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# A Hop, A Frock, A Hairdo: Irene Castle and her Female Networks of Theatrical Business

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*Focusing on American dancer/performer Irene Castle (1893-1969) and following the merchandising strategies and aesthetic and societal impact of her widely discussed short haircut, her costumes, and her dancing school, this article aims at describing and disentangling the tight network of theatrical and popular entertainment, economy, and urbanity in the 1910s. Through an interdisciplinary approach and with a focus on a limited time frame of five years (1910-1915), the author discusses various strands, agents, contact zones and business strategies that are part and parcel of this network. Next to Irene Castle, two female theatre professionals are of particular interest here: costume designer Lady Duff-Gordon (1863-1935) and theatrical agent Elizabeth Marbury (1856-1933). Nic Leonhardt is a theatre and media historian with a special interest in historiography, visual culture, popular culture, and urban history. She is currently associate director and researcher of the DFG research project "Global Theatre Histories" at LMU Munich, Germany, and a lecturer in theatre studies.*

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**W**hen a woman changes her hairstyle, this is always 'quite something' and is said to announce, more often than not, crucial shifts in her personal life. When, in 1914, American dancer and performer Irene Castle cut her long hair to a blunt bob, it immediately made the headlines of serious and less serious newspapers, and triggered a flood of short haircuts among young women in the United States and in Europe. The shifts in fashion were crucial, as were the shifts in the perception of 'modern' women at the time. Later in the 1920s, as is well known, the bob became part of an almost global discourse on female emancipation and gender questions.<sup>1</sup> But this took place almost a decade after Irene Castle asked her husband Vernon to cut off her hair.

Paul Poiret (1879-1944), one of the most influential fashion designers of the period, had already fitted his mannequins with short hairdos in 1910-11, an

action which did not, however, have any substantial effect on fashion trends. "Pantalettes that show only when the fluffy skirts fluff up, with Dutch-cut wigs, and gowns on tulle, or chiffon, or anything that's ethereal, will be worn this Spring," wrote the author of a *New York Times* article in March 1915, entitled "Mrs. Castle's Gowns a Momentous Question," and the author continued:

Paul Poiret is not being quoted; a Mere Man who knows not more of women's frocks than that he knows what he likes is prophesying. But he feels so certain whereof he speaks that he reiterates all the things enumerated above will be worn, and quite generally. And why? Because Mrs. Vernon Castle is wearing them now, and what Mrs. Castle has done women may do.

Why Irene Castle? Why did her haircut gain so much attention and prominence at the time? Irene Castle (née Irene Foote) was born on 7 April 1893, the daughter of Annie Elroy Thomas and Hubert Townsend Foote in New Rochelle, New York. In 1910, she met her 'male counterpart' Vernon Castle (1887-1918), with whom she began a career as a dancing couple that lasted until he died in an accident during World War I.<sup>2</sup> When they met, Vernon was performing regularly on Broadway under the successful management of producer and manager Lew Fields.<sup>3</sup> It was through this connection that Irene rapidly obtained engagements in various musical plays, in both small roles and larger ones, but Irene's popularity was not solely the result of her spouse's engagements. Within the short space of five years, Irene Castle became well known in Europe and in the United States; a fame made possible, as I will demonstrate in this article, by theatrical commodification, a lot of press coverage by local and international newspapers and magazines, and as a result of dense theatrical networks, in which I am particularly interested here.

In this article, Irene Castle's hairdo, frock, and dance club or school, will serve as the threads for my deeper exploration of the structural relations of the theatrical and popular culture of the 1910s. Speaking with and extending anthropologist George Marcus, I methodologically "follow the subject, the object, and the idea."<sup>4</sup> My investigation of these three strands does not follow a chronological order, for they are closely interrelated within the period of the five years I am focusing on in this article (1910-1915). Instead, I am trying to disentangle the tight network of theatrical entertainment and society, economy, and urbanity, and by so doing, identifying their parameters and agents. Two of these 'agents' stand at the core of my investigation, namely costume designer Lady Duff-Gordon (1863-1935) and theatrical agent Elisabeth Marbury (1856-1933). In highlighting three female members of this business network, I am aiming less at contributing to the discourse on the connection of women and consumption,<sup>5</sup> but rather, would like to stress the pioneering work of Castle, Marbury, and Duff-Gordon as highly influential professionals in the theatrical business of those days.

