Many of the spectators that lined the streets of Times Square to celebrate the crowning of the new millennium eight years ago met the final feet of the ball drop with skepticism and intrigue for what the New Year would bring. Had there been such an event at the turn of the last century, there is no doubt that many people felt the same way: Not because they expected a meltdown of their computers, back then they did not have the luxury of computers, or their problems, but because they too were in the midst of an accelerated period of change. Beginning in the middle of the 19th Century, America started its lengthy transformation into the economic power house that it would grow to be by the mid 20th Century. Out of the Industrial Revolution came new forms of transportation, production, and distribution, as well as numerous new industries with their own sets of jobs, innovations, and subsequent problems. Along with the physical infrastructure of the country, the ideas, customs, and practices of its citizens began to alter as well. The rise of two distinctly different theatre companies, The Theatre Syndicate and the Theatre Guild, would illustrate how the country’s perceptions of industry and people were changing.

The spectrum of entertainment that exists in the United States today is quite expansive and vastly different from the one that greeted “John Doe” and “Susie Q” at the turn of the 20th Century. In today’s society, citizens seeking entertainment get to choose from an array of different mediums, including the Internet, television, film, radio, books and other publications, and live events such as theatre, concerts, and sports. Over the course of the 20th century, each new medium that was developed sought to bring entertainment closer to the individuals. With the advent and mass adoption of the radio, the television, and finally the Internet, people had all the entertainment they wanted
within the comfort of their own homes. With each medium reaching more and more people, it is easy to see where the notion of a “mass audience” influences these types of media. What is a “mass audience?” Paul F. Lazarsfeld, a notable sociologist, defines “mass audience” as a large body, made up of mostly strangers, who act in a singular fashion due to the exposure they all receive (Webster, 8). By bringing entertainment into everyone’s living rooms it becomes more individualized, yet it also increases the extent to which a single type of exposure, whether it be a song, television show, or commercial can affect an audience. Although most typically associated with areas of mass communication, the theory of “mass audience” must not be limited to simply those fields. When Lazarsfeld and his sociologist contemporaries were formulating the theory of “mass audience” during the beginning of the 20th century, the forms of entertainment were limited to the live events. The entertainment forms of the day soon took hold of the idea of “mass audience,” especially the theatre. Despite being thought of as a massive singular unit, the “mass audience” is made up of market sections and can be approached in a number of ways. Two theatre groups that could not have been more different from each other, the Theatre Syndicate and the Theatre Guild, both were successful in appropriating the “mass audience” for their own use.

Before we discuss how each theatre company chose to deal with the “mass audience,” let us explore the theory in and of itself. Why did the theory only come about in the early 20th century and at no other time, and why must the theatre companies and all the others in the entertainment industry use the theory? To begin, a number of things changed during the latter part of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century that would lead to the adoption of “mass audience” thinking. First, like many other countries of power the United States entered into the Industrial Revolution. According to James G. Webster, “urbanization, mass production, the spread of public education, and the rise of the middle class all played a role in bringing the mass audience into being” (Webster, 2). Simply put, the many outcomes of the Industrial Revolution directly caused the formation of the “mass audience”
The giant influx of people from both the country and from overseas provided the urban manufacturers with their much needed workforce as well as the growing middle class which became their consumer base. However, mass production techniques worked so well that manufacturers overloaded the markets with their products to the point of market saturation. No longer were manufacturers worried about how to supply the growing demand, they were worried about how to get rid of their massive surpluses. In order to get rid of their surplus, manufacturers needed to inform the public that they were selling a quality product that was better than all the other competition. This necessity gave rise to both the advertising and marketing industries. Thanks to innovations in paper printing technology, manufacturers were able to utilize cheap massive paper circulars and later they explored the blossoming radio medium (Webster, 3). Now more than ever stores were competing with each other to sell their goods, and they needed to reach a larger audience. This idea would hold true for theatres as well.

