Sage Illusionists: A Historical Study Using Illusionists as a Reflection of Mass Entertainment, Popular Culture, and Change During the Late Nineteenth Century

2015

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STAGE ILLUSIONISTS: A HISTORICAL STUDY USING ILLUSIONISTS AS A REFLECTION OF MASS ENTERTAINMENT, POPULAR CULTURE, AND CHANGE DURING THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of History in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

Fall Term
2015
ABSTRACT

By the late nineteenth and early twenty century both the United States and Europe were experiencing massive shifts in social organization, social attitudes, and global influence due to the effects of the industrial revolution and imperialistic expansion. This birth of a public sphere and the mass entertainment industry was related to a blurring of the lines between traditional social classes. Mass entertainment’s growth was directly related to the need to attract large audiences with entertainment that appealed in some way to a broad spectrum of the populace. At the same time, stage illusionists or magicians were one of the most recognizable stars of mass entertainment. In fact, they were in the midst of what has been termed the “Golden Age” of magic. By recognizing the popularity of their performances in the United States and Europe, this thesis will use them as a reflection of historical trends and popular attitudes in areas such as romanticism, secular/technical superiority, race, and gender.

Historians, like Lawrence Levine, have produced a number of historical studies in regards to performance art, mass entertainment, and the historical implications represented in entertainment. Previous studies of magicians during the time period have been primarily biographical or technical in nature. It is only recently that historians have begun to combine the two in regards to performance magic. This thesis will
combine previous research on the historical narrative of the time from authors such as Leon Fink, Sean Cashman, and Alan Trachtenburg in order to analyze how magical performances confirm conclusions reached by previous work on the historical context of these performances.

The themes that are addressed within this work begin with the birth of mass entertainment, the need for an act with mass appeal to attract audiences, and how the mass entertainment displays a blurring of class lines. It will expand on work by Daniel T. Rogers in explaining how these trends were not exclusive to the United States or Europe and were actually a transatlantic phenomenon. It will use Simon During to explain how magicians, with roots in folk culture, became stars on the stage because of their appeal and their unique position in performance art. It will add to work by authors such as Lawrence Levine, showing how magicians needed to perform acts for mass consumption by working class, middle class, and upper class individuals. Finally, it will use magical performances as text to reflect social attitudes of the time period much in the way that authors such as Eric Green or Katherine Prince have done in their work.
Thank you to my mother, father, and Raquel for repeatedly asking “is it done yet”?
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you for the patience of my committee members Dr. Ezekiel Walker, Dr. Connie Lester, and my chair Dr. Robert Cassanello. Waiting for me to finish through two campaign seasons, an accident, and a full time job must have seemed like I was never going to finish.
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INTRODUCTION

The development of a leisure class and the rise of mass entertainment in the late nineteenth century provide an excellent backdrop for a historical study that focuses on the role of the stage illusionist in popular culture in the United States. The magician or stage illusionist was one of many types of entertainers that performed throughout the nineteenth century during the developmental stages of mass entertainment. Many times they worked as an individual act and were also frequently featured in combination with other performers in variety shows. The traits of the magician or stage illusionist hold a special place in the world of entertainment. He was a link between the folk traditions of the past and the technology of the modern world. He transcended the “low” culture of the masses and “high” culture of those classes that offered patronage. Stage illusionists are representatives of an emerging mass entertainment culture that transcended class lines. His performances were geared to show audience members the spectacular, the exotic, the strange, and the impossible. His performance reflected the tastes of masses and the environment in which he performed. He evolved with the business of mass entertainment and became part of American popular culture. This work will expand upon the work of earlier historians who have used performances as text and will also prove the importance and benefits of a study focused on illusionists.
The roots of mass entertainment and American popular culture are firmly planted during the nineteenth century. The industrial revolution brought with it urbanization, technical advancements, economic developments, and social changes that all set the stage for the birth of mass entertainment. The evolution in mass entertainment during late 1800s was helped by both an increase in wages for the middle class and the emergence of big business entertainment. Business models included an expanding availability of performances at theater venues for lower admission prices. It would eventually produce phenomena such as the widely popular vaudeville show circuits of the early twentieth century. The growth of an influential middle class along with rising participation by working class individuals, both of which had more disposable income and a want of entertainment, increased their attendance as audiences for this new theater archetype.

Author Lawrence Levine creates the most applicable definition of class for this work. His use of economic, cultural, and intellectual traits creates a dynamic definition that best suits this study without having to conduct further research. Levine states that in the early 1800s traditional theater and musical performances would have been attended by upper class members of society who had the means and developed, as he labeled it, a “high” popular culture based upon European traditions. At the same time a native “low” culture was developing under the influence of middle class and working
class tastes.¹ During the late 1800s, the growing participation of the middle class as audience members coupled with, to a certain extent, the increasing attendance of working class individuals meant that it was becoming possible for a merger of both “high” and “low” cultures at entertainment events. Patrons from all walks of life and classes participated in developing American mass entertainment movement. This can be easily seen in works such as No Applause – Just Throw Money by D. Travis Stewart.² Audiences were now participating in this mass entertainment movement that coupled with the development of a true popular culture that had the ability to transverse social classes. At the early stages of this development was the stage illusionist who had gained a new found stardom and entered a “Golden Age” of magic in his own right. This work will confirm the blurring of class lines in regards to entertainment in the late 1800s through the use of magical performances.

Completed works have shown the use of entertainment as a reflection of society through the use of performances as text. The scope of these texts varies greatly. For example, Eric Green proposed in his work that the famous science fiction film Planet of the Apes can be used as an allegory reflecting race relations in the United States during the 1960s. Green believes that a reversal in race relations was depicted as apes were


used to represent a dominant African-American race over the human white race in the movie. Audiences were able to identify the reversal and relate to the current state of race relations in society. More in line with the particular time period that this work covers is Katherine Prince’s description of how society interpreted and used Shakespeare during the Victorian era in England. She describes how gender roles were influenced from a young age in children through their readers and how adults found a sense of moral standards from watching or reading the works of the playwright.

In addition there are works that address the historical context of the Gilded Age in the US and late nineteenth century Europe. Topics within these range from imperialism, immigration, women’s rights, labor unions, and industrialization, to the growth of urban centers. Knowing that past work has explored the idea of using performances as text in a way to diagnose audience attitudes, and that multiple works have been done on Gilded Age America and late nineteenth century Europe, it becomes clear that a study combining the two is possible. Though illusionists haven’t typically been used in this way, this work will use magical performances as text to interpret societal attitudes and changes in the late 1800s.

Regardless there are three basic postulates needed in studying entertainment magic and its audiences. First, the nature of magic is one that is developed from a long

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history of mystical significance, religious rituals, folk cultures, and other elements that allows it to be understood in some way by all cultures and social classes. Second, one of the requirements for mass entertainment is a product that can be used to attract large diverse audiences. Magicians are ideally suited as providers of a form of entertainment that can be included in mass entertainment. Stage magicians or illusionists had a foundation in folk culture and an ability to adapt themselves in a way that would allow them to take advantage of the changes occurring during the nineteenth century and put themselves into the forefront of popular culture. Third, despite the fact that the United States had its own homegrown performers, this entertainment format actually had its roots in Europe and developed amongst the entertainment circles on that continent. In Europe, entertainers honed their craft and eventually crossed the Atlantic to take advantage of the developing market in the United States. At that point it becomes rather elementary to eventually connect magic or illusion shows from their roots in folk roots to the emergence of mass entertainment and popular culture as it crosses class lines and crosses the Atlantic.

Defining the parameters of this study could be difficult because of the nature of the subject, but this can and needs to be done in order to narrow the focus of the study and legitimize magicians as a reflection of popular society. The words “magic” and “magicians” are generally used as universal terms that can apply to a number of actions and roles. The first step of this project will be to narrow the definition of the subject or use a different label which helps in the understanding of the performance as text and at
the same time can be used to help define the audience as well. Past studies usually involve a narrative in which the magician is only a small footnote in the debate of broader ideas about history. Many times they also involve a much broader use of the term magician. For example the term preferred by author James Randi is that of the “conjuror.”\(^5\) He uses it to add a literary flair to his writing while he specifically addresses entertainers who claim no legitimate mystical powers.

In order to narrow the scope and separate the subject from various other magical forms, the term “stage illusionist” is the best fit for this study. It also helps us in that one of the goals of this work is to understand how the evolution of the magician, whose definition previous to the 1800s was rather broad and incorporated a number of entertainment styles, transformed into specialized performers that reflected the changes in American society. It is also widely accepted that origins of the “stage illusionist” lay with the French performer Robert Houdin. He is said to have laid the groundwork, during the second half of the eighteen hundreds, for the theatrical stage illusionist performance that is commonly thought of as the magic show today. This helps to clarify and narrow our subject, but unfortunately research that specifically uses the term “stage illusionists” has a tendency to be difficult to obtain because of the interchangeability of the terms used in reference to the subject. Nevertheless, the term

is a better academic label for focus our subject and will be the focus of this project despite using the alternate term performance magic and magicians.

The second parameter that needs to be set would be a definition of the time period that is going to be used in the study. A chronological study will be appropriate in order to explain how the rise of the stage illusionist as a star in the world of mass entertainment also coincided with the rise of mass entertainment itself. As an introduction to the history of performance magic we will need to briefly trace its beginnings during the Enlightenment and explain the American and European experience at the same time. Further detail will need to be added by delving into the conditions and foundations of the craft in the early to mid-nineteenth century. The primary focus will be a period that has been widely studied by historians that roughly falls between 1865 and 1910 and is generally regarded as the “Gilded Age.” It is also known as the “Golden Age” of magic and saw the early development of vaudeville as well.

During this period society in the United States had experienced a series of dramatic shifts that influenced the tastes of growing theater audiences. The United States would embark on the path to eventually becoming a world power through imperialist expansion and provincial Americans would begin to show an interest in the exotic, strange, and foreign. Rapid industrialization and urbanization brought about dramatic changes in the lives of Americans as they left the farms of the countryside and entered the fast paced wage-earning life of the city. These changes also created
intellectual conflicts between the spiritual, romantic, and naturalistic ideals of rural life verses the civilizing, secular, realist ideas of the urban environment.\(^6\) Such conflicts during this period can be seen in the works of authors such as Jack London or Stephen Crane and were also reflected in the performance of magicians. In the wake of these changes controversy about the relationship between economic classes sparked conflict in between labor and management.\(^7\) The economic inequalities of industrial capitalism created an incorporated working class that excluded non-Americans such as blacks and foreigners; the result being the organization of labor unions and anti-immigration legislation directed towards people such as the Chinese.\(^8\) Despite this, racial identities were adopted by white magical performers as a way to attract audiences with displays of the exotic. Existing gender roles in which magic was a male dominated profession were reinforced, but did face some challenges in regards to the definition of the illusionist and his performances with a new found interest in spiritualism. All of these events provide the context in which audiences would attend the illusion show. Their appearance as themes in the show itself proves that illusion shows were reflection of social attitudes.

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\(^8\) Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).
The audiences used in this study would be specifically limited to people who attended performances of entertainment magic which in turn serves as a sample or constituent form of a growing mass entertainment movement. In the last decades of the eighteen hundreds the sophisticated apparatus of mass entertainment in the Western world was in its infancy. The transformation of dime museum performances to big business was underway. Stewart explains that the development of the manager as “the heart of American show business” was a more efficient way of operating a growing operation. The development of the 10-20-30 ticket scale by vaudeville great F.F. Proctor, the use of mass media and advertisements, and the focus on attracting the “double audiences” of men along with women and children or members of multiple economic classes advanced the big business model of mass entertainment.9

Coupled with that infancy is the diversity and rapid change occurring in American society. In the late nineteenth century definitions of class had an evolving set of characteristics that were not as static as one may think, especially in terms of entertainment choices. Stage illusionists, as representatives of an emerging mass entertainment culture, show that their ability to transcend class was synonymous with the blurred lines of class distinction. It quickly becomes apparent that the task of identifying common themes or attitudes among all Americans would be difficult to do

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9 Stewart, *No Applause – Just Throw Money*, 82-93.
because of the evolutionary nature of these audiences and that of mass entertainment at the time, but the illusionist can give us a glimpse of these past attitudes.

After defining the scope of this study, it becomes necessary to identify additional historical theories besides the earlier mentioned ideas on class and performance as text. These will be used to provide a framework for inquiry and at the same time help to explain the origins and the transference of ideas within performances.

The first additional framework to be used in this study would involve performance theory. This work continues notable studies explaining the development of entertainment archetypes, such as vaudeville, helps to explain how Americans perceived themselves and how it has been used as a reflection of social trends. These works strive to use performances, advertisements, and other entertainment forms as textual evidence of change in mass popular culture. There are a number of academic studies on vaudeville entertainment. These would include works such as Gail Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization*. 10 Bederman explains that superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race and its imperialistic civilization became intertwined with definitions of gender during the time period. This led to an evolutionary period that created conflict between the ideas of primitive manliness and civilized masculinity. Sometimes these ideas could not only be used to explain white male superiority, but advance white

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female superiority as well. She has found support for her ideas in evidence ranging from the Columbian Exhibition of 1893 to sporting exhibitions.

Perhaps an even better example would be work such as Kasson’s *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America*. He echoes Bederman by explaining how evolving ideas of white male masculinity, in the face of a civilizing and changing world, were promoted by working those ideas into entertainment and popular culture. The displays of intellectual and physical strength coupled with the civilized manners of the modern man could be seen in performances that began to reflect these changes while audiences sought to define themselves and the world around them. Particularly related to this work is Kasson’s use of performances by Harry Houdini to support his conclusions. Alison Kibler’s focus on gender issues in vaudeville shows how the incorporation of women as performers and as audience members helped to ensure its success as mass entertainment, despite the fact that it had origins as working class male dominated entertainment that continued to be hostile to women.