For the last decade, as Strasser, McGovern and Judth put it in their study on European and American consumer societies, consumption "has emerged as a useful focus for historians because it addresses a variety of older questions, at the

same time raising other previously submerged but significant issues.”<sup>6</sup> The ‘commodity turn’ has been adopted quite recently also for the study of theatre histories—rather slowly by European scholars, one must add. Tracy Davis, in her pertinent and influential study *The Economics of the British Stage 1800-1914* (2000), has demonstrated how theatre in 19th-century Britain applied industrialisation and the dynamics of capitalist production for the sake of profit maximisation.<sup>7</sup> Since the 19th century, merchandising strategies for popular plays or actors and actresses were common practices of theatre business. Theatre managers acted with new strategies comparable to those of shopkeepers and other marketing experts in order to appeal to a broad audience with their theatre shows, and, in addition, to make multiple use of their actors and actresses, plays, and selected ‘products’ from their performances.<sup>8</sup> Robert Grau, in *The Business Man in the Amusement World* (1910), describes the theatrical manager of his time “as compared with his predecessor of 1870,” as a “vigorous personage, for, in forty years of progress, the amusement [...] has advanced to a position, which places him on a level with the great magnates and financiers of the commercial and industrial world.”<sup>9</sup>

The history of theatre business, that is, of theatre as a business, is still an under-researched field within theatre studies of almost all regions worldwide, yet it is a crucial one, as Christopher B. Balme points out in his essay on Richard Walton Tully’s play *The Bird of Paradise*. The facets of theatrical commodification, writes Balme:

[have] a narrative that can be reconstructed. This means that there is a specific chronology pertaining to a play or production and the commodification processes it engenders. Commodification is thus not amorphous and ubiquitous but rather located in defined temporal and spatial coordinates.<sup>10</sup>

The handling of plays, music pieces or products from a theatrical performance enhanced a play’s degree of popularity in society. Since the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, fashion designers were inspired by costumes worn by popular actresses on stage and in film. American theatre historian Marlis Schweitzer has astutely discussed these parallels between the performative and marketing operations of theatre and couture houses on American and emerging inter- or transnational markets. In *When Broadway was the Runway* (2009), she has shed light on the intersections of theatre and economy and described how theatrical products—as, allegedly, side-products—made their way onto various markets and became transmitters for (often internationally) shared consumer experiences.<sup>11</sup>

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century particularly, theatrical and popular entertainments were highly internationalised. Their institutional infrastructures were based on ‘transnational’ networks, assisted by new communication media such as telegraphy and developing transport systems. Cities had become cultural centres during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and this urbanisation was closely linked to the emergence of forms of theatrical entertainment, characterised by both local traditions and conventions and international imports from other cities. Typical urban institutions, which I will name ‘urban contact zones,’ were crucial

within the context of urbanisation since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By ‘contact zones,’<sup>12</sup> I mean real and virtual social spaces and places: theatrical venues, multi-purpose buildings such as department stores, railway stations, city halls or cafés, where cultural entanglements and exchanges took place. These contact zones were a) crucial for the emergence of a city, b) places where socially and ethnically diverse groups met, and where social entanglements ‘took place,’ and c) places where tradition, heritage, the past, the present, modernisation, and different conventional boundaries and regimes (scopic, economical, social, aesthetic), met and crossed. Moreover, the close connections and intense exchanges between the cities (in particular between Europe and North-America), as well as the relational dimensions of theatrical entertainment, business, fashion, and society are of interest in the following.

### ***A Hairdo: Castle Cut and a Wig Business***

As briefly described at the beginning of this article, Irene Castle’s significant change of hairstyle in 1914 caused not only a run on the new style, but also turned out to be a profitable business for barber shops and beauty salons throughout the country. It is reasonable to say that this run would not have taken place if Irene Castle by this stage had not been famous. In fact, she cut her hair, as she herself said, for pragmatic reasons of convenience during and after work and, in particular, before a surgical operation she had to undergo. In her autobiography *Castles in the Air* (1958), Castle recalls the cultural and economic consequences of her new hairdo:

Evidently women were just waiting for someone to do it first and give them enough nerve to face their outraged husbands. The first weeks there were two hundred and fifty Castle bobs; the next week twenty-five hundred. Stores began to feature the “Castle band to hold your hair in place.” Men’s barbershops began to hang out signs reading “castle Clips here” and cartoonists pictured men dressing like women so they could stand a chance of getting a haircut in a barbershop filled with women. It was a departure from long-established custom and so radical that one Connecticut newspaper spread the news in bannered type across its front page: “IRENE CASTLE CUT HAIR.”<sup>13</sup>

The newspaper coverage proves that Irene Castle’s hairstyle was not a private but a public affair, for Castle herself had become a public figure. “Newspapers,” writes Eve Golden in her biography of Irene and Vernon Castle, “ran complimentary articles about Irene’s style and horrified articles about the growing fad of women cutting their long, flowing hair.”<sup>14</sup>