The second major change to happen during this time was the expansion of sociology as a field of science and the use of statistical thinking (Webster, 4). Sociology is the science of studying an individual’s behavior within society. In order to study the individual, sociologist had to study him in comparison with society, and throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, they tried to track and monitor people in every way possible (Webster, 4). This line of thinking and measuring social phenomena, “statistical thinking” made its way into the rapidly increasing marketing field, as manufacturers were interesting in learning about their potential markets. Ideally, any information gathered from interviews, and tracking radio would provide some insight into the company’s customers and perhaps lend some predictability to their purchase decisions (Webster, 5). Logically the next step was to assume that a collection of people that are exposed to the same stimuli will inherently respond in the same way despite not knowing each other or being similar to each other, a “mass audience.” As with any theory, the “mass audience” theory is not without its criticisms. Perhaps the biggest criticism against using the
“mass audience” theory is that it takes away people’s individuality and makes them insignificant (Webster, 10). Also, there are arguments that the “mass audience” is a dumb collection of people that is easily manipulated by the media (Webster, 116). Brooks Atkinson once wrote, “Audiences are composed largely of brainwashed egotists who cannot be bothered with anything that is not fashionable” (Lynes, 128). Proponents of the system disregard that notion and point to the fact that by being a member of the “mass audience” any one person’s voice is not hampered or squandered but magnified, by being in contact with the others. Despite criticisms, since its conception, it is the tool by which the majority of today’s business in and outside the United States (Webster, 115). There is no other model that allows industry heads to forecast and predict the responses to their business decisions. What other model of measuring a potential audience could be used? Or should the real question be whether or not you should measure the audience?

Whether or not they were forced or climbed aboard willing, many theatres of the day followed suit and adopted the “mass audience” approach. Now Aristotle may disagree, but the most important part of a play is the audience. As the story goes, ever since the freethinking Thespis broke away from the rest of the chorus and spoke directly towards the audience, theatre and its audience have been intertwined. Theatre cannot exist without the presence of an audience for a couple of reasons. First of all, ever since the early days of theatre patrons were required to pay an admission in order to view the plays. The money that changed hands was used to cover the expenses required to produce the plays. As time went on and the number of plays increased, and technical elements such as lighting, costumes, and sound effects became more integral to the shows, theatre houses relied more and more on the revenue that they took in at the box office. Not only was the money used to produce plays, but entertainment was a business and therefore theatre owners sought a profit. Throughout the 1700s, 1800s, and 1900s, measures were taken to increase the size of the audience. The number of performances per week was increased from three to five (Brockett, 236). The average length of the
playbills was extremely shortened. At one time with all the parts of a show, and evening of theatre might last upwards of five hours. The number of theatres increased, as well as the number of seats available in those theatres. Many theatres were redone in order to add additional seating. With all these efforts to increase audience attendance and cash flow, it is a wonder that the idea and adoption of “mass audience” thinking did not occur until the early 20th century. At the turn of the 20th century in America, I suppose the conditions were just right. It was during this time that two practices of growing a plays audience were adopted. First, producers increased the run or length of time a particular play occupied at the theatre, adding additional performances which allowed people more time to attend the show. Although this decreased the number of plays in a theatre’s repertoire, it made sure that a seller would sell. Second, once that show’s attendance was beginning to wane the show would be placed on a touring circuit. These two practices helped ensure that the maximum number of people witnessed the play and experienced its message, as well as emptied their wallets.

At the beginning of the 20th century America was still implementing and getting used to the relatively new form of transportation; the railroad system. Beginning in the mid 1830s, the steady increase of railroad lines allowed for quicker travel across the country and with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 expansion further out west continued. Along with the transportation of passengers, businesses also slowly adopted the railroad as the dominant way to ship their product throughout the country. If the people went west, so did the need for products of all kinds. This idea did not escape the thoughts of the theatre owners of New York. Though New York was, and continues to be, the epicenter of theatre in the United States, small professional and community theatres had popped up all over the country. In New York, the practice of transferring a show from one theatre to another larger theatre had become common place. In those days, the majority of theatres ran as repertory theatres with multiple plays. If a theatre owner felt that the current show had made enough money with the seating at the original location, or the next show was due to begin they would rent the
show out to another space, usually with a larger seating area. Therefore, it should be no surprise for theatre owners to extrapolate the idea to encompass the railroad system. With the aid of the railroad system, Broadway shows began making their way out across the country.

