

Florida State University Libraries

Electronic Theses, Treatises and Dissertations

The Graduate School

2006

American Dance Marathons, 1928-1934 and the Social Drama and Ritual Process

Chelsea Rae Dunlop



THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF VISUAL ART, THEATRE, AND DANCE

AMERICAN DANCE MARATHONS, 1928-1934
AND THE SOCIAL DRAMA AND RITUAL PROCESS

BY
CHELSEA DUNLOP

A Thesis submitted to the
Department of Dance
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Degree Awarded:
Fall Semester, 2006

Copyright 2006
Chelsea Dunlop
All Rights Reserved

The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Chelsea Dunlop defended on November 3, 2006.

Sally R. Sommer
Professor Directing Thesis

Tricia H. Young
Committee Member

John O. Perpener III
Committee Member

Approved:

Patricia Phillips, Acting Chair, Department of Dance

Sally E. McRorie, Dean, College of Visual Arts, Theatre and Dance

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to Carol Martin for her elaborate and fascinating research into all things dance marathon. Without her interest in the dance marathon phenomenon and her wonderful book and numerous articles, I would have been lost. It was her book *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture in the 1920's and 1930's*, that caught me hook-line-and-sinker and kept me interested. If not for her passion to preserve the memory of these events that have otherwise fallen by the wayside of American history texts and dance texts, I never would have discovered my love for this timeless and truly American form of entertainment. Thanks also go out to Frank Calabria for his book, *Dance of the Sleepwalkers: The Dance Marathon Fad*, which similarly infected me with the marathon bug.

More thanks than I can properly express go to my wonderful, dedicated, and exuberant thesis advisor, Dr. Sally Sommer, who never let me lose sight of the end goal. Though there were some bumps and dips, in the road to its completion, Sally stayed on for the journey and never tried to jump off the bandwagon. Her passion, tireless editing, and general devotion to my thesis were instrumental to the completion of this manuscript. A true student-teacher collaboration, this project was encouraged and coached to fruition through the support she offered as advisor and friend.

I am also indebted to the other members of my thesis committee and the American Dance Studies program faculty of the Dance Department at Florida State University. I am sincerely grateful for the assistance of both Dr. Tricia Young and Dr. John Perpener whose gracious guidance contributed to my love and passion for dance and history.

Finally, I must thank my family and friends for all their support – emotional, financial, and material. Thank you to my parents, Hill and Shelly Dunlop, for always letting me chase my dreams, no matter how far they might take me. Their guidance and love during the past two years, has made this entire degree program worthwhile. And a very special thank you goes to my grandmother, Florence Adair, who made it possible for me to pursue this degree. Much thanks and love to all those who have stood by with kind words or a hug throughout this entire process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	v
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	vii
ABSTRACT.....	viii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
1. PRE-1920 HISTORICAL CONTEXT: DANCING TOWARDS A NEW DECADE AND MODERNISM.....	5
2. MAD-CAP FADS OF THE 1920S: THE HULLABALOO OF ENDURANCE DANCE, FLAGPOLE SITTING, AND PEANUT PUSHING.....	19
3. THE STOCK MARKET CRASH AND THE TURBULENT 1930S: HARD TIMES.....	24
4. THE SPECTACLE OF THE DANCE MARATHONS: STRUGGLE, HOPE, ENDURANCE, AND SURVIVAL.....	30
5. A DAY IN THE LIFE.....	37
6. GENDER ON THE MARATHON FLOOR: BLURRING AND LENDING.....	61
7. PERFORMANCE REALITY OF SOCIAL DRAMA: REDRESSIVE ACTION AND REINTEGRATION	74
8. REALITY-TV AND DANCE MARATHONS: A POSTSCRIPT.....	79
CONCLUSION.....	83
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	88
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	94

PREFACE

It was in my “American Dance History II” class at Florida State University that I first became interested in dance marathons. While the topic sounded vaguely familiar, I was not sure where I had previously heard of these events. Perhaps it was the dance marathon charity events held by numerous Greek societies at universities across the nation, or maybe the marathons had been discussed at some point in one of my undergraduate courses. Regardless of where I was first exposed to the dance marathon phenomenon, I was hooked on the topic and, after reading the assigned material and attending the class lecture including scenes from the motion picture *They Shoot Horses Don't They?*, I was definitely enthralled.

That semester I wrote two papers, one on the history of dance marathons and the other exploring the gender relationships played out in the events. My research led me to Carol Martin’s *Dance Marathons* and Frank Calabria’s *Dance of the Sleepwalkers*. I also picked up Horace McCoy’s novel *They Shoot Horses Don't They?* and a DVD of the motion picture based upon his book. By the end of the semester I had succumbed to a mild addiction to the dance marathons of the 1930s.

When the time came for me to choose a thesis topic, I was torn. I was still interested in the dance marathons, but was not sure that I could add much to the story Martin and Calabria had already documented. As a student of American history, I had developed an affinity for the early decades of the 20th century, especially the beginnings of American modern dance and social dance styles. As I considered options for my thesis topic, it became clear through discussions with my faculty advisors and peers that the dance marathon was a good fit with my academic interests and I already had a base of research upon which to build.

Once the question of a thesis topic was settled, I was still undecided on the perspective my research would assume. On the advice of my thesis advisor, Dr. Sally Sommer, I returned to Victor Turner’s work with tribal cultures and found that his theories of ritual process and social drama could be applied to the dance marathons. I found Turner’s theories thought provoking and decided to focus on how the marathons served as a redressive action for the participants and spectators during the economic and social upheaval of the Great Depression. As I researched and applied Turner’s theory, the thesis slowly revealed itself; I came to view the dance marathons as more than entertainment and spectacle—they were a way of life.

The finished text examines the historical significance of the dance marathons (something that has been substantially underplayed in both the world of dance and American society in general) and applies Turner's theories to the marathon events, the marathoners, and the audience members. Dance marathons were an extraordinary form of entertainment that, though born of the frivolous excess of the 1920s, were reinvented in the 1930s, ultimately to become a symbol of the struggle and hope that characterized America during the Great Depression.

Finally, the relevance of this historical examination is demonstrated by a comparison of the dance marathons to another equally absorbing form of entertainment, the current Reality TV craze. As I began to recognize that the dance marathons and Reality TV shared similar underlying characteristics and functions, I found newspaper articles that suggested the same parallels. Though the last chapter is brief and less developed, it serves to position the dance marathons within a continuum of entertainment that has reached a massive scale in the 21st century through the convenient, intrusive, and ubiquitous nature of television. Though different in form and medium, both dance marathons and Reality TV are rooted in struggle; they present a challenge, create drama, and are fueled by hope. I anticipate further research in this area and the possible future emergence of yet another competitive entertainment spectacle along the same continuum.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Flagpole Dancers	49
2. On your mark, get set, DANCE	50
3. Couple #30.....	51
4. Smitty & Ruthie.....	52
5. Yours for Endurance.....	53
6. Tom & Rita.....	54
7. Primping for the contest.....	55
8. Sleeping dancers.....	56
9. The 3,327 th hour.....	57
10. Dragging her partner.....	58
11 Keep those knees up.....	59
12. The weaker sex	60

ABSTRACT

Americans first experienced and embraced dance marathons in 1923, after which these events quickly gained popularity. But the dance marathon that burst upon the scene as yet another fad in keeping with the ebullient nature of the 1920s was dissimilar in form and intent from the dance marathon as it would evolve during the depression years of the 1930s. Within a decade, dance marathons were quickly transformed into a combination of contest and entertainment, replete with spectacle, humor, horror, romance suspense, and drama. By applying Victor Turner's rites of passage and social drama theories to these contests, the dance marathon circuit is revealed to have been a society within, and to a great degree separate from, the larger American society. This viewpoint serves to demonstrate why and how the marathon developed as it did. The specific social drama that developed within the marathon was a smaller reflection of the nation's larger Meta drama – establishing the micro within the macro of society. Viewed from this perspective – as a secondary or alternate society – social drama is confirmed to be the main utility in its development.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1928 and 1934 when the Great Depression was devastating America, dance marathons¹ became a major form of popular entertainment. Forced to consider all options for economic and emotional survival, many people chose the dance marathons. For the watchers, it was a diversion that held out the hope of seeing someone beat the odds and win, but most importantly, it was about them, a performative representation of people physically enduring gruelingly hard times. For contestants, winning meant earning money and maybe going on to bigger and better things. For the losers, they temporarily had hopes, food, shelter, and stability in an unstable world.

Simply defined, a dance marathon was a competition to see which couple could dance or stay upright for the longest period of time without stopping. As Harold Stern described it in *Dance Magazine*, “Despite the use of the word ‘dance,’ the dance marathon was not a dance event so much as a social phenomenon. It demanded everything in the way of stamina and determination.”²

Initially dance marathons were a product of the excessive mood of frivolity and celebration that characterized the 1920s and, as such, the concept behind them was both simple and naïve. Early marathoners wanted to break endurance records and gain fame. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, the Great Depression had altered the marathons. “Whereas in the 1920s marathons were part of the mood of liberated living in the name of patriotism, in the 1930s they represented arduous struggle for survival.”³

As the Depression worsened and many Americans were without work or shelter, their physical body became their only commodity. The Depression-era dance marathon contestants used their bodies as the tool through which they might achieve some measure of economic success. Ironically, although they may have succeeded in controlling their bodies to endure endless hours on the dance floor they were controlled by the marathon promoters. Spectators

¹ Dance marathons can also be referred to as walkathons. This term was used after 1928-1929, but dance marathons will be used for this particular paper. However, walkathons and dance marathons are interchangeable expressions in most respects, when discussing endurance-dance competitions of the 1920s and 1930s.

² Harold Stern, “Dance Marathons...Look Back in Horror” *Dance Magazine*. Feb 1970, 68.

³ Carol Martin, “Dance Marathons,” in *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, ed. Jeanne Selma Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 324-325.

frequented the marathons for different reasons. Perhaps they had family or friends dancing, or they had nowhere else to go, or they found the event exhilarating. Contestants and audiences alike were included in the realm of the marathon. “Dance marathons added music and sex appeal, plus the tension of rooting for your particular hero and heroines, whose history and ambitions were endlessly recited by fast-talking master of ceremonies.”⁴ Though the spectators were not included in the specific acts as the dancers, they too were “playing.” Audiences could reevaluate themselves and their luck while watching a competition, re-experiencing and witnessing acts of loss and humiliation.

By applying Victor Turner’s⁵ theories of ritual and theatre, and his theories about social drama and *rites of passage* in analyzing the significance and emergence of dance marathons during the Depression, marathons are positioned within the larger social circumstance. Moreover, Turner’s analysis reveals the symbiotic interactions among these different systems. The events leading up to and following the stock market crash on “Black Thursday,” October 24, 1929, neatly fit his definition of *crises* in a social system.

For me the dramaturgical phase begins when *crises* arise in the daily flow of social interaction. Thus, if daily living is a kind of theatre, social drama is a kind of metatheatre, that is, dramaturgical language about the language of ordinary role-playing and status maintenance which constitutes communication in the quotidian social process.⁶

The underlying theme in Turner’s social drama is that theatre as ritual *is always* functional, and acts as an emotional coping mechanism for those within the larger meta-drama. The marathoner proved to be everything the audience was fortunate *not* to be. They could vicariously use the marathon as a reflexive action and perspective to examine their own lives. Spectators felt an association with the marathoners because they, too, wanted to be successful. They may have been fortunate enough to not need to compete, but they felt empathy for the contestants. Dancers were models of optimism, strength and endurance.

⁴ Peter Buckman, *Lets Dance: Social, Ballroom, and Folk Dancing*, (New York: Paddington Press, Ltd., 1978), 184-185.

⁵ Victor Turner (1920-1983) distinguished anthropologist and ethnographer best known for his work with Ritual Process and Social Drama theories, defined through his research of the African Ndembu tribe.

⁶ Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*. (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 5-6.

For those who picked the winner, there is an even greater sense of contentment. If you choose the winner then you too must be a winner. Empathetic witnessing, then, becomes what Turner calls a *redressive action* by association with a positive. “It is the third phase of a social drama, redress that has most to do with the genesis and sustentation of cultural genres, both “high” and “folk,” oral and literate.”⁷ The marathon losers, who were all other contestants except the winning couple, earned commiseration as well. There is the inevitable relief of “Thank goodness that is not me!” coupled with the privilege and comfort of sitting and observing someone who is worse off. Watchers were also “losers” and victims of impersonal powers that controlled everything. They too had few economic options, and though they were not performing in the marathons, they had too much time on their hands (unemployed), which allowed them to continuously attend week after week. The spectators could weep for the performers, for themselves, and everybody else. Witnessing the struggle of every man, they gained a reflexive perspective vicariously. Catharsis relieves tensions and facilitates the ability to handle personal tragedies.

Social drama is performative and redressive. Promoters ensured the contest’s continuing appeal and impact during the 1930s by inserting theatrical *divertissements* throughout. Whether interjected as brutal elimination derbies, vaudeville acts, cot night, or special dances, everything was perfectly organized and timed. Even when something unplanned occurred, such as a contestant becoming ill, it only raised the excitement. The marathon was a piece of theatre, but as Turner notes, “Life, after all, is as much an imitation of art as the reverse.”⁸ By creating this micro-community and restricting it to the performance space of the dance floor, each action and behavior became performative.

The economic and social conditions of the 1920s and 1930s proved to be the means that transformed the dance marathons from a lark to a purposeful endeavor and bore witness to women’s sturdiness and resilience. Female mental and physical prowess had been hidden and suppressed by the strong patriarchal hegemony of the early 1900s. The exclusive world of the dance marathons provided an environment that encouraged women to depart from the dominant stereotypic gender roles. Success on the marathon circuit demanded that women behave in ways

⁷ Victor Tuner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

that challenged the orthodox values of the broader society and resulted in a sub-culture in which roles reversals and other “unwonted” gender behaviors were tacitly accepted. The impact of the marathon milieu on American society can be illustrated through an examination of the roles and the views of the participants, the spectators, and adversaries.

