

The Stage Door Canteen:
"Nothing Is Too Good for the Boys!"

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Ye that have faith to look with fearless eyes/ Beyond
the tragedy of world at strife/ and know that out of
tragedy and death/ shall come the dawn of ampler
life--/ Rejoice--/ Rejoice that God hath given you a
priceless dower/ To live in these great times and play
your part in/ Freedom's greatest hour.¹

World War II represents the ultimate fight for
freedom, democracy, and the liberation from oppression.
Countries banded together in order to demolish the evil
propagated by the Axis powers. No longer would humans sit
by and watch their brothers be harassed, controlled,
beaten, robbed, and murdered by the powerful. No longer
would oppressive rulers like Hitler and Mussolini be
allowed to dictate the lives of their citizens. No longer
would people be persecuted as a result of their color,
creed, or heritage. The Allied nations decided that justice
and freedom superceded personal interests of safety and
security. Thus, the world fought back for the little man.
However, these same democratic ideals for which Americans
were fighting abroad were being ignored domestically.
American troops were segregated, as were restaurants,
bathrooms, and water fountains. Jim Crow laws were strongly
enforced in areas of the United States, further persecuting
the American black. How could America expect its oppressed

¹ Adelaide Hawley, "Freedom," NBC Bond Day Program, 23 November 1944.

minorities to fight for freedom and equality abroad when they did not receive basic rights and liberties at home?

One organization, however, decided to take a stand against injustice: foreign and domestic. The Stage Door Canteen of New York City opened its doors to all Allied forces, regardless of race, creed, or color, on March 2, 1942.² For over three years, the Stage Door Canteen hosted up to 5,000 men per evening, totaling over 3,250,000 visitors during its career.³ Although the primary focus of the Stage Door Canteen was entertainment, servicemen found comfort, familiarity, kindness, and support within the 44th Street walls. The Stage Door Canteen had a tremendous impact on the theatre and armed forces communities during World War II. However, very little is known about this 1940's institution. What is certain is that the Stage Door Canteen did much more than entertain servicemen; the Stage Door Canteen was a socially progressive institution that strictly supported the ideals of democracy during World War II: Equality, Freedom, Peace, and Assistance. With over 3,000,000 visitors, the Stage Door Canteen played an

² Robert Roarty, "More Than Entertainment: The American Theatre Wing During World War II" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2002), 147.

³ "Stage Door Canteen Comes to Its End: Host to Millions in Allied Armed Services," *New York Times*, 29 Oct. 1945, sec. 1:21.

important role in both the lives of World War II veterans and the Allied Forces' fight for freedom.

The World Goes to War: World War II, the American Interventionist Movement, and the Formation of the American Theatre Wing

During the mid-1930's, tensions throughout the world were growing as a result of aggressive German, Japanese, and Italian expansion. The German government, under the control of Adolph Hitler, made advances into the Rhineland, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Norway, Denmark, France, and many other European nations, while Japan sought to conquer parts of China. Persecuting those of Jewish and minority descent, Hitler's regime became an imposing threat to the democratic ideals of many European countries. On September 3, 1939, Great Britain, France, Australia, and New Zealand declared war against Germany⁴.

With the onset of battle in Europe, the American public was split into two opposing groups: the isolationists and the interventionists. America had assumed a policy of isolationism with the 1935 Neutrality Act, which was an attempt to provide security, economic and domestic, during the insecure times of the Great

⁴ PBS, "The perilous fight: America's World War II in Color," <http://www.pbs.org/perilousfight/timeline/>. (accessed 5 April 2006).

Depression.⁵ However, when the act was up for “mandatory revision” Roosevelt pushed for amendments that would prevent the shipment of weapons to Spain’s fascist leaders.⁶ Thus, America’s neutrality was violated, angering isolationists nationwide.

In 1940, the America First Committee (AFC) was formed by famous isolationists such as Charles Lindbergh and Robert E. Wood. This committee argued that America should focus on “hemispheric defense.”⁷ That is, America’s concerns should remain domestic. By donating materials, restricting trade, and interfering in foreign politics, America weakened their resources and defenses during their own time of need and economic recovery. Thus, the isolationists, or anti-interventionists as they preferred to be called, argued for an American commitment to foreign neutrality.

In opposition to the conservative views of the isolationists were the interventionists and internationalists. Committed to the protection of “democracy, free trade, and the security of the United States,” the interventionists and internationalists pushed

⁵ Peter Buitenhuis, “Prelude to War: The Interventionist propaganda of Archibald MacLeish, Robert E. Sherwood, and John Steinbeck,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 26, no. 1 (Winter 96): 1.

⁶ Buitenhuis, 1.

⁷ Lise Namikas, “The Committee to Defend America and the Debate Between Internationalist and Interventionists, 1939-1941,” *Historian* 61, no. 4 (Summer 99): 848.

for varied forms of American assistance of the Allied Troops.⁸ The primary difference between the internationalists and interventionists was their support of American military action. The internationalists believed that America could lead by peaceful example, whereas the interventionists supported the use of military force against the Axis powers. However, both parties argued for the American intervention in foreign affairs during the early onset of World War II.

An essential element of the isolationist-interventionist dispute is the involvement of the artistic community. Several prominent writers, actors, and musicians not only supported the interventionist movement, but also used their artistic medium in order to propagandize their political beliefs. Once war actively broke out in Europe, President Roosevelt actively sought the support of influential novelists and playwrights: Archibald MacLeish and Robert E. Sherwood.⁹ Interestingly, both MacLeish and Sherwood were staunch pacifists after the disillusioning events of WWI. However, as awareness of the Axis powers grew, the authors' political ideals shifted to those of intervention. Appalled by the horrific actions taken by the

⁸ Namikas, 845.

⁹ Buitenhuis, 2.

Axis regime, MacLeish and Sherwood began writing in support of WORLD WAR II. In his Phi Beta Kappa address at Columbia University in 1937, MacLeish urged young scholars to take up action against the domineering evils in Europe: "Arise O scholars from your peace!/ Arise, Enlist! Take arms and fight."¹⁰ In addition to this address, MacLeish wrote propagandistic plays, poems, and radio programs that touched on the themes of American unpreparedness, Democratic ideals, and societal responsibility. In the spring of 1941, MacLeish and Sherwood, along with several others from the theatrical community, organized the Free Company, "whose main task was to mount plays attacking fascism."¹¹ Sherwood, who also wrote plays in support of the interventionist movement, used his position as president of the American National Theater and Academy to muster support for the war among his fellow playwrights. Thus, the theatre community banded together in order to support the American intervention of World War II.

For two years after the outbreak of war in Europe, the American government attempted to remain neutral in the escalating conflict. However in 1941, by signing the Tripartite Pact, Japan joined the Axis powers and began

¹⁰ Buitenhuis, 3.

