre parties ensured successful ticket sales and fund-raising.[39]

The nationalistic fervor that accompanied the Bartholdi statue events did appear in fund-raising drives for public artworks like the Grant Monument, even if the latter was not as much of a cause célèbre. The *New York Times* put out calls in the fall of 1885 for contributions to the Grant Monument fund, explicitly requesting that society members solicit contributions from social events and implying that their support of the fund was an appropriate form of patriotism. "Certainly no worthier cause for the labor of men and women can be suggested than that of rearing to the memory of America's great hero a memorial which shall

fittingly commemorate his deeds and character."[40] Throughout this editorial leisure-time social events and national pride are linked together through a type and amount of charitable giving that is clearly associated with the upper classes who participate in the social season. "Collections made at tea parties and receipts from amateur theatricals and other social entertainments may be made before the end of the season to increase the fund to an extent which cannot be estimated in advance."[41] The World of Society column made a direct appeal to all of the participants in 1885 theatricals for the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund, exhorting them to "consider the feasibility of giving *The Mikado* by amateurs for this popular fund."[42] In February 1886 a group of women answered the paper's call and, "determined to show that they could do something to indicate their patriotism, have been for some time past laboring to get up a theatrical performance for the benefit of the Grant Monument fund."[43] Their chosen play was *Richard III*, perhaps not the most flattering of choices for the fund, but the play appears to have been selected because the cast had "acted in it before with success,"[44] and the production could presumably be counted on to raise a substantial amount of money.

Comparatively few published accounts of theatricals for other public artworks have been found, particularly when compared to the extensive coverage of the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund theatricals. The disparity seems understandable, given that the Bartholdi statue's fund-raising became Joseph Pulitzer's pet project to raise donations, as well as the reputation of his *New York World*. Quietly advertised events for the Soldiers' Monument Fund in 1879 and Gottschalk statue in 1870 had neither the fanfare nor the public appeal, it seems, that accompanied the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund.[45] Even the Grant Monument's fund-raising, begun in earnest shortly after his death in the summer of 1885 and with lofty aims of raising one million dollars, could not rival that of the Statue of Liberty. Sufficiently powerful society members were associated with both causes, yet one wonders if the overlapping fund-raising drives, weariness from sustained fund-raising for the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund, a much higher price tag, and a lack of a finalized design ultimately rendered the Grant Monument a less-worthy charitable cause.[46] Certainly, the Bartholdi fund-raising was widespread and lasted for nearly three years, with even professional theatres and performers donating proceeds from specially advertised charity performances. Notably, this connection between amateur and professional performers seemed to cause little uproar in certain circles, as the charitable events continued, often housed in the same theatres, until the fund reached its goal of $250,000 in 1885.

The funds raised by the charity theatricals vary widely, but it was not uncommon for a theatrical in the 1880s to take in more than one thousand dollars, and the 1884 productions for the Bartholdi fund by Mrs. Brown Potter were expected to bring in twenty-five hundred dollars.[47] The Ladies' Dramatic Union staged an immensely successful production of *Iolanthe* on March 29, 1884, and sold six thousand dollars' worth of tickets for the Home for Chronic Invalids.[48] By 1899 a performance of *The Lady from Chicago* by the Strollers, one of the more prestigious clubs in New York, took in a reported twenty thousand dollars.[49] Although the latter staggering amount may be anomalous, the charity theatrical remained a solid means of fund-raising. Even without donations, events with limited seating could turn a sizable profit based solely on ticket sales, for ticket scalping was not unheard of. Tickets for the February 4, 1885, benefit performance of *Fair Weather and Foul,* held in Mrs. William C. Whitney's tapestry salon, were in such demand that some of the three hundred tickets, which had originally sold for three dollars apiece, were going for twenty dollars apiece outside the house.[50]

This tradition of helping the less fortunate does not characterize all charity theatricals in the period. As the century progressed, more and more groups began to hold events for the benefit of their own organizations, just as more and more theatricals were held without even the protective guise of "charitable" behavior. By the 1880s, increasing numbers of theatricals appear to have been staged in public venues either completely without designated beneficiaries or with what were, at best, sketchy ones. As a result the semblance of propriety and social justice that provided the socially approved foundation for earlier public performances was utterly lacking from many events in the 1880s and 1890s.