In fact, the blurring of the line between female and male gender roles was a target for religious reformers and others who waged war against what they considered the “exploitation” of women in dance marathons. But many other women and feminists of the time did not respond negatively to this blurring of roles. Rather they took pride in the women who endured, surviving mentally and physically, even outlasting their male partners. But as the women of the 1920s and 1930s earned admiration for their endurance and strength in marathons, they created a legacy that profoundly affected future generations of American women.

It is ironic that the number one form of entertainment for millions of Americans during the 1920s and 1930s seems to have been completely forgotten. Yet, at a time when many Americans were struggling to survive the economic collapse of the Great Depression, dance marathons provided the perfect performance. Marathons reflected the triumphs and difficulties of the period and consequently became a mixed blessing—a source of both pleasure and discontent to many Americans. They also dramatized an essential human truth. Success would always demand endurance. Only the obstacles would be different.

THESIS CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL CONTEXT PRE 1920: DANCING TOWARDS A NEW DECADE AND MODERNISM

Although dance marathons are most readily remembered as a popular form of American entertainment during the years of the Great Depression (1929-1939), the fad originated in 1923 and continued to evolve throughout the 1920s and 1930s. For the United States, the years following World War I (WWI) provided an environment that encouraged fads such as marathon dancing. Further developments in the marathons depended on not only what had occurred in the preceding years but also on what transpired after the crash of the stock market in 1929. As the American economy began to recover in the late 1930s, just prior to America entering World War II (WWII), individuals focused their time, energy, and endurance on other endeavors and, consequently, dance marathon contests began to lose their popularity.

In 1918, when WWI or the “Great War” ended, 50,000 American soldiers lay dead. The nation welcomed the surrender of Germany and hoped that the horror and sacrifice had been sufficient to end all wars. Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, signaled the war’s end, and crowds rallied in celebration, hopeful that normalcy would return once again. Although life in the United States slowly began to resemble that of the pre-war years, there were changes in the social and political environment of the country that could not be ignored. Proposing the institution of a permanent League of Nations to prevent another war, President Woodrow Wilson tried to implement his “Fourteen Points,” a plan that he believed would better postwar life economically and politically. Unfortunately, many Americans as well as some European countries held Germany responsible for the carnage of the war and, therefore, refused her admittance to the League. Ultimately, in 1919 the Senate voted 55 to 39 against the Treaty of Versailles, which resulted in Germany and America signing a separate treaty.⁹

Economically, a slight downturn followed WWI, raising the price of living. While salaries for some Americans increased as living costs rose, for many other Americans it did not. As veterans returned from the war, apartment and housing shortages caused rents to escalate. In response, all expenses went up, including food, clothing, and taxes. The cost of milk rose from

⁹ Carla Blank, ed., *Rediscovering America: The Making of Multicultural America, 1900-2000*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003), 92 & 94.

nine cents in 1914 to fifteen cents in 1919, and the price of fresh eggs increased from thirty-four to sixty-two cents.¹⁰

Perhaps the most drastic change for many Americans following WWI was the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, the “National Prohibition Act.” This amendment, ratified January 16, 1919, and effective January 16, 1920, banned the production, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors.¹¹ Supporters of prohibition felt that Americans had become too reliant on alcoholic beverages, and that drinking and the behaviors it engendered did not fit with the morals and Puritan values upon which our country was based. Further, beer drinking was associated with Germany at a time when prejudices still ran high. Thus, a decline in beer consumption and production occurred during Prohibition. The outcome was the introduction of “bathtub gin,” easily made and bootlegged—the attitude was “gin and anything” to drink.¹²

As America moved out of the formal Progressive Era (1860-1920) and into the modern era of the 1920s, lawmakers found it nearly impossible to enforce the 18th Amendment and keep the illegal consumption of alcohol in check. Daniel Snowman states it was:

...one of the most abused and ignored laws in history. Its main effects were to encourage the manufacture, sale and consumption of vile homemade brews of various sorts and the wide scale practice of smuggling, and it gave rise to an era of violence and lawlessness that called into disrepute the whole corpus of American law and the very concept of law enforcement. While alcohol was banned, it became all the more attractive.¹³

Speakeasies and the underground business of bootlegging liquor thrived. As historian Carla Blank confirms, “The new law made it almost fashionable for ordinary people to break the law.”¹⁴ Americans discovered a newfound excitement in their “lawlessness.” As “outlaws,” they celebrated the risks of living on the edges of propriety and stretching the boundaries. The 1920s erupted with new and drastic changes in what was acceptable behavior for men and

¹⁰ Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday, an Informal History of the 1920s*. (New York: Harpers & Brothers Publishers, 1931), 7.

¹¹ Blank, 94.

¹² Daniel Snowman, *America Since 1920*. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 39.

¹³ Snowman, 39.

¹⁴ Blank, 94.

women. Women were more radicalized. They were assertive enough to engage in such behaviors as smoking in public and dressing in skimpier attire.

As modernity engulfed Americans, they found new pleasures in the changing dance scene. In the area of American popular entertainment and culture, a strong upbeat mood had prevailed since the early teens (prior to WWI). American social dance fads swept across the country and across the world. First was the Cakewalk¹⁵ of the late 1890s and early 1900s, followed by the popular ragtime music and one-step dances (c.1907 to the nineteen-teens). Then, notably from 1911 to 1916, the enormously popular dance team of Vernon and Irene Castle toured Europe and the United States demonstrating to millions of fans that American social dance could be glamorous, romantic and accessible. The Castles personified the beautiful couple, effortlessly proving that ballroom and cabaret dancing could be classy and fun. Writing about American social and public practices of this time, Lewis Erenberg¹⁶ states, “Mayors, vice commissions, and social reformers looked on in horror at what they considered the degeneration of public and private morality, but they were powerless...Dancing was becoming a regular and public urban form of entertainment.”¹⁷

Social dancing as a public activity had often been associated with dance halls and saloons, thereby tainting it with notions of promiscuity. But as the 1900s progressed, private ballroom dancing and public social dancing began to merge into the increasingly respectable nightlife and nightclubs. Dancing together became a way for men and women to meet publicly and engage in acceptable behaviors, including tasteful dancing. The dance craze was so popular that in New York City’s Gimbel’s department store they gave afternoon tango teas for seventy-five cents and even entertained the dancers by showing them the latest fashions.¹⁸

¹⁵ The Cakewalk was the first national and international social dance craze. An African-American dance it included movement with high stepping and strutting. It was an exhibition dance of black Americans making fun of and mimicking white American dance styles (Erenberg, 151).

¹⁶ Erenberg’s book *Steppin’ Out* examines New York nightlife and its evolution from the Victorian era to the Jazz Age (1890-1930) focusing on amusements, cabarets, the Castles, Sophie Tucker, Broadway chorus girls, and Harlem jazz.

¹⁷ Lewis A. Erenberg. *Steppin’ Out, New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981; reprint, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 146 & 147.

¹⁸ Abel Green & Joe Laurie Jr. *Show Biz from Vaude to Video*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1951), 134.

In a parallel evolution, African-American rhythms that defined the tempo of ragtime music and dance were fused into American psyches and bodies. It was acceptable for white men and women to enjoy fresh black music and the dance styles of ragtime, blues, and jazz. As the cabaret life-style expanded, men and women were no longer restricted to dancing only in the pre-planned and chaperoned ballroom setting. By 1919, jazz-infused music had replaced the string orchestra. People of all social classes and ethnicities joined in the liberation of dance and performed such dances as the Fox Trot and other wacky animal dances like the Turkey Trot, the Kangaroo Hop, the Monkey Hug and Grizzly Bear, to name a few.¹⁹ As dancing became popular, moralists worried about the public role of women as they made contact with men in open society. Earlier standards of feminine decorum and ideals demanded that women demonstrate a greater reserve. In the Victorian and Edwardian period, the private and public spheres were two very different places and a proper woman would probably not be seen in public without her husband or a relative. These earlier standards of what constituted proper behavior are the reason why moral reformers struggled with the dance crazes of the nineteen-teens.

Women, as bearers of class and culture, were to inhabit a distinct sphere. In this atmosphere, it was difficult to introduce respectable women into public, commercial dance halls associated in the public mind with concert saloons that dispense liquor and prostitution. The fear of women mixing with all elements of urban life mitigated against widespread public dancing.²⁰

Reformers and moralists railed against new behaviors. “The press was filled with dramatic accounts of innocent daughters tempted by glittering dance halls, seduced and drugged by ruthless pimps, and held against their will in brothels.”²¹ Notwithstanding these fears, the walls between women’s private and public lives began to break down -- and dancing certainly aided in this process before and during the war years.

Still, dance adversaries attempted to weaken the dance craze. They thought it was highly inappropriate for a man and woman to move so closely together. The “neck hold” was one move that was linked to licentiousness since it could be observed in dirty dance halls where “women

¹⁹ Allen, 9; Erenberg, 150; and Blank, 77.

²⁰ Erenberg, 148.

²¹ Kathy Peiss, *Amusements, Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 98.

clasped their partners around the coat collar, men held their hands around the base of women's necks."²² As music and dances altered, dancers moved closer together and, in many cases, the couple's legs became entwined as they held each other.

As the music became more personalized in jazz, so did the dancing. The more individual the feelings became, the more moralists had problems with dancing. They refused to accept dancing as tolerable public activity. Reformers complaining about marathons in the later 1920s and early 1930s would echo these same revisionist attitudes denouncing dancing and physical closeness.

By 1919, most women emerged from the strictures of their private lives as the private became increasingly public. They lived more freely and appropriately in both arenas. "The renaissance of public dancing, furthermore, provided young men and women a relatively safe place and manner of searching out the sexual factors for marriage and lifelong companionship."²³ The surge in public dancing illustrated how many of the younger generation were rejecting the older parental, Victorian and Edwardian morals. Instead, the new morals said: "the woman who dances does not need other beauty aides; beauty will seek her."²⁴ Advocates of dance hoped to prove to the adversaries and reformers that dancing promoted a better life. "Dancing is not only a rejuvenator of good health and spirits, but a means for preserving youth, prolonging life, and acquiring grace, elegance and beauty."²⁵ Predictably, as the population grew, so did the number of dance halls and dance palaces, which helped to acclimate women's participation in a public social life.²⁶

With the end of the Progressive Era and the dominance of Edwardian morals, women moved forward in the public arena and in their struggle for gender and social equality. In 1913, Lucy Burns and Alice Paul formed the Congressional Union, later to become the National Women's Party in 1916. Their goal was to bring awareness to the cause of suffrage and rally women to participate in strikes and to picket, thereby furthering equality for all men and women.

²² Green, 134.

²³ Erenberg, 156.

²⁴ Mr. and Mrs. Castle, *Modern Dancing*, (New York: Harper Bros., 1914): 151; quoted in Erenberg, 166.

²⁵ Mr. and Mrs. Castle, foreward; quoted in Erenberg, 167.

²⁶ Peiss, 90.

One year later, in 1914, birth control was introduced, and two years later Margaret Sanger opened her first clinic in Brooklyn, New York. “Birth control is the first important step a woman must take toward the goal of her freedom. It is the first step she must take to be a man’s equal.”²⁷ The work of Sanger and the American Birth Control League was important and helped to lower the birthrate from 27.7 per thousand in 1920, to 21.2 per thousand in 1929.²⁸

By 1916, slow progress was being made towards equality and getting women the right to vote. The first woman was elected to the United States House of Representatives, Republican Jeanette Rankin representing Montana, was a pacifistic and is remembered today as the only legislator to vote against WWI and WWII.²⁹ When America entered WWI in 1917, women for the first time were permitted to serve the country in its war efforts. “The Navy [swore] in 12,500 women they [called] ‘Yeomen,’ the Marine Corp [enlisted] 305 ‘Marinettes,’ and the army [sent] 1,000 overseas.”³⁰

During the war, American women had gone to work to replace the men who were off fighting. In 1914, after Henry Ford increased his workers’ pay from the standard \$2.34 to \$5.00 per day; a minimum wage of \$9.00 a week was set for women. Things were looking more positive.³¹ Early feminists/suffragists took pride in women entering the workforce, despite the fact, that women were being paid less than men for the same job.³² Prior to and during the war years the suffrage movement gradually acquired more strength. Finally, on June 4, 1919 Congress passed the 19th Amendment, giving women the right to vote.³³

As the decade of the teens ended, women’s fashions started to reflect the progress towards modernism. In 1919, shortly after WWI, a stylish woman might wear a suit skirt that neatly clung tight just above her ankles, about six inches from her feet, with black stockings and low heels. A few years earlier the same woman might have worn a corset, a full covering blouse,

²⁷ Margaret Sanger, “Morality and Birth Control,” February 1918; quoted in Blank, 88.

²⁸ T.H. Watkins, *The Great Depression, American in the 1930s*, (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1993), 36.

²⁹ Blank, 86.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

³² *Ibid.*, 92-93.

³³ *Ibid.*, 83.

with a skirt and two petticoats and with thick ruffles on her undergarments. With such shifts it was easy to understand such statements as this one: “not since the days of the Bourbons has the woman of fashion been visible so far above the ankle.”³⁴ Yet women’s fashions and styles would continue to radically alter throughout the 1920s, with ever-shorter hemlines and haircuts, producing the undisputed iconic image of the 1920s woman: the feminine, yet boyish flapper.

Historian Daniel Snowman states that the time between the end of WWI and the crash of the stock market in 1929 was a period of calm, which America had not previously known. “There was [*sic*] no major revolutionary or radical movements, no sustained or recurrent riots...1922-29 saw a period of uninterrupted economic progress...available to an increasingly large proportion of upper-and middle-class Americans.”³⁵ As the 19th Amendment heralded and symbolized advances of the Progressive movement, the 18th Amendment, in an unintended irony encouraged an age of excess. Recovering from the war and moving forward with life, Americans engaged in a golden era of fun and fads that included dancing, significant changes in fashion, illegal drinking, speakeasies, and blues music. Excess seemed to be the key theme. Jazz (ragtime evolving into swing) and the blues’ rhythms of African Americans had been absorbed by the young white population. Dance halls, cabarets, and clubs teemed with night clubbers who loved the latest black styles and dance movements associated with the new music crazes.