¹¹ Buitenhuis, 5.

invading neighboring countries such as China and French Indonesia. Thus, the Axis' power now stretched across Europe and Asia. America stepped up its support of the Allied forces by providing weapons and war-relief aid to Great Britain and other Allied countries. President Roosevelt also "froze Japanese assets in the United States" in an attempt to persuade the Japanese to withdraw from the invaded lands.¹² President Roosevelt's restrictions on trade with Japan caused a great deal of tension between the two countries. The United States continued its support of Great Britain through the distribution of weapons and supplies, further increasing the tensions between America and Japan. On December 7, 1941, Japanese forces bombed Pearl Harbor. At this time, America joined the Allied forces' fight against the Axis powers. Soldiers were drafted and sent abroad to both the European and Pacific battlefronts. Although American officials had made several attempts to remain neutral, the attack on domestic soil required immediate military action.

In the spirit of the interventionist movement, three women, Rachel Crothers, Josephine Hull, and Minnie Dupree, created the American Theatre Wing of Allied Relief in

¹² Akira Iriye, Pearl Harbor and the Coming of the Pacific War: A Brief History with Documents and Essays, Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 1999.

January of 1940.¹³ At the 1940 World's Fair, Rachel Crothers spoke of her motivation for assisting the Allied Forces:

There is again war with the old enemy—an enemy 20 years stronger, 20 years more inhuman, 20 years more skillful in the art of killing human beings. We are determined to use the power of the theater to its full strength to help save England and thereby America.¹⁴

The Stage Women's War Zone Committee was formed out of the American Theatre Wing, and the actresses began sewing clothes for European refugees.¹⁵ Although the name of the organization changed over the years during the war, the purpose remained the same: to provide relief for victims, soldiers, and Americans in need during the war. Eventually, the American Theatre Wing added services such as special plays to benefit relief funds, comfort kits to be shipped overseas, and coin collection boxes in theaters.¹⁶ The American Theatre Wing members also housed children of British actors during the war to protect them from the bombing that occurred during World War II. Dinners and balls were held to benefit British families and war relief agencies, and actors such as Joan Bennett and Ralph Bellamy donated plasma for the wounded Brits.

¹³ Roarty, 30.

¹⁴ "Allied Relief Fund Aided By Actor's Fair Benefit: Theatre Wing Raises \$3,000; 500 Pay \$5 for Tickets," *Herald Tribune*, 3 July 1940.

¹⁵ Roarty, 6.

¹⁶ Roarty, 26.

During the spring of 1941, the American Theatre Wing moved to a new headquarters and made a call for more volunteers to aid in the relief programs. At this point, the programs continued to expand in quantity and quality. The organization that had started with a few women grew to over 3,000 "persons knitting, sewing, gathering funds, garments, food, blankets, even ambulances and canteens, and [kept] them moving to England in mounting quantity."¹⁷ In fact, just seven months after its formation, the American Theatre Wing had collected "9000 garments, 82 cases of supplies, six ambulances, and 4000 lbs of coffee" for Allied troops.¹⁸

It is essential to remember that America had not yet entered the war at this point in time. The relentless effort of the New York theatre community was out of sheer kindness, not self-motivation. The actors and actresses had little to gain by assisting the British forces in the early stages of the war. The actors and actresses, however, held fast to their personal ideals of democracy, freedom from oppression, and assistance by supporting the Allied effort. Their assistance was greatly appreciated by those involved in the war: "Even the knowledge that kind people still

¹⁷ Lemuel F. Parton, "Who's New Today: Rachel Crothers' Work For British Relief Typical of Her Efficiency," *Indianapolis News*, 13 November 1940.

¹⁸ "Stagefolk Aiding Refugees," Unknown newspaper clipping.

exist is a help.”¹⁹ The contributions and spirit of the American Theatre Wing gave hope to the Allied Forces; hope that the battle was worth fighting for and that their ideals were shared globally. By exemplifying the ideals of cooperation and concern, the American Theatre Wing reminded allied troops why democracy was worth saving. However, by December of 1941 America had entered the war, and the overseas focus of the American Theatre Wing changed to domestic relief.

America Goes to War: The Stage Door Canteen, Shifting American Perspectives, and the Fight for Democracy

It was on March 2, 1942 that the Stage Door Canteen first opened its doors. The opening, however, took months of planning and preparation. First, the American Theatre Wing had to secure an affordable location for the Canteen. Broadway producer and property owner Lee Shubert had a basement space in the 44th Street Theatre Building that was unoccupied. He agreed to donate the space to the American Theatre Wing for the location of the new Canteen. Over the next month, volunteers painted, decorated, built stages, installed lights, etc to ready the location for the grand opening on March 2. A majority of the supplies needed to

¹⁹ I.C.W., letter to Felice and Mildred of the ATW, 9 November 1940.

refurbish the abandoned club were donated by local organizations and individuals. The literal creation of the Stage Door Canteen exemplified the generous spirit of New Yorkers during World War II: everyone was willing to donate time, money, talent, and supplies.²⁰

After securing a location, the American Theatre Wing had to focus on securing volunteers to man the Canteen. The Canteen Committee met on February 17 to enlist volunteers. The Committee called for 600 hostesses, several hosts to provide security, and cars to transport the food to the Stage Door Canteen. The Committee also discussed how and what they would feed the servicemen, hoping that local restaurants would donate the suggested sandwiches, coffee, sodas, baked goods, fruits, and other snacks. Finally, the Committee began planning the entertainment, the key to the Stage Door Canteen's success. The Committee hoped to have at least six acts per night at the canteen, ranging from singing to comedy. The diverse lineup would provide the servicemen with a much needed distraction from the devastation and hardships of war.²¹ The purpose of the Canteen, according to an interview in Women's Wear Daily, was to make the "Canteen the pool into which the

²⁰ Roarty, 147.

²¹ Roarty, 147- 149.

entertainment world will pour its gifts for the men who are going to fight for us. It is the most direct way we can give our pride, our gratitude and Godspeed to our boys."²² After the lengthy planning, the doors were ready to open in service to the Allied Forces.

A special preview was given to members of the entertainment industry as well as the general public. The visitors, however, were required to donate a nonperishable food item in order to gain admittance.²³ During the preview, visitors were able to sample the entertainment and atmosphere that would become so popular with servicemen worldwide. On March 2, 1942, the doors opened for the servicemen. In the first hour alone, 500 sandwiches were eaten. Soldiers from the United States, Canada, England, Scotland, New Zealand, and Australia were in attendance. Gertrude Lawrence and "Lady in the Dark" company christened the Canteen with an hour long performance, which was followed by dancers Carole and Sherot, comedian Billy De Wolfe, Ballet Dancer Mme. Nikotina, and actress Tallulah Bankhead. With numbers far in excess of what was expected, the opening night was a huge success. In just a few hours, the Stage Door Canteen was able to create an ambiance that

²² "Theatre Wing Stage Door Canteen for Soldiers Opens," *Women's Wear Daily*, 2 March 1942.