Illusionists adopted personas and themes that many times freed them from social constraints and ideas along with providing them the opportunity to present

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illusions and acts that may not have been received by all audiences. These same elements also became part of the draw that attracted audiences to the theater. In order for an audience to accept the symbols and personas, something must ring true and have been deemed acceptable to those people who observe the performance. Works by Eric Lott on race issues within theater performances deal with blackface minstrelsy and how African-American racial identity became adopted and transformed by white performers. His work examines performers who donned blackface, danced, and performed comedy in an effort to portray blacks in a manner that was acceptable to American white audiences. Lott suggests that a thick history in which social attitudes can be diagnosed could be obtained from the examination of the performing arts. In regards to illusionists, this framework could be applicable as well as using it to examine illusion show audiences. Examples can be found with the running feud between Ching Ling Foo (a native Chinese illusionist) and Chung Ling Soo (who was in actuality a white illusionist named Robinson) or the multiple personas of quick change magician Lafayette. Knowing that historians have in fact used performances as text this work will also do this same by examining the advertisements and performances of illusionists specifically. These works prove that it is also possible to draw conclusions about American social attitudes of the time from trends in entertainment. The show itself would provide entertainment to increasing numbers of audience members that could identify and accept as appropriate

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interpretations of the world around them. It also helps to explain the rise of mass entertainment in the late nineteenth century.

The second additional framework is intended to describe a broader social process happening in the western world as a whole and how illusionists are a representation of that process. There has been an increasing interest by historians in approaching the Atlantic world using a more globalist perspective. The transfer of ideas and cultures back and forth across the Atlantic has been the basis for numerous studies. *The Atlantic Enlightenment* houses a collection of essays featuring the transference of enlightened ideals and is just one example on the topic. Work by Daniel T. Rodgers focuses on the cultural exchanges that occurred between Europe and the United States during the same period of time (1865-1935) as the one proposed in this study. In his work, *Atlantic Crossings*, he focuses on the development of social politics and reform within the United States and the influence that Europe may have had in shaping U.S. policies and social attitudes. In his preface, Rodgers critiques other historians who, when dealing with this period, have a tendency to limit their inquiry to within the boundaries of the United States itself. In the process of doing so, they would have inadvertently missed external events and movements that influenced change within the United States. While acknowledging that the United States is indeed different than

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other nation-states and that it did develop its own interpretations and reactions to change, it in no way was completely isolated from the rest of the world.\textsuperscript{15}

This study traces the origins of the illusion show from Europe as it crossed the Atlantic to the United States and explores the emergence of a mass entertainment as it crossed incorporated class lines and laid the foundations for a much more inclusive popular culture in the twentieth century. Stage illusionists were initially the product of an attempt to take street magic and make it more appealing to the middle and upper classes of the 1880s in Europe. In fact, it is widely accepted that the father of the modern magic show was French.\textsuperscript{16} As these shows crossed the Atlantic they became increasingly influenced by the development of mass entertainment. Illusionists frequently brought with them popular entertainment styles and practices from Europe. At the same time they also capitalized on performances from American acts, like spiritualists such as the Davenport brothers or Fox sisters, which toured in Europe and had drawn interested from audiences. It is also apparent in this study that it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the United States had its own native stage illusionists who enjoyed mass popularity. These illusionists modeled much of what they did off of their European counterparts, while at the same time developing their

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own acts that would in turn have an influence upon European audiences. This modeling included cultural themes that were universal on both sides of the Atlantic.

The opening statements of Rodgers’ work examines the provincialism of a comment made from man in Chicago in which he expresses his complete unawareness of events in Europe and could only identify it as a place. This provincialism, in Rodgers’ mind, is not a result of non-interaction, but merely a result of the unawareness of the origins of ideas and the influences taking place on American society. Therefore the identification of new brokers of indirect influence must occur in order to trace the impact that Europe and America had upon each other. These brokers acted in more subtle and indirect ways and were the result of actions such as immigration, social connections, economic exchanges, and intellectual contacts. Rodgers work opens up the idea that Illusionists and their shows, which frequently crossed the Atlantic from England and France to tour and make their homes in America, could possibly be yet another demonstration of how the interaction between Europe and the Americas resulted in the exchange of ideas and culture involved in creating a greater western experience of these societies.

Finding an academic study that specifically focuses on stage illusionists could prove to be a daunting task for a researcher. There are works that look purely at stage magic and are regarded as seminal by magicians and scholars alike. These works

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17 Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age.
Unfortunately do have noticeable problems. The first is that some are by no means an academic study of the subject. While they are full of primary sources and anecdotes, they are simple narratives written by other magicians. These magicians have a tendency to promote their favorites and delve into three basic descriptive questions: how technological aspects of the illusions worked, how the trick was performed (the theatrical aspect), and the receptiveness of audiences and other magicians. The two most comprehensive works are David Price’s *Magic: A Pictorial History of Conjurers in the Theater* \(^{18}\) and Christopher Milbourne’s *The Illustrated History of Magic*.\(^{19}\) The previously mentioned *Conjuring* by James Randi also falls into this category.\(^{20}\) Those works written by academic professionals tend to be broader in scope. Works on vaudeville, entertainment, and popular culture are much more plentiful and do, on occasion, mention stage illusionists. Beth Kattleman of Ohio State University states that finding primary documents could be difficult, but mentions a series of collections that mostly are in the possession of various theater departments at state universities. She claims that these collections are particularly useful and the Price, Randi, and Milbourne books are all standards on the subject.


\(^{19}\) Milbourne, *The Illustrated History of Magic*.

\(^{20}\) Randi, *Conjuring*. 
The final element to this work is that stage illusionists will be recognized as a legitimized subject of study that are valuable in helping to understand the past. In light of illusionists' participation in the development of mass entertainment, stage magic can be used to further a greater understanding of society’s perceptions and attitudes of themselves and others in the late nineteenth century. It continues a historical trend using entertainment as a way of understanding definitions of class, gender, and race during the late 1800’s. It gives a more in depth look at the impact of historical events, such as the U.S. Civil War or industrialization, and how those impacts can be seen through the audiences’ appreciation of symbols within magical performances.
CHAPTER ONE: ILLUSIONISTS AS A REFLECTION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF
MASS ENTERTAINMENT AND POPULAR CULTURE

The first step in analyzing the position of the illusionist in the popular
culture of the late 1800s is to examine the roots of mass entertainment and the blurring
lines of class identification. I will expand upon the work of Lawrence Levine who
identified both the “high” and “low” cultures in the late 1800s and explained attempts
by members of the upper socioeconomic class at defining those cultures. I will further
argue that these cultural distinctions were not wholly definitive but were dynamic in
nature. In the midst of these evolving definitions of class and culture, a set of conditions
developed in order for mass entertainment to exist in that they allowed producers to
provide a product which would appeal to large numbers of consumers across a wide
social spectrum. Mass entertainment would exploit the blurring of class lines and search
for products that can appeal to a larger populace which in turn would engrain
themselves as part of society’s popular culture.

As we will later see, magical entertainment provides an example of a
popular culture product that emerged and crossed class lines despite the attempt to
segregate culture. Levine described this attempt at segregating culture by class
distinctions in his work *High Brow/Low Brow* using examples in the performing arts and
music. He used a broad definition of class in order to explain the actions of upper class
individuals in attempting to establish a separate cultural identity. This work will also use
the theater arts as a means of understanding the role class played in formulating a popular culture. Through the development of mass entertainment illusionists could participate and did overcome a number of factors that had the potential to divide culture and ultimately prove that a totally segregated cultural structure based on socioeconomic class was not a complete way to view society in the late 1800s.

To help further explain the symbiotic relationship between producers and consumers, an example could be a person selling any particular entertainment item they want on a street corner. If the public does not purchase said product it would in no way cause anyone to perceive it as popular or a part of mass entertainment, even if the apparatus existed to extend its availability to a larger populace with the same result. An exchange has to occur in which the provider has the ability to produce the product and the audience deems the entertainment item purchasable. Therefore mass entertainment in many ways responds to market forces and is a very democratic form of popular culture in that people have the ability to shape and make choices in their leisure interests. To put it another way, if the opera became the single most attended event in the United States today, would it not become popular culture as mass entertainment providers scrambled to open or book venues? At the same time would operas still be considered “high” culture of the upper class if the demand for them were to rise in those of lower socioeconomic status and multiple providers had lowered prices in an attempt to attract audiences to their particular offering? The answer is that it would in fact be incorporated into the main stream mass entertainment system and be identified
as popular culture by the democratic nature of the business. This was a phenomena reflective of an industrializing and urbanizing western world.

The development of popular culture and mass entertainment is a dynamic event in the history of the Western world. It is the culmination of a number of factors that will be discussed. Past historians have attempted to define this event by declaring turning points, causes, and definitive identities upon what was occurring. It is probably best to recognize this event for what it is, a truly complicated development, and find examples that best describe its evolving and dynamic nature.

In the United States, mass entertainment and popular culture would have their roots in the eighteenth century and center around the country’s largest cities. Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and Charleston were the cultural and urban hubs of the nation. This is in no way indicating that there were not cultural or entertainment activities in the rural areas or small towns of the nation, but it is only trying to state that the population size and infrastructure (venues, technical ability, performers, and communication outlets) were in place in urban settings to make it more likely to propagate a form of mass entertainment. By the late eighteenth century, U.S. cities had developed enough in size and facility to allow for even larger audiences and had begun to lay the groundwork for what would eventually become mass entertainment in its recognizable form. Sociologist Paul DiMaggio claims that the city of Boston was the urban area to most likely be labeled the cultural hub of the United States in the late
nineteenth century. 21 Boston then becomes a model for use in understanding American audiences of the late nineteenth century and the socioeconomic attributes represented by culture.

Popular culture in the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth century is rather difficult to uniformly define because of the dynamic composition of the population along with the changes that were occurring in regards to those audiences and the entertainment provided. The United States population was built out of many regional, ethnic, and economic differences. One approach to defining culture is to observe what appears to be an existing duality that was essentially based upon economic class. Historian Lawrence Levine states that by the end of the nineteenth century culture became synonymous with social class. A culture was an implication that an individual had made a choice of the leisure activities befitting their station in life. To be “cultured” meant refinement and was displayed by your choice of entertainment, selection of art, social graces, and other activities. Upper class individuals would choose activities that would be seen as classical or Western European in origin.22

As socioeconomic advancement became possible, a growing middle class found increasing amounts of time and income to be spent on leisure activities. While their

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22 Levine, *High Brow/ Low Brow*. 
origins in the lower classes influenced their choices, many times they mimicked the attitudes and activities of the upper class while developing an identity in their own right. Those who were not “cultured” were therefore looked upon as lower class and generally fell into the same economic category. Working class individuals would have had little expendable income at first and most likely would gather at saloons, singing folk tunes, telling jokes, or spending money on alcohol and tobacco. As time progressed they too also found themselves with more expendable income, attending the music halls, and theaters as well. Regardless, there evolved two competing cultures based upon socioeconomic class differences and they would become labeled as “High Brow” and “Low Brow”.23

Dimaggio, like Levine, will also make a distinction between a “High Brow” culture and a popular culture that could be labeled as “Low Brow”, but argues that it was not only by social class alone that they could be defined. He would continue distinguishing the difference between the two cultures by describing how they were dependent upon two distinctly different types of organizations that supported them. “High Brow” culture was supported by private or semi-private, non-profit cultural institutions. These institutions were backed by what he terms as “cultural capitalists” of whom one of the leading groups was the Boston Brahmans. The Brahmans were said to have been originally labeled as such by Oliver Wendell Holmes. They were comprised of

23 Ibid.
the descents of Boston’s leading families from the previous two hundred years and because of their wealth and power were looked at as a part of the leadership class of society. He would eventually question the commercial viability of “High Brow” cultural activities, for example fine art. He explains that they never really got off the ground in terms of being economically sustainable by themselves, thereby leaving these activities in the realm of private non-profit organizations patronized by the wealthy. Popular culture on the other hand was typically supported by for-profit organizations or individuals that sought the inclusion of all economic classes. 24

Both writers offer examples of the interplay between class, economics, and culture that would lead to this polarity in American society. DiMaggio explains that by the second half of the century, museums and art shows were based on the P.T. Barnum method. Fine art was intermixed with curiosities like bearded women and exhibited for a fee. Music and theater shows had a tendency to do the same. It would not have been uncommon to see something along the lines of a clown reciting Shakespeare in the center ring of a traveling circus. More specific examples of this mixture will be explained later, but what is important now is to understand that with such entertainers providing diversity and variety within their acts, a movement had begun at the end of the century that sought to differentiate between two different cultures. This movement was

sponsored by wealthy patrons and included the goal of separating Western European traditions from the cultural menagerie that was common in for-profit entertainment.25

Paul DiMaggio mentions that it was not uncommon for members of the cultural capitalists to have spent time overseas in Europe studying art or music. For example Henry Lee Higginson, founder of the Boston symphony orchestra and the Lee Higginson Brokerage House spent considerable time overseas in Europe and thus brought back his interest in classical music of the European variety.26 Lawrence Levine remarks that by 1900, examples of a duality in popular music could be found in Boston as well. He points out that when the Boston Symphony moved to its new home, its former venue became the site of developing vaudeville shows. This was taken as a sign of degradation for the old Music Hall which was still held in much regard by the citizens of Boston. Those upper class members of society who preferred the European symphonic displays were dismayed at its new use, though nothing is remarked about how those members of society who had attended the vaudeville shows felt about the building’s new entertainment offerings. He later remarks that society members such as Henry T. Finck, Enrico Caruso, and others thought of the symphonic orchestra as “divine” and that it only stood to reason that other forms of music must logically “occupy a lesser region”. 27

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 377-413.