Even for those theatricals that still had beneficiaries, the call to improve society appears to have been answered with much less frequency as the century drew to a close. Impoverished children were often forgotten and replaced by rowing paraphernalia. Athletic clubs, in particular, seemed to have caught on to the fund-raising possibilities of theatricals, and they often staged events to benefit their own clubs. For example, the Staten Island Cricket Club performed *Caste* on June 16, 1885, because it needed to raise funds to move the club after the land was sold out from under it.[51] Columbia's and Harvard's athletic teams appear to have been particularly needy in the latter part of the century, and the North Shore Ladies Tennis Club staged a November 1886 theatrical for the benefit of the Ladies' Tennis Club of the Staten Island Cricket Club.[52]

While the often scarce extant documentation on some events cannot

rule out the existence of a beneficiary, comments such as the following description of a May 22, 1883, theatrical suggest that in the 1880s it was no longer uncommon for amateur theatricals to be staged in public venues simply as entertainment: "At the Lexington Avenue Opera House, the Amateur League gave its seventh dramatic performance and reception of the season. The entertainment was not a complimentary one, but was given for the purpose of establishing a fund for the purchase of a club-room."[53] Countless other advertised or reviewed events are conspicuously lacking a beneficiary. Had it finally become appropriate for middle- and upper-class women to act in public?

Late-century increases in the respectability of theatre could do little to prevent vociferous public outcry over a society woman's choice to leave the amateur stage and work in the commercial theatre. Perhaps one of the most famous defectors was Mrs. Brown Potter, who parlayed her success in the New York amateur theatrical scene into a thirty-year career as a professional performer. As an amateur Brown Potter rarely performed with a titled dramatic group, and her acting and marketing skills enabled her events to become associated with her own name. She took her condoned amateur reputation and the power it provided overseas and began her commercial career in England and then returned to make her professional debut in New York on October 31, 1887, amid much fanfare and scandalous gossip. Her first years as a professional were plagued by contractual issues, a high-profile divorce, charges of ruining the family name, and an eventual love affair and rumored second marriage to her costar, Kryle Bellew. Behaviors and individual public notices that had been passably acceptable in charity theatricals were most decidedly not respectable choices for a woman of her social status. In the eyes of society she had been corrupted by the evils of the world and was no longer able to embody the role of the mythic benevolent female who could help others by remaining unscathed by immorality. Indeed, the outcry's subtext suggested that Mrs. Brown Potter's choice to go pro meant that she was unable to maintain her own moral superiority, thereby proving that she was somehow not a proper woman.

Despite the increased acceptability of theatre, therefore, many of the old stereotypes and preconceptions about the theatrical profession remained throughout the last half of the nineteenth century. Tracy Davis argues that nineteenth-century women existed in a realm where "[s]ocial respectability was merited as long as women met the views prescribed for their age and class, but actresses—virtually by definition—lived and worked beyond the boundaries of propriety."[54] For any woman respectability depended as much on her actual behavior as on the pub-

lic's perceptions of her behavior, thus rendering the creation of reputations to be, at best, an imprecise process.

It would be easy to assume that amateurs who joined this increasingly respectable profession would naturally end up in the upper echelon of the profession and would maintain their respectability, yet the evidence points to a much more conflicted response and result. Many amateurs were believed to have talent, but they lacked the training and skills necessary to land them in the upper ranks of performers in terms of aesthetic success. Furthermore, parental responses to a daughter's desire to turn professional, daughters' behaviors while making the transition, and the general social and parental responses afterward seem to suggest that the profession, no matter how respectable it might have been for others, was not a viable choice for *their* daughters. Despite the increasing respectability of theatre, the social ostracism, disinheritance, parental wrath, and private detectives who trailed many a society-member-turned-pro suggest that this appearance of respectability and appearance of acceptance was only capable of being maintained from a safe distance. For many, that distance did not involve personal connections with the theatre establishment; indeed, it seems that although many wished to remain in the role of audience, or even adoring fan, that affection did not extend to the idea of making the commercial theatre part of the family.

That distance, however, kept shrinking. Amateur performances were generally held within the bounds of propriety, but those bounds became increasingly porous as the nineteenth century progressed and the already close links between the amateur and the professional stage rendered the two harder and harder to distinguish. Even though some commercial performers were able to shed the immoral stigma that had been previously assumed of most actresses, all was not yet well for the amateurs who wished to turn professional. Yet just as the use of commercial spaces was seen as variably acceptable, so too was the choice to join the profession. For some middle-class women the shifts in public perception of commercial theatre and the popularity of amateur theatricals led to an increasing acceptability of the stage as a professional choice. As Davis notes, "With a different type of play and a different audience, however, the theatre became an attractive career for middle-class women, though the idea of one's daughter exhibiting herself before one's peers was still loathsome to parents."[55] Again, for the amateur this performance before peers was acceptable so long as it was under some means of societal reputation protection; early in the fad the parlor provided this safety. Charity enabled women to maintain their reputations even while per-

forming on commercial stages and eventually doing so alongside professionals. Clubs and dramatic societies also afforded a cover for their public performances, and community theatres that developed after the turn of the century continued the tradition. This trajectory toward activities that were increasingly closer to and modeled on commercial theatre—even as the acceptance of the commercial theatre grew—kept amateur performers so close to the taint of the commercial stage that only their reputations did protect them, at least until they decided to take up the profession.