After the burdens and tragedies of WWI the nation retreated from internationalism and voted in a new presidential administration to lead the country in a new era. Warren G. Harding was elected the 29th President in 1920 and “promise[d] a return to normalcy,” for the American people and the economy. In 1920, Harding outlined the country’s needs,

America’s present need is not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy; not revolution, but restoration; not agitation, but adjustment; not surgery, but serenity; not the dramatic, but the dispassionate; not experiment, but equipoise; not submergence in internationality, but sustainment in triumphant nationality...³⁶

³⁴ Allen, 2

³⁵ Snowman, 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

Although the Republican Harding seemed to say the right things about rebuilding post-war America, he was a poor leader. Corruption and political scandals led to his professional and personal demise, and he died of a heart attack in 1924 before completing his term.³⁷ Harding's sudden death vaulted vice president Calvin Coolidge into the oval office to complete Harding's term. In 1924, Coolidge was elected in his own right as the 30th President of the United States. To many, Coolidge's idea of government and big business working together was a sure sign of economic affluence and an assurance that Americans would show their wealth and power to the whole world.³⁸

Many people forgot (unconsciously or not) the horrors of WWI and the brief economic depression that had followed. Instead, the onset of the 1920s indicated that the wealth and power of America was growing. People were benefiting from the good times, making and spending money. The stock market expanded and investors from middle-class families took part in the newfound game of "playing the market." For most of the decade stocks continued to rise, and thousands of Americans now had a "position" in the market. By 1925, the market was worth over \$34 billion. By 1929, just before "Black Thursday," the market had risen to \$64 billion, almost doubling.³⁹ Despite the market's record growth and the beginning of an increased number of middle-class investors, the 1920s was still represented by two extremes—the very rich and the very poor. "The top one per cent earned almost 15 percent of all earned incomes. In 1929, one-third of all personal income was being earned by the top five percent."⁴⁰

As the economy expanded so did the building of American cities. Large numbers of people left the rural farm areas and migrated to the nation's cities and suburban districts. This left the population in many rural communities and small towns older, whiter, and more Protestant and traditional. They were uneasy about the cities and large urban areas which they pictured as squalid, teeming with immigrants or un-Americanized people.⁴¹ Despite these beliefs and a

³⁷ Blank, 106.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁰ Snowman, 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

reverence for the American agrarian lifestyle, people continued to flee, joining the migrating flood from countryside to city.

Architecturally, mass-produced houses, such as those from Sears & Roebuck, and the building of skyscrapers, allowed cities such as New York and Chicago to grow both vertically and horizontally.⁴² Inspired by dynamism and machines, streamlined Art-Deco design styles became the rage during the 1920s and the 1930s. Merging *art nouveau* with Cubism, this modern style was employed extensively in architecture and interior designs as well as appliances, furniture, fashion, graphics, and the exterior of houses and business. A few notable architectural examples include the Empire State Building, built in 1931, and the Chrysler Building, completed in 1930.⁴³

The 1920s were truly a prelude to the age of communication and consumerism. The economy was good and Americans were eager to spend the money that began to seem abundant. With the rapid growth and popularity of radio, Americans could listen to music, shows, and national leaders inside the comfort of their own homes. This was an age of modernism and robust economy, mass advertising and mass production of goods. Commercials now played over the radio and, with the popularity of radio shows and music, the big radio conglomerates of NBC and CBS were formed by the 1930s. Shopping centers were created in order for Americans to obtain what they needed or wanted. The first of its kind in the world, the Country Club Plaza opened in Kansas City in 1922.⁴⁴

After struggling to get the vote, the women of America finally achieved a level of success and voted for the first time ever in the 1920 election. Their national political party was called the Women's Party and Alice Paul was the first woman candidate for president. The National League of Women Voters was founded to help women make educated decisions about their newfound political freedom.⁴⁵ In 1925, two women were inaugurated as governors: Nellie Ross, a Democrat in Wyoming, and Miriam "Ma" Ferguson, a Democrat, from Texas.⁴⁶ Women

⁴² Blank, 100 & 58.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 100 & 103.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

continued to flood the work place accounting for 20.4% (or 8.6 million women) of the work force, in contrast to comprising only 19.9% (7.5 million) a decade earlier.

With their newly achieved political power, and the progress they had made on issues of equality, the “modern” women of the 1920s broke free. More than any other name, “Flapper,” as it applied to young women of the 1920s, defined this age of liberation, indulgence, and enjoyment. The flapper represented the new woman full of modern ideas living an unshackled lifestyle. She no longer worried about standing out in public or staying close to her private sphere. The woman of the 1920s took on the public defiantly. Fashions had shifted from the lace petticoats of the early teens to the pencil skirts and blouses of the late teens. However, the fashions that defined the 1920s were far more radical -- flaunting *everything* shorter. “With bobbed hair and pudding-basin hat, her rouge and lipstick, her flattened breast, her waistless short skirt, her flesh colored stockings...”⁴⁷ flappers were a sleek icon of the evolution of woman, a nod towards an abstracted Art-Deco modernism in the flesh.

Drinking and dancing were *a la mode*. Prohibition went into effect in 1920, but Americans continued with their parties and liberations.⁴⁸ An important contributor to the new excitement of nightlife was the glamorous, chic era known as the Harlem Renaissance, which began to be recognized nationally during the 1920s. The creolized blend of styles had produced the new African-American forms of music, visual arts, writing and, of course, dancing. These were now admitted as products for popular consumption. White New Yorkers made the pilgrimage uptown to watch, participate in, and copy the African-American dance styles and music. Soon, jazz, ragtime music, and dances such as the Charleston were thriving in nightclubs, speakeasies, and cabarets across the country.⁴⁹

The Charleston probably dates back to 1904-1905 to Charleston, South Carolina where an early version was danced by African Americans. In 1923, it burst into mainstream popularity through the Broadway musical, “Runnin’ Wild.” White Americans were enthralled and fascinated with the dance and, by 1928, it had spread throughout the world.⁵⁰ Posters, sheet music covers, fashions and records attest to the national and international success of the

⁴⁷ Snowman, 17.

⁴⁸ Blank, 94.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵⁰ Jacqui Malone, *Steppin’ on the Blues* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 77.

Charleston during the 1920s and 1930s. An enormously fashionable form of participatory dance and stage entertainment, it was done by everyone, regardless of culture, ethnicity or economic status.

This vibrant social scene of the 1920s, “the jazz age,” spawned phenomena of fads and excesses. F. Scott Fitzgerald, a major American writer and chronicler of the 1920s, accurately described a decade of frivolous endeavors in his novel *The Great Gatsby*. He understood the importance of the display of wealth and pursuit of pleasure to his generation. But he also saw that these values merely covered up deeper problems. In his book *America Since 1920*, Daniel Snowman alludes to this reality.

F. Scott Fitzgerald writes ambivalently about the rich. They are he says wistfully ‘different from us’, but he knows that the perfect girl of the period—the ideal flapper—should be not only ‘lovely’ and ‘nineteen’ but also ‘expensive’. He is critical of the undeserved wealth of a poseur like Gatsby, but he knows that only the man with wealth can really have the opportunity of enjoying all that life has to offer.⁵¹

The young men and women of the “Roaring Twenties” flourished in the social milieu and nightlife excitement of jazz, illegal booze and dancing. They lived very differently than their parents’ stricter generation and they reveled in their rebellious, unconventional habits.

There was a huge increase in attendance of spectator sports and entertainments. Whatever it might be, people invested financially and emotionally in the fads and nonsense that were popularized—Americans wanted to see victory in all forms.⁵²

...so the more leisured Americans continued to idolize sporting heroes and film stars, to sit on flagpoles and play Mah-Jongg, to drive all over the country in their flivvers, or, if these pastimes did not satisfy them, to concoct and consume poisonous hooch, to make vitriolic speeches about their less fortunate neighbors, and to shoot one another.⁵³

Perhaps the recent victory of WWI compelled Americans to see themselves as invincible. Americans had worked hard to rebuild their livelihood after the war and they sought liberation in their leisure, “...The age was one of absurd high jinks, of flagpole-sitting sessions and marathon

⁵¹ Snowman, 14.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 41.

dances; one year crossword puzzles were all the rage...”⁵⁴ Above all, the people found interest in American people doing American things -- whether it was football, boxing, running, or dancing.

Mass entertainment had become a vast enterprise encompassing theatre, cabarets, movie houses, and vaudeville, but, the favorite pastime for many was films. It had been noted that the movie industry, more than any other type of entertainment in the 1920s, “created a reckless lack of appreciation of true values.”⁵⁵ Movies and Hollywood had taken control of many Americans’ idealistic views of their world and their romances. According to Snowman, movies were more popular than ever and by 1926, 17,000 film houses were running, which formed no less than 97% of all amusement houses in the country.⁵⁶ Theatre and live entertainment had always been keenly attractive—but with the development of the film industry, Americans could see more stories and far-off places without leaving their hometowns. Movies of the time certainly depicted the foolish, flamboyant conventions of the 1920s, and the chic opulence that average Americans hoped to gain some day.

Competitions, crazes and fads swept the nation. Americans sought to prove themselves to the rest of the world and to one another. Americans were fascinated by any attempt to break any record -- no matter how meaningless, stupid or noble. Their pursuit of fame became a pastime, and there were always things that had never been done before. People wanted to be the “first;” the fads continued to develop, and crowds flocked to witness the phenomenon.⁵⁷

There were dance marathons, kissing competitions, marathon handholding contests, egg-eating contests, gum-chewing races, and flagpole sitting. One man, on a dare of \$500, pushed a peanut up Pike’s Peak with his nose, completing the task in thirty days.⁵⁸ Fads varied from silly hotdog eating contests, to the ridiculous and risky dancing of the Charleston atop skyscrapers and strapped to the wings of airplanes. The prominent and significant record-breaking endeavors of the period were the achievements of American aviators Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart, and long-distance swimmer, Gertrude Ederle. No matter how little or how well known,

⁵⁴ Snowman, 27.

⁵⁵ Watkins, 24.

⁵⁶ Snowman, 28.

⁵⁷ Carol Martin, ed. “Life on the Floor, Art, Sport, and Scam: Dance Marathons of the Twenties and Thirties,” *New Observations*, No. 39, 1986, 3.

⁵⁸ Martin, “Life on the Floor,” 3.

citizens were eager to prove that America could do it bigger, longer, and better.⁵⁹ “Lindbergh himself epitomized for many people—in his healthy and rugged appearance, his self-effacing charm, and his physical courage—all the legendary American virtues which seemed in the 1920s to be at such a premium.”⁶⁰ Americans sought national and hometown fame, in all and any possible arenas.

Given this competitive environment and the popularity of dances like the Charleston and Black Bottom it was no surprise that dancing would also become a competition-form for record setting. Dance was an activity in which the average American could participate. Moreover, no one needed to be a good dancer in order to win an endurance contest. Dance marathons seemed to catch on quicker and became more popular than many other fads. For those who had little patience for peanut pushing and flagpole sitting, dancing was the likely option.⁶¹ Americans recognized the need for ordinary entertainment, and the savor of dance-endurance contests fit this mold. Rising to the challenge, Americans took up the fad, and endurance dance swept across America. As dance-marathon historian, Carol Martin states, “this provided an arena where people could use this new physical freedom to describe and test the changing constellations of heterosexual relationships and class divisions.”⁶²

As an era, the 1920s capitalized contradictory characteristics and an explosive energy of recovery and freedoms.

[It was] an age of conformity and of liberation, of the persistence of rural values and the triumph of the city, of isolationism and new internationalist ventures, of *laissez-faire*, but also of government intervention, of competition and of merger, of despair and of joyous abandon.⁶³

Americans had triumphed in the war, and they felt youthful power in themselves and in their country. They basked in the glory in proving their worth to one another and the world.

⁵⁹ Carol Joyce Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, (Ph.D. diss. New York University, 1991), 6.

⁶⁰ Snowman, 29.

⁶¹ Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 1.

⁶² Martin “Life on the Floor,” 3.

⁶³ William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity* (Chicago: University of Chicago); quoted in Snowman, 22.

Although it was a time of lightheartedness and whimsical pastimes, America was turbulent as well during the 1920s. The country was evolving slowly from a nation of small rural towns and farming townspeople into a burgeoning industrial powerhouse, with a growing class of white-collar, professional city dwellers. Americans were attempting to balance themselves in-between the new and the old.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Snowman, 22-23.

THESIS CHAPTER TWO

THE 1920'S MAD-CAP FADS: THE HULLABALOO OF ENDURANCE DANCE, FLAGPOLE SITTING, AND PEANUT PUSHING

With the influx of nonsense fads, fame, and spectatorship, it was no wonder that dance marathons, and other crazes, became so popular. Not only was record-breaking an incentive for many, but there was also the lure of money. For those who participated in the fads of the 1920s, eminence and the monetary recognition closely resembled the fun and party attitude of the 1920s.⁶⁵ With mock chauvinism, a 1923 *The New York Times* article gave early recognition to the dance marathon craze and heralded undoubted future American dominance of these competitions.

The good, old-fashion [*sic*], 100 per cent American who thrills afresh at each new demonstration of the superiority of his homeland over other nations of the earth may just as well go up in the attic and get out the flags and dust them off and get ready to celebrate...For it is in the field of dancing that Yankee grit is scoring another triumph. Baring the interference of the law—and what are laws when they go counter both to personal liberty and international rivalry?—right here in our own country [there] will be established—[and it]may already have been established—a record for nonstop dancing that may endure for eternity.⁶⁶

Endurance dancing predates the fads of the 1920s and the concept of dancing until one drops is not uncommon in ritual and religious rites.⁶⁷ Though there is the possibility of earlier dance contests held in the United States before the 20th century, the first official, on record, dance-endurance contest took place in 1910. It occurred when Sid Grauman of Grauman's Theatre in Hollywood promoted a dance marathon in San Francisco. He then produced another three weeks later. Records do not show how long the contests lasted, or who won, but the second marathon was shut down after fifteen hours by doctors who determined the contest was

⁶⁵ Allen, 224.

⁶⁶ Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 37.