27 Levine, High Brow/ Low Brow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America, 136.
Levine continues by describing the emergence of a crusade to promote “High Brow” culture occurring in the 1880’s. At its core was the idea that a classical American culture would be impossible to create due to nature and composition of American society. With so many discordant parts, a classical American culture could not be ascertained until all parts had merged. Therefore classical culture for Americans became based on its historical roots. Those historical roots were Anglo-Germanic. Thus the old established families of America with the economic ability to patronize entertainment venues supported this new “High Brow” culture with European origins. So it was that by the end of the eighteenth century there was a movement to clearly define and separate the “low” culture of masses from that of “high” culture by members of the elite classes of the United States.

Levine and others like him were influenced by the historical context in which they formulated their theories. They were a generation of historians who had lived through a mass entertainment model that had provided common experiences that crossed social class. Yet, by the 1970s and 1980s, they searched for a more structural historical narrative that was based on class. This would lead Levine to study the arts and seek to find a hierarchical influence based upon class. His definition of class was primarily economic, but eventually began to incorporate cultural and intellectual aspects as well. The use of the term high brow to define cultural pursuits of upper class even has a racial physiological notation to it. It was based upon the physical look of Europeans as opposed to other races. Defining class is a complex issue that is subject to
a number of influences. The result is a definition that is constantly changing. Regardless, Levine’s definition is most applicable because of his use of culture and the arts in his description. Following Levine’s themes, this work on illusionists is based in the theatrical arts and can prove some influence of class on entertainment. In contrast, it shows that the arts helped in creating a diverse popular culture that did not divide, but brought the social classes together.

In searching for what the activities of “low brow” participants may have been, we may first need to look at the economic conditions of the working class. An 1884 survey conducted by the Illinois Bureau of Labor included over 2000 labor class families. Detailed accounts were recorded for 167 of these families. In examining these accounts it becomes clear that household income barely overcame household expenses. The diversity of ethnic backgrounds and occupations was also clear, but it remains to be seen how a family could actually afford a luxury such as entertainment, especially one that required paid admission to a theater.\textsuperscript{28} Robert Houdin describes his suggestion for ticket prices by given the admission charges he used when he opened his theater in the mid-1800s. His prices ranged from 5 francs to 2 francs, but he was seeking members of the middle and upper class to attend his stage performances.\textsuperscript{29} Attempts would have to

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{29} Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin, \textit{Secrets of Stage Conjuring} (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1900), 30-31.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
be made to attract larger numbers of audience members by lowering the price of admission in and in turn this would have caused class diversification within the audiences as well. Some of this may be explained by the advertisements themselves. While household income looked stretched, advertisements for illusions acts show that popular magicians such as Keller or Thurston would commonly sell tickets for 0.25¢ (Figure 1).\(^3\) This is a figure well below Houdin’s suggestions. It also is lower, but similar to an advertised 0.50¢ show from the 1770s. It seems unlikely that regular attendance to the theaters and musical halls of the day were common by working class individuals. This by no means excludes them from participating, but they most likely would not have been in large numbers until the turn of the century and the rarity of their participation may mean that a sustained presence of members of this class could only happen in areas of large populations, like cities.

Magicians would need to attract working class individuals with promotional tools and the promise of something to the equivalent of door prizes to perhaps offset the cost of a theater ticket. This could explain the rise in popularity of the “gift show”, a technique that illusionists would employ using this exact same idea. It would seem that if a member of the working class were to see an illusionist it most likely would have been in a place they were more likely to frequent like a saloon or on the street and not in the theater. The magician would then have to leave the theater stage to perform

where the audience gathered. A saloon’s primary objective was to serve alcohol and entertainment would have been included as part of the draw. The “gift” would now be the magic show and the admission was the price of a drink.

Roy Rosenzweig describes the rise of Saloon Culture, a venue that illusionist sometimes played, in the late 1800’s as a result of changing economic conditions coupled with ethnic tendencies. He in particular uses the town of Worcester Massachusetts (just outside of Boston) as an example of how these changes occurred. In the early part of the nineteenth century drinking on the job was essentially a given habit. Workers often expected alcohol to be served or the allowance of alcohol consumption on the job to be a standard. The temperance movement soon changed that. As work place behavior patterns changed, alcohol consumption at work was eventually banned. Curiously, at the same time, the numbers of hours in a work day also declined. Workers began to demand shorter working days and more leisure time. Normally workers use the time off work to complete others tasks at home or elsewhere, but the extra hour or two during the day now allowed for other activities. By the late 1800s the drinking saloon had been firmly established. As a working man’s income increased, more time was spent on leisure drinking. The saloon became an entertainment and social hub. This is not to say that working class peoples spent all their free time drinking. They participated in a variety of activities such as lectures, music halls, theaters, athletics, skating, etc. but, they were more likely to spend time in the saloons.
Saloons also had a tendency to provide entertainment. This entertainment was primarily music, singing, and joke telling (many times at the expense of their bosses and upper crust members of society). They also provided unofficial amusements that included with illegal gambling, cards, and prize fighting. In 1889, best paid workers had enough expendable income that they became more likely to purchase extra indulgences like tobacco and alcohol on a regular basis. Jane Ziegelman’s work emphasizes the importance of not only the market places of the time, but the beer halls and drinking establishments that became a center of social life for tenement families. She writes that German immigrants brought their beer hall culture to the lower East side of Manhattan and it was common to see entire families sitting together in large establishments. While the likelihood of working class members’ regularly attending paid theater performances was small it does not mean that they were completely exclusive from members of the upper class in regards to leisure activities. Upper class members of society participating in saloon culture were usually limited to males seeking adventure and sex. Ziegelman also mentions that saloons also made it possible for some intermixing of the classes, especially when it came to the food they served. Her example


32 Ibid.

of Irish immigrants and the serving of corned beef in the lunchrooms of New York shows that the lines of class were not absolute. Therefore duality within leisure activities would somewhat exist for a better part of the nineteenth century and illusionists would have to be versatile if they were to appease both audiences. It would not be until the rise of a mass popular culture that the gap between these two cultures could be fully bridged and that popular stars could be made out of illusionists along with ushering in the “Golden Age” of magic.

Knowing all of this background may seem to point to a ridged set of performance guidelines when approaching these two types of audiences and cultures, especially in regards to the setting, when in fact it was not as static as it looks. As previously mentioned there does seem to be some flexibility in what was performed in musical halls and theaters while at the same time some acknowledgement of the importance and purity of a classic high culture. In many ways this shows a blurring of cultural boundaries while still recognizing distinctive parts. Levine points out that it was common for “high culture acts shared the bill with light musical comedies called vaudevilles.” In New Orleans opera companies regularly featured “strong men, jugglers, animal acts, a trestigator, mimics, and an angostemith.”

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34 Ibid, 78-79.

35 Levine, High Brow/ Low Brow, 91.

36 Ibid.
walker Herr Cline danced a pas de deux with his grandmother on the high wire” at one Opera company in the southern city. When it came to opera, flexibility was common in the production of shows but many times it could also be impermissible by audiences. In New Orleans it was reported by the *New Orleans Picayune* that an 1837 performance of Rossini’s Semiramis had the final act cut by the performers. In response the audience rioted and tore apart the theater. This shows that the audience must have had some level of understanding and expectation when it came to the opera and those expectations were disappointed by the omittance of a portion of the opera despite the modifications that were made to attract audiences of all classes. This seems to support the idea that there was some sort of a “sacralization” of European “high culture” as describe by both Levine and DiMaggio.

Levine, in regards to audience response, finds a marked contrast between nineteenth century and twentieth century theater house behavior indicating some developmental flux. His example is the degree in which a “polite” uniform theater behavior was observed in the twentieth century versus the habits of the nineteenth century. The theater house of Nineteenth-century were to some degree a “microcosm of the entire society” was more the equivalent to modern sports events with spectators

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37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.
feeling fully vested in what was occurring and expressing themselves often. The
twentieth century the audiences were fragmented or segregated so that they would
respond more individually rather than as a collective group. Twentieth-century
Vaudeville houses took on the air of homeliness in which audience members felt
comfortable and undisturbed by others around them. This was not a repudiation of a
mass culture but more of an acceptance of a common pattern of behavior that was
incorporated into mass culture. Vaudeville promoters B.F. Keith and F.F. Proctor noted
that later audiences no longer displayed their past habits in that they did not hiss, boo,
or cheer as they had in the past.\textsuperscript{40} Even those at the operas of the time were much
more agreeable to performances and rarely expressed themselves as a group or as an
entire audience collectively. They rarely expressed displeasure and if they did, they
simply walked out. It was as if the audiences deferred to the experts (performers) on
what was good entertainment.\textsuperscript{41}

It might be said that what Levine has pointed out is that nineteenth century
theater houses had more of a mass appeal than the twentieth century versions. If that
were the case, then performers would have to cope with the diversity of the audience
by using a variety of entertainment styles. This in fact did happen because Illusionists
used variety to their advantage when attracting audiences. It also could subscribe to

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 195-196.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 194-199.
the theory that there was a duality in culture and that socio-economic conditions meant that only those who could afford to attend theater houses did so. Then what it would mean is that Levine is actually proving that audiences in the twentieth century were much less diverse and segregated. His evidence may be a description of an audience comprised of only those in the lower socio-economic spectrum. That would mean there were in fact audiences that were much more uniform in that they only contained members of the upper portions of the socio-economic classes or only those of the lower classes if the performance was a more affordable matinee. But what he seems to show by pointing out a changing etiquette is that the behavior of upper class theater goers and the new cultural trait of the privacy of personal opinions were being adopted by all segments of society. It also meant that these audiences were even more diverse in that upper class members of society were now attending performances that might have not been judge as purely classical or high brow or vice versa. As the economic capacity to pay for entertainment grew, so did size and diversity in the composition of audiences over the course of the turn of the century.

One additional aspect affecting American audiences that has not yet been addressed is population growth. As the nation grew so did the scope and diversity of its audiences. U.S. Census Bureau statistics show that in 1800 the population of the nation was just over 5 million people. By 1850 those numbers had increased to just over 23
million and eventually approached 77 million by 1900.\textsuperscript{42} Clearly there was a population explosion as the country experienced large numbers of net immigration. With every influx of immigrants additional cultures were added. This increased the cultural complexity of the United States and further added to the difficulty of creating a definition. American culture became even more complex because of the actual increase in the physical geographic size of the country. The United States added a patchwork of new environments to its frontier which in turn helped to create local cultures. These cultures had adapted to their surroundings and also incorporated those cultural traits that they had brought their immigration America. The additions of locales such as New Orleans and its French heritage in the early eighteen hundreds are prime examples of how this expansion would add to the diversity of the nation. This myriad of influences would cause one to think that creating any type of mass entertainment with a popular culture in the eighteenth century would be difficult, but it in fact a popular culture of the masses did evolve.

The construction of theaters in major cities and small towns coupled with an expanding transportation system that was creating a national market allowed for mass entertainment to take root. In 1850 the country had approximately 9,000 miles of rail line, but by 1890 that number had increased to 130,000 miles.\textsuperscript{43} Included in this was the

\textsuperscript{42} U.S. Census Bureau; “Census 1800,1850, and 1900” generated by Clay Phillips; using American FactFinder; <http://factfinder2.census.gov>; (28 October 2014).

\textsuperscript{43} Chauncey Depew, \textit{One Hundred Years of American Commerce 1795-1895}, (New York: D. O. Haynes and Company, 1895), 111.
increased capabilities of mass communication. Communication through print media became much more cost efficient as new technologies such as the rotary press, typesetting machines, and cheaper wood based paper were available.\textsuperscript{44} The invention of the telegraph along with the rapid expansion of newspaper and periodicals helped tie together the country and enable participation in an emerging public sphere.

The subject of how, where, and when the performances occurred can be just as complex as the audience. Magical entertainment, like its audiences, was evolving. Houdin’s inspired movement of illusion shows into the theater indicated change was occurring. Simon During presents what may be the best concept in helping understand magic as an art form, business, and its audience in flux. He introduces an idea he terms the “magic assemblage.” This concept is not a solid concrete set of definitions and limitations, but an open and debatable idea. It first provides a suggested list of locales where a performance would take place. Such locales would include fairs, streets, taverns, and theaters. It also suggests a set of magical performances, like ventriloquism, puppet shows, optical illusions, juggling, and mind reading, which would be included into the concept. He furthers that “these assemblages are defined less by virtue of any formal or abstract feature that they have in common than by their contiguity to one

\textsuperscript{44} Ted Curtis Smyth, \textit{The Gilded Age Press: 1865-1900} (Westport Connecticut: Praeger, 2003), 123.
another in day-to-day commercial show business.” These assemblages could be massive in size such as the German fairs and picnics that required “staggering” amounts of food and drink along with diverse entertainment options as described in Ziegelman’s work on immigrant families in New York. With mass entertainment in its infancy, it may be good to keep in mind the broad parameters of magical entertainment and its ability to reach diverse audiences in multiple ways.

At the center of these assemblages was what Simon During believes was the most stable element of show business, the magic show. Stage illusionists were uniquely situated in that their ability to adapt to a changing environment. They presented a variety of entertainment options in order to entertain audiences of the first half of the century and later narrowed their focus to develop the techniques, craftsmanship, and showmanship that would engage the mass audiences of the latter half of the century. Magic required only visual and some mental capacity in order for the entertainment to be transferred. An audience member did not need to know the culture or language of the performer in order to be entertained. Mysticism is one of the most basic elements of any culture. This makes magical entertainment easily understood by audience members.