²³ Roarty, 149.

remained until the last performance in 1945:

Otherwise, life in the new canteen settled down to the sort of exuberant friendliness that the hundreds of people who have been working on it never dared to hope it would attain instantaneously...After the canteen had been open for an hour you would have thought that it had always been there. It seemed to have a tradition.²⁴

Although there were other canteens in New York City, the Stage Door Canteen was by far the most popular, with over 8,000 servicemen visiting during the first week. The club was only designed to hold 500 people safely; therefore, the men were asked to limit their visit to two hours in order to accommodate the large crowds.²⁵

With such tremendous attendance every evening, the Stage Door Canteen had to increase fund-raising and food donations. As a result, they began soliciting contributions from New Yorkers. Again, the Theatre Wing was successful in raising the needed money and food items:

the Canteen has been financed in many ways, by donations, the proceeds of theatre parties and dinners, by the rent each night of a Patrons' Table, where for \$100 civilians may sit and be welcome. Various manufacturing companies and distributors have helped out, many of them to a magnificent degree and with no expectation of reward.²⁶

In addition to the Patron's Table, the American Theatre

²⁴ Brooks Atkinson, "Curtain's Up at the Stage Door Canteen," *The New York Times*, 3 March 1942, sec. 1:26.

²⁵ Roarty, 151.

²⁶ Lewis Nichols, "Stage Door Canteen: One of the Town's Better Institutions Celebrates an Anniversary," *The New York Times*, 28 Feb. 1943, sec X1: 1.

Wing solicited funds through radio fundraisers, speaking tours, and "American Goes to War" book sales. Although the Canteen was expensive to operate, only two of the staff were paid: the dishwasher and janitor. The remaining 90 hostesses per evening, performers, and administrative staff required to keep the Canteen running worked for free.²⁷ The entire community of New York City pitched in to provide the service men with the Stage Door Canteen, further demonstrating the supportive spirit of World War II America.

In addition to the Broadway shows, opera singers, Hollywood actors, and bands that appeared at the Stage Door Canteen, the men were treated to simple pleasures as well. The Canteen had a picture service that allowed 20 boys per evening to be photographed. The pictures would then be mailed home to their families. There was also a telephone service that allowed one lucky serviceman to call home every evening. Additional phone calls were granted on holidays and birthdays. Due to the war-related injuries, the Canteen operated a sick bay where soldiers could get their wounds redressed, for which the hostesses received first-aid training from the Red Cross. Most soldiers were

²⁷ Sally MacDougall, "Need Cow for War Canteen," *New York World-Telegram*, 15 February 1942.

just glad to dance and talk to the hostesses after being overseas for so long. A member of the Canadian YMCA commented in a letter to director Jane Cowl:

Our fellows certainly enjoyed the experience of being able to talk and dance with so many charming American girls, while the liberal giving of the meals and the brilliance of the cabaret left us with a deep sense of gratitude to this unique enterprise.²⁸

It was these simple pleasures that satisfied the servicemen. The Canteen and its hostesses were like a home away from home for thousands of soldiers. At the Stage Door Canteen, every man was greeted with respect, kindness, and genuine interest. The volunteers at the Canteen showed every soldier who entered the nightclub how grateful they were for their dedication and service to the war.

As the war waged on, hostesses and other Canteen staff began to notice a difference in the soldiers, both physically and mentally. The events overseas lowered the spirits of many soldiers. When the Stage Door Canteen doors first opened, most soldiers had not yet seen the battle fronts of Europe and Asia. Quickly, however, soldiers returned to the Stage Door Canteen battered from the war:

But beneath the surface a spiritual transformation has taken place. For two years this was a meeting place for eager, pink-cheeked boys on their last liberty before marching up the gangplank. Now some of these same men are back, lean and bronzed, ribbons and

²⁸ AG Phillins, A letter to Jane Cowl, 14 March 1942.

clusters of leaves and stars telling stories of deeds they will not talk about. All too many of them, on crutches and in cast, are brought in ambulances by the Red Cross from casualty hospitals... farewell to adolescence.²⁹

Broken limbs, bullet wounds, and the memories of war began to eat away at the servicemen. When they entered the Canteen, however, the soldiers were able to temporarily forget the horrendous war that had stolen their innocence. Instead, they were able to dance away the pain and suffering that the battle had caused them. Isadora Bennett commented in a memo:

Their morale could not be better. They are tough but not subdued. Even the wounded are gay and humorous. The best Jitterbugs will often be wearing Purple Hearts or even Presidential Citations. Best of all, they make the Canteen a first stop on their return.³⁰

American Theatre Wing officials instructed the hostesses how to attend to the injured soldiers in a sensitive manner. The following are the instructions to hostesses for conversing with wounded veterans:

1. Treat him normally.
2. Remember the man; forget the wounds.
3. Listen with interest when he talks about his experiences, wounds or decorations, but don't ask for more details than he wants to give.
4. Don't use the word "cripple."
5. Don't give him help unless he asks for it.
6. Don't say "it could have been worse," and don't offer him pity.³¹

²⁹ Brock Pemberton, "The Canteen Grows Up," *The New York Times*, 25 February 1945.

³⁰ Isadora Bennett, Memo.

³¹ Edward Hipp, "Watching the Crowd," *Newark Call*, 3 June 1945.

The spirits of the hostesses, however, seemed to be plenty for the injured. Pfc. Alfred Cohen, who was on crutches from a war-related injury, hesitantly danced with a well known hostess named Marjore. Her spirits must have been enough to cure the injured veteran, because at the end of the night Pfc. Cohen was dancing without his crutches.³² Stories like these show how influential the Stage Door Canteen was in the lives of the World War II servicemen.

The changes in the servicemen mirror a change within society. Total war, as World War II is often referred to, leaves its effects on all involved. The soldiers were faced with tremendous stress and anxiety during arguably the most grueling battles of the 20th Century. Not only were they weakened in body, but also in spirit. Brothers watched, helpless, as their flesh and blood died beside them in battle. Friends were forced to march on, leaving compatriots to die alone in a world foreign from their own. It is undeniable that the effects of war are tremendous on the human spirit. These effects, however, are not limited to the soldiers.