As is generally known, women’s magazines such as *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Women’s Home Companion*, *Vogue*, *Illustrierte Frauenzeitung*, *Harper’s Bazaar* and others of this ilk also reported about the latest stage productions and designs from Europe and the United States. Advertisements published in these magazines and on posters were aimed especially at female audiences as consumers, with campaigns designed to attract interest in a spectacular performance and also in the consumption of commodities. Conjoined with ‘contact zones’ such as cafés,

and with shop windows, these media constitute a public sphere for negotiating styles and trends and for making private issues of public personae visible and, even physically, accessible. *Vanity Fair* published pictures or sketches of Irene Castle in almost every issue during the years when she was at the peak of her success (and, by doing so, nurtured the magazine's own prosperity), as did countless other magazines. As the above-mentioned *New York Times* article observed:

You may have heard, or read in the papers or magazines, or seen pictures in the shop windows, or observed in the theatre or café, or acquired the information in some less direct way, that Mrs. Vernon Castle was dancing [...].<sup>15</sup>

Irene Castle must have cut her hair during the spring or summer of 1914, that is to say, before the premiere of *Watch your Step* in December of the same year (see below). For one performance of that musical play, Castle introduced "a white bobbed wig with one of her costumes," as reported by the *New York Times* on 21 March 1915. The article alludes to the common practice of enhancing a play's profit by merchandising side-products:

[T]he astute press agent hastened to a wig maker. "Tell you what you do—make up a white wig and we'll plant it in the audience and then telephone the papers," he said to Hair Professors. "Off that stuff, off that stuff," answered the wig man, whose friends say he is "hep" in coiffure styles as well as in the penult of his name. "I have orders for six already, and I'm charging a hundred dollars apiece, and I don't want to queer it.

The idea to let a piece of costume leave the stage and turn into a commodity for economic reasons of profit enhancing was successfully realised in the following case of the dress that Irene Castle wore for the premiere of *Watch your Step*, at the New Amsterdam Theatre on 8 December 1914.

### ***A Frock: How to Multiply a Garment's Stages of Profit***

In early 1914, the Castles were touring France and parts of Europe when a cable reached them from the Broadway producer Charles Dillingham (1868-1934) offering them roles in a new musical named *Watch Your Step*. This musical play, considered the first by Irving Berlin (1888-1989) and said to have made his reputation, premiered at the New Amsterdam Theatre on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street in New York on Tuesday, 8 December 1914. Irene Castle acted the role of 'Mrs. Castle' and Vernon Castle also more or less played himself. As the *New York Times* wrote one day after the premiere, it was a "syncopated musical show" that "the London dailies would describe in accents of horror as a 'big, noisy, typically American entertainment,' and which the London public would witness clamorously [sic] and with every evidence of high approval [...]."<sup>16</sup>

I am not so much dealing with the play itself here, but with Irene Castle's costume which turned the 'must-see' show into a 'must-have' commodity for the female spectators. Castle herself, in her memoirs, described the costume as:

probably the loveliest costume the world has ever seen. It was designed by Lady Duff-Gordon and Elsie de Wolfe likened it to a Fragonard. To me, it was sheer heaven. It was the first dress with a torn hem line and was made of a blue-gray chiffon that looked like smoke and was twelve yards around the bottom.<sup>17</sup>

As "Broadway was the runway"<sup>18</sup> around the turn of the 20th century, the gown not only contributed to the character represented, it pleased the performer as well as the spectator-as-customer: already, the day after the premiere at the New Amsterdam Theatre, the dress was in demand. Castle continues—still following the rhetoric of marketing herself and Lucile:

The day after *Watch your Step* opened Lady Duff-Gordon told me that there were people waiting in line for the shop to open so they could order the dress. Before the week was over they had shipped ninety to California besides selling scores of them in New York. [...] Probably no dress worn on the American stage has ever attracted more attention or been so widely copied. Later the Metropolitan Museum asked for it as a part of their permanent collection. [...] Even if she had never done another thing, Lady Duff-Gordon would still be remembered for that one beautiful dress, a master-piece which was to influence American style for a long time to come.<sup>19</sup>

These events demonstrate a merging of stage and street, of costume and fashion, of *theatromania* and *conspicuous consumption*.<sup>20</sup> Six years earlier, a successful cooperation between the theatre management and Lucile had also borne fruit at the New Amsterdam Theatre, when, under the management of Henry Savage, the international box office hit *The Merry Widow* was staged and a similar piece of costume had caused a stir: the Merry Widow hat. On the occasion of the operetta's 275th night at the Amsterdam Theatre on 13 June 1908, Savage carried out a marketing strategy to celebrate the show's on-going success and to appeal to a female audience: he promised "Merry Widow" hats as souvenirs to all the women occupying orchestra and balcony seats. The local press had announced this promotion several weeks beforehand. On the day itself, the action ended up in a riot among female New Yorkers from the city and the urban fringe. In total, Savage had ordered 1,200 hats with a French firm, sought after by 1,300 women.<sup>21</sup> Lucile had designed the prototype of the hat for the London premiere of the operetta in 1907. In the US, it became a mass-produced article, a 'must-have' frequently commented on ironically and criticised in caricatures, cartoons, and columns. Journalists and illustrators picked up on the hat, mocking its expansive size, its lack of suitability for daily use, and the *chichi habitus* of the women wearing it.