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46 Ziegelman, 97 Orchard, 44-45.

47 During, Modern Enchantments, 67-69.
With this in mind we can now point out a few conclusions: diverse audiences could be kept entertained with magic, magicians have a versatility that allows for mass appeal, and that magical entertainment has its roots in folk or popular culture through the mysticism inherent across all cultures. This last point about magic’s roots in folk culture is the first step in confirming magical entertainment’s position as a forerunner of mass entertainment. Illusionists, like Houdin, took to the stage in large theaters to present their modified version of street magic and salon mechanizations. Houdin’s ability to use large mechanical illusions for large audiences in theaters to be able to see along with his mentalist street magic point to this adaptability. His change to a more theatrical style and costume also shows this ability to change with an evolving world.

In order to completely understand the versatility of performance magic, the origins of distinctive types of magic must be explained. Previous to the 1800s, while early performance magic was in the process of constructing a definition, magicians of the time performed a plethora of entertainment types besides illusions. Mixed into their shows would have been singing, bird calls, juggling, and various other forms of entertainment. Regardless, over time a type of stratification was forming when dealing with performance magic. It is at this point that two distinctive types of performance magic, stage illusionists and street magic, may be discussed. Prior to the 1800s the lack of theater circuits or performance arenas, the social status of the magician, and education would lead magicians into one of these two types of performance genres. Spiritualist could be added as a third type of magic. Unfortunately the motivational
factors of these performers is rather difficult to fully include in this work, but it will be discussed briefly as a theatrical style used by stage illusionists.

This first type would be that which, according to the lexicon of magicians, would be called illusions. \(^{48}\) Illusions are considered those acts that include devices that would be mechanical in nature. Performers had a tendency to be fairly well educated in scientific areas such as physics, math, engineering, etc. and consequently also enjoyed a social status above the common laborer. These magicians would create apparatuses that would be used in salon performances or the private displays of a noble, monarch, or members of the gentry. Perhaps the most famous example would have been Baron von Kempelen’s “clockwork” Turk who would miraculously play games of chess against entertained guests. \(^{49}\) Von Kempelen’s Turk was a simple automaton display that was the subject of constant inquiry on how it worked (Figure 2) \(^{50}\). These would be in no way a display of supernatural power, but an entertaining performance that showed the mastery of scientific principles or mechanical genius even though they many times had a theatrical element of mystery or supernatural power. This type of magic had a tendency to be considered more refined and worthy of the attention of the educated and the upper or middle classes. The social implications of this type of magic will be discussed

\(^{48}\) Fleischman, “Words in Modern Magic,” 38-42.

\(^{49}\) Milbourne, *The Illustrated History of Magic*, 30-47.

\(^{50}\) “Engraving of the Clockwork Turk” [1770’s] in Milbourne, *The Illustrated History of Magic*, 32.
later, but by the 1800s this type of magic (using large displays) would be employed on
the stage of large theater houses as a way to compensate for the size of the arena and
the audience. At the time, it would also help to define the magician as a stage illusionist
rather than a lower class street performer.

The second type of emerging magic would have been found in the streets. These
feats would have included the use of cards, cups and balls, fans, ventriloquism, feats of
physical prowess, and the occasional never emptied bottle of liquor, wine, or beer. The
performances themselves were once again not meant to show supernatural powers, but
merely to once again entertain despite the fact that many street magicians would don
wizard’s robes and blow trumpets to attract crowds as can be seen in this mid-
nineteenth century print of Philippe (Figure 3). The print depicts what was considered
the traditional image of a magician from the past. Philippe was a prime example of a
magician in the 1800s continuing to use past definitions of the role of a magician from
the previous millennium with imagery of snakes, stars, and crescents embroidered upon
his robe. This type of magic did have duality within it that primarily had to deal with the
motives of the performer. The honest performer would sometimes have to compete
with the reputation of the hustler or con artist whose sole rational was to “trick” the
audience in such a way as to make a dishonest pay day. This also explains why magicians

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51 “Engraving for a Night in the Palace of Pekin” [1840’s] in Christopher Milbourne,
even today do not typically use the term “trick” in public to describe what they perform.\footnote{Fleischman, "Words in Modern Magic," 38-42.} This type of magic was usually associated with the public houses, the streets, and those of the lower classes.

At this point we can see that the words “magic” and “magicians” are generally used as universal terms that can apply to a number of actions and roles. Many times the definitions are so broad that they are subjected to multiple interpretations and become incredibly diverse. This is even further complicated by the nature of the performances that magicians gave. They seemed to have evolved over time from variety artists to eventually the stardom of nineteenth century stage illusionists that focused solely on magic. It also gives credit towards recognizing the ability of those acting in the role of a magician to adapt their act and change that role to fit the environment in which they perform.

Even today the terms are confusing. According to James Randi, a writer and stage illusionist himself, the term that more accurately reflects the act and role of the stage magician is that of the “conjurer”.\footnote{Randi, Conjuring, xi-xii.} The conjurer is a performer who actively engages in distorting their audiences’ senses to make the impossible appear to happen. There is no motivation by the performer to claim supernatural or mystical powers, only to entertain. The audience in response recognizes that the performer is only showing
them a trick and does not recognize nor validate the fact that the performer has
supernatural powers. Randi uses this term in his work as a way to separate the
performer from the hustler. His work does have an agenda in which he shows that faith
healers, mystics, and others dealing in the occult are not “magicians” but con artists.

The biggest problem is that the performers themselves and their audiences use
the terms interchangeably and still refer to any magical performer as a magician
because Randi’s term is not in common usage. Even Randi himself uses the term
“magician” in place of conjurer with the common understanding that he means the
stage illusionist. The term that best describes the subject of this thesis is the stage
illusionist, those performers of magical feats that claim no supernatural power but
merely entertain in a large scale setting.

Magicians found that their versatility became a virtue as they traveled about the
country meeting an ever changing audience. Having established the blurred lines
between “high brow” and “low brow” cultures, the relative diversity of audiences
involved in magical entertainment, the wide range of performance venues and
beginnings of mass entertainment, the roots of magic in folk culture, and the variations
in magical performances, we can now move on to how all these factors combine to form
the premises of a model that shows the evolutionary process occurring within the
society of the United States and that illusionists can be seen as a reflection of that
change. We can also explore the idea that these events were not exclusive to the United
States. Western Europe was experiencing similar patterns of development and magical entertainment itself was perfected within those parameters in Europe. By the mid-nineteenth century it began to cross the Atlantic finding that American provided a rich market that in many ways resembled those back in Europe.

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century the modern magic show was born. This change did not originate in the United States, but in Paris, France. There was a combination of events, innovations, and social changes that allowed for it to be developed. Street magic, with its cups and balls or card tricks, had its home in the pubs and street corners while mechanical illusions were increasingly looked upon as intellectual marvels and were more common in private locations such as salons or workrooms. As the middle class expanded in the 1800s, popular entertainment moved into theaters. Magic performances also moved off the streets and out of mechanical workrooms to the theater stages as well. The father of the modern magic show is widely considered to be Robert Houdin. He was so influential in the craft that 50 years later a young immigrant to the United States named Erik Weisz, when creating a stage name for himself, adopted a form of his name as an homage and became Harry Houdini. Houdini, after reading Houdin’s memoirs, said that Houdin had given the profession “a

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dignity worth attaining at the cost of earnest, life long effort” and that “I asked nothing more of life than to become in my profession like Robert Houdin”.  

Jean Eugene Robert, or Houdin, was born in 1805 to a watchmaker and was apprenticed into that profession as a young man. He was known for his clever and unusual mechanical creations and had once won a silver medal in the 1844 universal exposition in France. He had built an automated man that could give a written reply. When questioned about the population of Paris by King Louis Philippe, it wrote with a pencil on paper 998,964. It astonished even P.T. Barnum who promptly bought the device and put it on display in London. He was an avid fan of the magic shows that passed through the city and was greatly influenced by illusionists such of the likes as Louis Comte (who entertained the kings of France), Giovanni Bosco (an Italian who had honed his art in the sparse conditions of a prisoner of war camp), and Lugwig Doebler (an Austrian who was the first to use electricity in a spectacular fashion on stage). By 1845 the mysterious clockmaker was ready to embark on a short stage career that was to have a lasting influence on the art of performance magic. It was a rather inglorious beginning that was characterized by awful performances and low attendance. As time progressed he became more comfortable on stage, added self-designed larger mechanical illusions, and included a mentalist aspect that featured his son. By the end

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of his stage career in 1856 he had achieved worldwide fame and was even being used as an ambassador of French culture in Arabia.  

Houdin happened to be the right man at the right time in France. By the time he took the stage, the Revolutions of 1848 had occurred and France was under the rule of Emperor Napoleon III. Fredrick Brown, in his work on late nineteenth century France, describes a country that found itself splitting into two camps. Those of the liberal, secular, growing bourgeoisies trumpeted the triumph of science and liberal economics. They were opposed by an archconservative, deeply spiritualistic, Catholic segment of society. After the following description of Houdin’s show it should be clear that a “magic” show might possess enough elements to make both halves of French society interested in the performance.

In the mid-eighteen hundreds Houdin combined both street magic and illusions with a series of theatrical elements that took magic out of the parlors, salons, public houses, and off the streets and placed it on the theater stage. His rising popularity seemed to echo the growth of a leisure class that sat somewhere between the corporate working class and gentry of Europe. He was on the cusp of popular culture by creating an act that was suitable for mass entertainment. The most lasting legacy of

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Houdin was not only the theatrical pattern he set for what most people today now consider a magic show, but the now easily identified uniform of the magician. 

Previously, magicians were still known to wear the garb of a wizard as seen in the earlier referenced prints of one of Houdin’s contemporaries Jacques Andre Noe Talon, otherwise known as Philippe (Figure 3). Houdin replaced the wizard robes and common dress of street magicians by adopting the attire of the gentry. The now familiar top hat (opera hat), cane, tuxedo, and tails that were becoming popular as the formal wear of the times became Houdin’s new uniform. As seen in the nineteenth century print he wore the Bourgeoisie outfit and presented large mechanical illusions along with mentalist acts (Figure 4). Many contemporary illusionists began to follow his example such as the French illusionist Henri Robin. Prints showing Robin, Houdin’s principal rival in Paris, depict him in formal wear at the Tuileries Palace, surrounded primarily by a male upper class audience that has a small number of segregated women off to the side. His use of the formal wear placed him in a position to legitimize lower class street magic in combination with large illusion as acceptable, in that setting, for upper class entertainment (Figure 5).


59 “Engraving of Robert Houdin” [1840’s] in Milbourne, Panorama of Magic, 76.

60 “Print of Robin at the Tuileries Palace” [1865] in Milbourne, Panorama of Magic, 97.
Prints and playbills depicted that Illusionists in England began to use Houdin’s style of performance. Jacobs the Magician had an advertisement that included ventriloquism and improvisation as part of his act. Various scenes are shown in a diamond shaped pattern on the engraving. The ventriloquism portion of the show may be represented by two scenes. One shows a man in a nightcap looking towards his attic while another man is presumably knocking on the ceiling. In another, a man is answering a knock at his door. There is a scene of what appears to be a military officer, wearing epaulettes on his shoulders, involved in a trick known as the never empty barrel or bottle. This particular trick was especially popular and was usually featured regularly in pub and saloon performances. In yet another scene a family on stage suggested an improvisational performance for a mixed crowd of men, women, and children. All scenes feature what looks to be middle class members of society. In the center of the advertisement is the magic show and a mixed assortment of tricks in the background. Jacobs has taken the traits of a street magic performer with the diversity of those acts, placed them on stage, and made them acceptable for middle class audiences of mixed company (Figure 6).61

An advertisement for John Henry Anderson, otherwise known as Professor Anderson as nod to the technical and scientific emphasis of his act, displays a setting

attuned to middle class or upper class audiences. He conducts a rather popular trick of
the time in which he pours from a never empty bottle of alcohol, in this case wine or
champagne. In contrast to the earlier Robin engraving, Anderson’s “Grande Soiree” has
men and women mingling together in their opera attire (Figure 7). 62

The new stage attire served a purpose. Illusionists adopted the dress of their
middle class or “cultured” audiences in order to present tricks that in many cases were
looked at as “low brow” or bar room scams. The magician’s uniform of a top hat, cane,
and tuxedo became the standard image of a trusted or honorable performer that was
about to show the spectacular to his audience as opposed to the bar room street magic
swindler who would cheat you out of some coins. This also made the middle and upper
class perceive magic as an acceptable form of entertainment befitting of their
socioeconomic class. Their illusions became more grandiose as they combined sleight of
hand and eternally full bottles of beer with other large scale mechanical spectacles
such as levitations. Houdin had even renamed “the pit”, a seating area where
traditionally lower class members of the audience were placed. He now called it the
amphitheater to attract middle and upper class members of society to his theater. 63
Clearly the stage magician was beginning to cross class distinctions as the “low brow”

62 “Engraving for Professor Anderson” [1850’s] in Milbourne, Panorama of Magic, 87.
elements of magic combined with the “high brow” aspects in an era that would eventually become known as the “golden age” of magic.

His costume served not only a legitimizing effect for many of the street magic sleight of hand displays he performed, but it also served as a device he used for the conducting of his act as well. Interestingly many of the terms for the pockets and adjustments he made to his outfit became part of the standard lexicon used by performers today. For example the terms “pochette” and “profonde” are used to describe the pockets, small pocket and deep pocket respectively, that illusionists use. These terms started off in his native France and eventually worked their way to England and the United states.