Although they did not invent the concept of the traveling show, the Theatre Syndicate, through flawless execution, made it their own. Prior to the creation of the Theatre Syndicate, touring plays around the country involved dealing with a tangled string of managers, booking agents, local theatres, and everything in between. Many times there would be multiple shows booked for the same town causing no one to make a profit. Also, the booking of shows with different managers and agents made for gaps and illogical road stops (Manzella, 2). Seeking to capitalize on the disorganization of “on the road theatre” and with the viable “mass audience” in mind, the Theatre Syndicate began. In 1896, a group of theatre owners met one day at the Holland House in New York and hatched out a plan to combine their individual assets into a collective company (Travis, 35). This effectively meant that the majority of theatres along the most popular circuit routes was controlled by six men, two from the Philadelphia area; Sam Nixon and Fred Zimmerman, and four from the New York area; Charles Frohman, AL Hayman, Marc Klaw, and Abraham Erlanger.

Once, they had consolidated all their theatres and made contracts with some additional theatres, the Theatre Syndicate began enacting their plan. Frohman and the others’ plan was simple, “because of the operational methods of touring companies, [they] needed direct and absolute control of only a relatively small number of theatres in order to control the entire theatrical situation” (Travis, 36). Theatre companies had to pay in order to ship a set, all the actors, and all the technicians from New York to Chicago, Philadelphia, or any other major city, so ideally they would stop at towns along the way and perform to pay for their expensive “shipping and handling.” Because they owned a good majority of theatres along the theatre circuits, they could send their productions to their theatres without having to deal with independent managers or booking agents. They therefore had vertical control of their
production, distribution, and exhibition. The Theatre Syndicate was efficient and effective, and by 1900 was in control of all the major entries to the major cities (Travis, 36). By simplifying the process what was once a very complicated process proved easier for everyone. Not only did the Theatre Syndicate cut down on cost, they provided their contractual local theatre managers with an entire season worth of productions by acting as the singular agent, which greatly improved the old way of changing shows and agents after every show (Brockett, 403). The syndicate proclaimed to eliminate multiple bookings, increase efficiency, and offer quality shows, but it soon became evident that they only meant to do so for themselves. If theatres opted to go with another show, the Syndicate would cancel the tour for that theatre and any actors that were involved with a syndicate show were not allowed to do future shows at that particular theatre. Since the Syndicate controlled the pathways in and out of the major cities, they could prevent competing shows from traveling.

There were however, independent theatres that did try to compete with the conglomerate. To combat these determined adversaries, the syndicate used some techniques to their advantage. First of all, for the most part because they had all the major theatres, the Theatre Syndicate was entitled to the majority of the stars. Therefore, the Theatre Syndicate had the appeal of the masses, for like today’s film industry (and sometimes today’s Broadway as well), many productions were advertised by the stars that they contained (Manzella, 4). Star power was very valuable; however, there were a few stars that refused to join the likes of the Theatre Syndicate. The most notable would have likely been Mr. and Mrs. Fiske and Sarah Bernhardt(Travis, 38). A rival production house named the Shubert Brothers advertised a major tour with Sarah Bernhardt against the monopoly, where she performed in second-hand venues and at times even in tents (Lynes, 175). Second, the Theatre Syndicate began to focus on the “mass audience” in general and started eliminating plays that would not appeal to a mass audience (Brockett, 403). Such crowd pleasing productions included many farces, melodramas, and musical comedies like 1896’s The Girl from Paris, 1897’s The Little Minister, and 1910’s A Trip to Japan (Manzella,
4). These shows were the longest running shows of their respective series. In her own paper, Abby Manzella offers the theatre historian Mary C. Henderson’s words as perfect definition for the selection of plays at the time. Henderson writes “Light romantic comedies and frothy musical comedies, overproduced spectacles and modern melodramas, chic revues and star vehicles, all considered safe fare, overwhelmed the small number of classical revivals and serious message plays” (Manzella, 4). Third, the Theatre Syndicate used the power of price to boost revenues and crush their competition. Despite proclaiming to end double bookings, the syndicate felt it absolutely fine to book similar, yet cheaper and star-studded versions of shows in order to detract from independent originals. Not unlike the giant conglomerate of Wal-Mart, which forces its producers to maintain low prices in order to undersell its competition, the syndicate would cut wages and then cut prices until the other show was forced to close. According to Russell Lynes, the syndicate further attempted to regulate their mass audience, by flooding papers with advertisements and purchased reviews, and keeping failing shows afloat in New York, so that they could account for a longer initial run as a selling point on tour (Lynes, 174). The Theatre Syndicate tried everything they could in order to fill seats, and collect on tickets. They fully embraced the business mind of the 20th Century and went after the mass audience.