Despite outcries over actual participation in commercial theatre, the nature of amateur theatricals by the end of the nineteenth century aligns them more closely with commercial theatre than with the parlor entertainments of the 1850s. Amateurs advertised their events; charged admission; used commercial venues; expended great amounts of time, money, and energy in creating aesthetically pleasing entertainments; and interacted with commercial actors by hiring them as coaches or limited engagement stars or by joining commercial shows as supernumeraries. Although all performances did not blend the commercial and amateur, the point remains that this explosion of amateur activity was initially made socially viable because theatricals were staged for charity. What began as groups of women performing their socially appropriate role in public had devolved into thinly veiled opportunities for public displays of self. The once-clear distinctions between amateur and professional theatre were obfuscated by women doing exactly what society wanted them to do. Indeed, a legal case between William Gillette and the Mansfield Amateur Dramatic Association in the early 1890s determined that the presence of paychecks was the only way to legally distinguish between an amateur and a professional.[56] Ethically and morally, the distinction rested entirely on the perceptions of the public.

Notes

1. "Private Theatricals," *New York Times*, July 27, 1855.

2. The terms *private* and *amateur* were used interchangeably to refer to theatricals during the period, and although parlor performances were rarely called "amateur" theatricals, performances in halls and theatres used both names.

3. This is not to suggest that charity events in public theatres in the 1860s did not occur. A particularly novel event was an 1864 charity production of *Cinderella* at Niblo's Garden, staged in part by the children from Mr. Allen Dodworth's dancing academy. The event was described as having "a highly interesting character. . . . Private theatricals seldom take so pleasant a shape as

this, and we will venture to say that the young folks will be rewarded for their efforts" (Amusements, *New York Times,* April 16, 1864). This afternoon benefit for the Sanitary Commission represented numerous departures from prewar practices, for it was a charity event in a public theatre staged by children. These once-novel practices were followed with regularity in the postwar years, although records of children on the charity stage remain rare.

4. This postwar growth in popularity may be related to the availability of performance spaces, for charitable events that produced large donations necessarily required an audience larger than could fit in even a private ballroom.

5. Rita Lawrence, *Amateurs and Actors of the 19th–20th Centuries (American, English, Italian)* (Plymouth, UK: William Brendon and Son, 1935), 107.

6. "Private Theatricals," *New York Times,* July 27, 1855.

7. Lawrence, *Amateurs and Actors,* 44.

8. G. J. Barker-Benfield, "The Origins of Anglo-American Sensibility," in *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History,* ed. Lawrence J. Friedman and Mark D. McGarvie (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 87.

9. Ibid., 85.

10. Ibid.

11. Wendy Gamber, "Antebellum Reform: Salvation, Self-Control, and Social Transformation," in *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History,* ed. Lawrence J. Friedman and Mark D. McGarvie (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 129.

12. Ibid., esp. 129–30.

13. Ibid., 152–53.

14. Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 216.

15. Ibid.

16. There were a few notable amateurs, such as Elsie de Wolfe and Edward Fales Coward, who lent their talents to multiple amateur dramatic societies and thus did operate on what can be viewed as a version of the star system.

17. I have located few records of amateurs ever staging a charity theatrical for the Actor's Fund or any other charity that would have benefited professional actors or any segment of commercial theatre production aside from the occasional benefit performance held for the acting coach with which a particular amateur troupe regularly worked. It appears that the amateurs decided to forgo the chance to further establish their moral superiority over the commercial theatre by working to benefit that morally bereft segment of society. Perhaps they assumed that the actors chose to lower themselves in ways that impoverished youth did not, or perhaps they perceived that their already precarious moral positioning might be weakened by such a clear connection between the two realms of theatre. As always, this hole in the historical record may also be due to the ephemeral nature of amateur performance's historical documentation.

18. For amateurs who chose to adopt a professional career there seemed to be a general consensus among critics that the amateur needed to display innate

talents but that those talents then needed to be shaped and groomed. The amateur tradition of hiring professionals to work on productions as coaches and stage managers can be seen as a means by which a talented amateur could obtain the professional skills necessary to survive on the professional stage.

19. "The Bijou Opera-House," *New York Times,* Sep. 10, 1882.

20. Amusements, *New York Times,* Feb. 25, 1881.

21. "A Russian Honeymoon," *New York Times,* Dec. 30, 1885.

22. "Amateur Performance at the Union League Club," *New York Times,* Feb. 9, 1872.