The commodification practices of the Widow's hat and Castle's dress are certainly comparable. Moreover, if one traces the trade routes of the *Merry*

*Widow* hat and Irene Castle's costume in *Watch your Step*, they cross paths at Lucile Ltd., the professional label of costume designer Lucy Christiana, Lady Duff-Gordon.<sup>22</sup> Duff-Gordon can be considered one of the most successful fashion designers of the early-20th century. Having started as a limited liability company in London in 1903, Lucile operated internationally through branches in Paris, New York City, and Chicago.<sup>23</sup>

Lucile costumed theatrical productions, revues (the Ziegfeld Follies) and also films (D.W. Griffith's *Way Down East*, 1920). Her designs were featured in newsreels of the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Pathé films) and she had her own column on fashion in the *Harper's Bazaar* and *Good Housekeeping* magazines. She was said to have introduced the dramaturgically thought-out fashion show or mannequin parade, with mannequins wearing the latest designs as the actual protagonists. In doing so, she adopted theatrical means and showcased her costumes like products on display in a department store.<sup>24</sup> Active in the fashion business since the late-1890s, Lucile was regarded as a representative of a ready-to-wear fashion industry. Moreover, Castle's dress serves as an example of the observation that even in the early 20th century:

couture clothes were not purchased exclusively by the wealthy. Instead, couturieres created seasonal models that were intended to be copied or adapted either for individual, wealthy clients or for the developing made-to-order and ready-to-wear trade in department stores [...] catering to a broader consumer market.<sup>25</sup>

Department stores were designed as multifunctional buildings, where the customer could not only purchase and gaze at things, but also indulge in exhibitions, music, and performances—without paying for them. Walter Benjamin's renowned comparison of the department store with a cathedral not only points to the charging of products with an immaterial value or fetish, rather, as in a cathedral, a department store is also a place to meet, a 'contact zone' and a hub—of products and people. As Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain have observed:

The department store now appears as not merely a huge sales hall, but as a meeting place, a site for female sociability and arguably also emancipation, where the absence of conventional boundaries engendered the contemporary anxieties which have themselves become an object of study.<sup>26</sup>

Shopping not longer meant purchasing things, but spending free time and consuming visually, gazing at things and being gazed at by other people. Department stores also became theatres, not only in a metaphorical sense; already, during the 1890s, music and plays were being performed in them. In 1904, for example, Richard Strauss conducted two performances of his *Symphonia Domestica* in the big rotunda of Wanamaker's New York store.<sup>27</sup>

Department stores, with their artful displays and social relations (salespersons and customers) also provided a wide range of topics, conflicts and

settings for theatrical and musical plays. Consumption, entertainment, as well as the collaborative relationship between the stage and the fashion industry (in the United States as well as in Europe), were taken up frequently as topics in theatrical plays, shows, and revues. As an example of this, the musical revue *Kill that Fly!* by André Charlot (1912), first staged on 12 October 1913 in London,<sup>28</sup> includes a scene with the French title “Robes et Modes.” The principal character of this scene is no less a personage than Lucile herself.

Irene Castle’s hairdo and dress were showcased, sold and worn in public spaces that can be regarded as zones of social, economic, and cultural encounters—cafés, clubs, bars, shops, department stores, and the street. Following the commodification processes, as well as the agents of this commodification, enables us to pinpoint the transgressions of boundaries between stage and street, between cultural and economic sectors. In the last section of this article I will focus on another type of ‘contact zone,’ the ‘Castle House,’ and the club ‘Castles in the Air’ which, as I will suggest, bridged the experience of commodities with the commodification of experience.