Families were torn apart, children left without fathers to raise them, communities with holes in their

³² Winifred Van Duzer, "Miracle at the Canteen."

workforce and life-force alike. Like all American citizens, the hostesses and administrators of the Canteen lost loved ones as a result of the cruel war. For example, Hostess Mrs. Glen Jamison, while dancing at the Canteen, was notified that her husband was reported missing somewhere in the Pacific. She left the dance floor with an officer on either side to tell her mother and twin sons of her husband's disappearance.³³ Events like these brought the reality of the war home to the Canteen. World War II quickly took a toll on the entire American and world community. When soldiers returned wounded or pictures surfaced from the battlefronts, the American public's morale sank. However, the hostesses of the Stage Door Canteen were forced to muster energy and cheer in order to raise the spirits of the returning soldiers. They, regardless of the fear felt inside, continued their duties with an increased sensitivity to the physical and psychological needs of the allied soldiers who returned to the Canteen after months fighting abroad. Although their spirits remained bright for the sake of the soldiers, hostesses, like all Americans, felt the grief and fear that was a result of such a large-scale war.

Another key aspect of the Canteen was its socially

³³ "Bad News Hits at Celebration," *Times Herald*, 31 January 1943.

progressive policies. The policy at the Stage Door Canteen was that any serviceman of an allied army was allowed into the Canteen, regardless of race, creed, and origin. This nondiscrimination policy was groundbreaking for the time period. It did not, however, come without controversy:

Effectively squelching discrimination and Jim-Crow tactics, the Stage Door Canteen of the American Theatre Wing at 224 West 44th street is nightly entertaining from 1,600 to 1,800 khaki-clad soldiers and blue-middled sailors, both Negro and white. The throwing open of the canteen doors to Negro boys was accomplished only after a behind-the-scenes battle with biased die-hards in the setup who opposed the plan on the basis that it was neither practical or desirable. Negro hostesses are being used but not as a "front," for there is no ban on mixed dancing or mingling. The main idea of making all soldiers, regardless of color, feel at ease has been accomplished with surprising effectiveness.³⁴

For many hostesses, it was the first time speaking, let alone dancing, with a black man. However, the Stage Door Canteen's staff was adamant that the policy be followed. When selecting hostesses, the committee would directly ask if the individual was uncomfortable in any way with interacting with people of different races. If the candidate replied yes, she would not be accepted as a hostess. By having an integrated club, the ATW was enforcing their political views of nondiscrimination and equal treatment for black citizens. A decade prior to the

³⁴ "Negro Performers, Hostesses Aiding American Theatre Wing Canteen Work," *The People's Voice*, 14 March 1942.

start of the Civil Rights Movement, the Stage Door Canteen was a forerunner in social equality. Even in a city as large and diverse as New York, segregation still occurred. The Canteen wanted to honor all men who were fighting for freedom because all soldiers needed the relaxation and entertainment that the Canteen offered.³⁵ The policy reflects upon the values for which the SDC stood: equality, consideration, and respect. Although most would not associate radical democratic ideals with a group of Broadway actresses, it was one of the Stage Door Canteen's fundamental goals:

The chorus girl turns out to be a cultured, intelligent person in whose heart burns an abiding love and understanding of democracy...typical Miss America who hates tyranny and who wants democracy to survive and grow to its greatest potential throughout the world...Miss Kaye, under my prodding, revealed an aspect of the Canteen's work which has not appeared in the 100's of articles and features written by the press—the Canteen's absolute lack of discrimination against any serviceman because of color, or for any other reason. And 1000's of negro GI's and sailors...write back their appreciation after they return to camp or to the battlefield...they thanked the Canteen for helping realize that true democracy cannot thrive when it is blemished by racial discrimination.³⁶

One of the most important tenets of democracy is equality. This equality is for all people, regardless of race, creed, nationality, etc. America, however, was supporting, both

³⁵ Virginia Kaye-Chilewich, interview by author, New York, New York, 10 Nov 2004.

³⁶ John Meldon, "Bullets Don't Discriminate—Nor Does Stage Door Canteen," *Daily Worker*, 7 May 1945.

socially and legally, the discrimination of African Americans. Thus, our country, which was fighting so admirably for democracy abroad, failed to support its own ideals domestically. The Stage Door Canteen, and many early civil rights activists, was determined to uphold democracy for all Americans, not just the Caucasian segment. Thus, there was a strictly implemented non-discrimination policy at the Stage Door Canteen that upheld the democratic ideal of equality. The draft was colorblind, the enemy's bullets were colorblind, and as a result, the Stage Door Canteen was also colorblind.

In addition to the Canteen's support of American troops of all colors, the organization was also open to all members of the Allied Forces. Therefore, Russian, Chinese, British, Australian, and Canadian soldiers were welcomed into the Canteen. During a time where Russians had been scorned for their communist beliefs, the country was forced to reconcile their conflicting political opinions with the fact that the Russians were also fighting for the Allied cause. Therefore, those who had once been enemies of the United States were now openly received into the doors of the Stage Door Canteen as a part of the Allied Forces. Again, this demonstrates the melting away of differences under the blanket of the Allied fight for freedom. All who

opposed the Axis powers were welcome to celebrate at the Stage Door Canteen.

Due to its enormous popularity, several songs were written about the Canteen. One song in particular, "I Left My Heart at the Stage Door Canteen," became the anthem for the establishment. The Stage Door Canteen was known

Worldwide:

The story the Canteen itself likes is the one about the two passing ships and a sailor on one who signaled the other asking where to go in New York. Came the answer, not uncertainly, "Stage Door Canteen. No liquor but lots of fun."³⁷

In addition to the Stage Door Canteen songs, a Hollywood film was made about the bustling nightclub. Sol Lesser released the film version in June of 1943, which was aptly titled "The Stage Door Canteen". Dozens of high profile actors and actresses appeared in the film reproduction of the Canteen. Such performers include: Helen Hayes, Katherine Hepburn, Ralph Bellamy, Ethel Merman, and Paul Muni. The film depicted the New York Stage Door Canteen. The actors and actresses often played themselves in the movie, showing how they entertained the servicemen. A few select soldiers were also allowed to be in the film. The Hollywood reproduction of the Stage Door Canteen perpetuated its fame and success. The film also alleviated

³⁷ Nichols, 1.

much of the Canteen's economic concerns. 20% of the film's profits went straight to the Stage Door Canteen and 69% went to the American Theatre Wing. The remaining 11% went to Lesser and various war relief funds.³⁸

During the summer of 1944, the Stage Door Canteen closed temporarily in order to renovate the club. It was reopened on June 20 with a line of servicemen waiting to reenter the Canteen. During the first hour, 400 were admitted to the Stage Door Canteen. New air-conditioning, iceboxes, and benches were among the improvements to the canteen. Although the renovation cost the American Theatre Wing \$25,000, the alterations were greatly needed. Through the hard work of staff and volunteers, "gone were the crowded conditions that hampered the old canteen...The rough plaster posts have become mirrored columns that reflect the dancing couples, 'just like a swanky nightclub,' as one sailor put it."³⁹

Unfortunately, however, everything was not all fun at the Stage Door Canteen. Due to increased need for materials and food during war time, rationing was set into effect. This placed several limitations on the Stage Door Canteen because of the high volumes of servicemen being entertained

³⁸ "Charity, Hope and Faith in FilmLand," *New York Times*, 20 September 1942.