Houdin added various elements of theater in his show because of the mechanical necessity involved in performing his illusions in theaters full of large audiences. It was also as a way to appeal to audiences’ tastes and popularize magic as a craft worthy of being in those mainstream bourgeoisie theaters. His ability to combine these theater elements left a profound impact on the craft so that even today illusionists are many times grouped or compared to stage actors. As Jim Steinmeyer explains, “His magic was original, thoughtful, and adorned with an elegant setting of Louis Quatorze

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“furniture” and “Houdin had announced to Paris that magic was not an amusement for children or fairground ruffians; it belonged in a theater, and attached a respectable audience”.

Houdin himself explained that he preferred an “elegant and simple stage unencumbered by the paraphernalia of the ordinary conjurer”, “real sleight of hand must not be the tinman’s work, but the artist’s”, and that he “never thought of making any change in the attire civilized society had agreed to accept for an evening dress”. Prints of his set on stage show what appears to be the simple refined setting of a salon or living room (Figure 4). Houdin’s street magic elements included the standard cups and balls, cards, appearances, and disappearances. He was especially fond of his sleight of hand performances. Gone were the ventriloquist tricks, juggling, and displays of physical prowess used by those performers on the street as they were replaced by a more selective program that focused on illusions. Houdin’s most famous quote “the conjurer is not a juggler; he is an actor playing the part of a magician” probably best sums up his approach to the performance. These common street acts were to be

66 Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant*, 144.


discarded in favor of introducing the grandiose illusions that used to be prominent in the salons, parlors, and courts of Europe. He seemed to concentrate on the ability to show that feats of the mind could amaze by conquering the laws of nature on a grand enough scale to be seen by all in the large theater audience. One of his more prominent illusions was “the Orange Tree” in which a small potted tree began to miraculously grow to mature size in front of the audiences’ very eyes.  

Houdin was the beginning, but London would soon become the Mecca for stage illusionists. This was because of the careful management of popular appeal and business aspects of the craft in an effort to create a popular art form that could be used as mass entertainment. The London theater circuit in many cases involved illusionists building their own theaters to house long running shows. A magic dynasty was born with John Nevil Maskelyne and the Maskelyne family. Through three generations of illusionists, their manipulation of popular tastes through advertisements and other methods offers a number of examples on how popular entertainment can be used to show the preferences and attitudes of society at the time as well as the development of a mass entertainment that crossed class lines.

John Nevil Maskelyne was born in 1838 in Gloucester, England. This short, narrowed eyed man with a large bushy mustache did not look like the showman and master architect of an entertainment empire that would eventually gain royal approval

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70 Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant*, 140.
He would later be known simply as “the chief” or “the guv’nor” by his contemporaries. Steinmeyer claims that it would be difficult to classify Maskelyne as just a magician and offers up the similar comparison of P.T. Barnum as a great man of the circus even though he didn’t walk a tightrope. Having a knack for mechanical genius, he had originally made a name for himself by exposing the fabrications of spiritualists that had taken advantage of growing public interest in the romanticism and mysteries of the occult. After the U.S. Civil War, an increasing number of spiritualists had made their way across the Atlantic. In Europe they played off the primal emotions of spiritualism and death that they had been able to exploit in the United States.

Maskelyne first made a name for himself when he confronted, on stage, American spiritualists the Davenport Brothers. He debunked their claims that they were able to contact spirits who manipulated objects in a closed “spirit box”. He parlayed that fame using a business model that focused on fame in the print media into a stage show and took it to London where he rented the soon to be famous Egyptian Hall on Piccadilly Circus. Maskelyne’s early steps are a great example of a forerunner of mass entertainment that would take magical entertainment out of the realm of “low” or folk culture and bringing it to the masses.

71 “Advertisement for the Egyptian Hall” [1880’s] in Randi, Conjuring, 61.
72 Steinmeyer, Hiding the Elephant, 93-113.
The Maskelynes would thrive and find tremendous success in an England that was at its height. Victorian England was an economic powerhouse with a growing middle class that had disposable income. With a series of Great Reform Bills it was also in the process of a democratization that not only included the right to vote, but also included the ability to participate in society in a much broader scale with the repeal of the Combination Acts in the early 1800s. Newspapers and advertising expanded as did the public sphere. The Empire and its economic strength grew as exotic items from around the world could be seen on the shelves of the stores and on public display, and the public clamored for stimulation. The Maskelynes tapped into this atmosphere and built a business model that advertised and displayed the spectacular while raking in a hefty profit.

One example of the Maskelyne dynasty’s prowess and domination was their ownership of what could only be considered the capital building of stage magic during the late eighteen hundreds, the Egyptian theater in London. This theater utilized the “Egyptmania” craze sweeping through Europe at the time and would later transplant it and its business model to the United States. During the Napoleonic wars of the early eighteen hundreds, Napoleon Bonaparte had led an expedition into Egypt that eventually failed. This expedition was, in part, a strategic military maneuver versus the British Empire. During the process of that failure, he began to promote the expedition as a scientific, historic, and cultural inquiry as well. This promotion and the numerous artifacts that were brought back to France fed a public yearning for a mysterious and
spiritual outlet in the midst of a growing industrially secular world. It also easily fit into the growing Romantic Movement that was sweeping through Europe. In what was labeled by one documentary as “Egyptmania”, the populations of Europe (notably England and France) became fascinated with many aspects of Egypt. This fascination echoed within the ranks of magicians as well. As Albert Hopkins put it, “Magicians are fascinated with the magicians of the ancient pharaoh’s court. The book of Exodus talks of Moses’s clash with the Pharaoh’s magicians and the wonders they could produce. Victorian magicians were enthralled by this.”

The Egyptian Hall, as it would be called, is one of the first magic theaters of its type and used Egyptian columns and architecture as not only a structural design, but as an advertising gimmick as well. As seen in a photograph, the architectural style resembled a building from Egyptian antiquity. It was adorned with hieroglyphs and markings of pharaohs with mysterious gods. The advertisements that adorned the building completed the dime store amusement image of “England’s House of Mystery” and included a chemist, improved moving pictures, art displays, and the two stages that featured magic performances (Figure 9). His stage show set would include Egyptian

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75 “Photograph of the Egyptian Hall” [late 1800’s] in Walderman and Layden, The Art of Magic, 98.
themes that fed off the earlier mentioned “Egyptmania”. The audience itself was segregated by ticket price or class. Balcony box suites were available as well as the Houdin styled amphitheater seating (Figure 10). Maskelyne again shows how tapping into popular tastes and incorporating them into magical acts could be used to promote magic as popular culture and cross class lines and culture with mass entertainment.

In 1873 Maskelyne and his partner, George Cook, rented one of two stages in the Egyptian Hall of London. It was originally intended to house a then defunct show featuring animals and artifacts, but the appeal of the building was too great to pass up. This was the first step towards creating his dynasty of magic. Fierce competition became the game that Maskelyne excelled at. His biggest rival was one Dr. H.S. Lynn who had coincidently rented the second stage in the hall. This fierce rivalry was played out on the stage and in the newspapers as each claimed to be the innovators of numerous illusions. Maskelyne gained a large amount of publicity in public media outlets as they reported on his rivalries and this created the aura around the Egyptian hall that made it a center of entertainment in London. This is another example of using promotional techniques in the public sphere as an element of developing a mass entertainment business model.

Another of these famous of these duals dealt with a version of the earlier mentioned Davenport Brothers’ spirit cabinet. Maskelyne continued to square off

against spiritualists by challenging them and debunking them in front of court rooms and audiences as a method of gaining publicity. In a print from 1876, Maskelyne is in a London court room testifying against spiritualist Henry Slade. (Figure 11).\textsuperscript{77} Slade conducted a slate writing trick and was exposed as a false medium which was accompanied by a three month sentence. As competition between magical performers raged through law suits, newspaper articles, and theater reviews, Maskelyne honed his skills as a promoter. His acts would then capitalize and draw upon themes that the public seemed enthralled with.

By 1875, he eventually came to dominate the Egyptian hall and soon began to hire new and innovative acts that were constantly changing what they offered to audiences. Many of the most popular and famous illusionists of the time played the Egyptian. Eventually some would begin world tours to various parts of the British Empire and the Americas. When these same illusionists began to tour, a few decided to stay and make their homes in the United States. The most important at the time would create a dynasty in and of itself within the United States, the Hermanns.\textsuperscript{78} They in turn began to build theaters of their own and employ Maskelyne’s methods in major U.S. cities.

\textsuperscript{77} “Newsprint of Maskelyne at the trial of Slade” [1876] in Milbourne, Panorama of Magic, 152.

\textsuperscript{78} Milbourne, The Illustrated History of Magic, 155-180.
groundwork had been laid for the incorporation of magical mass entertainment into popular cultural.

Maskelyne and Houdin perfected the art of tapping into popular culture by taking a form of folk art and developing it to a point where it could cross class lines and be accepted by the masses. It could then be used by an emerging mass entertainment business. Illusionists can now be considered representative of changes occurring in Western society. Being reflective of changes lays the premise that it is now possible to use by using illusionists as a way to interpret popular attitudes as well. These audiences have a choice in what they may participate or purchase. Shows that are not appealing or that do not ring true to what they perceive as truth or the norm would have difficulty attracting patrons. It is this idea along with the previous conclusion that illusionists are reflective of changes within society that moves us into the second half of this study.
CHAPTER TWO: THE EVOLUTION OF THE ILLUSION SHOW IN THE UNITED STATES AS A REFLECTION OF SOCIAL ATTITUDES

At this point it has been established that audiences, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, in the United States as constantly evolving in composition. This allowed, to a certain degree, a blurred line between class distinctions and leisure activities. We also have seen how the roots of mass entertainment had begun to take hold in the latter half of the nineteenth century allowing for magic performances and magicians to begin specializing in illusion shows. We have traced the birth of the stage illusion show to Europe and shown how it crossed the Atlantic to the United States. We have pointed to the illusionist as a reflection of these changes by examining magical performances’ folk culture background, adaptability, and rise towards mass popularity across class lines. It is now possible to begin to dissecting the illusion show and examine how it reflected some of the attitudes that a diverse American society and European society had in common.

Upon examining magical performances it will become clear that several themes emerge. There was a dualistic embrace of both the realistic secular attitudes of liberal science while at the same time an increasing interest in the mystical and romantic. Gender roles were reinforced and white males would dominate the stage. Imperialism would be the backdrop for the reinforcement of civilized white male superiority compared to the mystical exotic traits of other races in distant nations. By comparing works from other authors that describe the historical context along with social attitudes of the time to descriptions and visual representations of an illusionist’s stage performance, we will be able to validate the formers’ conclusions while proving that magicians can indeed be used representatively to interpret audience attitudes.
Looking at the historical context of the second half of the nineteenth century to find events and social attitudes that may have been reflected in the performances of stage illusionists may at first appear impossibly complex and dynamic. It is, however, possible to identify some common themes. The Industrial Revolution profoundly affected societal order and its impact can be seen in the previous chapter regarding class and mass entertainment. The mechanical marvels or illusions that were being presented in magic acts during the 1800s are representative of the growing interest in secularism associated with industry and science. The mysticism of their presentation was also representative of a contrasting interest in the Romantic Movement. Imperialism gave illusionists more material as they presented the exotic and reinforced the presumption of white male superiority over the quaintness of other races and reinforced gender roles.

A more linear approach with turning points makes it possible to identify a few specific events that helped shape audiences’ world view. Upon further examination these same events can also show commonalities between nations as magicians crossed the Atlantic in the latter half of the eighteen hundreds. For example, events such as the U.S. Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War, the Sepoy Mutiny in India, and the Crimean War can be seen as catalysts in their respective States. Before these events enlightened secularism coexisted with a reactionary romanticism. By the 1800’s scientific thought and industry was becoming a dominate theme in intellectual circles. These wars created an atmosphere for themes such as spiritualism and romanticism to thrive as well. We will start with them because of this ability.

The U.S. Civil War had a profound effect on American society which in turn would have an equally profound effect on entertainment in the United States. Authors such as Sean Dennis
Cashman, H.W. Brands, and Jackson Lears present a nation that emerges from the war as vibrant, growing, advancing in its economic and industrial might, and reaching out across the oceans. But the nation was not without its problems as well.\textsuperscript{79} Leon Fink recently explored the idea of a growing labor movement led by middle class intellectuals who were inspired by European labor movements. These movements organized with the goal of creating a more egalitarian society in response to the problem of profound economic disparity. In the process of doing so, they clashed with upper class ownership and eventually accomplished their goal to some degree.\textsuperscript{80} Louis Menand presents in his book, \textit{The Metaphysical Club}, a nation searching for answers, new ideas, and its soul.\textsuperscript{81} The war had a psychological impact on the population that illusionists and other performers quickly identified and used to captivate audiences.

The massive loss of life in what may be called the first industrial war fought by the United States had created a country that still grieved for those who never came home. This grief led to conflicted thoughts about human civility, industrial progress, and a romantic fascination with the afterlife and spirituality. Mysticism in particular became an obsession for some and performers began to capitalize on it as a draw for audiences. The tragedy of the Civil War brought about an increase in the popularity of spiritualism which began before the war as a small movement in mid-state New York. Coupled with this was the increased tolerance for what


\textsuperscript{80} Fink, \textit{The Long Gilded Age}.

was known as the black arts. Many no longer feared them, but considered them nothing more that fanciful tricks. Works by Philosophers such as Auguste Comte reinforced this idea and the triumph of science over spiritual power, for many, seemed certain. The opposite was also occurring in society as romanticism flourished among those who felt the emotional uncontrolled nuances of nature trumped man’s civilized secular science. The number of these mystical performances increased along with their popularity and the attendance at such events. This pointed to changes in the tastes of American audiences and reflect the embrace of a reactionary mysticism.