⁶⁷ It is speculated that marathon dancing dates back to 1364 London, when citizens danced throughout the streets for four to five days at a time. Although dancing extending, for days and nights may have been documented as early as this 14th century incident, one wonders if America's 20th century phenomenon of non-stop, secular endurance-dance *contests* might be a first for the world? (Frederic D. Schwarz, "The Time Machine, April-1923, Can't Stop Dancin'," *American Heritage* Vol. 49, Issue 2, 1998 April, 118.)

debilitating to the dancers' health. These contests were much tamer than the marathons of later years, and the rules simply stated: "Dancers are not allowed to leave the floor,"⁶⁸ implying that the marathons were not officially structured to provide the fifteen-minute breaks that were later implemented.

Worldwide popularity of American social dances following WWI predated any interest in continuous dancing. The Charleston became the iconic dance associated with the 1920s and everyone was doing it. The fascination with this one particular dance created a sense of competition around the idea of who could dance the Charleston better, and contests to this end began to surface in the 1920s. However, as the contests evolved, the focus shifted away from who was the better dancer, to who could last the longest. One marathon at the Roseland Ballroom in New York City lasted 22 1/2 hours, and the winner, a 23-year-old father, won a week's engagement at the Rivoli Theatre in New York City.⁶⁹

In February, 1923 an English couple named Olie Finnerty and Edgar Van Ollefin, set the first dance-endurance record. The couple, dance teachers from Sunderland, England, danced for seven hours straight—quite brief in terms of the times clocked in the later marathon craze. Olie's and Edgar's success fired others with enthusiasm to beat their seven-hour record. As Martin states, "Probably never before in history had the quality of dancing officially been consigned to a secondary position in favor of quantity."⁷⁰

Alma Cummings was the first American to respond to the dance endurance challenge, beating the English record in April 1923, by dancing for twenty-seven consecutive hours at the Audubon Ballroom, New York. Not only did she set a new record, the 32-year-old Alma out-danced and exhausted six male partners, showing that it was possible for women to out-distance men in an endurance event. In her successful challenge to the English record, Cummings danced the Fox Trot, one-step, and the waltz, and ate a diet of fruit, nuts and near beer.⁷¹ "[When] Cumming's moment of triumph approached, the band, 'which meantime had slept, eaten, been to

⁶⁸ Green, 36.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁷⁰ Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 1.

⁷¹ Near beer was a term used for malt beverages with very little or no alcohol content. Because of its small to non-existent alcohol content it was sold in mass during Prohibition and usually was labeled as cereal beverage, not "beer" and was called near beer by the general public. ("Near Beer" in Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia. Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Near_beer.)

church, and returned, blared ‘The Star-Spangled Banner,’” without doubt a true moment of American pride.⁷² Following Alma’s record-setting performance -- begun at 6:57 Saturday evening March 31, and ended at 9:57 the following night, April 1, 1923 -- dance-endurance contests spread across America as others hoped to prove that they could do it better and longer.⁷³

Alma Cummings only held the world dance record for four days before another dancer successfully challenged her twenty-seven-hour achievement and the big bang of the dance-endurance fad exploded. Americans began competing for supremacy on the dance floor, as individual after individual surpassed the previous record. Interestingly, *women* were the main record holders for many of the early contests and, on more than one occasion, they had worn out their male partners in the process. In the early dance marathons, records were not usually set by couples, but by individuals who traded in their partners as they tired.⁷⁴

Soon, towns across the country began to sponsor dance marathons on a regular basis. The contests included endurance, patriotic blather, grit, and popular dances of the time.⁷⁵ Also referred to as “endurance dance,” “non-stop dance,” “long distance dancing,” “jitterathons,” “speed derbies,” and “walkathons,” the name “dance marathons” gained the most common usage. Americans were intent on proving that their bodies could and would withstand anything--even dancing continuously for hours, days, weeks, and months.⁷⁶

In the short month since Cummings had set the first American dance-endurance record, spectators began to take notice of these events. People attended to support friends or family, and to see a world record set—even if the record only lasted for two days before being broken again. Very quickly professional events promoters learned that there were tricks that would bring in larger audiences. Of course, in these first marathons the dancers actually danced. Whether or not the dancing was well executed, the shuffle-movement of later dance marathons had not yet

⁷² Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 3-4.

⁷³ Frank M. Calabria, *Dance of the Sleepwalkers: The Dance Marathon Fad*, (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 6; and Ian Driver, *A Century of Dance*, (London: Octopus Publishing Group Limited, 2000), 134.

⁷⁴ Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 9.

⁷⁵ Martin, “Dance Marathons,” 325.

⁷⁶ Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 2.

emerged.⁷⁷ On May 9, 1923, just one month after the first record was set by Alma Cummings, someone first danced for nearly an entire week. RJ Newman danced for 160 hours and 55 minutes, and held his title longer than most, until he was bested by a Midwestern couple at the end of May.⁷⁸

Originally, the fad was more about breaking and setting a new record than it was about fierce competition between individuals who all desperately wanted the same thing; another example of the giddy 1920s attitude. During the first phase of the early marathons (1923), individuals competed alone to better the record held by another person who could even be in a different state. Rapidly, this developed into numerous couples competing against one another to set new records and win. Little or no admission fee was required, and it was not until John McCartney, manager of the Audubon Ballroom of New York (where Alma Cummings started the fad), began to charge money that marathons became profitable endeavors. Gradually, the “dance” contest, where one was required to stay in a dance position with their partner, became codified as the display of non-stop motion and stamina of the later era.⁷⁹

Even early on, there were adversaries of the contests. The first ban on endurance dancing was instituted on April 10, 1923 in Sunderland England. Following this, the first ban on dance marathons in the U.S. occurred on April 15, 1923.

On this date, in the midst of the excitement of escalating world records, the first ban on dance marathons in the United States was clamped on the contests in Boston. Mayor Curley flatly declared “It is all foolishness to try to reestablish long distance terpsichorean records.”⁸⁰

Another specific law in New York banned endurance contests of any type.

Or, if these laws did not apply, there were specific anti-marathon regulations originally enacted to prevent the grueling bicycle races that had been a fad in an earlier day. The New York Section 832, Article 78, of the penal code read as follows: “in a bicycle race or other contest of skill, speed or endurance, wherein one or more persons shall be contestant or contestants, it shall be unlawful for any contestant to continue in such a race

⁷⁷ Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 20.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 40-42.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

or contest for a longer time than 12 hours during any twenty-four hours. The proprietor, occupant or leasee of the place where such race or contest takes place, consenting to, allowing or permitting any violation of the foregoing provisions of this section is guilty of a misdemeanor.”⁸¹

From the beginning, the popularity of record breaking brought in spectators, but the later undeniably naughty behavior seen in endurance competitions also intrigued the audiences. People in the professional dance community considered the contests demeaning. The term “dance” was used loosely in reference to the contests, since little or no actual dancing took place. The technique and overall importance of dancing was not important. Some took offense at this. What may have started out as a legitimate attempt to dance for as long as possible, mutated into shuffling and struggling to stay upright -- hence the later term “walkathon.” “Louis H. Chalif, VP of the American Society of Teachers of Dancing, [said that it was] ‘dangerous to health, useless as entertainment, and a disgrace to the art and profession of dancing.’”⁸²

Those who opposed the fun and carefree nature of the first marathons, questioned why they appealed to the participants. They found these events to be ugly and uncalled for, despite the fact that they were consistent with the prevailing views, ideas, and social pastimes of the 1920s; playful, silly, and sometimes unnecessary. Nevertheless, dance marathons persisted as a form of American entertainment during the 1920s. “[T]he ballyhoo continued and the country seemed fat, affluent, and happy” until 1929.⁸³

⁸¹ Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 17.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸³ Snowman, 34.

THESIS CHAPTER 3

THE STOCK MARKET CRASH AND THE TURBULENT 1930S: HARD TIMES

Although the mood of the 1920s was positive and pleasurable, and America appeared to be experiencing endless prosperity, things were about to change. The crash of the stock market on October 24, 1929, later referred to as “Black Thursday,” transformed America for the worse. The loss of fifteen billion dollars in a single day signaled an economic downturn that would result in most investors eventually losing everything. Though it took a year or two for some of the nation to feel the full effect of the crash, by the end of 1929 it was evident that the “roaring twenties” had roared away, leaving many Americans jobless, homeless, and hungry.⁸⁴

The Great Depression, a direct result of the stock market crash, left Americans stranded and alone, and unemployment climbed at an astonishing rate. In 1929, the estimated unemployment in the United States was 1,800,000. Just two years later in 1931 that number had risen to 8,700,000 and by 1933 an unbelievable 13,800,000 Americans were unemployed.⁸⁵ In 1931, stocks were worth only 20 percent of their 1929 value. The output of American industry had dropped by 50 percent.⁸⁶

Americans were panicked about their lives and their losses. Those who had been let go from their jobs found that no new work existed. As the Depression deepened, homelessness and hunger intensified and a stunned nation grappled in vain for any form of relief.⁸⁷ Daily, thousands of men waited in lines for a hundred jobs. People sold apples on roadsides or turned to panhandling. It was not uncommon to see entire families waiting in line for bread, and small villages of shacks, called “hoovervilles,”⁸⁸ sprouted up all over the country.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Blank, 130.

⁸⁵ Agnes Rogers, *I Remember Distinctly: A Family Album of the American People 1918-1941* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1947). 125.

⁸⁶ Fred Voget & Mary Kay Voget, “The Butte Walkathon,” *Montana* 1998 48(3), 54.

⁸⁷ Blank, 133.

⁸⁸ Small makeshift homes created by the homeless and named after President Herbert Hoover, who many blamed for the poverty and crash of the American economy.

⁸⁹ Rogers, 126-127.

Hope and confidence gave way to worry and despair. Workers were alarmed to read and hear on the radio that hundreds of thousands of idled workers throughout the country were on the move looking for any kind of work. The unemployed, mostly young men but including some women, drifted across the country, panhandling for pennies and nickels, stealing chickens, and begging for leftovers from back doors. Able-bodied men left home to ‘go on the bum’ where there was work. The Northern Pacific Railway estimated it had thrown 683,000 ‘bums’ from its boxcars in a single year.⁹⁰

By the early 1930s, many had lost everything. Victims of the economic devastation occasionally turned to theft for food or a piece of clothing, and in desperation, some even committed suicide.⁹¹ Hungry, homeless, poverty-stricken and sometimes ill, many Americans had nothing but their bodies. It became their only possession. If you had somewhere to go, you walked. And even if you had nowhere to go, you still walked. For those with few possessions and even fewer prospects, wandering and walking became a way of life; miles were covered looking for work, shelter, and food.

With the landslide election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932, the American public hoped the new administration would provide solutions to their economic problems. Acting upon the mandate the election accorded him, Roosevelt quickly moved to implement changes aimed to improve the nation’s economic picture. However, by the end of 1933, his first year in office, little had changed and the public’s frustrations were rising. The personal income per capita was \$374 as compared to \$705 before 1929. Eventually, FDR’s New Deal programs were effective in helping to increase the demand for workers by providing necessary jobs.⁹² In an effort to fulfill his promise of a “new deal for the forgotten man,” FDR worked to create jobs for as many Americans as possible.⁹³ The New Deal brought to the country new roads, bridges, buildings, railroads, cabins, culverts, trails, and water and sewage lines, all produced by the previously unemployed.⁹⁴ Established in 1933 as a part of the New Deal, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was a federally funded government program that, among other

⁹⁰ Voget, 54.

⁹¹ Allen, 337.

⁹² Melissa Spencer Allen, *The Roles of Popular Entertainment Dance During the Great Depression*, (Masters thesis: Brigham Young University, 2000), 1.

⁹³ Blank, 146.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

sponsorships, employed artists to create art works that represented the common person and depicted daily life in Depression-era America. Under the WPA over 4,000 artists were employed and about 15,000 works produced.⁹⁵

Under FDR's leadership a slow and uncertain recovery began that instilled a sense of hope in the common man. It would take time, but through the New Deal programs, thousands of people were once again working, people who had not worked in more than two years.⁹⁶ The national mood responded tenuously to the hope that an end to the suffering might be within reach. Sadly, despite the New Deal many Americans never escaped the shackles of poverty and scarcity, and were destined to trudge along as best they could. FDR had implemented a remedial alternative to the Great Depression, but Americans would not experience full recovery until 1939-1940, when massive war production began, and industry and the American economy were revitalized.⁹⁷

To those associated with the dance marathons of the 1930s the contests were variously a business venture, a form of entertainment spectacle, or an unlikely "career" entered upon for shelter and succor, or even for fame. Viewed from an external perspective the marathons can serve as a lens through which to analyze the emotional and physical response some Americans had to the Great Depression. As a theoretical framework, the marathon phenomenon can be interpreted as social drama representative of Victor Turner's theory. In response to the economic havoc wreaked upon American life, the dance marathon circuit assumed the form of a separate community for the participants and a reprieve from daily life for the spectators.

Originally, Anthropologist Victor Turner used the term "social drama" in his study of crises situations in African villages. He found that the social drama triggered by crises had a "recurring 'processional form' or 'diachronic profile'—in other words crisis situations tended to have a regular series of phases."⁹⁸ Social dramas can occur in communities or societies where the timing is aligned for all four phases to transpire.

⁹⁵ Blank, 147

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 133-134.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁹⁸ Victor Turner *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1985), 74.