³⁹ "Stage Door Canteen Reopens In Splendor," *The New York Times*, 21 June 1944, Sec 1: 23.

each evening. In just three years, the Stage Door Canteen distributed 438,000 half-pints of milk, 720,000 sandwiches, 5,000 lbs. of candy, 7,800 lbs. of crackers, 55,000 cakes and pies, 1,000 cases of fruit to its 3,000,000+ visitors.⁴⁰ In addition to the immense amounts of food stuffs needed for the Canteen, Hostesses regularly needed more than their two allowed pairs of shoes per year. With numerous hours jitterbugging away on the cold concrete floor, holes formed quickly in the bottoms of hostesses' shoes. As a result, the Stage Door Canteen was forced to file petitions with the OPA in order to receive additional allowances for food and shoes during the war-time rations.⁴¹

Another blow to the Stage Door Canteen was the slanderous comments made by Congressmen Faddis and Ford regarding the efforts of the theater community. The United States Representatives were quoted as questioning the "loyalty of the theatrical people."⁴² Although the theater community volunteered time, money, resources, and entertainment to the war relief effort, its motives were viewed as unclear by several Washington bureaucrats. Instead of being viewed as generous civil servants, the

⁴⁰ Pemberton.

⁴¹ "Dancing Girls at Canteen Here Demand More Shoes," *Times Herald*, 24 April 1943.

⁴² "Actors Protest 'Slurs' of Congressmen in Debate Over Theatre's Role in War," *New York Times*, 10 February 1942.

participants of the Stage Door Canteen were maligned by government officials. However, President Roosevelt squelched the issue in his statement that "'entertainment is always a national asset...Invaluable in times of peace, it is indispensable in war time.'" ⁴³ Although some did not appreciate the generosity of the theater community, it was clear that the President of the United States and the allied forces were both in support of the war relief efforts such as the Stage Door Canteen.

After almost six years of battle, Allied victory was finally secured in Europe on May 8, 1945. ⁴⁴ With the conclusion of the war came the end of the Stage Door Canteen. Although the closing of such a beloved institution saddened those who both worked at and attended the Canteen, it marked the much anticipated Allied victory. The Canteen had fulfilled its purpose, to entertain the Allied troops, and ended its service to America on November 1, 1945. ⁴⁵ Although servicemen would have continued visiting the Canteen, the American Theatre Wing thought that their efforts could be better directed after the conclusion of the war. Thus, they closed the canteens nation-wide and shifted their focus to veteran's hospitals and

⁴³ "Roosevelt Praises Amusement Field," *Box Office*, 5 June 1943.

⁴⁴ PBS.

⁴⁵ "Closing Stage Door Canteens," *Atlantic City Press*, 23 September 1945.

rehabilitation centers.

During the war and the months following its conclusion, the American Theatre Wing served 25 hospitals within a 75 mile range of the city, sending over 6,000 volunteers to area hospitals. The Theatre Wing also dispatched units to Navy and Marine bases to visit with recovering veterans. During the first year following the war, the Theatre Wing contributed approximately 600 volunteers per month to the hospitals and military bases.

In September of 1945, a planning committee met regarding postwar priorities. The Theatre Wing concluded that its two main priorities were "to further the welfare of the theatre itself and to utilize the resources of the theatre in the service of the community."⁴⁶ The changes in the American Theatre Wing's priorities reflect the changing priorities of the American public at the conclusion of WORLD WAR II. It was now time to have a domestic, rather than foreign, focus. The Community Players, once known as the Victory Players, created skits and plays to help families deal properly with returning veterans. Eventually, the Community Players broadened their issues to general societal problems such as "poverty, cancer, safety, race

⁴⁶ American Theatre Wing, "A History of The American Theatre Wing," <http://www.americantheatrewing.org/history.php> (accessed 30 March 2006).

relations and mental health.”⁴⁷ Many of the active participants with the Stage Door Canteen, such as Katharine Cornell and Vera Allen, continued to serve America through the American Theatre Wing. In 1947, the Theatre Wing created a specialized recreation program for Veterans. Several actors and actresses took leave of their stage and radio jobs in order to conduct the three and a half month tour of veteran hospitals. In 1946, a theatre school was opened for returning veterans. Classes ranged from acting to singing and dancing and were taught by famous performers and entertainers. The veterans’ performing arts school remained open until 1965.

Eventually, the Theatre Wing broadened its programs to serve the entire community. Theatre-In-Schools programs, community seminars, and non-profit grant programs have assisted the development of performing arts in New York City. The Theatre Wing offers scholarships and career support for promising performers in the New York area.⁴⁸ Although the Theatre Wing began as a war relief effort, it eventually shifted its focus to the improvement and advancement of performing arts in New York City. However, its noble roots were not forgotten by those who volunteered

⁴⁷ American Theatre Wing.

⁴⁸ American Theatre Wing.

hours, dances, supplies, and performances in support of the democratic ideals for which Allied soldiers were fighting.

Lasting Impressions: Hollywood Captures the Essence of the Stage Door Canteen Through Film

As mentioned earlier, the American Theatre Wing's project was turned into a Hollywood film in 1943. Although the primary functions of the movie were fundraising and entertainment, it serves as an important historical document in the study of the Stage Door Canteen. The Stage Door Canteen quickly fits into the genres of sentimentalism and patriotic propaganda; however, there was a paradoxical element of reality amidst the contrived sentimental plot. This is because a majority of the actors in the film were, in some sense, not acting but rather playing themselves. Thus, we are given an intimate glimpse into the historical Canteen's actual routine, policies, and deeper implications. Through an analysis of the film, the evaluation of the Canteen itself becomes richer and more complete.

The movie opened with a group of soldiers writing letters home at their military training camp. One soldier's

letter began, "This may be the last letter I send you."⁴⁹ Quickly, the film tugged at the audience's heart strings as they imagined their own children preparing to leave the safety of the United States for the chaos of the European or Pacific battlefronts. Prior to shipping off, however, the boys got one last adventure in the form of a layover in New York City. In these opening scenes, we saw a common scenario that led young men to the doors of the Canteen. New York City was a common port of deployment during World War II; thus, many a young sailor, marine, or cadet found himself with a few days leave in the bustling city. As the boys were set free by their commanding officers, they were warned to not "abuse the uniform or the hospitality."⁵⁰ These 24 hours of adventure marked the last hours of freedom, excitement, and safety for the young soldiers. The theme of finality ran throughout the movie. It was the boys' final adventure in America, it was their final dance with a woman, it was their final breath of freedom before entering a war marked by fatality and horror. Thus, we saw the Stage Door Canteen as a safe haven for the Allied forces. Once inside the Canteen, the boys could forget

⁴⁹ *Stage Door Canteen*. VHS. Directed by Frank Borzage. Culver City, CA: Madacy Records, 1943.