By the middle of the 1880s Europe too experienced the gruesome toll of warfare. This outbreak of fighting had interrupted a sustained period of peace after the Napoleonic wars that had lasted for almost 40 years. Works like Christopher Herbert’s *War of No Pity* describe the toll that the Sepoy Indian Mutiny had taken on “civilized” English society. In the midst of a mass media expansion, spearheaded by the newspapers, the public sphere saw the birth of a type of shock journalism that reported the wild uncontrolled emotions of the combatants. English newspapers were filled with stories of white English soldiers whom had shed their civilized behavior and committed barbaric acts during the fighting in India. Despite the fact that the soldiers were from an industrially advanced civilization, they still devolved into uncivilized behavior during the war. This reinforced the idea to many that man’s natural state was chaotic. Questions about the perceived superiority of a civilized European race and the conflict between nature and technology followed the war.82 The Crimean War was yet another example of what

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may have been looked upon as the futility of civility and the horrors of war. Illusionists saw the growing interest in Romanticism and wildness of nature. They created magical performances that would reflect that interest.

Post war interest in graphic horror novels, like Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein*, seem to echo Herbert’s conclusions about the conflict between technology, civilization, and the mysticism of nature. Charles Darwin’s evolutionary ideas gave rise to the search for what was termed “New Humans.” Victorians looked at those with special physical attributes as either supernatural freaks or the future face of humanity. Doctor Franz Mesmer began to theorize on a force called animal magnetism that was thought to have properties that could be used to heal. It eventually evolved into a sort of faith healing called “Mesemerism” that was commonly accepted in the absence of established modern medical fact. It appears that the limits to science and technology were truly unclear and a blurred line existed between it and the mystical, the spiritual, and natural world. London in the Victorian Age was rife with legends and accounts of strange phenomena in its streets. A strange ghost like figure was described as an English gentleman with animal like qualities and thought to roam the streets of London attacking young girls. This legendary figure, known as Spring Heeled Jack, was frequently reported by the newspapers. It also became the inspiration for our modern day Batman. A belief in crisis apparitions captured the imaginations of Londoners and frightened them as well. Haunted cemeteries and spirit photography were outlets for those who searched for contact with the undead. Indeed,

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England may have been ripe for the American spiritualist movement and the romantic notions that followed with it while at the same time enjoying its industrial and imperial height.

The Franco-Prussian War was yet another event that echoed these same themes in France. Fredrick Brown writes in his work, *For the Soul of France*, that the Franco-Prussian War exposed a rift in French society between those devoted to the spiritual soul of Catholic France and the secular nationalists who supported a capitalistic industrialized nation. Brown uses Emile Zola as an introduction to the struggle between spiritual and the secular movements by quoting the writer as saying “study and dramatize the endless duel (in France) between science and the longing for supernatural intervention.”

The “Americanization” of politics, a future world exhibition on the horizon, the growth of an urban middle class, and a rural public who felt increasingly left behind were elements of a larger developing problem. The defeat of France during the Franco-Prussian War exposed these fissures in French society and the public searched for answers. Scape goats were needed as competing ideological factions fought to an eventual climax in the very controversial Dreyfus affair. The political left wing believed that defeat in the Franco-Prussian War would cause France to wake up from its Bonapartism and move the nation towards secularization and science. They believed in the organization of a world exhibition would champion liberty, support technology, and cosmopolitanism. Rural conservative France began to reconcile with mysticism in an attempt to combat the secularism of the left wing and, led by the church, return the nation to its Catholic roots in a fit of conservative nationalism.

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85 Brown, *For the Soul of France*, xxiv-xxv.
These events provide a historical context that can be used to understand magic's appeal to large numbers of people by firmly establishing a setting in the United States, France, and England. It is not surprising that spiritualism would find mass appeal in all three nations. The adoption of spiritualist traits in magical performances is a good example of how magicians reflect popular trends and tastes within their audiences. The role spiritualism played in magical performances will also give us insight into the male dominated role of the illusionist as well. In addition, as illusionists crisscrossed Atlantic Ocean they brought with them mystical, spiritual, and romantic themes that appealed to audiences. These themes, after being adjusted to the audiences’ preference, became common on both sides of the Atlantic. Rodgers Atlantic Crossings theory seems to be at work here and can be extended into the nineteenth century as the United States did not develop in a bubble, but was influenced by outside States and vice versa.

The evolutionary stages of stage magic up until the nineteenth century along with its connections to folk culture are important in helping to lay a framework for understanding of this particular performance art. After the establishment of a relationship to its forbearers in folk culture, the adaptable nature of magical entertainment and the emergence of the modern magic will show how it reflected the changes in society that will eventually allow for it to be at the forefront of mass entertainment.

Whether it is labeled “folk”, “low brow”, “religious”, “spiritual”, or anything else, magic shows are imbedded into the social fabric of Europe. These shows have
transcended class for most of European history until the Enlightenment seemed to downgrade them to the level of mere superstition or tricks of the lower classes. By the end of the nineteenth century, magic shows strove for acceptance across all classes of society by evolving into modern illusion shows. By acknowledging this connection to folk culture and establishing a connection to its forbearers, only then can we come to understand the adaptability and evolutionary nature of the shows themselves and how they help us to understand the rise of mass entertainment.

Society has gone through various stages of acceptance and rejection when dealing with magicians and illusionists. The craft has also suffered through what might be best described as an identity crisis that, until the specialization of stage illusionists in the latter half of the nineteenth century, had never really been resolved. For example, early magicians were often referred to as wise men and shamans. Historian Randall Styers points out that it has always been difficult to separate elements like religion, culture, mysticism, and magic from each other.86 Owen Davies writes that in post-medieval England they were referred to as “cunning-folk” a term that would be replaced by the nineteenth century “magician” as they evolved into performance artists rather than practitioners of medicine, science, or spiritual aspects.87 Therefore the magician or

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those in magician-like roles had a tendency to be looked at in an abstract, multidimensional, or dynamic way. This fog of definition or non-definition allows magicians the flexibility to drift in their activities. They often skirted the law depending on the profession they associated themselves with. For example, whether magicians operated in a medicinal capacity, scholastic role, or as an entertainer, they could often be surrounded by debates over whether they were performers of good or evil. Later, enlightened empiricism and rationalism confirmed them as either artists or quasi-scientists associated with expanding technology. They would either be judged positively or regarded as quacks and hoaxers bent on promoting the arcane or worse. This duality of judgment is reflective of how magic had an adaptable nature that allows it to be recognized in various ways throughout the spectrum of society.

Performance magic, during the Middle Ages existed in a precarious position in that those who practiced the art would have a hard time defending themselves against attacks and accusations of witchcraft or sorcery. European Christian beliefs caused illusionists and magicians sometimes be identified with the dark arts, evil, and in league with Satan. This sometimes would have resulted in declarations of heresy or witchcraft. These declarations would led to persecution and death. It would not have been uncommon for a performer to walk a fine line in order to stay out of trouble with local authorities, the Church, or even a scared public who might find a magician’s act

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88 Owen Davies, Cunning-Folk.
precariously close to those actions identified with black magic and being in league with dark forces. The code of silence that magicians kept in order to maintain the secrecy of how an illusion worked would have made it even more difficult to defend oneself. To say nothing meant guilt, but to admit to secular causes would be to admit to the commission of fraud.

Distinctions between black magic (evil) and white magic (good) were sometimes made. White magic had a tendency to be identified with scientific advancement and would also be commonly practiced by males. Black magic was increasingly identified as the realm of females because their perceived moral and physical weakness made them prone to be seduced by the minions of evil. The fact that it was acceptable for males to practice white magic as a scientific endeavor whereas women who practiced magic would be considered to practitioners of black magic show that gender did have an influence. It is also an early indication that magicians may be able to act as a representative of cultural and social attitudes about gender. This traditional acceptance of a male dominated occupation would continue for hundreds of year afterwards.

Francis Bacon is said to have attempted to dispel the idea that these tricks had anything to do with the supernatural. He promoted the idea that they had simple secular explanations for how they were done and that what appeared to be magic was

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89 Christopher Milbourne, *The Illustrated History of Magic*, 8-29.

90 Ibid.
merely the acts of natural law.\textsuperscript{91} Despite this, the populations of the Western world would still cling to a belief in superstition and it would take another hundred years before they began to disregard it.\textsuperscript{92} Men would continue to be accepted as practitioners of white magic whether it was using mystical magic as a priest or secular magic of entertainment. Women on the other hand never gained widespread acceptance with either and would continue to retain a negative image or in worst case scenarios be accused of witchcraft. To continue this exploration of medieval magic would be beyond the realm of this work, but does help in understanding the magician’s origins and the sequence of events that brought about a kind of identity, acceptance, and inclusion into the theatrical arts. At the same time it shows some early signs of the magician’s ability act as a representative of social and cultural attitudes.

Perhaps the turning point in the acceptance of magic occurred with the Enlightenment. With the shift in human perception of the world around them, performance magic began to gain some acceptance among populations in the Western world. Increasingly more secular attitudes and acceptance of rational and empirical thought made performing magic no longer something to be feared as paranormal and evil by certain segments of the population. As the Enlightenment progressed, illusionists sometimes were accepted as scientists. This was especially true if they possessed an


\textsuperscript{92} James Randi, \textit{Conjuring}, 18.
education, were middle or upper class, and male. Many times those who lacked these attributes would have been deemed as scam artists or even witches. At the same time, emerging romanticism gave room for people to spectate and appreciate the wild, spiritual, and natural elements of the world.

Post U.S. Civil War spiritualism in popular performances had its origins with the Fox sisters in the 1840s. These spiritualists would attempt to communicate with the dead and would sometimes be associated with occultists. It is interesting to note that traditional roles associating women with the occult or mystical have been reinforced with the Fox sisters. Men would eventually incorporate these spiritualist themes into their acts as a way of capitalizing on the public interest and at the same time maintain their dominance within the performance magic profession. Margaret and Kate Fox originally began conducting séances in their home in upstate New York when they were 8 and 6. In these séances rapping or knocking sounds were touted as communication from the deceased. As seen in a later advertisement from 1851 the girls had become young women positioned with two older women, one of whom is there mother, and their performance touted spiritual reform and hymnals (Figure 12).  

The spiritual reform movement had at its core the search for a divinely inspired morality. This morality could be derived from the spirits of the deceased who had obtained an enhanced knowledge of right or wrong because of their position in the afterlife. This knowledge was to be gained by

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communicating with them through séances. The movement itself advocated reforms such as abolishment of slavery and women’s suffrage.

The Fox sisters became widely popular in the Northeastern part of the United States and many of high society’s most famous individuals, such as Horace Greeley, Mary Todd Lincoln, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, were participants. This popularity is interesting in light of the fact spiritualism had been previously considered a “black magic” and that they were female, but the Christian religious undertones may have provided the room for them to gain fame and acceptance. Much later the sisters eventually confessed to orchestrating a hoax, but their impact was already felt.

Clearly the girls had touched on a subject that held great interest to the American public. They had gained some acceptance as practitioners of mystical magic without completely incurring the wrath that had befallen their predecessors hundreds of years earlier. The popularity of spiritualism increased after the U.S. Civil War in part because of the post war atmosphere in which a number of Americans grieved for family members or close friends lost on the battlefields. It also had room to grow during the ongoing Romantic Movement. The sisters remained popular, but also brought about a series of male imitators as magicians began to quickly assume the role or image of a spiritualist and forced women out. This is rather reflective of a continuing belief that women had been delegitimized as purveyors of magical entertainment and remained in the role of spiritualists, occultist, and the old witches of the past.

94 Steinmeyer, Hiding the Elephant, 54-56.
Among those who became fascinated by the Fox sisters’ performances were two boys, Ira and William Davenport, who lived nearby in Rochester. The two brothers would eventually go on to create a stage show that took advantage of the public’s interest in the supernatural as well. The Davenport brothers performed throughout the 1850s and reached a zenith in their popularity in the 1860s. They had picked up where the Fox sisters left off by touring the U.S. and eventually reaching Europe. An advertisement for their act shows that the crossover from the Fox sisters’ “in home” séances to an actual stage show was now underway (Figure 13). The advertisement features their famous “spiritual cabinet” in which the two brothers were bound and placed in a closet. Inside the closet were various devices and musical instruments. Shortly after the brothers were locked inside the closed closet, it began to emit noises from those very same devices that were left inside. The audience in the advertisement consisted of upper class men and women using opera classes to see the show on stage. This shows an acceptance of this type of performance by the depicted audience. It was claimed by the brothers that they had the ability to communicate with ghosts and spirits. They explained that members of the spirit world had been creating the noises. In actuality, they were stage magicians who had taken up the role as spiritualists. They were able to replace the image of the female practitioner of mystical dark magic by assuming the role as men.

The Davenports quickly became a huge hit on both sides of the Atlantic. Illusionists had seen how the public’s imagination had been captured by this type of magic and sought to use it in some type of way as a box office draw. The brothers had sparked a great controversy in

Europe involving whether they were fraudulent spiritualists or simply entertaining magicians. Their European tour eventually turned into a disaster as European illusionists would seek to discover their gimmicks or duplicate what they had seen from the American performers.96 Eventually the brothers were chased off of the continent when Maskelyne exposed how the trick was done, but in their wake they left a wave of European performers who had been deeply influenced.