### ***‘A Hop’: Dancing Societies—Institutionalisation of Steps and Style***

The turn of the 20th century is characterised by ground-breaking innovations and developments in communication and transport that enabled trans- and international connections in all cultural, economic, political, and societal fields. The railways, the opening of ports, printed media, telegraphy, radio, and new forms of advertising all engendered a dense exchange of goods, imaginaries, and people. During one of their early engagements in France (under the management of Lew Fields), Irene and Vernon Castle made use of current newspaper reports and acted as ‘cultural ambassadors’ for American popular culture by introducing French audiences to the latest American dance trends. Irene’s mother had mailed newspaper clippings to the Castles in Paris, in which the ‘Grizzly Bear’ dance (a syncopated ragtime) and the ‘Texas Tommy’ were described. Castle recalled in her autobiography:

We decided, as a finale for the show, to introduce French audiences to the latest American dance furore. Unfortunately we had not seen the latest American dances and had only the vague newspaper descriptions to go by. Vernon decided, however, that if we hadn’t seen the Grizzly Bear, the French hadn’t either, so they wouldn’t know whether we were doing it right or not. Reading between the lines of the newspaper stories, he evolved a close approximation of the Grizzly Bear and Texas Tommy to the tune of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.”<sup>29</sup>

‘The Grizzly’ as well as the ‘Texas Tommy’ started presumably in San Francisco and were shown on Broadway by Fanny Brice (1891-1951), of the Ziegfeld Follies, in 1910. Abroad, newspapers could only report on the dance. The Castles however were able to perform in a supposedly ‘authentic’ manner, from the perspective of French audiences. The next step to make ‘The Grizzly’ lucrative would have been to teach the French to do it. But the idea of teaching dance to a broad public was to follow later, when Elisabeth Marbury became the manager of



the Castles back in New York. It was she who leveraged the dancing couple and made them into the faces of ballroom dancers. It was Marbury who took up the industrial notion of 'standardisation' and made the Castles the experts to teach 'the right steps.' Arthur Williams wrote in *Vanity Fair* of August 1914:

In the multitude of new steps which rioted over the land, many were ungainly and some unseemly. Even if they were graceful and proper, they differed so in detail that those who had learned them in Thirty-ninth Street could not run double in harness with those who had learned them in Fortieth Street. The crying need of the moment was standardisation.<sup>30</sup>

Elisabeth Marbury is certainly one of the most interesting public figures of the literary and theatrical scene of the time and a few basic elements of her professional life might be addressed here. "The Three estates of the dramatic world are playwright, actor, and manager," wrote David Gray in the February number of *The Metropolitan Magazine*, 1911. "The fourth is Miss Elisabeth Marbury. She is an institution without precedent, without a possible successor, self evolved, autogenerated."<sup>31</sup> Marbury was born on 19 June 1856 in New York City into the family of Elizabeth McCoun and Francis Ferdinand Marbury, an admiralty attorney, and she died on 22 January 1933.<sup>32</sup> A frequent traveller to Europe during her adolescence, she took up residence both in the US (New York) and France (Versailles). A personal friend of famous European *litterati* (among them Victorien Sardou, Edmond Rostand, Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde, whose agent she also became), she had a profound knowledge of what one would nowadays call 'world literature.' At the turn of the 20th century, Marbury started her business as a literary agent and representative in the US and Europe, particularly in France, London and Berlin, with business connections to South Africa and India as well as Manila.<sup>33</sup> She later expanded into other fields of cultural entertainment such as dance, music, and theatre (she worked closely with Charles Frohman, the Shubert brothers, and later, in 1914, formed the American Play Company with several other agents). She co-produced plays such as *Nobody Home* (1915) and *See America First* (1916).

'Bessie,' as Irene Castle nicknamed her, returned to personal management in 1913 and took the Castles under her wing, extending the European and the American success of the dancing couple. At the time, Marbury was living with Ann Tracy Morgan (1873-1952), daughter of J.P. Morgan, and Elsie de Wolfe (1865-1950, first an actress, later allegedly the 'first' American interior designer) and, according to Irene Castle, "among the three of them they had social contacts no amount of money could buy."<sup>34</sup> When Marbury and de Wolfe returned from their French home to their American residence, local newspapers let their readers know:

Miss Elizabeth Marbury and Miss Elsie de Wolfe returned from Europe last Saturday, and the dear little Washington Irving house they occupy is once more thrown hospitably open to their friends. Although the Irving homestead has the misfortune to be just off Broadway—(it stands, as you know, on the corner of Seventeenth street and Irving

Place)—it is saturated with the atmosphere of Mayfair, the atmosphere of the avenue Champs Elysees, the atmosphere of Unter den Linden, the atmosphere of every street in the world where wit and grace and art and literature live.<sup>35</sup>

Upon her return from Europe, Marbury arranged contracts for the Castles and helped them to increase their success within the framework of theatre business. The craze for ballroom dancing was already closely associated with the Castles, discussed and fuelled by countless newspaper articles, illustrations, photographs, and interviews with the dancers. Marbury, quite literally, 'institutionalised' the Castles themselves, in that she established the 'Castle House,' an innovative combination of club and ballroom dance school, located opposite the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. "The Castles had fame, cachet, lots of work coming in—but they needed a 'command post,'" explains Eve Golden. They needed a dance 'centre,' a "focal point to serve as a gathering place and magnet for their growing cult of followers (and a place to attract the all-important press, as well)."<sup>36</sup>