Typically, they have four main phases of public actions. These are (1) Breach of regular norm-governed social relations; (2) Crises, during which there is a tendency for the breach to widen. Each public crisis has what I now call lamina characteristic, since it is a threshold (limen) between more or less stable phases of the social process, but it is not usually a sacred limen, hedged around by taboos and thrust away from the centers of public life. On the contrary, it takes up its menacing stance in the form of itself, and, as it were, dares the representatives of order to grapple with it; (3) Redressive action ranging from personal advice and informal mediation or arbitration to formal juridical and legal machinery, and, to resolve certain kind of crises or legitimate other modes of resolution, to the performance of public rituals. Redress, too has its liminal features for it is “betwixt and between,” and, as such, furnishes a distanced replication and critique of the events leading up to and Composing the ‘crises.’ This replication may be in the rational idiom of the judicial process, in the metaphorical and symbolic idiom of a ritual process; (4) The final phase consists either of reintegration of the disturbed social group, or of the social recognition and legitimation of irreparable schism between the contesting parties.⁹⁹ [underlining mine]

In applying the over-arching theory of ritual, one must be cognizant of the characteristics of the primary culture and keep them at the forefront. The impact of the Great Depression on the macro-American culture created the micro-culture of the endurance contests, and initiated the related social drama and ritual process. In his social drama analysis, Turner stresses the flexibility and play of intra-cultural forces. If the culture were fixed or static, there would be no opportunity or potential for change through social drama or ritual process. The fact that culture evolves over time allows it to be destabilized by both positive and negative events. In Turner’s view, public and social rituals or demonstrations are *systemic* within the social system. “They are inherently dramatic because participants not only do things, they try to show others what they are doing or have done; actions take on a ‘performed-for-an-audience’ aspect.”¹⁰⁰

The first phase of the social drama may be either a symbolic or a concrete event that goes against or seriously challenges societal norms. Turner refers to this event as *symbolic transgression*. Looking at the dance marathon circuit through Turner’s conceptual framework of social drama theory positions the marathon within the larger context of American society. While the dance marathon circuit constituted a community unto itself (the micro), it was, in fact, still a part of the larger community (the macro) against which it enacted the first phase or *breach*; the break was relative to the “regular norm-governed social relations” of the overall American

⁹⁹ Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 4-5.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

society. From this perspective the role of the outside community is essential since it defines the dance marathon contest as a concomitant alternate reality.

If the social drama theory is applied to the marathon phenomenon at its inception, then the early 1920s can be identified as the first phase or the *breach* that occurred. The *breach* and *crises* would be related to those precise elements that have come to represent the Roaring Twenties, i.e., the challenge to traditional cultural norms and values posed by emerging modernity. In that scenario the early 1920s marathon was just one of many follies, such as flagpole sitting and drinking bootleg whisky, that were acted out in an era of economic well-being in a rebellious rejection of older traditional social values of proper behavior and morality. Dance marathon participants during the heady atmosphere of the 1920s were primarily seeking diversion, and they did not remove themselves from the general society.

Using Turner's model, one may postulate that the stock market crash of 1929 was the *breach* of the normative status within the macro-community. It heralded a gradual economic collapse that widened the breach and introduced the second phase, the *crises*, of the Great Depression on the larger community—the American nation. The stock market collapse, business failures, and crop failures led to widespread unemployment. This particular crisis propelled people in critical want and need from the streets to the micro-community of the dance marathons, either as participants or as audience members. Social drama is linear in nature, and can only move forward when the previous phase has taken place. “Whether it is a performative utterance, a chance word, or an act of calculated violence, if the social circumstances are ‘ripe’ for drama, the next phase begins.”¹⁰¹ As the economy weakened, the crisis took its toll on the American psyche.

Crises, is a stage that places people betwixt and between, resulting in aggressions and offensive actions that would have been unlikely to occur under “normal” conditions. “Crises is usually one of those turning points or moments of danger and suspense when a true state of affairs is revealed, when illusions are dispelled and masks torn off or made impossible to don. It is a test of the strength of loyalty and duty.”¹⁰² When a country suffers any devastation, the people become anxious, feeling trapped by circumstances they can neither control nor comprehend. Following the stock market crash, the impact of a global economic collapse

¹⁰¹ Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush*, 215.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

touched a large segment of the American public in the macro-community, crippling them financially and altering their entire outlook on life. Suddenly they were outsiders with no clue about how to regain their former lives. The *crises* stage of the social drama provides the context for “why” dance marathons played such an important role in people’s lives.

Even with the election of Roosevelt, many Americans still felt and found themselves and their families having to take care of issues alone, because the American government and economy was still struggling to fix the depression. If no jobs were to be found, and Americans were homeless and broke, they would have to come up with their own form of *redressive actions*, within the macro-community, or perhaps separate from. For many, the marathon competitions became the way in which they could keep living within a broken society, by generating a micro-community of their own. Despite its genesis of being instigated by the partial collapse of the macro-culture there was ultimately a stability provided by the micro-culture of the dance marathon. As the participants came to comprehend and feel a part of their new environment, they achieved a level of comfort denied them in the greater community. It may have been oppressive for some and liberating for others but, once they became acclimated to it, they gained a previously lost sense of stability. Having made a personal choice to join the marathon and escape what appeared to be an unending uphill battle for survival, some contestants likely accepted, if not welcomed, their subjugation by audiences, promoters, media, and themselves. They were merely living out on stage the subjugation of their lives on the street.

For the United States during the 1930s, the New Deal offered by the Roosevelt administration was a macro-level *redressive action*, put in place to counter the economic and social impact the Depression exerted on the whole of the American people. On a micro-level, the dance marathon contest was a *redressive action* taken by individuals seeking to mitigate their personal economic and social crisis. The marathon circuit became a ritualized and performative reflection of the larger social drama, taking place in American culture and life. For some defenders of the status quo, the New Deal’s government-funded and sponsored programs and legislation posed a serious challenge to the existing *laissez faire* view of government. And, like the New Deal, dance marathons had both their supporters and detractors.

THESIS CHAPTER 4

SPECTACLE OF DANCE MARATHONS: STRUGGLE, HOPE, ENDURANCE, AND SURVIVAL

When they became media-driven entertainments for the masses, characterized by moneymaking and exploitation by promoters, dance marathons were no longer what they had been.¹⁰³ In the 1920s, they had been one more leisure-time activity undertaken for amusement and diversion, part of the mood of liberated living in the name of patriotism. By the 1930s, they were an onerous struggle and offered the unemployed and unwanted a community of their own.¹⁰⁴

Seeking respite from the real world and the pains that accompanied the Great Depression, several gained a measure of solace in the marathon circuits that criss-crossed the country. “The contestants danc[ed] wildly, arhythmically, desperately for a square meal, a place to flop, the handful of pennies thrown to those who pleased the crowd and the chance for big money and illusory security...”¹⁰⁵ Although the standard rules of American society did not exist within the small marathon world and many participants felt that the nourishment and shelter provided more than offset the rules and regulations by which they were forced to abide.

Arnold Gingrich, a journalist during the 1930s, referred to dance marathons as “[t]he innocent jail.” Contestants were forced to adhere to a very strict regimen, almost as if they were serving a prison term.¹⁰⁶ Paradoxically these men and women thought they were taking charge of their lives by walking, shuffling, and dancing for as long as possible. In actuality, they were being used and abused by one another and by the promoters, whose goal was to provide entertainment for a profit. In her autobiography June Havoc refers to some contestants as people who had few other choices for “work” during the 1930s. The promoter of her first marathon, Mr. Dankle, explained the situation to her in new terms,

“Only the horses stay on for the grinds and sprints...”
“Horses?” I inquired.

¹⁰³ Calabria, 1; and Martin *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 87.

¹⁰⁴ Calabria, 18.

¹⁰⁵ Stern, 68.

¹⁰⁶ Calabria 3.

“Yeah,” he answered. “Horses—the desperate ones. They got no place to go. They got no brains, so they got lots of guts. They can outlast the daintier ones easy.”¹⁰⁷

Other contestants and spectators believed that these events represented the American Dream. “Everything could be had—fame, food, and fortune—by winning a contest, and to win, all the contestant had to do was keep moving until everyone else had dropped.”¹⁰⁸ Audiences came to voyeuristically experience the anticipation, hope, and endurance of the contestants, some returning every day for weeks and months, offering encouragement to their favorite couples. The dramatic combination of hope and suffering served as a metaphor for the Great Depression: “... complex entertainment spectacles that reflect[ed] the overall hopelessness of the culture of the Great Depression similar to the mood of ‘the aimless, endless movement of superfluous people around the country.’”¹⁰⁹

Although they continued throughout the 1930s the prime years of the last phase of the dance marathons was from 1928 to 1934. Dance marathons usually combined elements from vaudeville, which was just beginning its decline in popularity. Many Americans could not afford the movies or live theatre, and the 15 or 25 cents admission cost to dance marathons was well worth it. The show went on day and night, for days, weeks, and months, and included drama, suffering, romance, sport, as well as cabaret and vaudeville acts.¹¹⁰ Specialty numbers, weddings -- both fake and real, and elimination derbies were all part of the contests.¹¹¹ Marathons were a cheap form of entertainment, which was a major reason for their success.

The promoters, financed the contests. But often they persuaded the townspeople to supply the food, materials, and medical needs for the contestants, and absorb the cost of advertisements in local newspapers. These commitments secured their involvement in the enterprise. “To Stage Dance Marathon,” *The New York Times* read “M.D. Crandall Announces Contest in Garden to Start June 10. Beginning on Sunday evening, and continuing until the last

¹⁰⁷ June Havoc, *Early Havoc* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1960), 20.

¹⁰⁸ Martin, “Dance Marathons,” 325.

¹⁰⁹ Calabria, 18; quoted in Melissa Allen, 17.

¹¹⁰ Calabria, 22.

¹¹¹ Melissa Allen, 18.

exhausted couple sinks to the floor.”¹¹² Though similar in form and governed by comparable regulations, marathons were often flavored by the promoter’s own interests and reflected his style. Contests offered a blend of walking, dancing, vaudeville-cabaret acts, big bands, and athletic endurance and each catered to a particular audience.

Promoter Hal Ross called his dance marathons “Family Man’s Night Club,” and urged the other promoters to run their contests as high-class legitimate businesses.¹¹³ Unfortunately, most marathon promoters had well-earned reputations for their bad business practices, often leaving towns with bills unpaid and their contestants stranded or holding bad checks. These criminal and anti-social behaviors contributed to the opinion of the women’s leagues that marathons were immoral.¹¹⁴ Ross, one of the few legitimate promoters who cared about the event, was not overly exploitive of his contestants, and because he paid his bills and debts, he became known as a top-of-the-line promoter.¹¹⁵

The media helped to rope in audiences by dramatically selling the concept of dance marathons. Newspapers reported the numbers of hours that had passed and the number of participants who were still standing; radio shows reported on the dramatic narratives and events of the marathons as if they were soap operas, broadcasting tidbits of gossip and telling listeners what occurred each day.¹¹⁶ Newspapers announced when the elimination derbies would take place and then printed the results. On July 27, 1930, *The New York Times* devoted an entire article to dance marathons around the country with such entries as this one: “In Detroit, Mich, a marathon dance has lasted 106 days when the local authorities stopped it with five couples still on the floor.”¹¹⁷

The media served itself and the promoters by keeping the public up on the action, especially if it was sensational. An article titled “15 Couples Remain in Jersey Dance,” that ran

¹¹² “To Stage Dance Marathon,” *The New York Times*, 23 May 1928, 33.

¹¹³ Calabria, 31.

¹¹⁴ Calabria, 40; and James T. Farrell, “The Dance Marathons,” *MELUS, Irish-American Literature Vol. 18, No. 1*, Spring 1993, 134. Previously unpublished paper, from the Department of Special Collections at the University of Chicago Library. Original date of work is unknown.

¹¹⁵ Carol Martin, *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture in the 1920s and 1930s*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 87.

¹¹⁶ Calabria 39.

¹¹⁷ “Endurance Contests Sweep on in Cycles,” *The New York Times*, 27 July 1930, 114.

in *The New York Times* on June 27, 1928 proclaimed, “Jack White of New York proposed to Kitty Oliver of Chicago while dancing, and because she refused, punched her.”¹¹⁸ Was this purely a plea for the attention of audiences and press, or had poor Jack White become fanatical due to his exhaustion? The newspaper and radio broadcasts of dance marathons created a drama in which Americans could take part. The marathon circuit was where small town residents often found their entertainment and drama.

According to one source, the *Guinness Book of World Records*, the longest period of continuous dancing was twenty-four weeks and five days.¹¹⁹ But there is no date provided for this record and it only indicates that it was set in Pittsburgh, and that the marathon was closed down for health reasons. If this was in fact the longest dance marathon, it is an impressive feat, considering that the winners had been dancing for six months—4,152 hours. The prize was the considerable sum of \$1,000, which when translated to a rate of \$0.24 per hour. Frank Calabria mentions a few record-breaking contests in his *Dance of the Sleepwalkers*, including solos and couples. The longest dance marathon, without derbies or athletic features, took place in Chicago, 1930-1931, lasting over nine months, and the winner was Kay Wise. Essentially, she danced, shuffled, and walked for approximately 6,400 hours. Perhaps her partner did not make it to the end with her because the longest solo record goes to Nobel “Kid” Chissell who danced for 468 hours alone. Al Astro and Edna Gowacke hold the longest record for a marathon with athletic features in which they lasted for six months and thirteen days. In the end, it is unclear which of these records for endurance dance are correct because the documentation is questionable and conflicting. According to Calabria, *The Guinness Book of World Records* states that Frankie Lane and Ruthie Smith logged in 3,480 hours, and historian Paul Sann gives the honor to June Havoc with 3,600 hours—five months and nine days.¹²⁰

From the moment the marathon participants passed from the outside community of Depression-era America into the environs of the marathon contest, they separated from one community and relocated and identified themselves with another. “Once a contestant was in, they became involved in the living drama that was part real and part showmanship.”¹²¹ Although

¹¹⁸ “15 Couples Remain in Jersey Dance,” *The New York Times*, 27 June 1928, 27.

¹¹⁹ Buckman, 187.

¹²⁰ Calabria, 28.

the process of passing from one world to another is an activity common to various groups, it is a ritual process that is acted out uniquely by each. The idea of social drama and performance has particular resonance in regard to the dance marathons because, though very real for the participants on the floor, for audiences and promoters it was purely entertainment.

Feeling effectively excluded from the American mainstream, participants and spectators sought fellowship with and comfort among others suffering a similar fate. Excluding the promoters' inclination to know who the winning couples would be, the dance marathon, like other social dramas, was comprised of *real life* experience. The moment the music began and couples entered the dance floor they were *performing* for those who paid to watch the real life drama unfold.