Some magicians simply copied their séances from American performances and continued the fraud. As seen in chapter one with the Henry Slade trial, magicians could be accused of fraud and dragged into court for claiming supernatural powers and talking to the dead. Illusionists on the other hand added the theatrical spiritualist elements they had seen performed into their acts and in the process began debunking the practices. 97 Despite the danger of legal action they used the theme of the supernatural to appeal to audiences while at the same time appeasing the secular with their disclaimers. This was for entertainment purposes only and clearly played off the audiences’ new found interest in the romantic and mystic. European illusionists presented these same mystical feats with new versions of the spirit cabinet on the continent and then promptly shipped it across the Atlantic to tour the United States. For example, Harry Kellar brought back his version of spiritual performance magic to the


United States. This exchange lends itself to furthering Rodgers’ idea of transatlantic cultural exchange.

The absence of women as popular illusionists stands out as one of the most noticeable trends in these acts and it continues into the late eighteen-hundreds. This profession was clearly a male-dominated one. It is difficult to find any female magician who reached the stardom level of their male counterparts. Only one woman came close to claiming this type of draw at the box office, Adelaide Herrmann of the famous Hermann dynasty of illusionists. She was originally a Belgian dancer whom Alexander Herrmann had met in London. They were married and she performed in his shows as an assistant. She original performed a fire dancing routine in her husband’s show and continued to incorporate feminine dancing as a large part of the act after he had passed away. When Alexander died in 1896, she carried on the shows with her nephew Leon and was simply drawing upon the name of her late husband. The arrangement only lasted three years and she, using the Herrmann name as a draw, continued on her own as the lead. It is an interesting commentary that Adelaide Herrmann had to rely upon her dancing and her husband’s name as a box office draw despite the fact that she was an accomplished illusionist in her own right. After years of experience working in her husband’s show, she was able to perform many of the same illusions at a comparable level. By the end of the nineteenth century she was able to take advantage of new found nationalism within the United States by using the imperialistic and jingoistic (the eve of the Spanish American war) to adjust her deceased husband’s act with the Images and trappings of patriotism. This could be clearly seen in this
photograph of Adelaide on her late husband’s stage set (Figure 14). Adelaide is posing much like the Statue of Liberty. She is surrounded by iconography of the United States such as the national flag and George Washington.

In comparison to her show, Adelaide’s deceased Husband relied on a mystical theme that portrayed him with an almost devilish look as seen in this advertisement (figure 15). He like to mix into his act a sharp sense of humor and was known to be as master of sleight of hand tricks. He also included an illusion known as the bullet catch in which the illusionist would appear to catch a bullet that had been fired at him from a gun. Adelaide Hermann performed versions of her deceased husband’s illusions, but the crowds were never the same as her husband’s and she found herself paired with other acts. Her grandmotherly approach appeared to be more of a tribute to her husband. This example furthers the conclusion that the role of the illusionist is partly defined as a cleaver, intelligent, civilized male and confirms other historian’s work on the subject of masculinity and the male role in society.

When looking for examples that would combine both Daniel Rodgers theories on Atlantic crossings with a cultural study of popular entertainment featuring magicians, one of the best subjects might be P.T. Selbit. He is even more important in regards to role that men and women would play in magical performances and society. He grew up in an artisan household in

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98 “Photograph of Adelaide Herrmann in a Finale” [Early 1900’s] in Milbourne, Panorama of Magic, 133.


100 Milbourne, Panorama of Magic, 196-197.

101 For example works by Kasson, Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man; Kibler, Rank Ladies; and Bederman, Manliness and Civilization.
Hampstead England and his parents did not hold steady employment. Originally set on path to become a silversmith, Selbit had been inspired to perform magic by a chance happening while an apprentice. A Mr. Charles Morritt had rented a private basement space below the silversmith shop that Selbit worked in. Morritt used the space to build and practice his stage show. Selbit would wander down to the basement, pick the lock, and explore the illusions being built.

At the time Selbit was growing up, London was the center of the universe when it came to performance magic and the great Egyptian Hall was its capital. With well over 500 music halls, London had plenty of stages to book a performance. Stage shows included vanishings, productions, transportations, levitations, escapes, and mystic séances. The trappings of the East and acts labeled as Oriental were all the rage. Magicians such as Ching Ling Foo, Rameses, and others performed bright and colorful acts that mesmerized their audiences with the exotic. Interestingly enough Selbit’s life and career would be changed by a suffrage movement rather than the magic he had grown to admire in that the negative reactions towards the changes in roles for women could be capitalized upon as a draw for audiences.

Women’s suffrage and the liberation of women from common social norms was yet another change that seemed disruptive to a public who, in some ways, were tired of change. Led by the Pankhursts, the Women’s Social and Political Union would eventually gain notoriety. Emmeline Pankhurst and her two daughters, Christabel and Sylvia, were known for their militant tactics in support of women’s suffrage. Selbit, with a stroke of luck and genius, ended up taking advantage of the situation. He had been contemplating an answer to an old magic problem whose solution would garner him worldwide fame. He was trying to figure out how to present
an illusion in which the assistant seemed to have been sawed through. It is important to keep in mind that previously to this, mutilation tricks were not prominent on stage. They had been done in the past, but usually involved a vanishing and a male assistant. Selbit eventually developed an illusion that solved this problem and, by chance, employed a female assistant because her body type fitted the apparatus better than that of a male. His new illusion of sawing a women in half would eventually become an iconic stage illusion for future magic acts.

The trick was first presented to the previously mentioned John Maskelyne, who was not interested. Maskelyne felt he had tricks of similar caliber and it seemed that Selbit’s illusion was not initially appreciated. The act was picked up on a smaller stage and then the unexpected happened. During one of the performances, as Selbit was slipping his female assistant into the contraption, he issued an impromptu remark to the suffragettes that challenged them to participate as the object of the mutilation trick if they so desired. The audience response was rabid and as the news spread about the new trick he began to sell out shows. Imitations that used the more common male assistant quickly sprouted up, but they never seemed to be as popular as Selbit’s versions. Overseas it was copied, but they did not get the same response as his original. Then he realized the difference was that the use of a female assistant in a mutilation illusion had tapped into the audiences’ feelings about the changing roles of women and the suffragettes. His act unknowingly reinforced the role of a white male in a position of power over women. He also had unknowingly started a trend that exists today, the beautiful female assistant and volunteer. This trend shows a reinforcement of the idea that the secular illusionist

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or magical performer is, as it was then, a male-dominated profession that continued to be accepted as such by society.

To digress, there are countless examples of how much influence the spiritualist movement and the Davenports had on the art of entertainment magic, but there are also examples of performances that show the celebration of technology and industry. These acts are examples of performances that show the celebration of technology and industry. These acts are a reflection of the dualistic embrace of both themes by society. Yet another example of this mixture between the spiritual entertainment and the industrial or technological is the development of Pepper’s Ghost. Professor J.H. Pepper of the Royal Polytechnic Institute will forever be connected to his performance that was able to bring a visual ghost onto the stage. In actuality it was created by a member of the Society of Civil Engineers named Henry Dirks who had hoped that it would be lauded by theater owners when he presented it at the Crystal Palace exhibition in London. It was Pepper who saw the Dirks invention and developed a use for it on stage. In its first real use on stage it left audiences in awe as ghosts began to appear during a performance of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. The process to create the effect was rather simple. A clear glass pane is placed at an angle across the stage for audiences to view without their knowledge. As house lights are dimmed, back lights are raised to create a mirror effect on stage. In what is termed a “Corsican Trap,” an actor is placed in a position so that a ghostly image is reflected upon the glass. The illusion was very easy to produce in varied scales and is used in some form by magicians everywhere today. It can even be seen on a grand scale at

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Disney’s Haunted Mansion ride. The combination of secular technology with mystical themes continues to be a draw for audiences as it was in the 1800s.

John Henry Anderson and Henri Robin, according to Stienmeyer, adapted and turned their shows into crusades against the American spiritualist movement. As mentioned earlier it was Maskelyne who actually exposed how the Davenport brothers trick was done. He did this by building his own cabinet and accusing the brothers of fraud. In fact, over the years, the Maskelyne family and their stable of illusionists were frequently called in as witnesses to debunk spiritualist claims by explaining how the trick was performed and in the process gained even more publicity for the Egyptian theater. It had become one of the staples of the Maskelyne publicity machine in England. Maybe the Davenports most lasting influence was on the magicians who became enormously famous in the United States. Alexander Herman, who was wildly popular in the United States, never exposed the secret to the Davenport bothers trick. Instead he incorporated the mystic style into his act. He adopted the devilish look of a goatee and mustache, purred in a French accent on stage, and dressed the part of a devious gentlemen while he conducted his act. His appearance can be seen in this simple advertisement that states “I Am Coming” (Figure 15).

The Davenports had in their employ a young stage manager that absorbed every successful illusion and gimmick he saw. That manager, Harry Kellar, would eventually become

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104 Ibid., 65.
105 Ibid.
the first American to gain worldwide fame with his magic that included a version of the spirit cabinet and other “simulations” of the spirit world.\textsuperscript{108} Howard Thurston, a successor to Kellar, would use the images of death and the spiritual world in his advertisements. The ads depicted a skeletal figure, in a suit, with a flowing cape. The figure is carrying a young, unconscious, barefoot women across a graveyard filled with crosses (Figure 1).\textsuperscript{109} Finally a young immigrant magician made a special trip to visit and swap secrets with a very elderly Ira Davenport, who was towards the end of his life. That magician, Harry Houdini, went on to make himself famous as an ardent anti-spiritualist and gifted escape artist.\textsuperscript{110} The themes of romantic mysticism and secular technological illusions remain constant within magical performances and are integral parts of what makes these shows reflections of popular culture and tastes.

Imperialism is another great movement that was spreading across Europe and the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Magical performances began to reflect this theme as well. The United States began an imperialistic expansion of its territory in the 1800s. Manifest Destiny brought much of the North America continent under its control. The inclusion of territory in the Caribbean and Pacific Rim caused Americans to assess their relationship with other races and define who they were as a people. This may have also been influential in helping to define the role of a “civilized” white male. Incidentally, this same reassessment was occurring in Europe. Imperialism and increased interaction with other peoples

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 165-167.


\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 67.
also added elements of the exotic to the debate. American exceptionalism was on the rise and could be seen in the way Americans were represented in events such as the 1893 World Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. Historians such as John Kasson and Sean Cashman saw that Americans were redefining themselves as a people and creating stereotypes that gave identity to themselves and the new exotic peoples they now were discovering.\\footnote{Kasson, Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man, and Cashman, America in the Gilded Age.} Writers like James Bradley agree that a masculine identity was created in which the white male was considered a superior being in intelligence and physical ability.\\footnote{James Bradley, The Imperial Cruise: A Secret History of Empire and War (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2009).} This superior ability allowed him to be master of other races and verified the imperialist expansion of Kipling’s’ White Man’s Burden.

Some historians have debated the extent to which the public actually even understood the idea of empire and what impact it had on daily lives. Historians such as Bernard Porter, Catherine Hall, and Sonya Rose suggest that people had an uneven understanding of imperialism, but an impact that seemed to be everywhere when going about the business of their daily lives. Lower classes did not seem to fully grasp what was going on outside their immediate lives, but did recognize the exotic images and products that came with the increased consumerism and wealth from an empire. Upper class individuals had a much better education and understanding of the complexities of empire and sought advantages.\\footnote{Bernard Porter, The Absent Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and also Catherine Hall, and Sonya Rose, At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).} The earlier image of
the illusionist Philippe had a darker figure bending out from behind his wizard robe. It appears to a young African boy and may be symbolic of recognizing the difference in race and role during this age of imperialism (figure 3).  

Rosalind Williams discussed the Paris Exposition of 1900, the same exposition that Daniel Rodgers uses to kick off his Atlantic crossings theories, to comment on consumerism. She explained how it had affected the exposition in a way that showed its increasing influence on society. The exotic became a draw or promotional technique. The stated goal of the exposition was to instruct and learn. Despite that goal, the displays became absurd and no longer realistic in their interpretations of foreign lands. According to Williams, the many examples of animals and people all included a kind of value represented by price tags. Williams quoted Maurice Talmeyr, the author of an article commenting on the fair. She stated that Talmeyr eventually comes to the conclusion that all advertising is a lie and, “People are duped. Seeking pleasurable escape from the workday world, they find it in a deceptive dream world which is no dream at all but a sales pitch.” According to Williams, department stores of the time began to use the exotic to sell goods. Movie goers began to prefer fantasy to factual portrayals of everyday life which reminded them of “their sorry and monotonous existence, from which they love to escape.” It becomes apparent that the exotic images and romanticism of far flung lands and

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116 Ibid., 204-206

117 Ibid., 214
strange new peoples was a draw for consumers. These themes would find their way onto the stage of illusionists. It can be seen in the promotional advertisements by performers such as Charles Carter and Howard Thurston (Figure 16).\textsuperscript{118} Clearly there was some type of influence of imperialism on popular culture and mass entertainment that was reflected in the advertisements and acts of illusionists.

The impact of Imperialism and the exposure to different races by a Eurocentric population was seen in the shows of magicians. It was not long before industrial science, aka white man’s superiority, was being used to show the quaintness of exotic peoples from around the globe. It reaffirmed the superiority of white “civilized” man over those he now sought to dominate in the global game of economics and imperialism. The fantasy images in Carter’s and Thurston’s advertisements were common (Figure 16).\textsuperscript{119} In Thurston’s advertisement, headhunters from Java appear to be strange three eyed monsters with fangs and stereotyped Asian eyes. Their long finger nails reaching for a women’s head floating in water. There are elements of terror and the exotic here. Carter is depicted as the great white explorer traveling the exotic locals of North Africa, in this case Egypt, on a camel. In furthering the exploitation of the earlier mentioned Egyptmania, Carter is riding past the sphinx and above an Egyptian man in Arab dress. Reaching out towards the Egyptian are devils with pitchforks with only Carter keeping them at bay. Images like these could be seen on any number of posters.