⁵⁰ *Stage Door Canteen*.

about their ominous mission and, even if only temporarily, experience the joys of living without the fears of dying.

After creating a sentimental and patriotic tone, the movie shifted to the Canteen and its hostesses. We saw a line of beautiful girls entering the Canteen ready to work. As the camera took the audience backstage, we were introduced to several famous characters. Working the front door was comedian Ed Wynn, who I quickly recognized as the voice of the Mad Hatter in Disney's animated version of "Alice in Wonderland." Famous actresses served as Canteen "moms," herding the young hostesses along. Most of the girls expressed sober pride in their job, but a few were clearly more interested in promoting their struggling careers. Eileen, the love-interest of the film, expressed her desire to meet Brock Pemberton, a big time producer. In her pocket, as we later learn, she carried news clippings of her reviews to show producers and actors who might be interested in hiring her. Eileen's self-interested motives, however, did not coincide with the majority of the hostesses presented in the film. Her peers criticized her for her selfishness and reminded her that they were there to give the boys one last thrill before they go off to war. Through this scene, we were shown a legitimate issue that was faced by the Stage Door Canteen: Selfishness instead of

Selflessness. Many girls were interested in being hostesses not because of an unwavering patriotism but rather a futile hope of self-promotion. However, the producers and actors of authority were at the Stage Door Canteen to serve their country, not themselves. Thus, they were disinterested in struggling artists who used the Canteen simply to advance their careers. In simple sentimental form, the movie demonstrated this through the transformation of Eileen's character in the film.

One element that made the contrived plot bearable was the star cameos. When our group of soldiers from the opening scenes entered the Canteen food line, they encountered Katherine Cornell serving treats to the soldiers. She was recognized by one of the boys who saw her performance as Juliet in Shakespeare's classic tragedy. She quickly entered into a rendition of the balcony scene with the boy, who knew all of Romeo's lines for the scene. The Canteen visitors and movie audience were both treated to a taste of New York drama through her impromptu performance. As their dialogue concluded, however, it was clear that Cornell understood the impact that she has made upon the departing soldier. No matter what happened in battle, the soldier would always have his memory of meeting Katherine Cornell at the Stage Door Canteen. The movie was also

scattered with cameos from actual Canteen performers. There were comedy skits, band performances, patriotic songs, and even a provocative pseudo-strip tease by Gypsy Rose Lee. One motivation of these cameos was to give the audience a peek into a real night at the Stage Door Canteen. However, it also gave the audience a glimpse into New York night life for the general public. All of the performers could be seen, for a price, on Broadway stages and various city nightclubs. Thus, the movie incited interest in the public audience, which potentially resulted in increased attendance at their for-profit shows. Like many things in life, there are multiple motives to every action. Although the primary motive of the stars' performances was entertainment for the Allied forces, there was an aspect of self-promotion in even the most famous stars' participation.

In the cameos, several patriotic war songs were sung. It was easy to see the propagandized notions of World War II America through the lines of the songs: "Three Jap planes were up in the sky, looking for trouble while flying high. Along came the Yank and what did he do? (Gunshot noises) And there were two."⁵¹ There was an attitude of strength, fearlessness, and superiority that resonated in

⁵¹ *Stage Door Canteen*.

the jovial songs. It was recommended, and often enforced, by the Canteen that performers restrain from playing songs that would remind the boys of their grave situations. Thus, the songs remained light-hearted and optimistic. The words of the songs, however, reflected an attitude of joy in killing Axis soldiers. Although meant to inspire, the songs displayed an ignorance of the realities associated with actual combat. When reading through interviews of war veterans, very few found actual joy in the slaughtering of fellow humans. Although they were proud to fulfill their duty to their country and to the institution of democracy, the attitudes reflected in the patriotic songs did not ring true of the attitudes of battle-worn veterans. However, the purpose of the Canteen was to entertain and uplift the Allied Forces, which is what they did.

Another troubling aspect of the film that I observed was its portrayal of hostesses. In some scenes, the assignment of hostesses to particular soldiers very closely resembled that of a brothel. Men would ask the Hostess Director for a "brunette" who is "5 foot 3 inches."⁵² It was as if the soldiers were at a female department store ordering the size and color that suited them best. The Canteen had strict rules that prohibited hostesses from

⁵² *Stage Door Canteen*.

dating soldiers or even getting too close while at the Canteen. But, there seemed to be an air of subservience that went along with the distribution of a hostess to a soldier.

Gender studies of World War II suggest that the war had varied effects upon the roles of women in American society. On one hand, women were thrown into the workforce at astounding rates. They were urged to help fill the gap of male labor in order to allow more men to enter the battle front. Women were filling jobs that were undeniably male-dominated: production, agriculture, and even the army. Images of "Rosie the Riveter" filled American homes, promoting a strong, independent, hard-working female. However, the American public was concerned with the evolving roles of the female. Much emphasis was placed on the fact that these jobs would be temporary, only lasting throughout the war. Women were expected to work as men, but uphold their femininity.⁵³ Thus, the effect of the female's role within American society during World War II was twofold: liberating and confining. It opened women's eyes to their potential as workers and individuals. When the war concluded and American society attempted to return to

⁵³ Bilge Yesil, "'Who Said this is a Man's War?': propaganda, advertising discourse and the representation of war worker women during the Second World War," *Media History* 10, no. 2(2004): 103-114.

traditional values and gender roles, it was difficult for women who had experienced the liberating role given by society during the war to return to the restrictive role of pre-war culture. The film's portrayal of women sheds light on the history of both the Stage Door Canteen and American culture during World War II, allowing us to see the hostesses in their dual roles of independent workers and objectified beauties.

Eileen, the female love interest of the story, is unlike her fellow hostesses. When paired with Dakota, one of the soldiers from the opening scenes, she shuffled through her routine list of questions for soldiers. Her attitude during this interview was strikingly indifferent as she scanned the crowd for producers and stars. The other hostesses who were entertaining Dakota's friends appeared to be genuinely concerned with the soldiers' lives whereas Eileen was merely concerned with her own self-promotion. For whatever reason, Dakota took an interest in this distant hostess and remained with her throughout the evening. At the end of the night, Eileen brushed Dakota off when he asked if she would be at the Canteen the following evening.