...the truly 'spontaneous' unit of human social performance is not role-playing sequences in an institutionalized or 'corporate group' context; it is the *social drama* which results precisely from the suspensions of normative role-playing and its passionate activity abolishes the usual distinctions between flow and reflection, since in the social drama it becomes a matter of urgency to become reflexive about the cause and motive of action damaging to the social fabric.¹²²

Contestants no doubt had trouble clearly defining the lines of realism even more because their reality *was* marathon life and keeping the audience in their seats. For some marathoners, the decision to enter the contest likely was an easy one. But for those who continued to suffer on the dance floor, they must have felt desperately trapped. Betrayed by a government that could not care for them, they sought relief by joining an event that controlled and manipulated them 24-hours each day for months. Perhaps, although "used," they benefited from a regulated and straightforward "society" in which they could be at least confident of a routine life. As Turner reminds us, in situations like these, "[e]ach person, party, and faction strives to 'maximize its gratifications,' to advance its own interests, and to minimize and retard those of its opponents."¹²³

Dance marathons were highly regulated and well-organized events. If the contests had become a form of odd and dehumanizing entertainment, it only enhanced their ability to make

¹²¹ Martin, "Life on the Floor," 4.

¹²² Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush*, 196.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 217.

money. Promoters attended to every detail. Dancers were permitted to sleep on their partners while shuffling and dancing, and many dancers became sufficiently accustomed to this form of rest that they were able to get from six to nine hours of sleep throughout the day and night.¹²⁴ People best suited to life on the marathon circuit were those who could thrive in organized systems, such as the army or even jail. While some could cope with the rules and remain in the competition, others faltered.

The social drama of the dance marathons is important in reference to a particular arena. “An arena may be described as ‘social and cultural space around those who are directly involved with the field participants but are not themselves directly implicated in the processes that defined the field.’ (Swartz 1968:11[sic])”¹²⁵ The performance and the entertainment produced by the contestants are *for* the audience, although, theoretically, even without the audience, the dancers’ community would exist *because* of the performance. “The social drama, in short, shows how people actually live in the arenas of a particular type, how they pursue their ambitious or altruistic ends in them, and how, through significant choices made by important individuals or groups, the arena structure may itself be changed.”¹²⁶

The dance marathons were able to function as a smaller, more circumscribed vision of the outside community during the Great Depression. The dance marathon’s significance to America’s social drama is related to how, within its limited venue, it reflected American society at large; the macro-community. At the height of the phenomenon most if not all large cities were playing host to one or more contests. While large marathon contests like M.D. Crandall’s at Madison Square Garden were highly influential, the mid-size, smaller city marathons had a purer correlation to social drama. Well-known promoters were disinclined to go to small towns where little money could be made, but that did not mean that marathons did not occur there. The promoters needed to set up dance marathons in locations that could draw a large crowd; they were obliged to assuage the locals, giving lip service, at least, to hometown values and getting the local people involved in advertising, employment, and, of course, dancing.

The contests of smaller proportions held in midsize cities across the country reached out to the truly ordinary American – most likely, individuals under the burden of hard times. Not

¹²⁴ Farrell, 135-136.

¹²⁵ Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush*, 84.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

surprisingly, the dance marathon audience was populated by lower- or working-class people who could more closely identify with the participants and often came to root for their local favorite or a family member. Though the dance marathon could in no way offer permanent redress or solve the individual's personal crisis, it did provide a palpable though impermanent solution to his or her problems. It provided momentary diversion. As a temporary *redressive action*, it allowed both spectators and participants to turn away for a moment from the *crises* that confronted the larger society and to focus solely upon a contest. Dance marathons were a coping mechanism, a way to deal with loss of jobs, income, homes, or family.

THESIS CHAPTER 5

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Once marathons morphed into entertainment spectacles that were fully produced, fixed and organized by promoters and businessmen, the marathon floor began to resemble a small private community. When an individual decided to join a marathon there were certain admittance processes to complete and requirements to pass. Promoters were adamant about having healthy contestants who could withstand the stress of non-stop dancing and who could live in close quarters. Obviously, if one person was ill or had a problem (such as lice) he or she could quickly infect everyone. Living communally 24 hours a day within close contact was a defining feature of the marathons.

Promoters hired doctors and nurses to check the participants when they arrived and to monitor their health during the contest. In reality, health inspections were brief upon entering the contest and many things were simply overlooked. The physical examination required a quick once-over for fleas or any other easily noticed ailment. A deep cough could preclude participation, as could an obviously contagious disease. June Havoc describes her experience in *Early Havoc*. “The physical examination consisted of filling out a questionnaire. It asked how old you were, if you’d ever been seriously stricken with a contagious disease, or if you were subject to fits. It also asked if you had body lice or if you were mentally ill.”¹²⁷

Aspiring contestants were asked if they had tuberculosis or a venereal disease, although no confirming examination was conducted. The rules stated participants had to be 18, but without verification, the age requirement tended to be fudged or totally ignored. One rule was closely followed: if any contestant had medical or recreational drugs, they were prohibited from joining.¹²⁸ Promoters advertised their dance marathons as a “clean” form of entertainment for families, including children of all ages. Interestingly no women were asked if they were pregnant. Certainly, being upright for 24 hours could be injurious or even deadly for the mother or baby. In an interview with Carol Martin in 1985, Edna Smith said she was pregnant when she entered her first marathon.

¹²⁷ Havoc, 33.

¹²⁸ Calabria, 70.

Smith: ...The funny part of it was when I went into it I was about three months pregnant,...It didn't take much to be accepted. They took your blood pressure, and listened to your heart...My husband came there to try to get me out of the contest. But he didn't have a job and they needed a cook so he ended up being the cook...I don't think the kind of physical they gave you back then would ever pass muster if they were gonna have an event like that today. I think that's why the board of health closed us down...People maybe ruined their life forever by ruining their health. I could've hurt myself and my baby and not realized it. I did almost die when he was born.¹²⁹

Specific questions about the dancer's personal history might be solicited in order to build a character profile of sorts. Beyond trying to weed out the emotionally fragile, however, promoters were curious if the participants had any talent, such as dancing, singing or comedy, which could be used in small divertissements during the contests. These brief "spots" of singing or dancing added entertainment and, following the "spot," the contestant would be showered with coins. "They performed in an atmosphere that celebrated personality, style, and attractiveness as well as any ability to sing or dance. If you couldn't do either you could develop a *persona* as a marathoner that could make the audience cheer you on or wish for your defeat."¹³⁰

When these rituals of health inspections and brief queries about mental readiness were completed, the individuals officially passed from the outside community and into the dance marathon world. Not yet official marathoners, they progressed from the check-in area to their separate quarters and the meager space that was home-base, their private territory for fifteen minutes of each hour. Depending on where the marathon was held, rest quarters and bathrooms might be a makeshift array of tents or actual locker rooms. Here, each contestant had a cot with one or two feet separating one from the other. Of course, as marathoners were disqualified more room opened up, but living quarters remained extremely cramped. Because no closet or drawer space was allotted, contestants slid their suitcases or bags beneath their cots. After they staked claim to their cots and private spaces in the quarters, they met with the promoter or emcee, who briefly introduced them to the rules.

Professional marathoners, however, traveled the circuits competing in as many marathons as possible. Other dancers might work closely with a particular promoter and were subsequently guaranteed a top spot if not first place at the end of the contest. In addition they got extra money.

¹²⁹ Martin, "Life on the Floor," 19 & 21, 22.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

Marathons of the early 1920s were more honest than those of the later 1920s and 1930s. In truth the local people who joined a marathon in their hometowns probably had little idea that the contest was “fixed.” In the spirit of manipulation and creating a dancing narrative that had greater dramatic effect, promoters encouraged their professionals to falter and struggle at different moments in the contest, making the competition appear more “fair.” After all, the support of the townspeople for their local participants was what brought in the audiences and the money.

A dance marathon employed scores of doctors, nurses, floor judges, cooks, and musicians who kept the marathons running. It has been estimated that there were “20,000 who made their living as floor judges, nurses, trainers, MCs, publicity men, promoters, contestants, cashiers, dieticians.”¹³¹ Because of the large number of people needed to keep a marathon running, the contests were extremely beneficial for small towns, not only for employment opportunities, but also for the influx of out-of-town spectators who came to watch and spend money.

Arguably the most important person employed by the show was the emcee. The emcee needed to be personable and entertaining. He kept the audience on their toes and got them emotionally engaged with the contestants who, in turn, reminded the audience about the larger struggles of Depression-era life “outside” that comprised the deeper over-riding theme of the show. The emcee kept track of the hours and motivated the contestants by repeating the common marathon phrase, “How long can they last?”

The attendance on the first day of a marathon was usually small. Some promoters advertised in advance, but others relied on word-of-mouth advertising to get the audience into its seats. When contestants walked onto the floor for their first dance, some of them had no idea how long they would be able to carry on. New dancers may have been overzealous about how long they might last, whereas the old-timers understood the rituals and the true nature of the event. A large sign above the bandstand read, “0-0-0-0 Hours” and another sign tallied the number of couples. At the beginning of the show, the sign might read “60 couples remaining” though it never took long for the feeble or inexperienced dancers to drop out. Within two or three days, the sign might read “30 couples remaining.” In fact, it was not uncommon to lose half of the participants within the first 100 hours or less.

¹³¹ Martin, “Life on the Floor,” 18.

The difference between a new and old couple was that the experienced ones knew how the marathon floor and community ran, and they knew how to condition their bodies and pace themselves. They did not expend too much energy by dancing vigorously in the beginning. They had been through the ritual before; they understood the ins and outs of the circuit; and they kept minds and bodies balanced because a good physical and mental state determined who lasted and who lost. It was common after many hours for dancers to begin to hallucinate or become “squirrelly.”¹³² In the early days and weeks of the competition, the arches of the feet would begin to flatten and the entire foot and calf would swell. Professionals anticipated these changes and came prepared to deal with them, but the inexperienced new couples had no idea about how to cope. If they were smart, newcomers sometimes attached themselves to an older couple in order to learn the tricks of the trade. But in a marathon, it was always difficult to know who to trust. These were ferocious contests with distinct winners. All the rest were losers.

In contrast to Turner’s social drama theory, the theory of ritual process first used by Arnold Van Gennep¹³³ can also be used as a theoretical mechanism to observe the dance marathons. As defined, rites of passage are “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age,” characterized by three special phases: 1-*separation*, 2-*marginality* or *liminality* (transition), and 3-*aggregation* (reincorporation).¹³⁴ In an African tribe or community, the three stages of *separation*, *liminality*, and *aggregation* usually occur at specific life moments, such as puberty. But they apply equally well to the dance marathon phenomenon which can be viewed as a ritual process related to a specific period of American cultural and social history. Marathons were unique to American culture, and functioned successfully because they were a theatricalized response to the social and economic turbulence of the Great Depression and the drama of national liminality.

Individual rites of passage commence when a person is ready for a life change. In the *separation phase*, the participant breaks away from the community and attempts to enter into

¹³² A dance marathon term, referring to a contestant who had begun to go crazy or hallucinate while on the dance floor. Usually brought on by lack of sleep and the same monotonous activities.

¹³³ Arnold Van Gennep (1873-1957), was one of the first anthropologists to examine the phases and ritual process of human life. Through his countless research he coined the term “the rites of passage,” which can be examined further in his seminal book *The Rites of Passage*. Victor Turner’s research and development of social drama allies with Van Gennep’s rites of passage theory.

¹³⁴ Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969; reprint, New York: Walter de Gruyter, Inc., 1995), 94.

another. The nature of this separation varies with the culture and circumstances. It may be a shift from childhood to adulthood or a promotion from one job to another. Turner states that it “comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions, or from both.”¹³⁵

The *separation* stage of the dance marathon circuit occurred when the participant left the normal American community and focused his or her strength, energy, and desires on the marathon contest. In taking this initiative the individual separated. Phase one was complete.

Whether for economic or professional reasons, or simply for diversion, men and women chose to temporarily leave behind their old lives and enter the alternative life of the marathon floor. By setting foot into that arena they committed themselves to a new community that existed within, but was distinct from, the larger American community. Physically closed off and governed by strict rules and regulations, it was an unknown and confining world. Once they signed on, the participants could not leave. For the duration of their participation, they were, in fact, removed, distinguished, and disassociated from the world that was outside the marathon. Thus, they became contestants and entertainers that represented the common, and sorry plight of Americans during the 1930s.

Liminality or *marginality*, the second stage in rites of passage, is referred to as a province of “betwixt and between,” and it was in this status that participants spent most of their time. “Liminal” which originates from the Latin word “*limin*,” can be described as an entry point, the moment when a shift occurs in the participant’s reality, transitioning them from the mundane to the atypical. During this transformation, status and social stance are unclear. While the marathoners never actually ceased to be members of American society they were shut off from its day-to-day existence, locked into another world. This *liminal* stage is where the social drama is initiated and continues until the individual departs the marathon to rejoin the outside world. “During the intervening ‘liminal’ period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.”¹³⁶

Despite their *liminal* or *marginal* status, the dancers were very much involved in creating and maintaining their new *communitas*. Although most dance marathons were a form of cookie-

¹³⁵ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

cutter sequences of dance, music, games, derbies, and vaudevillian entertainment, each marathon had its own character, shaped by its participants. As a group, they were initiated into a distinct world, a world found only in other forms of spectacle and entertainment, such as the circus. Audience members and outsiders looked upon marathoners as being sheltered in an oddly reflective and theatrical space that existed in-between, “betwixt” the before and the after. Yet for thousands of men and women the marathon floor was a real community they were part of and in which they lived.

Turner explains why and how *liminality* defined the participants’ experience in the ritual process. “Liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or the moon.”¹³⁷ The state of being caught in between processes is precisely what defines the *marginal* stage, it explains why and how the marathon contestants fit into Turner’s theory. Whereas the marathoners were aware of their surroundings and of one another, they were governed by a process they had not previously experienced.

Turner postulates that the *liminal* stage forces the initiate through the ritual process and delivers him or her on the other side as a new person, or, as one who has arrived at a new station in life. As a *communitas initiade*.

...their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly; and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life.¹³⁸

The marathoners were under the total control of their “instructors.” Contestants were absolutely required to follow the strict rules imposed upon them and breaking them resulted in immediate elimination.

The early marathons of 1923 had no certifiable rules. Although there were likely observers present to serve as witnesses, no rules were organized until the later 1920s.¹³⁹ Some rules heightened the entertainment value while other rules simply limited the individuality of the

¹³⁷ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 4.

contestants. For instance, strict rules defined what qualified as “dancing” and determined when and how the contestants competed. Most marathon competitions ruled that staying on one’s feet while on the floor was a minimum requirement. Whether or not one partner was physically supporting the other made no difference. As long as a contestant’s knees did not touch the ground, couples could lean, lie upon, or literally carry one another.