\textsuperscript{118} “Carter Advertisement of Devils in Egypt” [early 1900’s] and “Thurston Advertisement of the Mysteries of Java” [early 1990’s] in Walderman and Layden, \textit{The Art of Magic}, 152.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
In the United States, the exotic could be close at home on the western frontier. The Great Lafayette featured a two act show in which he would warn the audience that the Indian “savages” were on the war path. While riding a white steed, he would help a group of settlers as they circled their wagons to defend themselves. His magic would combat the Indian medicine man’s tricks and he even saved a young white girl in the process.\textsuperscript{120} This is yet another example of how illusionists continued the perform acts that showcased a white male superiority that their audiences would identify with.

Harry Kellar, the most famous of the American born magicians, traveled the world on tour and in the process began to incorporate the magic he had seen performed by indigenous peoples into his act. He learned to speak Dutch in Java and picked up a gimmick from a fazir. The fazir performed a trick that involved swallowing sugar and then, once the mouth was proven to be empty, producing multiple colored clouds of dust from his mouth.\textsuperscript{121} Though primarily he used magic that was presented in a mystic fashion, he could also change the visual aspects of the performance to the exotic. At any rate, the exotic was now on stage in both Europe and America to be subjected to the approving judgment of audiences.

Perhaps one of the most interesting examples of incorporating the exotic into an act is the curious rivalry between Ching Lee Foo and Chung Ling Soo. At the intersection of the exotic, romantic, and show business sat this rivalry and incredible story of identity crisis. Previous Chinese entertainers had performed magic around the world, but their focus was more on the

\textsuperscript{120} Milbourne, \textit{The Illustrated History of Magic}, 241-244.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 205-211.
agility and dexterity. They would exhibit these abilities by performing knife throwing, juggling, and acrobatics. This can be seen in a nineteenth century advertisement from 1854 (Figure 17). The ad, solicited an audience that included sweethearts and wives. The inclusion of women in the Chinese act was also deemed appropriate as one is prominently featured as the target of knife thrower and another, Madame Whanghoo, is to demonstrate an act dexterity with the revolving oil jar. The Chinese magicians were reported to be from the royal court of the emperor or “celestial majesty” and had gained imperial approval from an overseas monarch. The use of the term magicians is rather loose in the advertisements because most of the acts are more acrobatic or displays of skill.

Ching Lee Foo was no different in that he still had these elements in his act, but he included many more gimmicks that featured appearances and disappearances. The exotic flavor of a mysterious Chinese magician from a land whites had only recently made inroads into was too much to pass up for audiences. In 1898, Ching Lee Foo appeared at the Trans-Mississippi exhibition in Omaha, Nebraska. He was the first Chinese illusionist to gain notoriety in the United States and was so successful he spawned a number of imitators that included rivalry with Chung Ling Soo. In this particular case it might be a good idea to keep the ideas of Eric Lott in mind when approaching this rivalry. A photograph of Ching Lee Foo clearly shows him as Chinese (Figure 18). His rival, Chung Ling Soo, was actually a white man named William Robinson who was posing as a Chinese illusionist as seen in this photograph (Figure 19). The

123 “Photograph of Ching Lee Foo” [early 1900’s] in Randi, Conjuring, 83.
124 “Photograph of Chung Ling Soo” [early 1900’s] in Randi, Conjuring, 79.
fact that Ching Lee Foo was Chinese and claimed a more authentic Chinese show did not stop Robinson from becoming his biggest rival. Robinson saw the exotic appeal of a Chinese magician and he quickly capitalized on it. He began to take on the persona of Chung Ling Soo and his elaborate stage set was adorned with imagery of the Far East as seen in this photograph (Figure 20).\textsuperscript{125} So intent on pulling off this portrayal, Robinson went so far as to recruit his family into the act as seen in this photograph (Figure 21).\textsuperscript{126} They never broke character in public and traveled around the world pretending to be Chinese. The two began a fierce competition that was essentially based upon who was the better and more authentic Chinese magician. Chung Ling Soo, Robinson, Interestingly enough had apparently came out ahead after a series of aborted challenges.\textsuperscript{127}

Why would audiences suddenly embrace this Chinese phenomena and how did Robinson managed to capitalize on it? At the time the Chinese were not held in high regard by Americans who blatantly discriminated against them to the degree that they were sometimes treated even worse than African Americans. The Chinese Exclusion Act had been passed and even the illusionist with the biggest box office draw in the country had a bit that mocked them. Alexander Herrmann would present an illusion in which he would make lines of actors, dressed

\textsuperscript{125} “Photograph of Chung Ling Soo set” [early 1900’s] in Milbourne, \textit{Panorama of Magic}, 172.

\textsuperscript{126} “Photograph of the Robinson family” [late 1890’s] in Milbourne, \textit{The Illustrated History of Magic}, 248.

\textsuperscript{127} Milbourne, \textit{Panorama of Magic}, 241-258.
in Chinese garments, disappear and joked that he was solving the immigration problem.\textsuperscript{128}

Taking a cue from Eric Lott, the truth may be in the acts themselves.\textsuperscript{129} While both used the romantic mystery of the exotic Far East as their setting, their acts were in fact different. Ching Lee Foo still had elements of athletic prowess and heightened mental capacity within his act. He also used a more traditional Chinese approach towards his magic that was similar and less grandiose. Robinson, Chung Ling Soo, on the other hand, had presented a theatrical spectacular with illusions that highlight the mysterious as opposed to the skillful. In the end, white audiences choose the act that best fit their image of what a Chinese magician would be rather than what he would authentically be. Whites would not fully appreciate the sparse sets and physical ability of Foo. When Soo offered an alternative that fit their image of Asia, audiences gladly gravitated towards him. Thus Soo’s “white” interpretation of Chinese magic was deemed acceptable by and for “white” audiences.

In light of what appears to be a mostly white male dominated profession that continued as a business that maintained the status quo in regards to race and sex, there were some exceptions. One of the most noted absences was that of any famous or popular magician of African descent. Searching for any trace of a representative of that segment of the population is almost futile except for one example. Howard Thurston was one of the biggest box office draws of his time. His notoriety was such that he could use it to force changes to his advantage. While Thurston was white, he travelled with an African American assistant named George White as

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 193.

\textsuperscript{129} Lott, \textit{Love and Theft}. 
seen in this photograph (Figure 22). White not only helped on stage, but he designed and operated many of the devices used in Thurston’s act. Knowing the attitudes of American audiences of the time, there is no way an African American illusionist as talented as George White would ever find fame on the stage as a magician. White remained Thurston’s loyal assistant throughout his career and in return Thurston was known to use his fame to receive special treatment for White. It was not uncommon for Thurston to insist that White be allowed to stay in the same hotel room and eat in the same establishments as him. Thurston will be known as one of the greatest magicians of all time, but he may never be remembered as helping George White become the first African American Illusionist on stage.

In conclusion it becomes quite clear that magicians and their acts were influenced by the events and themes of the time period in which they performed. They reflected the audiences’ perceptions and ideas about the world around them. Imperialism and the accompanied ideas about race and the exotic could be seen on the stage. The role of the white civilized men was reinforced by multiple acts. The blurred lines between secular science and the mystical romantic world played out on the stage as well. Magicians and their performances easily show what attitudes and social prejudices were popular among American and European audiences of the later nineteenth century.

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CONCLUSION

The development of mass entertainment was clearly a nineteenth century phenomena that had profound significance for the Western world. The birth of the modern magic show or illusionists coincided with this development as a popular culture that crossed class lines was created. Magic in some form was practiced both in the United States and Europe, but the illusion show, as a performance type and business model, had its origins in Europe and crossed the Atlantic to the United States. This performance type capitalized on its own versatility and folk culture roots in order to create mass appeal and become a popular form of entertainment. Magic entered a “Golden Age” as it also entered popular culture. In the process of this incorporation into mass entertainment and popular culture it was required to present a product that would be acceptable to consumers. Consumers would reject anything that did not reflect popular tastes and attitudes. This allows the use of performance magic as a window into society’s attitudes and world view. Using advertisement and performance descriptions as evidence we can look for commonalities in magicians who became wildly popular and see a dual embrace of the romantic and mystical with the technological and secular. We can also see the reinforcement of white males as dominant within the profession, as well as the use of the exotic to once again display white male superiority over those in nations that were now under imperial control of the West.

Authors, such as Levine, point out attempts at creating cultural tastes based upon class differences. A defined high brow culture and low brow culture was used as a way of identifying class archetypes. While these attempts did occur they were not entirely successful. As mass entertainment was in its infancy during the 1800s, it would require increasingly large numbers
of participants in its audiences. It could not simply segregate entire portions of the population if it planned on functioning as a business model. Promoters would have to find an entertainment product that would cross lines and society would have to be willing to cross those lines in order to be entertained. Modern magic shows were born in Europe, but their roots in folk culture and their adaptability made them a perfect candidate for mass entertainment on both sides of the Atlantic.

Magic’s origins are in the folk traditions of every civilization. In an anthropological study one could see its attachment to the mystical and religious as something that can cross the social strata. It had a tendency to be looked upon as low brow. It changed and evolved over hundreds of years and proves its ability to adapt. Its recognition and appeal across class lines is in contrast to labeling it strictly low brow entertainment. To declare magic low brow would be much like declaring opera low brow, simply because there was singing involved. This appeal and versatility led it to become a viable option for mass entertainment. As magic shows became increasingly part of popular culture, magicians would find themselves constructing performances that crossed class lines. Robert Houdin clearly adopted elements of street magic, enlightened salon parlor contraptions, and middle class dress to appeal to people of all classes and tastes. The Maskelyne family of magicians created a dynasty by using this performance type. They created a mass entertainment business model to forge a successful empire of entertainment. This approach is easily validated by the fact that magic shows had entered a “Golden Age” and magical entertainers became famous worldwide.

As magicians became ingrained into the popular culture of the nineteenth century their shows began to reflect popular attitudes of the masses. Entertainers must take into account the
tastes of their audience and present them with a show that would in validate their preferences as well as amuse. To do work contrary to this would be tantamount to trying to drive audiences away. There is past work by authors such as Lott, Bederman, and Kasson who have used performances as evidence of popular taste and attitudes. Magicians are yet another example of how this approach is successful. By analyzing the advertisements and performances of magicians we can see common themes that arise. Taking these themes and comparing them to studies of the time period by other historians, validates many of their findings. Magicians used the folk roots of the art as way to adopt the mystical and romantic themes that were sweeping through the Western world during the industrial revolution. Historical tragedies such as the U.S. Civil War brought forth a renewed interest in spiritualism. This same trend could be seen in Europe as well. Traditional dark arts that were associated with women became incorporated into male-dominated magic acts. While the mystical portion was emphasized as a theme, it was rejected as legitimate magic. Traditional male association with education, science, technology, and cleverness would be at the heart of these performances while they were colored by romantic ideas. The magic show would remain male dominated and reinforce that dominance in society as well. In the wake of the imperialist movement the dominate role of the white male was further emphasized over other races and cultures. White male performers would adopt the exotic personas and dress of the peoples of far off lands to once again display the mysterious, but it was still the white male with his superior intellect and technology at the heart of these shows.

This was by no means a comprehensive work on the entire subject, but just a small sample of what could be a much large discussion about popular culture, mass entertainment,
and how performance magic can be an indicator of trends in society. Perhaps in the future more studies could be focused on the significance of Illusions shows in the nineteenth century and what they could tell us about the popular culture of the time. In fact, just recently, a historical quarterly has just been announced to start publishing on that subject. As for now, the real use of such a work can be to describe the nature of popular culture and mass entertainment not only in the past but in the present. As technology and business models change, it seems that mass entertainment is more democratic than ever and popular culture is more inclusive than ever.

But is it? Globalization also has tendency to homogenize as well as incorporate multiple diverse elements. Could the failed attempt at creating distinctly segregated “high” and “low” cultures in the late nineteenth century, only to be doomed to a homogenized popular culture, be a similarity to our own world today? With mass entertainment’s technological reach today there are a number of entertainment types to choose from at our fingertips. Can they remain distinct or will one of them become ingrained as part of a new popular culture that crosses global classes and cultural lines? This perhaps may remain a mystery much like the origins of the white rabbit within popular magic performance.
APPENDIX: VISUAL REFERENCES
Figure 2 - The Clockwork Turk

Figure 3- Philippe in a Wizard’s Robe

Figure 4- Houdin in a Tux

Figure 5- Robin in a Tux

Figure 6- Jacobs in a Tux

Figure 7- Anderson in a Tux

Figure 9 - Exterior of the Egyptian Hall

Figure 10-Egyptian Hall Set at St. George’s Hall

Figure 11- Maskelyne at Court

Figure 12- Fox Sisters

Figure 13- Davenport Brothers

Figure 14- Adelaide Hermann

Figure 15- Herrmann Advertisement


Figure 17- Chinese Magic Show Advertisement

Figure 18- Ching Lee Foo

Figure 19- Chung Ling Soo (Robinson)

“Photograph of Chung Ling Soo” [early 1900’s] in James Randi, Conjuring (New York: St. Martin’s Press. 1993), 79.
Figure 20- Chung Ling Soo Set

Figure 21- Robinson Family

Figure 22- Thurston and George White

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