The 'Castle House,' for which Marbury had acquired the services of African-American James Reese Europe's orchestra (which was called the first 'society' jazz band), opened on 15 December 1913. The *New York Times* gives an insight into the opening:

There was a large and fashionable attendance yesterday afternoon at the opening of Castle House, in East Forty-sixth Street, opposite the entrance to the Ritz-Carlton, where society is to enjoy modern dancing every afternoon from 4 to 6:30 o'clock as they would in a private house. The dancing will be under the personal direction of Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Castle. Miss Elsie de Wolfe and Miss Elizabeth Marbury are interested in the project, which has transformed the building formerly occupied by Mrs. Osborn's dressmaking establishment into a new centre for dancing, and they were much gratified yesterday at the turnout of people prominent in the social world. Mrs. John Corbin and Mrs. R. L. McDuffie, with Miss Marbury, are the superintendents.<sup>37</sup>

The Castle House soon became a popular urban institution in New York, attracting local and international patrons alike. Later, 'Castles in the Air,' a dance club on the rooftop in the vibrant neighbourhood of New York's 45<sup>th</sup> Street followed, as well as a 'Castles on the Sea' on Long Island. During the day, they taught New York's urban citizens how to dance (also in private lessons), at night, the Castles either performed on stage or received their audience (and *élèves*) in their club. Recalling the 'breath-taking' costume designed by Lucile for Irene's part in *Watch Your Step*, it seems significant to note that female dancing students wore the ready-made dress when visiting the club. "When we were dancing at Castles in the Air on the roof of the Forty-fourth Street Theatre after the show," writes Castle, "it was not unusual to find the same dress (sometimes in different colours) on at least six of the women in the room."<sup>38</sup>

The institutionalisation of ballroom dancing and the societal penetration of dance (in 1914 the Castles also published a book on dancing titled *Modern Dancing*),<sup>39</sup> by means of Vernon and Irene Castle's (life)style was just the next logical step in maximising the cultural and economic impact of dancing and products related to it. Williams' section on the Castle House (in his aforementioned *Vanity Fair* article) reads like a homage to Marbury and her business acumen—as compared to the 'dilettantism' of contemporary press agents:

The publicity which Castle House received is still a nine days' wonder on Broadway—and a more than nine days' grief to the band of indigenous press agents who had modestly conceived that they themselves were not ungifted in passion. Articles and photographs multiplied in the local press and swarmed throughout the newspapers of the land. [...] Under Miss Marbury, in short, the Castles became the national institution which they so happily are. Cities throughout the West begged and implored that they might be favoured with a visit from them.<sup>40</sup>

Adding the factors of pedagogy and education to the societal impact and glamour of dance in those days opened up yet another profitable and innovative sector for merchandising and popularising the dancing couple. The Castles were booked for other venues in New York and other cities, where even competitions became popular forms of entertainment, as Williams further informs:

Miss Marbury arranged to have Mr. and Mrs. Castle exhibit the true and proper forms of the modern dances at the Colony Club. For what other purpose was the Colony Club so exclusive and so highly distinguished? Quite naturally, the newspapers took notice. When the Castles went on their Spring tour, this idea was developed and greatly extended. Not only were the correct steps exhibited, but all the typical solecisms in dancing were exhibited as well. First you were told how to do it, and then how not to do it. In each city, contests were held and prizes offered for those who excelled in Castleian grace. Then a general contest was held in New York for the Castle Championship of America.<sup>41</sup>

As could already be demonstrated using the example of Irene's hairdo and costume, the boundaries between stage reality and everyday life, between staged acts and acting 'as if' on stage, become blurred. One could argue that the 'experience of commodification' is consequently joined by a 'commodification of experience.' Not only could the products and style of Irene Castle be imitated by a broader public through simply purchasing them, but also the steps and movements, that an audience usually only watches passively during a performance, could be individually experienced. With dancing schools and manuals, private lessons by the stars and their competitors, this experience was brought to various urban markets. Following the concepts of today's marketing, Marbury revealed the unique selling point of ballroom dancing, she marketed the 'social' in social dance.

### *Preliminary Conclusion*

From the late-19th century theatre business was embedded and interwoven within a local society (in its urbanity and its economy), whilst at the same time it was also characterised by inter- and transnational operations. The given limit of this article allows only for a tentative and, as yet, preliminary approach to the tightly enmeshed personal and professional networks and intersections between theatre, city, economy and society that constituted theatrical and popular entertainment at the time. The various parallel strands examined here concerning Irene Castle's hairdo, costumes, and dance-as-product, demonstrate that in the early-20th century, theatre and society were conjoined by means of the rhetoric of selling and consuming. Department stores, clubs, cafés, and theatres are 'contact zones' where spectators gather in order to encounter and exchange cultural and economic values, intellectual and commercial commodities. Not only theatrical products and stardom were subject to commodification, but also institutions and 'experience,' such as learning how to dance and style. On stage and off, urban culture, fashion, international goods, public affairs, visual and economic regimes are re-collected and aesthetically and dramaturgically negotiated.