However, with this overbearing monopolistic approach, the Theatre Syndicate was bound to receive some backlash. Despite being an efficient and economic answer to the problem of the theatre circuit, the Theatre Syndicate accumulated bad press for its less than chivalrous ways of ousting their competition (Lynes, 174). Over time, the Shubert Brothers rose to challenge the Theatre Syndicate. Although they would go on to replace the syndicate as the next monopoly, they were not as cutthroat at least in the beginning, and allowed for freedom of booking for a while. Travis suggests that:

“there were five major factors involved in [the] demise: the birth of the legitimate theatre’s ‘bastard child,’ the movies; the rise of such spectator sports as baseball, football, and horse racing as a major form of entertainment; a substantial increase in railroad rates just after the turn of the century; the advent of unionism in the theatre; and finally the Syndicate War” (Travis, 40).
By 1910 the Syndicate War was leaning toward the Shubert’s as more and more theatres were aligning with them. Those factors coupled with the death of key syndicate member Charles Frohman, lead to the eventual decline of the Theatre Syndicate (Brockett, 404).

On December 19, 1918, nearly a decade after the demise of the Theatre Syndicate, another group of six individuals met to discuss the formation of a theatre company which they dubbed the “Theatre Guild.” As opposed to the Theatre Syndicate before them, this new group consisted of both men and women, and business and theatre-oriented people. Most of the founding members were just fresh out of college and had joined together before World War I as the Washington Square Players. Their goals as an organization were markedly different than their predecessor. Helburn writes:

“theatrical managers in New York had assumed, as so many advertisers were to do later, that the American public had a low common denominator and that its idea of entertainment could be summed up in the apparent needs for amusement of the Tired Businessman, though he has never really been as tired as all that” (Helburn, 66).

As a response to the Theatre Syndicate and Shubert conglomerates of the decade before, and the Broadway theatres pandering to the base crowd, the Theatre Guild set out to produce only those plays that they deemed artistically valuable. Those present at the initial meetings Josephine Meyer, Helen Westley, Edna Kenton, Philip Moeller, Rollo Peters, Lawrence Langner, Helen Freeman, Lee Simonson, and Justus Sheffield discussed and decided that the Theatre Guild would be a professional, self-sustaining, art theatre (Eaton, 30-31). They all felt that theatre was about more than the individual, and that one should do their absolute best to make art that will further theater as a whole (Eaton 4). Following that line of thinking, the Guild operated as a democracy with a Board of Members. The Board discussed and decided on play selections as well as job assignments on a play-per-play basis, and operated on unanimous decisions alone. To add to that, guild member Lawrence Langner also believed, “that there was an audience, a large untapped audience, for plays of real value, plays with something to say, plays that were literate and assumed literacy in the audience” (Helburn, 67). They also strove to produce American written plays, but not at the expense of “true art.” Whereas the Theatre Syndicate
had pursued their ambition for money, the Theatre Guild avidly pursued their dreams of aesthetic ambition.