It was clear that she had no interest in entertaining the young soldier. Later in the evening, her fellow

hostesses scolded Eileen for her apathetic attitude. The following night, Dakota returned looking for Eileen. Although she talked to him briefly, she made it clear that she was not interested in the young soldier. Dakota left the Canteen hurt, and Eileen began to regret her harsh attitude. The boys were given an extension in New York due to some sort of military delay. As a result, they returned to the Canteen for a third night of entertainment. Dakota did not want to go back to the Canteen and face the merciless Eileen, but did so to appease his comrades. However, what he found is an apologetic and suddenly caring Eileen. The couple quickly fell in love and broke the cardinal Canteen rule of no dating the servicemen. Dakota met Eileen at her home and they spent the entire night talking until the sun came up. Dakota and Eileen planned to get married, but Dakota was called back to the base to leave for battle. He sent his marriage promise to a hopeful Eileen who waited at the Stage Door Canteen for his return.

Within the melodrama of the plot exists an insight into the values of the Canteen. Eileen's self-promotion was clearly deemed as inappropriate by the Canteen. Her transformation throughout the film showed that hostesses should be caring and concerned for the soldiers. Dakota's promise to Eileen represents the hope that the Stage Door

Canteen gave soldiers who were leaving for battle. It gave them lasting memories of security and joy; it gave them something for which to return.

Amidst the sentimental love story of Dakota and Eileen was a gripping sense of reality. The actors were playing, for the most part, themselves. They were performing the tasks that they actually did at the Canteen. The soldiers were often real soldiers and not actors. The set was crafted to look exactly like the New York hotspot. Thus, the reproduction of the Canteen was a strange mixture of reality and fantasy. Although there was never an actual Dakota and Eileen, there was a hostess who married a soldier whom she met at the Canteen. The policies represented were real guidelines of the institution. The activities presented were those that actually existed for the soldiers' entertainment. Thus, the Stage Door Canteen movie, while sentimental and patriotic, was at its core a real representation of the historic institution. Thus, the values espoused in the movie adequately represented the true values of the soldiers, hostesses, and founders of the Canteen.

What stuck me most about World War II American culture as portrayed in the film was its strange connection to contemporary American life. In some ways, things are as

they were and at the same time how they will never be again. The elements of love, pride, self-interest, generosity, and youthful folly are consistent with modern life. However, the unwavering patriotism, cheerful innocence, and optimistic attitudes are harder to find in the 21st Century. The movie, as well as the Canteen itself, restores hope in a world filled with innocence-shattering evils. People do, in times of need, band together for the greater good. When a cause is worthy, it will be defended. It is clear through the film that the founders of the Stage Door Canteen were primarily interested in supporting their troops, their country, and their freedom. Although the inevitable faults of the Canteen were alluded to in the film, its lasting mark on society is one of patriotism and generosity.

Aftermath: Changes in Theatre and Culture after World War II

By evaluating the effect World War II had on American drama, the alterations in the attitudes of the playwrights and actors who were supporting undertakings such as the Stage Door Canteen can be ascertained. Immediately prior to the United States' entrance into World War II, American dramatists were urging both the public and the government

to support and enter the war. The plays focused on a justification of the war, displaying the undemocratic Nazis and Japanese as a threat to our own way of life. Although many playwrights were pacifists, opinions started to change when they were bombarded with information regarding the Axis powers. Drama has always been closely tied to the political world, serving as an avenue for exposing and commenting on the circumstances of the dramatist's country. By presenting the harsh realities of the situation in Europe and Asia, the American public became aware of the need for American support:

More often than not, the plays that sought to convince audiences of the need for American involvement in Europe and in World War II made Americans aware of the dire situation in Europe and then forcefully stressed the threat of those developments to American democracy and the ideals upon which this country was founded.⁵⁴

Once America did enter the war, the playwrights continued their support of the cause by creating patriotic and propagandist plays. Drama historian C.W.E. Bigsby wrote that during the war, the theatre community "quickly rallied to the cause."⁵⁵ These plays not only justified America's entrance into the war but also the values of war itself:

Once America has gone to war, the focus shifts from plays that urge and justify involvement to those

⁵⁴ Albert Wertheim, Staging the War (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 15.

⁵⁵ C.W.E Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama 3: Beyond Broadway (Cambridge: University Press, 1985), 1.

documenting engagement in the war effort, both by those who go abroad to fight and by those left behind. Works appearing while the fighting was going on, however sincerely felt, tend to be little more than patriotic tracts in their intention and appeal.⁵⁶

Dramatists often presented war as an opportunity to redefine and reconnect the world, eliminating the potential for future evils such as the Axis invasions.

As the war progressed, so did the theater industry. Radio shows, plays, and movies were becoming more realistic and accessible during this time period. Battle scenes became part of staged plays, further enlightening the public of the seriousness of the war. The plays were highly propagandistic, portraying the enemies as brutal savages. The plays were able to make the newspaper and radio reports and photographs more real for those in the States.

In addition to the effects of drama on the general public, the plays had a tremendous effect on American soldiers as well. The soldiers were in need of relief after weeks of boot camp with thoughts of war and death on their minds. Thus, the plays were a source of entertainment and a temporary suspension of their uncertain realities. Clubs such as the Stage Door Canteen also helped aid these soldiers in their much needed relaxation.

⁵⁶ Thomas P. Adler, American Drama, 1940-1960: A Critical History (NY: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 8.

The government became involved with the playwrights of the period, requesting a series of propagandistic plays for the general public and for the troops. The primary purpose of these "Uncle Sam" plays was to inspire patriotism and support for armed forces during the difficult times of World War II. In addition to the inspirational themes of the plays were the didactic messages that were central to each performance. The government used the medium of theater in order to foster particular attitudes among the American public. These themes included war bonds, victory gardens, and patriotism.⁵⁷ Given the artistic efforts of the theater in supporting American involvement in World War II, it is not surprising that its members would support an undertaking like the Stage Door Canteen.

However, playwrights felt less obliged to justify the war once it had concluded. It was in this period that playwrights began to criticize their own country and the possible hypocrisies of the war. The post-war period is marked with sentimental plays that reflect a loss of innocence and values in American culture. There is also a strong emergence of plays discussing the loss of the individual in post-war American society. The post-war plays expose cultural flaws such as racism, economic disparity,

⁵⁷ Wertheim, 47-177.

government control, and apathy. This is also found in the postmodernist movement in American and European literature that addressed the alienation of the individual, loss of purpose and meaning in life, and a general despondency regarding the future. Prior to and during the war, American drama, literature, and general culture was marked by an inspiring idealism:

Faced with the manifest threat of Nazism the theatre was swiftly enrolled in the battle...for the most part the war generated an idealism which was different in kind from that which had dominated the 1930's but which was no less intense. However, by the same token, it was an idealism which was not likely to survive the events of the war any more than that radical and even sentimental model of human relations which had sustained a number of America's major playwrights through a decade of economic and spiritual collapse. And it did not.⁵⁸

There is hope of change and improvement on the eve of the war. The values of democracy that we were fighting for were worth the risk. America was a virtuous country striving to protect the innocent victims in Europe and Asia. However, as the war raged on, the ideals became shattered by the immense casualties, horrific acts of the Nazi concentration camps, and the atomic bombings of Japan. Dramatists began to question if there really was a *good guy* in the fight, if we were even upholding democracy in our own land, and what the future of humanity really was. The post-war period in

⁵⁸ Bigsby, 2.