In most cases, partners took turns sleeping and carrying each other’s weight so one of them might get some rest. Another crucial rule regulated the amount of time spent on the floor. Fifteen minutes out of every hour was used to get off their feet, sleep, use the toilets, or do anything else they deemed necessary. A loud siren alerted the marathoners and sent them shuffling back onto the floor at the end of their rest period.

Elimination resulted when a contestant’s knees touched the floor or when a couple lost in an elimination derby. It was not unusual for one partner to become sick, injured, or too frail to continue safely, in which case, for health considerations, the sick individual would be asked to leave. In such an instance, the remaining solo contestant was given twenty-four hours to team-up with another partner. Alone, they would wander the dance floor awaiting the disqualification of another hapless individual with whose remaining partner they could then team up and continue their struggle.¹⁴⁰

Appearance, hygiene, and general behavior were also subject to regulation. Women were required to wear skirts at all times, except in the late evening/early morning hours. Men and women were always to be showered and well attired. Gum chewing, spitting, fighting, and swearing were not allowed. If a contestant disrupted the ritual space by stepping off the floor -- other than at break time -- the team was immediately eliminated. Since participants were required to be standing and moving even while eating meals, tall tables were placed in the arena for meal times.

The promoters introduced rules that made the contests more difficult and entertaining, these rules served to secure the dancer’s *liminal* status in terms of the rites of passage. Turner found that in many African tribal rituals ritual costumes or dress were worn by the *initiades*. Just as the “passengers” in a tribal ritual had to wear appropriate clothes or costumes, women were

¹⁴⁰ Calabria, 70; and *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?*, dir. Sydney Pollack, prod. Irwin Winkler and Robert Chartoff, ABC Pictures Corp presents A Palomar Picture and A Chartoff Winkler/Pollack Production, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1969, DVD.

required to wear skirts or pants at particular times. Another parallel to the tribal ritual costume was found in the custom of couples accepting sponsorship from local shops, restaurants, etc.; in turn, they would agree to wear matching sweaters that promoted and advertised the sponsoring business. Although it is unlikely that these individuals would have normally done this, within the context of the marathon ritual process, they accepted this exchange as another aspect of their descent into *liminality*.

Some rules were established to ensure that the dancers' activities contributed to the overall spectacle and satisfaction of the spectators. Other rules existed to protect the contestants from their audiences. Marathoner June Havoc's autobiography, describes her entry into the dance marathon circuit and relates a few of the many rules posted by the promoters.

'This is a place of refined amusement. Whistling, stomping, and catcalls will not be tolerated.' 'Warning!' a wall warned. 'Contestants are not permitted to accept any candy, food, or liquids from spectators.' 'Do not touch the contestants.' 'No spitting.' 'Here's a treat! Family Matinee: 2 bits for the whole family up to five (5) people. Ringside seats, 25 cents extra.'¹⁴¹

The rules for the audience both protected the contestants from rowdy individuals and added to the image of the dance marathon as a well-behaved and legitimate form of "family" entertainment. Paradoxically, some rules attempted to formulate the marathon as a fun competition with no intentions beyond non-stop dancing. Rules that defined elimination derbies were designed to purge couples from the contest and cruelly aimed specifically to exhibit and exploit the dancers. Some derbies were inhumane and demonstrated how the contestants were truly in a *marginal* position and needed protection from unscrupulous promoters and emcees. Havoc notes another of the many rules posted upon the wall before her first elimination derby.

"We had a new set of rules, too." A freshly painted sign read:

1. ONE FALL AND OUT.
2. DOG COLLARS¹⁴² WORN FROM 8P.M. TO 8A.M.
3. NO ONE ALLOWED TO WAKE A SLEEPING DANCER."¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Havoc, 37.

¹⁴² Some dance marathon promoters required the contestants to wear dog collars while participating in elimination derbies. Marathoners might also have to hold on to their partners with these collars while racing. Altogether another horrific display of inhumane entertainment spectacle within some marathons.

¹⁴³ Havoc, 99.

Turner suggests that the rules and restrictions placed upon the individuals going through the ritual process represent a homology between weakness and passivity. “The ‘liminal’ and the ‘inferior’ conditions are often associated with ritual powers and with the total community and are seen as undifferentiated.”¹⁴⁴ Dance marathoners constantly were portrayed as “inferior” to the audience and to others in the greater community. The audience may have chosen to feel compassion for specific contestants, but when they were ready or needed to, they could walk away from the drama and misery of the performance with a sense of relief at their own place in society. Moreover, when individuals decided to participate in a dance marathon, they chose to compromise their dignity and consciously submitted personal will and integrity to the whims of the promoters, emcees, and audience to become ritualized victims. Whether seeking shelter, food, or hoping to be discovered, participants dedicated hearts and bodies to the contest. Unwittingly, perhaps they submitted to an important ritual process, forfeiting individual sovereignty. *Liminality* stages depend upon this structure of the weakening of the participants. Defined by ritual process theory, the entire contest involves the process of marginalizing a specific group of individuals who create a new community, a *communitas* of their shared experience.

Depending on the circuit or promoter, at particular times during the contest certain dances were required to be performed, such as a Fox Trot, Tango, or the Charleston. In the beginning, performance of the required dances might be easy. But as the weeks and months advanced, these dances became a form of grotesque torture. Marathons were combative entertainments -and by upping the ante as the contest progressed, the drama of the struggle -- and audience attendance -- increased. During afternoon and evening hours there was usually a live band playing. It was at these times that a particular dance would be required. In addition, this was also when individual performance “spots” would take place, allowing the participants to show off their talents and personalities. During off-peak hours, in the early mornings and late nights, only phonograph records provided the music.

Because these activities demanded heavy time commitments, some contestants could also use them to their advantage. For those who had unsuccessfully tried to find a job, the marathon could be an easy way out. They were able to “sleep” and be fed for free as long as they kept moving. Of course, it was far more complicated and taxing, but the contestants were taken care

¹⁴⁴ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 100.

of. Meals were served six or seven times a day (or it might be defined as three meals and three or four snacks), served on high tables that enabled the contestants to simultaneously eat and move.¹⁴⁵ In general, the meals were balanced and planned according to the amount of energy needed. Sugar was rarely served because it had the tendency to increase the “squirrelly-ness” in dancers. The following is a sample menu from the 1929 *Marathon Guide*.

7:00 a.m. Breakfast

One-Half grapefruit
Boiled Oatmeal (sweetened with syrup)
One soft-boiled egg
2 slices of whole-wheat toast (buttered)

10:00 a.m.

Cookies
Glass of Milk

12:00 Lunch

One cup of soup (puree or thickened soups)
Vegetable salad with oil dressing
Cottage cheese
Two slices of whole wheat buttered bread

3:00 p.m.

Apples
Oranges
Celery

6:00 Dinner

Soup
One slice of meat loaf
Small baked potato
Cabbage with oil dressing
Two slices whole-wheat buttered bread

9:00 p.m.

Apples
Oranges
Celery
Cookies

¹⁴⁵Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 57-58.

12:00 midnight

Whole wheat sandwich of jelly or relish

Black coffee

3:00 a.m.

Celery

Apples

Cookies

Black coffee¹⁴⁶

It might be assumed that the combined lack of sleep and time spent on their feet would cause the contestants to lose weight; however, often the opposite occurred. As the menu demonstrates, participants were well fed and seemed to take in enough calories to sustain or even gain weight.

It was said that if the contestant could make it through the first 300 hours they could last forever. Once the marathoners arrived at this point, their bodies grew accustomed to the demands placed upon them and could do what was needed, without thought. Couples set up sleeping schedules and took turns carrying one another's weight, staggering around the floor. They also trained their bodies to withstand the extreme exhaustion or zombie-like state they needed to maintain for most of the 24 hours. The fifteen minutes allotted out of each hour was timed perfectly to handle essential bodily functions. The early morning and late night shows were the best times to rest up for the afternoon and evening shows, when they would "perform" for a little extra cash or just to keep the audience coming back.

When the couple or individual attained some sense of normalcy in their marathon life, they were then part of the *communitas*, they made the transition by escaping the outside world and committing themselves wholly to the marathon. They were no longer a part of what might be happening beyond the marathon doors. Their world was complete inside the arena, with shelter, food, medical care, and personal relationships with one another and with the audience. "Winning was not as fascinate[ing] as the ritualized display of a highly regulated set of procedures that governed every activity: dancing, sleeping, eating, and using the toilet, and bathing."¹⁴⁷ Once the individuals acclimated to the marathon timetable and the performance of

¹⁴⁶ Everett Perlman and G.W. Nelson, *The Marathon Guide* (Minneapolis: privately printed, 1928): 20; quoted in Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 58-60.

¹⁴⁷ Martin, "Dance Marathon," 327.

daily life practices in the marathon, they had completed their rite of passage, and it became the performative ritual display by the few for the many.



ILLUSTRATION 1

Flagpole Dancers prove the reckless nature of the “Roaring Twenties”
(Photo from the New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Collection,
Lincoln Center)



ILLUSTRATION 2
On your mark, Get set, DANCE
(Photo from New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Collection,
Lincoln Center)



ILLUSTRATION 3
Couple #30 from the Wildwood, NJ Dance Marathon
(Photo from Private Collection of Sally Sommer)



ILLUSTRATION 4
Smitty and Ruth, Wildwood, NJ
(Photo from Private Collection of Sally Sommer)



ILLUSTRATION 5
Yours for Endurance, Frank and Nora. Camden, NJ Dance Marathon
(Photo from Private Collection of Sally Sommer)



ILLUSTRATION 6
Tom and Rita proudly holding their trophy
(Photo from Private Collection of Sally Sommer)



ILLUSTRATION 7

A contestant gets her hair primped while on the marathon floor
(Photo from New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Collection,
Lincoln Center)



ILLUSTRATION 8

A group of marathoners catching up on sleep while still shuffling
(Photo from New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Collections,
Lincoln Center)



ILLUSTRATION 9

One of the remaining couples in the 3,327th hour during a Chicago Dance Marathon
(Photo from Agnes Rogers's *I Remember Distinctly*)

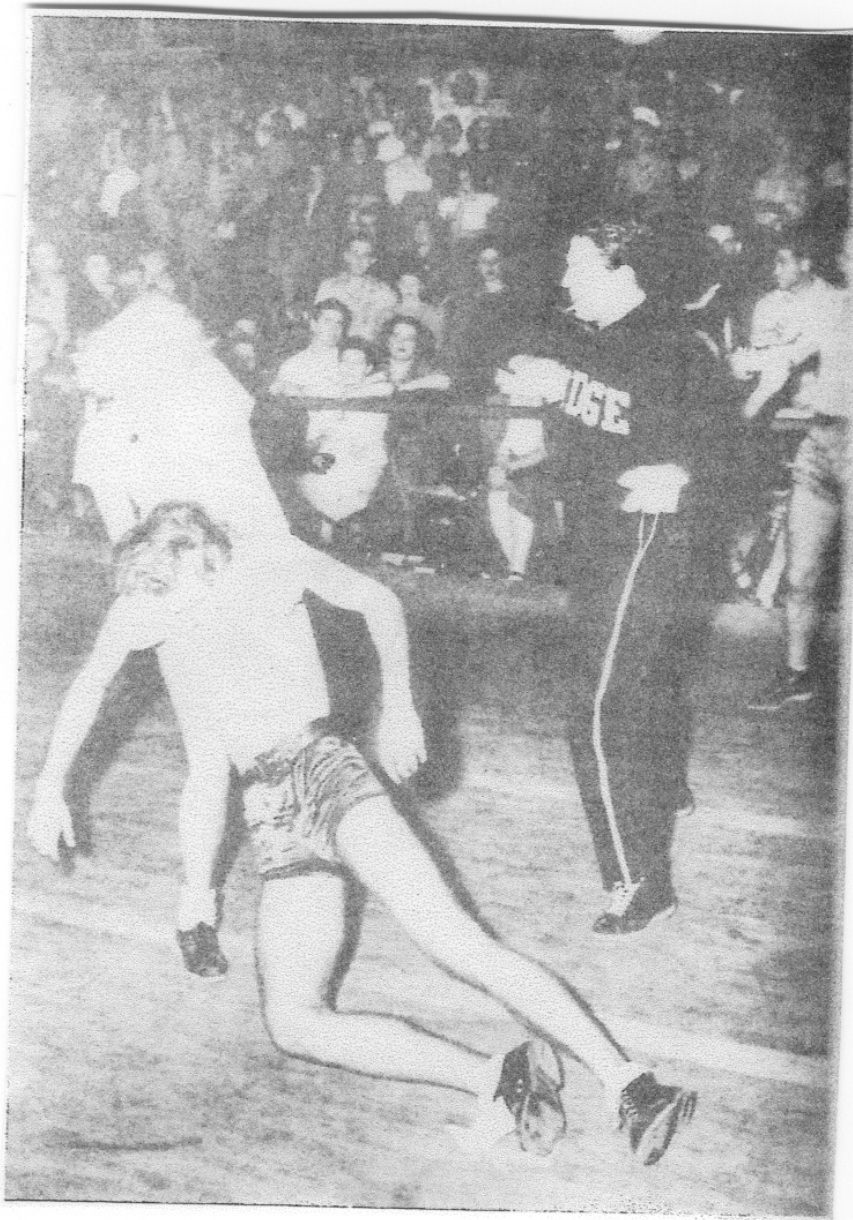


ILLUSTRATION 10

A female marathoner attempts to drag her male partner along during a race
(Photo from Frank Calabria's *Dance of the Sleepwalkers*)

