**Ziegfeld Follies (1907-1931)**

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## Summary

Named after its founder, Broadway impresario Florenz Ziegfeld (1867-1932), and inspired by the *Folies Bergères* in Paris, the *Ziegfeld Follies* (1907-1931) remains one of the most celebrated American revues of the twentieth century. Its brisk pace, ripped-from-the-headlines content, popular songs, and innovative designs, combined with its regimented display of beautiful, young, white female bodies made it a distinctly modern entertainment form. Each installment of the *Follies* offered a series of acts, ranging from solos and comedy routines to full-company dance numbers and fashion spectacles. In keeping with the revue format, the theme and narrative varied from year to year, but the show consistently offered a rapid-fire ‘revue’ or review of current events, hit Broadway plays, technological innovations, and other modern developments.

The *Follies* attracted the biggest names in commercial entertainment, thanks to the charismatic energy and cutthroat tactics of its founder. But the real stars of the *Ziegfeld Follies* were the Ziegfeld Girls, an elite group of attractive, young women who appeared in lavishly costumed and choreographed production numbers. Dance directors, a type of choreographer, were largely responsible for training the chorus girls and ensuring that they lived up to the Ziegfeld brand. Costume and set designers likewise contributed to the Ziegfeld brand by giving the *Follies* a modern yet lush aesthetic that further distinguished it from vaudeville or musical comedy.

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1n-jVdaISZ4>

Figure Ziegfeld star Eddie Cantor performs a version of his nightclub act in blackface, preceded by a chorus line of women who may have been Ziegfeld Girls (copyright, Paramount Pictures).

## Origins

Stage legend holds that it was Ziegfeld’s common-law wife, the French singer and Broadway headliner Anna Held, who came up with the idea of staging the *Follies* as a refined and lavish alternative to vaudeville entertainment. Although by 1907 Ziegfeld had worked for over a decade as a promoter of stage acts and producer of musical comedies, his career had stalled after several box office failures. With the support of the powerful producing duo of Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger (known professionally as Klaw & Erlanger), he revitalized his career through the *Follies*.

File: held.jpeg

Figure Anna Held and Florenz Ziegfeld

Source: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1817692>

*The Follies of 1907* opened on July 7, 1907 at the Jardin de Paris, a roof garden theatre on top of the New York Theatre operated by Klaw & Erlanger. In 1913, after six successful years, Klaw & Erlanger moved the *Follies* into their flagship theatre, the New Amsterdam, on 42nd Street at Times Square, where the show remained until 1927. Although Ziegfeld’s name was closely associated with the *Follies* from the first production onwards, it wasn’t until 1911 that the official title for the revue included his name.

## Structure, Theme, and Content

In keeping with the revue’s episodic format and emphasis on topical content, each edition of the *Follies* featured a series of loosely connected songs, sketches, and dance numbers celebrating modern life and American innovation. For example, the 1909 edition of the *Follies* celebrated the round-the-world voyage of the US Navy’s ‘Great White Fleet’ with a number called ‘The Greatest Navy in the World,’ in which chorus girls wearing battleship headgear moved in formation about the stage. Unlike vaudeville, which similarly presented a diverse range of acts, the *Follies* had a more clearly developed narrative with all production elements held together by a thin plot or overarching theme, i.e. the time-traveling adventures of Captain John Smith and Pocahontas (*Follies of 1907*) or the history of civilization (*Follies of 1908*). The revue nevertheless shared vaudeville’s emphasis on speed, action, and excitement, as a reflection of the intensity and vitality of the modern American city.

## Audiences

Unlike vaudeville, which appealed to working- and middle-class audiences, the *Ziegfeld Follies* catered to a predominantly upper-middle-class audience eager to participate in Manhattan’s flowering nightlife. In addition to attracting politicians and other public figures, Ziegfeld aimed to please the ‘TBM’ or Tired Business Man, a much-discussed media type who represented affluent yet exhausted white-collar workers in search of escapist entertainment.

## Performers

The *Follies* distinguished itself from other popular revues, such as George White’s *Scandals* or Lee and J.J. Shubert’s *The Passing Show*, by offering audiences access to the biggest names in commercial entertainment. Ziegfeld had a reputation for stealing acts and performers away from his rivals with offers of higher wages and more prominent billing. Some of the most popular *Follies* stars included comic singers Fanny Brice, Nora Bayes, and Sophie Tucker; dancers Marilyn Miller, Ann Pennington, and the Dolly Sisters; and comedians Will Rogers, W.C. Fields, and Bert Williams.

File: sheetmusic.jpeg

Figure Sheet music for Bert Williams song, ‘The Moon Shines on the Moonshine,’ from the Ziegfeld Follies of 1920

Source: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?g98c131_001>

Ziegfeld’s decision to star Williams, a black performer born in the West Indies who performed comic numbers in blackface, is especially noteworthy. Prior to joining the *Follies*, Williams and his performing partner, George Walker, had produced a series of popular musical comedies, most notably *In Dahomey*, which parodied modernist characterization of Africa as a dark land of magic and desire. Williams joined the *Follies* after Walker’s death and remained with the show for almost a decade (1910-1919), despite facing prejudicial treatment from fellow cast members and restrictions on where and when he could appear onstage with white female performers.