American drama is characterized, according to Bigsby, by a loss of innocence. The culture became paranoid as a result of the war and its disastrous effects (red scare, bomb shelters, etc). Although drama is not simply a mirror of the times, there is a dramatic shift in the themes of American plays during and after World War II that reflects the cultural shifts from naiveté to paranoia. These same ideological alterations are found in the changing attitudes of Stage Door Canteen members and American Theatre Wing war-relief efforts.

Greater Implications: What Can Be Learned from the Stage Door Canteen

The Stage Door Canteen was not merely a cabaret to the servicemen who attended the club. Instead, the Canteen was a place of comfort, entertainment, respect, and familiarity. It is in times of crisis, such as World War II, that the true character of society is illuminated. During World War II, New Yorkers pulled together to honor and serve those who were protecting their freedom. People from all walks of life were involved in the Stage Door Canteen: performers, restaurants, carpenters, businessmen, etc. The creation of such a fine establishment reflects on the care and concern of American citizens during World War

II. After being immersed in a culture of gun shots, blood, death, and chaos, the Stage Door Canteen was a safe haven for returning soldiers. No matter how bad the war was, the Canteen greeted the soldiers with smiling faces and fresh food. The Stage Door Canteen has been remembered by thousands of World War II veterans. These memories are due to the remarkable work of the hostesses, American Theatre Wing, donors, and citizens of New York City. Although the Canteen was replicated in other cities across the nation, nothing could compare to the original where “nothing [was] too good for the boys.”⁵⁹

Additionally, the policies of the Canteen exemplify the values that the organization possessed: Equality, Freedom, Peace, and Assistance. Steeped in philosophical notions and theories, Democracy centers on the concept of personal individual freedoms and equalities. Each human has the right to be considered, as Immanuel Kant wrote, as an end in and of themselves. That is, a person’s worth is not related to an exterior value, but rather is inherent in being a human being. Thus, all men have an equal inherent value insofar as they are members of the human race. Although many scholars argue that the “men” referenced in the Declaration of Independence is limited to white,

⁵⁹ Stage Door Canteen Motto. Source unknown.

property owning men, take into consideration other writings of Thomas Jefferson's in which he stresses the equality that is due to those of the human race—not the white race:

For if a slave can have a country in this world, it must be any other in preference to that in which he is born to live and labor for another: in which he must lock up the faculties of his nature, contribute as far as depends on his individual endeavors to the evanishment of the human race, or entail his own miserable condition on the endless generations proceeding from him.⁶⁰

In this passage, Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, discusses the limiting nature of slavery upon the individual and the entire human race. What is clear in this passage, however, is that Jefferson considers all men as part of the human race. Does that not follow then, that the author of such words would use the term man to refer to members of the human race? If so, it is certain that the Declaration of Independence, from which our country's democratic ideals are drawn, is meant to espouse the fundamental equality of all humans. Thus, the segregation that was still present during World War II was in direct contradiction to the spirit of democracy. Were we not fighting for the little man during the war? Did we not criticize the Axis powers for their inhumane and undemocratic treatment of minorities while at the same time

⁶⁰ Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia: Query XVIII: Manners," *Voices of the American South* (NY: Pearson & Longman, 2005), 55.

practicing segregation of superior and inferior races? It seems certain that American politics during World War II were contradictory at best. The Stage Door Canteen, however, was committed to democracy in its purest form: equal treatment of all.

When man is tested by the presence of evil, his true character shines through. Those of the weaker sort will fold to the powers that threaten to assume control, regardless of their conflicting inner opinions. Others, however, will follow the voice of morality within. The latter are the groundbreakers within society: those who go against the majority when needed, those who are willing, even amidst fear, to hold fast to their virtues. The participants of the Stage Door Canteen did just that. They did not sit idly by and allow their fathers, brothers, sons and neighbors to fight for democracy. Instead, they participated and fought for democracy at home. They were dedicated through and through to the Allied cause. In fact, they took their dedication further than the majority by supporting the equal treatment of blacks in American society. Their ideals and actions were consistent, unlike many of their peers. In the spirit of future President John F. Kennedy, the American Theatre Wing, and subsequently the Stage Door Canteen were willing to serve their country:

"ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."⁶¹ On the surface, the Stage Door Canteen was merely a nightclub for servicemen. Like other swanky clubs, the Canteen had music, food, dancing, pretty women, and a jovial spirit. However, behind the smiling faces of the hostesses and servicemen alike was a stringent commitment to the Allied forces' actions in Europe and Asia, a commitment to the brave men, of all colors and nationalities, who put their very lives at stake for the cause of freedom from oppression, a commitment to the American ideal of democracy in its purest form. Singer, actress, and avid supporter of the SDC Gertrude Lawrence eloquently states the motivation behind war relief programs such as the SDC:

The funny thing about any freedom, the Fifth Freedom included, is that we cannot enjoy any of it without imposing a sort of slavery on ourselves now and then. We either drive ourselves or some cause drives us, and it is particularly true of life in the theatre where we find no period so hard on us as when we are 'free' or 'at liberty.' We work so hard towards our theatrical Holy Grail that freedom, which most persons regard as a sort of aimless relaxation, is almost unknown to us. But one cause in which we cannot go wrong, no matter what our nationality, is Patriotism. I don't mean by this the conventional flag-waving patriotism, the pointing-with-pride patriotism. I mean the hard-working, extra benefit-performance, singing-to-the-point-of-collapse sort of patriotism which is inspired by the knowledge that others, less well known than ourselves all over the world, have made supreme

⁶¹ John F. Kennedy, "Inaugural Address," 1961.

and final sacrifices that we might live at all. And that we should be proud of the chance to prove ourselves worthy of the cause others give their lives for. For us to praise ourselves because we have given one extra performance and so made a youth laugh once more before he went aloft to die for us is not a 'sacrifice' on our part. It is an entertainer's proud privilege!⁶²

Many of the actors and actresses could not participate in the battles of World War II. However, that did not stop them from doing what they could to help those who were fighting for freedom and democracy. As Lawrence states, it was not a sacrifice but rather a privilege to entertain troops before they embarked on long and dangerous journeys into Europe and the Pacific. The participants of the Stage Door Canteen were willing to give all they had and more to the entertainment of Allied troops, not for reasons of self-promotion or economic gain, but rather for selfless devotion to democracy and the American government.

⁶² Gertrude Lawrence, "A Hard Road, but the Best Road," *Variety*, 7 January 1942.

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