Because the Theatre Guild was going against the grain to the end, they did not target mainstream Broadway. The Theatre Guild was also of the mind that the star of the production was the play itself and not any one actor. Therefore, they seldom had what the public would refer to as stars. Instead they started off slow, by attracting some subscribers. Picking the first production was difficult for many reasons, among them the fact that all six board members must agree; as of yet there were no guidelines; the choice will be the first representation of the new theatre; it must be a valuable to the theatre world as a whole. After some deliberation the group came to the consensus that they should perform, Jacinto Benavente’s *Bonds of Interest* (Helburn, 73). Despite a calculated pick and a grand effort of obtaining a $1000 worth of subscriptions which became their shoe-string budget, the play was not a hit. They would have to wait for the second play of the season, St. John Ervine’s *John Ferguson* to garner any success. According to the International Broadway Database (IBDB), the run of *John Ferguson* lasted 354 performances before it closed (John Ferguson). It just so happened that that summer, the actors went on strike and closed every other theatre besides the Garrick, so if you wanted to see a play, *John Ferguson* was the only option (Helburn, 77).

As luck would have it, the Theatre Guild began at the dawn of one of the United States’ most prolific times. By coinciding with the upstart of the “Roaring Twenties” the theatre would do quite well. Despite meek beginnings, the guild eventually started to pick up speed. Upon arriving at the Garrick Theatre, Otto H. Kahn gave the Theatre Guild his current subscription list, which turned out to be a box with a couple hundred names in it, and from then on it was up to the group to build their own subscription base (Helburn, 116). Through a combination of heavy pre-show speeches, handing out pamphlets, and continuing to provide their audience with plays that they were eager to see (Helburn, 116). Many other art house theatres would later ask how the Theatre Guild managed to do it, and the
simple answer was that “you can’t reasonably ask for support until you have earned it” (Helburn, 116). Despite their best efforts, much of what sold the Theatre Guild’s plays was not their meek advertising campaigns, but the word-of-mouth that spread through New York as a result of the fine works that they presented to their audiences.

In order to maintain their audience, the Theatre Guild had to continually produce top quality shows that they wanted to see. That is not to say that the Guild pandered to their audience. The Board Members deliberated at length on what shows they felt would positively affect the theatre as a whole, and then let word-of-mouth and subscriber loyalty work its magic. Each and every time they selected a play, the Board made sure that the play would be beneficial to the art of theatre. The time and care with which they choose plays are evident when compared to the fanfare that was commonplace of the day. Although the Guild exercised the utmost care in their play selection, they could not help missing the mark at times. One such incident was when The Theatre Guild mounted a production of The Rise of Silas Lapham, in their second season. Not only was it one of their first American plays, but it was the first and only time they attempted to hire a star, James K. Hackett, to play the lead (Eaton, 46). Unfortunately, the run of The Rise of Silas Lapham only lasted for 48 performances. From then on, the Guild would try to maintain a core group of actors and directors.

They would also develop long-lasting relationships with two playwrights; one being George Bernard Shaw, and the other was Eugene O’Neill. Introduced through St. John Ervine, the Theatre Guild and George Bernard Shaw had the closer of the two relationships. Throughout the years the Guild produced a number of Shaw’s works. Shaw’s work could be overtly lengthy even for his own time period as can be expressed by his Back to Methuselah. The play consists of three parts, which could be considered plays themselves. With this in mind, the Guild allowed each part an entire week of performance before moving onto the next part. This in turn meant that any theatergoer who wanted to see the entire play to come out to the theatre for one night a week for three weeks (Eaton, 248). Yet
the Guild continued to choose his works out of their intrinsically artistic value. O’Neill’s contribution seems to have become more evident once the Theatre Guild moved into the Guild Theatre (the Virginia Theatre) in 1925. Having increased their subscriptions from a few hundred to near 15,000, a bigger theatre was required to accommodate the ever growing audiences (Botto, 195). January 9th, 1928 marked the first performance of a Eugene O’Neill play in conjunction with the Theatre Guild. *Marco Millions* was the play, but much like the Guild’s first season, it was to be the second play that struck gold with the audience. Later on in that month, *Strange Interlude*, was unveiled at the John Golden Theatre and took O’Neill and the Theatre Guild on a 432 consecutive performance ride (Eaton, 291).

Coming to power during the “Roaring Twenties” was both a blessing and a curse. It only took ten years for the Theatre Guild to go from the brainchild of Lawrence Langner and other former Washington Square Players, to the “foremost producing organizations of the world, if we take into consideration its standard of plays, its skill in presentation, and the extent of territory and population which it serves” (Eaton, 3). However, the Great Depression took a toll on every industry, and the 1930s proved rough for the Theatre Guild. Stressed finances, short-lived shows, and increasing pressure from the growing film industry caused the guild to start renting the Guild theatre out by 1938, and by 1944 they had relocated across town (Botto, 198-99). In the end, the Theatre Guild was successful in spreading their art to a very receptive and eager audience.