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<sup>1</sup> Girls with short haircuts were to be seen on stage and in all big cities, in films and advertisements. Film stars such as Marlene Dietrich and Asta Nielsen made the short hairdo popular again in Germany, the latter via her famous performance of *Hamlet*. In the late 1920s, according to a foreign correspondent of the German paper *Vossische Zeitung*, the short haircut was even subject to special taxes in China and the Philippines. Women and actresses wearing the short hairdo in Japan were considered suspicious persons; film actresses were signed off their contracts until their hair grew again to a reasonable length. *Vossische Zeitung*, no. 5, 4 January 1928.

<sup>2</sup> Vernon Castle, born William Vernon Blyth in Norwich, Norfolk, England, 2 May 1887–15 February 1918.

<sup>3</sup> Lew Fields, born as Moses Schoenfeld, 1867-1941.

<sup>4</sup> See George Marcus' notion of a multi-sited ethnography that he proposes for coming to terms with transcultural intertwinings. Marcus suggests a "multi-sited ethnography" for understanding the local and global impact of objects, people, and ideas (as opposed to the conventional investigation of single-site locations). He argues that culture is embedded in macro-constructions of a global social order, and, as a consequence, also needs to be studied in various locations. As an alternative to single-site studies, he suggests tracking a subject across spatial and temporal boundaries. George E. Marcus, "Ethnography in/ of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (Oct. 1995): 95-117.

<sup>5</sup> See for example William R. Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925," *The Journal of American History* 71:2 (1984) and Krista Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern and Matthias Judth, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Tracy Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage 1800-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 335.

<sup>8</sup> The field of theatre managers, entrepreneurs and impresarios in the 19th and 20th centuries is still highly under-researched in scholarly work. While there are single studies on selected

managers in the US and Great Britain, no serious research has been done on European managers. This is partially due to the refusal of economic parameters in German theatrical cultures of the 19th and early-20th centuries. See Nic Leonhardt, *Piktoral-Dramaturgie: Visuelle Kultur und Theater im 19. Jahrhundert (1869-1899)* (Bielefeld, 2007). In my larger study on transatlantic theatrical networks I am starting to investigate this knowledge gap from a global historical point of view.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Grau, *The Business Man in the Amusement World: A Volume of Progress in the Field of the Theatre* (New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1910).

<sup>10</sup> Christopher B. Balme, "Selling the Bird: Richard Walton Tully's *The Bird of Paradise* and the Dynamics of Theatrical Commodification," *Theatre Journal* 57:1 (2005): 1-20, at 3.

<sup>11</sup> Marlis Schweitzer, *When Broadway was the Runway: Theatre, Fashion, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2009), and "'Darn that Merry Widow hat': The on- and offstage life of a theatrical commodity, circa 1907-1908," *Theatre Survey* 50:2 (2009): 189-221. At this point, I would like to thank Marlis Schweitzer for stimulating exchanges at ASTR conferences and for sharing her profound knowledge on the intersections between theatre and fashion history.

<sup>12</sup> See Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 33-40.

<sup>13</sup> Irene Castle, *Castles in the Air* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), 117.

<sup>14</sup> Eve Golden, *Vernon and Irene Castle's Ragtime Revolution* (Kentucky: University Press, 2007), 65.

<sup>15</sup> *New York Times*, 21 March 1915.

<sup>16</sup> *New York Times*, 9 December 1914.

<sup>17</sup> Castle, *Castles in the Air*, 135.

<sup>18</sup> See Schweitzer, *When Broadway was the Runway*.

<sup>19</sup> Castle, *Castles in the Air*, 135.

<sup>20</sup> See Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York, London: The Macmillan Co., 1899).

<sup>21</sup> A more detailed description of this case is offered by Marlis Schweitzer in *When Broadway was the Runway* and in "'Darn that Merry Widow hat'." Among the theatre managers of those days, Henry Savage (1859-1927), a former real estate agent, was considered one of the most successful. *The Merry Widow* opened at the Amsterdam Theatre on 21 October 1907 and closed on 17 October 1908, with a total of 416 performances.

<sup>22</sup> Lucy Christiana, Lady Duff-Gordon, née Sutherland, 13 June 1863-20 April 1935.