‘Leg shows’ had been a staple of American entertainment from the mid-nineteenth century but Ziegfeld revolutionised female spectacle by ‘glorifying’ his performers, showcasing them as representatives of an ideal American girlhood with a decidedly modern attitude. Chorus girls in the early *Follies* were known as ‘The Anna Held Girls’ but Ziegfeld later rechristened them with his own name, in keeping with the tradition established by British impresarios such as John Tiller, whose ‘Tiller Girls’ exemplified modern capitalist goals of producing rationalised, standardised bodies. Through the workings of his sophisticated publicity machine, Ziegfeld fashioned himself as the ‘Glorifier of the American Girl,’ publishing articles with such titles as ‘How I Pick Beauties,’ in which he described his casting process. To further his ‘glorification’ project, Ziegfeld turned to artists and photographers such as Alberto Vargas and Alfred Cheney Johnston, who produced tasteful yet suggestive images of the Ziegfeld Girls.

## Dance Directors

Dance directors trained the chorus girls and choreographed their movement. Julian Mitchell staged and choreographed the early *Follies* until 1914, when he fought with Ziegfeld and was replaced by Earl Carroll. In 1915, Ziegfeld hired Ned Wayburn to oversee the staging and choreography. Prior to joining the Follies, Wayburn had worked extensively as a dance director and developed a unique classification system, whereby he organised chorus girls into five groups (A,B,C,D,E) according to height, personality, and physical ability. Influenced by recent innovations in military training and the scientific management techniques of Frederick Winslow Taylor, Wayburn regulated and rationalised the bodies of dozens of chorus girls in precisely choreographed dance numbers. Like soldiers and factory laborers, the Ziegfeld Girls exemplified the efficient, modern body—a body capable of working collectively with machine-like accuracy. During and after the First World War, Ben Ali Haggin complemented Wayburn’s precision dance numbers with tableaux vivants (living pictures) that drew on the long-standing tradition of recreating classical art and statuary through the arrangement of nude (or nearly nude) female bodies.

File: wayburn.jpeg

Figure Ned Wayburn examining chorus girls

Source: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ggbain.08411/>

## Designers

Costume and set designers gave the *Follies* a modern yet luxurious aesthetic that further distinguished it from vaudeville or musical comedy. In 1915, Ziegfeld hired British couturier Lucile (Lady Duff Gordon), the self-proclaimed inventor of the modern fashion show, who shared Ziegfeld’s interest in the training and regulation of attractive young female bodies. At her Hanover Square (London) showroom, she transformed working class women into sophisticated mannequins who walked down her salon runway with coolness and hauteur. Reworking the logic of the assembly line, she paradoxically emphasised the standardization of the female body, while simultaneously promoting individuality in dress. After viewing a “mannequin parade” (fashion show) at Lucile’s New York salon with his new wife, the actress Billie Burke, Ziegfeld decided to hire both the designer and her elegant, aloof mannequins for the *Follies*.

Austrian designer Joseph Urban, best known for his rich use of colour, exotic backdrops and art deco style, also joined the *Follies* in 1915, introducing elements of the European avant garde to the commercial stage. Trained as an architect, he promoted the Wagnerian ideal of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, whereby all elements within a production support a singular artistic vision. Other influential *Follies* designers include Cora McGeachy, Erté, John Harkrider, and Charles LeMaire.

## Influence

The *Ziegfeld Follies* influenced all aspects of American entertainment culture. Songs introduced in the *Follies* by singers such as Fanny Brice or Eddie Cantor became national hits, driving sales of sheet music and records. Dance numbers inspired new crazes. Costumes designed by couturiers such as Lucile were copied by other designers and adopted by women throughout the United States. Photographs of the Ziegfeld Girls promoted new beauty ideals and practices. The *Follies*’ influence is also apparent in the popular mid-twentieth-century films of Busby Berkeley (*Gold Diggers of 1933*), which feature elaborate dance numbers with dozens of dancers moving en masse in shifting geometric patterns. The *Follies* influence can even be traced to the writings of psychoanalytic film theorist Laura Mulvey, who references both Ziegfeld and Berkeley in her discussion of the sexual objectification of women and the privileging of the male gaze (1975). Mulvey’s theorizations would in turn inspire a generation of feminist scholars interested in the risks and political potential of female spectacle.

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTwq_Fxr5ak&feature=related>

Figure Fanny Brice reenacts her pre-Ziegfeld burlesque days in The Great Ziegfeld (1936). Copyright MGM Pictures.

The May 11, 2010 death of Doris Eaton Travis, the last surviving Ziegfeld Girl, marked the end of an era, yet the popularity of female spectacle in reality television and other forms of popular entertainment suggests that something of the *Ziegfeld Follies* remains with us today.

**Further Reading**

(Cantor)

(Mizejewski)

(Mordden)

(Ziegfeld)

(F. J. Ziegfeld)