Now that we have explored both the Theatre Syndicate’s and the Theater Guild’s approaches towards the early 20th century’s “mass audience,” it is quite evident that both approaches were successful in their own right for a period of time. Making almost polar opposites in terms of decisions, the Theatre Syndicate fully embraced their audience and attempted to give them whatever they wanted. They saw their audience as the mass audience and as a collective whole, whereas the Theatre Guild felt inclined to offer what they felt they should, and that an audience would arise to consume their message. Although it may be beneficial to measure, quantify, and predict social behaviors by using the
“mass audience” theory, there is no denying that within the “mass audience” there are varying segmentations. Both of these theatre companies successfully pinpointed their respective audiences and tailored their efforts to their segments.

Lazarsfeld defined a “mass audience” by stating that it consisted of a large group of people that respond to the same exposure in a similar fashion. Each niche is its own “mass audience,” in terms of definition. Therefore the audiences that were attracted to the respective theatres were in and of themselves “mass audiences.” In order to avoid further confusion, the larger group of people that qualifies as “theatergoers” will hereafter be referred to as the “maximum potential audience.”

Regardless of what approach is used, or what definition is used, there is no denying the effects that “mass audience” thinking has had on the theatre community and the country as a whole. It is not clear nor is it possible to discern if the United States would be different today, had the sociological and economical conditions of the early 20th Century not lead to the widespread adoption of “mass audience” thinking. But one can hypothesize that not only would the theatre industry be affected, but advertising campaigns on radio and television would be operate differently as well. And while it is obvious that history is written in an evolutionary style, the influences of both the Theatre Syndicate and the Theatre Guild can still be felt today.

To this day, there is still division amongst the theatres that occupy the 22.96 square mile island that we call Manhattan. Theatres are broken into groups by geographic location, which over the years has also become synonymous with subject matter and style. The three categories are Broadway, Off-Broadway, and Off-off-Broadway. Much like the Broadway during the early 1900s, today’s Broadway seems to be overrun by big-budget, spectacle-filled musical comedies, that are designed to bring in a large audience. An example of a typical show that runs on Broadway is the critically acclaimed Wicked. The show comes complete with an incredible set, costumes, sound and lighting effects, as well as a large ensemble cast capable of performing complicated song and dance routines. With the amount of
spectacle that these shows pack in, it is no wonder that they are booked in the largest theatres and are set-up for long runs. Generally these shows, like Disney’s *the Little Mermaid* will be packed up and hit the road across the country once they are no longer viable in their New York theatres. Beginning about the time right after World War II, Off-Broadway began to come into its own. Centered near the Greenwich Village area, they would be the modern day version of the Theatre Guild, producing the classics, avant-garde or both (McNamara, 125). Finally, Off-off-Broadway consists of those plays that are not as well funded, and can range from classics, to one act plays, to newly written works. But sometimes these distinctions are not always clear. Take for instance the relatively new musical hit that was released in 2006, *Spring Awakening*. Essentially a remake of Frank Wedekind’s play of the same name, which remained open for one night in 1917, the new Broadway version adds rock and roll musical numbers that serve as the character’s inner monologue. A mix between the typical, flashy musical, and a melodramatic social piece, it blurs the lines between Broadway and Off-Broadway. It started out after multiple workshops as a small venture in a small venue Off-Broadway at the Atlantic Theatre Company, and then because the numbers were good, the producers moved it to Broadway.

“Mass audience” thinking continues to shape and form many industries, including the theatre field, regardless the time period. Its goal of quantifying our society as a singular consumer fits succinctly within the capitalist idealism that our country fosters. Companies and organizations can choose to recognize the phenomena and actively embrace it, or they can choose to ignore it and go about their own business. Either way, they are still in need of an audience, and whether they call out or wait patiently they will all find their own mass audience.
Works Cited