<sup>23</sup> It is surprising that there has hardly been any research done yet on Lucile's transnational activities. My current research project also aims to shed light on Lady Duff-Gordon and her role as an early global player in the fashion business. On Lucile's designs and business strategies see Valerie Mendes and Amy De La Haye, *Lucile Ltd.: London, Paris, New York and Chicago 1890s-1930s* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2009). A more detailed description of Lucile's early years as a fashion designer are offered in Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), notably the chapter titled "Millinery Strategies."

<sup>24</sup> Caroline Evans elaborates broadly and insightfully on the history of mannequin parades in her article "The Enchanted Spectacle," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 5:3 (2001): 271-310.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1850-1939* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 89-207. The intermingling of shopping and socialising had been described already by Gustav Stresemann in 1900. In his article "Die Warenhäuser. Ihre Entstehung, Entwicklung und volkswirtschaftliche Bedeutung (trans. *The Department Stores. Their origin, development and economic significance*), he notes: "If nowadays you hear somebody saying to his family: 'We go to Wertheim,' it does not mean they urgently need something and therefore purchase something. Rather, 'going to Wertheim' means announcing that you will go for a short leisure trip, like an excursion to a picturesque sight. What you need is to reserve an afternoon off and friends you can meet." [Author's translation].

<sup>27</sup> See Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 27.

<sup>28</sup> "'Kill that Fly!' proved rich in topicality: there were satirical jibes at the fripperies of hat-making, at the newly trendy "science" of eugenics and (without much of a logical connection) at the

corruption, not to mention linguistic strangeness, of New York policemen. The show's many jokes were directed at the producers Frohman and Edwardes." James Ross More, *André Charlot: The Genius of Intimate Musical Revue* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2005), 37.

<sup>29</sup> Castle, *Castles in the Air*, 54.

<sup>30</sup> Arthur Williams, "Two Feminists and Dance Managers Who Have Proved That a New Profession is Open to the Ladies," *Vanity Fair*, August 1914.

<sup>31</sup> David Gray, *The Metropolitan Magazine*, February 1911: 635-636, here at 635.

<sup>32</sup> Elisabeth Marbury's autobiography, *My Crystal Ball: Reminiscences* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923.)

<sup>33</sup> See *The New York Times*, 25 January 1903.

<sup>34</sup> Castle, *Castles in the Air*, 88.

On Elisabeth Marbury, Elsie de Wolfe, and Anne Tracy Morgan see the group biography by Alfred Allan Lewis, *Ladies and Not-So-Gentle Women: Elisabeth Marbury, Anne Morgan, Elsie de Wolfe, Anne Vanderbilt and Their Times* (New York: Penguin, 2001). The relationship of Marbury and de Wolfe is particularly addressed in Kim Marra's chapter "A Lesbian Marriage of Cultural Consequence." See also "Elisabeth Marbury and Elsie de Wolfe, 1886-1933," in Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra, *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theatre History* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 104-128. Marra critically reflects the lack of scholarship regarding Marbury and de Wolfe's revolutionary professions, and the gap she described in 1998 still needs to be adequately filled: "Although these pioneering lovers became as wealthy and influential as many theatrical potentates with whom they associated, like Charles Frohman, David Belasco, and the Shuberts, and innumerable stars and playwrights, the treatment of their careers in American theatre historiography is comparatively nil. That they were women whose primary theatrical contributions lay outside the conventionally most valued feminine role of star actress may be one reason for the historiographical gap. That they were women linked in a highly visible affectional relationship suggests additional motives for erasure." 104.

<sup>35</sup> Unidentified newspaper article, gathered from Elizabeth Marbury Clippings, #1311, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Locke Collection. Stamped date: Nov 5, 1913.

<sup>36</sup> Golden, *Vernon and Irene Castle's Ragtime Revolution*, 86.

<sup>37</sup> *New York Times*, 16 December 1913.

<sup>38</sup> Castle, *Castles in the Air*, 135.

<sup>39</sup> In 1914 the book was advertised as the "only book in the world [that] teaches you the refined and correct way to dance the modern dances." Potential readers/dancers were promised to "learn [dancing] at home in the genuine Castle way." Advertisement, Irene Castle, Scrapbooks 1907-1939, Scrapbook "Summer 1914," 6, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The scrapbooks comprise countless newspapers articles on the Castles, their dances, shows, their book, costumes, and their remarkable career. In the same year, 1914, Troy and Margaret West Kinney published their book which comprised the latest ballroom dances such as the One Step, the Boston, the Hesitation Waltz, the Argentine Tango or the Brazilian Maxixe, *Social Dancing of To-Day*, (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1914).

<sup>40</sup> Arthur Williams, "Two Feminists."

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* The Colony Club, on Madison Avenue, was built as a private social club for women in 1904 by socialite, suffragette and diplomat Florence J. Herriman (1870-1967), Elisabeth Marbury, Elsie de Wolfe, and philanthropist Anne Tracy Morgan.