23. This concern over propriety often accompanies a general dismissal of antitheatrical arguments. Most of the suggested plays are farces or comedies, often translated and offered for sale by the author or publisher, with the occasional domestic drama and fanciful piece for children thrown in for variety. Within this context the contemporary plays that appear most frequently in the guides can be seen as exemplifying the type of theatre that the authors, at least, deemed appropriate. *Caste, Money,* and Robertson's *Home* appear frequently in the texts, although it must be noted that the publishers ran ads for plays that are less obviously part of the commercial shift toward a more gentlemanly melodrama and toward plays otherwise appropriate for middle-class consumption.

24. "Amateurs at the Lyceum," *New York Times,* May 6, 1886.

25. This development of associations parallels the development of women's clubs prior to the 1860s and is part of a larger trend toward participation in events and groupings outside of the home.

26. Kathleen D. McCarthy, "Women and Political Culture," in *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History,* ed. Lawrence J. Friedman and Mark D. McGarvie (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 182.

27. The social organizations in which women chose to invest their time and energy were, understandably, determined in part by their class and social circles. Ginzberg notes that "conservative benevolent women were far more likely than abolitionists to be members of wealthy, locally influential family and community networks, and their benevolent goals and means reflected the economic and political privileges of their class" (Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence,* 6).

28. "Summary of Amusements: Benefit of the New-York Infant Asylum," *New York Times,* March 17, 1872.

29. "Plays by Amateur Actors," *New York Times,* May 17, 1894.

30. Christian Blanchet, "The Universal Appeal of the Statue of Liberty," in *The Statue of Liberty Revisited: Making a Universal Symbol,* ed. Wilton S. Dillon and Neil G. Kotler (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 31.

31. Barbara A. Babcock and John J. Macaloon, "Everybody's Gal: Women, Boundaries, and Monuments," in *The Statue of Liberty Revisited: Making a Universal Symbol,* ed. Wilton S. Dillon and Neil G. Kotler (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 84.

32. "Statue of Liberty," *New York Times,* Nov. 15, 1882; "The Beacon of Liberty," *New York Times,* Nov. 26, 1882.

33. "Bartholdi Statue Fund Benefit," *New York Times,* Feb. 4, 1883. For lists of attendees see the former and "In Aid of the Bartholdi Statue," *New York Times,* Jan. 14, 1883; and "The Bartholdi Statue Fund," *New York Times,* Jan. 28, 1883.

34. Charles H. Crandall, *The Season, an Annual Record of Society in New York, Brooklyn, and Vicinity* (New York: White, Stokes, and Allen, 1883), 363–67.

35. Babcock and Macaloon, "Everybody's Gal," 79.

36. From March through September of 1885 Pulitzer took it on himself to regularly post the amount received for the funds, opportunities for donations, and repeated exhortations to support the statue.

37. "National Guard Gossip," *New York Times,* March 29, 1885; "For the Pedestal Fund," *New York Times,* April 14, 1885.

38. The World of Society, *New York Times,* March 29, 1885.

39. For listings of participants and box-holders see "For the Pedestal Fund," *New York Times,* April 13, 1885; The World of Society, *New York Times,* May 3, 1885; and "Helping the Pedestal Fund," *New York Times,* May 9, 1885.

40. Editorial, *New York Times,* Oct. 17, 1885.

41. Ibid.

42. The World of Society, *New York Times,* Sep. 6, 1885.

43. "For the Grant Monument," *New York Times,* Feb. 24, 1886.

44. Ibid.

45. City and Suburban News, *New York Times,* June 8, 1879; Amusements, *New York Times,* May 18, 1870.

46. For a detailed discussion of the twelve-year design and construction process for the Grant Monument see David M. Kahn, "The Grant Monument," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 41, no. 3 (Oct. 1892): 212–31.

47. "For the Bartholdi Pedestal," *New York Times,* Jan. 3, 1884.

48. "Rebuilding the Standard," *New York Times,* March 27, 1884.

49. "Some Happenings in Good Society," *New York Times,* Dec. 10, 1899.

50. The World of Society, *New York Times,* Feb. 8, 1885.

51. The World of Society, *New York Times,* June 7, 1885.

52. City and Suburban News, *New York Times,* Nov. 17, 1886.

53. Crandall, *The Season,* 394.

54. Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women* (London: Routledge, 1991), 3.

55. Ibid., 77.

56. The details of this case can be traced through a series of newspaper articles in the *New York Times* and the *New York Dramatic Mirror,* in particular. Summaries of the case are found in "Gillette and the Amateurs," *New York Times,* July 2, 1891; and "In Favor of Gillette," *New York Dramatic Mirror,* July 11, 1891.