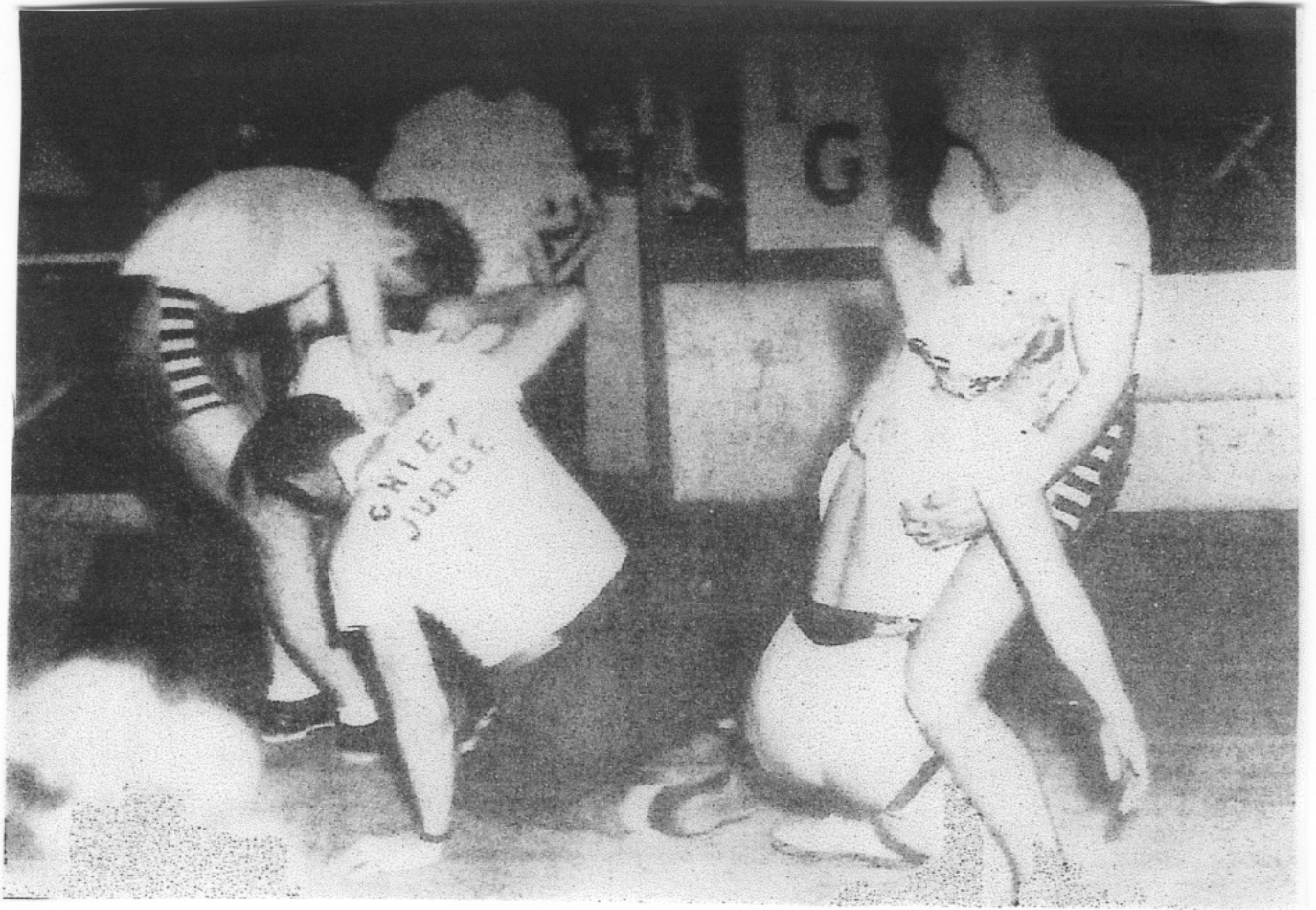


ILLUSTRATION 11

A floor judge checking on a couple, while a man desperately keeps his partner's knees up
(Photo from Frank Calabria's *Dance of the Sleepwalkers*)



ILLUSTRATION 12
The strength of the weaker sex
(Photo from Carol Martin's *Dance Marathons*)

THESIS CHAPTER 6

GENDER ON THE MARATHON FLOOR: BLURRING AND BLENDING

The struggle to survive that drove the participants to compete and the relative isolation enforced by the structure of the marathons fostered and encouraged experimentation. Behaviors and values on the dance floor were judged by whatever benefit they could deliver. When it came to behavior, the final test was functionality. If it worked, it was good. One outcome of this attitude was the transformation and, in some instances, the reversal of gender roles.

During, the first two decades of the 20th century, the United States had witnessed more than one assault against traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The Suffragettes of the Progressive era had successfully lobbied to gain the vote for women. The demands of the WWI economy resulted in the reluctant and temporary acceptance of women being employed in jobs that would have been considered inappropriate for females in peacetime. Though many women had joined the workforce during WWI, they had lost their jobs when the men returned home from overseas; “so women were forced to use leisure activities as the arena in which to make their mark.”¹⁴⁸

As American society moved from the liberation and freedom of the 1920s to the more serious behavior and attitudes prompted by the economic plight of the 1930s, social codes began to revert. The emerging gender equality of the 1920s -- characterized by women voting, wearing short skirts, long strings of pearls, bobbed hair, and publicly drinking and smoking -- was undermined as the Depression steadily deepened.¹⁴⁹ The “red-hot-baby” had grown up and had traded in the boyish look of the 1920s for an image that was decidedly more serious. Women began to wear their skirts longer. For the more affluent, frills and ruffles adorned clothing, and long white gloves and corsets reminiscent of the late 19th century were once again in fashion. “It was a little severe, especially with the hemlines dropped down so that the knees vanished, but the times were stressful and frivolity seemed inappropriate in day-to-day things.”¹⁵⁰ In comparison to the “modern” women of the 1920s, the women of the 1930s were more conservative and tame.

¹⁴⁸ Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 11.

¹⁴⁹ Allen, 347.

¹⁵⁰ Don McDonagh, *Dance Fever*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1979), 63.

People seemed to look back fondly to the mores and social behaviors that preceded the liberation and fun of the 1920s. Perhaps Americans imagined that a return to the pre-WWI values and manners when the country was economically sound, would resolve their current problems.¹⁵¹ In this atmosphere one woman cautioned that the dance marathon epidemic would almost certainly lead the country to war.

More ominously, Mina Van Winkle, Chief of the Woman's Bureau of the Washington DC police dept predicted that the dancing epidemic was a sure sign of war. 'A dance epidemic always precedes national disaster, as clouds precede a storm' she said. 'A prominent historian tells us that dance fevers always come before revolution. America is dancing herself to war.'"¹⁵²

Women throughout the nation sought ways to bolster and preserve American morality, hoping that it would somehow reenergize the economy. If asserting a cause-and-effect connection between mindless dance crazes and war worked, then they would preach it.

Consistent with Victor Turner's social drama theory, though existing as its own performative community, the dance marathon represented the "reality" of the broader American society. The changes in gender roles that evolved during the 1920s survived intact within the unique world of the dance marathon circuit, and promoters made sure to use heterosexual couples as the principal organizing theme presented to the audience.¹⁵³ It was not that dance marathoners set out to create an arena of gender equality, but rather that the nature of the event required a pragmatic acceptance of such a condition. On the one hand, women were enthusiastic in their admiration for the image of strong women as portrayed on the dance floor. They hoped that the empowerment of women they perceived would spread beyond the confines of the marathon venue. Some female participants were becoming feminists as they realized what might be achieved when gender roles were blurred. They took enormous pride in their prowess and success in these endurance contests. On the other hand, just as many women were opposed to the marathons because they believed in and yearned for a return of Victorian and Edwardian ideals about proper gender roles.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Allen, 337-338.

¹⁵² Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 26.

¹⁵³ Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 76.

In general, the greater American society was still comforted by clearly proscribed gendering. Even in the special world of the dance marathon arena the couples were always heterosexual. However, beyond this nod to convention, the dance marathons presented couples as two people of equal ability and strength, working together in their bid for success. Without couples on “equal footing” there could be no possibility of success. A full measure of mental and physical support, from each partner, was essential.

During the 1930s, the female dance marathon participants differed considerably from their more conservative counterparts in the outside world. The women who competed were usually of lower- or working-class status. They might be single or married but generally neither they nor their husband had a job.¹⁵⁵ The dance marathons offered a defined sense of a community to those who had little to nothing. Many women became participants in the hope of being “discovered” by a movie scout or model agent, and whisked away to Hollywood, fame, and fortune.¹⁵⁶ This is not surprising. The motion picture industry during this period was depicting visions of beauty, class, grace, and extreme wealth often obtained when the poor girl married rich. It was good escapist fare, but hardly a realistic portrayal of American society. Carol Martin takes a contrary view and rejects this motivation: “Appearing ‘beautiful’ to men could not have been a serious consideration in a contest that demanded hours of sweat and wakefulness. Determination, without benefit of rouge or powder, was what spectators looked for.”¹⁵⁷ This certainly reflected most women’s survival reality in the years of the Great Depression. Despite what many reformers may have thought there was no obvious or extreme emphasis on sexual titillation during the contests. In fact, women were always fully clothed and were not profligate in behavior.¹⁵⁸

There is nothing inspiring in seeing an extremely tired pretty girl in a worn bathrobe, dingy white stockings in rolls about scuffling slippers, her eyes half shut, her arms hung

¹⁵⁴ Martin, “Dance Marathons,” 327; and Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 70

¹⁵⁵ Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 69-70.

¹⁵⁶ Farrell, 133.

¹⁵⁷ Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 71.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

over her partner's shoulders, drag aching feet that seemed glued to the floor in one short, agonizing step after another.¹⁵⁹

The women who competed successfully were necessarily strong and athletic, two qualities required to sustain the abuse of the marathons and derbies. What is most interesting is that many women were able to outlast their partners, a fact that greatly pleased the feminists. Early on, in 1923, Alma Cummings established this precedent by setting the first American dance marathon record and exhausting six younger male partners. The success women exhibited in outlasting the men challenged traditional gender beliefs and propelled more women on to the dance marathon floor.¹⁶⁰ Frequently, having lost their dance partner, the women would continue to shuffle and stagger alone, waiting for another man to open up and become their new partner.¹⁶¹

This is not to say that the male marathoners could not endure, and the fact that women exhibited surprising stamina on the marathon circuit in no way diminishes the achievements of the men. Partners relied equally on each other and without a supportive partner, no marathon contestants would have lasted. Just as many men lost their female partners and staggered on alone. Nevertheless, in light of the pervasive gender-based cultural and social stereotypes of the period, it is interesting to note the so-called "weaker" sex's ability to overcome exhaustion and endure long periods of dancing, walking, and running.

The normative male role was also transgressed. Men were the primary breadwinners for their families. They made up the majority of the salaried work force and, therefore, they experienced the job loss. Having accepted the normative societal standard that a man should support and protect his family, the self- and public-image of "masculinity" of the out-of-work male suffered. Men spent endless hours seeking even temporary employment, waiting at the docks or factory doors or even traveling from town to town-seeking opportunities. A man who could not support himself or his family must have felt emasculated. Furthermore, having swallowed his pride and subjected himself to the demeaning environment of the dance marathon,

¹⁵⁹ Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 25.

¹⁶⁰ Jennifer Bothamley, *Dictionary of Theories*, (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 2002), 199 & 225.

¹⁶¹ Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 69.

he could only have felt worse to find himself helplessly hanging on to a woman, relying upon female strength to carry him.

The male and female equality felt by dance marathon participants, was not reflected in the greater American society. Within the dance community, women were respected and rewarded for their physical achievements. They could take pride in accomplishments based on strength, virility, and independence -- qualities that, if not derided in females on the outside, were certainly not qualities that were acclaimed. Ironically, women were succeeding in an environment fully controlled and regulated by men.

Though the micro community of the marathons can be viewed as unique and divorced from the macro American community, it was still a product of the larger culture and economy. In both situations, it was a man's world -- and only men produced marathons, dating back to Sid Gruaman's first marathon in 1910. Although the marathons employed more than 20,000 men and women during their reign, management remained under the exclusive control of men. Women were chosen to be employees according to normative gender roles. They might be nurses, cooks or assistants, but never emcees or members of the band.

The organization and management of dance marathons by wealthy men eventually led to an attempt to standardize and organize these events as a league. Marathons had made their way into American society overnight, and many promoters worried that they could disappear overnight. In 1934, the National Endurance Amusement Association was formed in the hope that marathons would continue into the 1940s as legitimate entertainment.¹⁶² Hal J. Ross, one of the few honest promoters of genuine dance marathons, thought that with stricter rules the "entertainment value of marathons went beyond the circumstances of the Depression."¹⁶³ With the creation of the NEAA, it was hoped that entertainment and business would merge successfully. It was envisioned that contracts would protect contestants from corrupt promoters who left participants high and dry with unpaid bills, and it would also regulate the type of entertainment marathons could display. In fact, allowing for minor differences, most marathons were very similar in nature. "[S]ome were good, clean fun" writes Martin "others stressed the

¹⁶² Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 111.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 113.

plight of the contestants and exploited sadomasochistic themes; still others featured off-color, downright lewd humor imported from burlesque.”¹⁶⁴

Despite the gender-related changes in American culture that surfaced during the years preceding WWI and gained momentum during the 1920s, the incredible impact of the Great Depression stung society deeply enough to nearly turn back the clock. Many women had reveled in modernism and the sense of emerging equality that existed in the 1920s but now they feared that the severe and impersonal retribution of the Depression was due to their previously giddy life. Though the committed feminists continued to fight throughout the 1930s for equal rights, many women sidelined notions of fighting for equality and directed their attentions and energies instead to the mundane task of surviving the Great Depression.

Although part of the performance appeal of the dance marathons was rooted in the ambiguities witnessed in gender roles, the underlying structure of the events *vis-à-vis* male and female interactions was a replica of these in outside society. Being intelligent businessmen, promoters understood that the profit from a dance marathon increased with ticket sales, and ticket sales continued as long as the event did not conclude. It was clear that, in many instances, the women fared better than the men. If the promoters were to ignore this reality and, consistent with gender assumptions, allow only men to hold up women, dance marathons would have been much shorter. Being pragmatic, the men who planned and promoted dance marathons presented highly-ritualized theatrical representations to the public that were superficially consistent, at least, with accepted gender distinctions. Couples were heterosexual, and men and women were appropriately accorded their separate rest areas.

Audience members who began to see the marathon through the eyes of the promoter became aware of why and how the marathons mirrored the greater society. In Victor Turner’s social drama theory, people who have suffered a *breach* in their community will find a community they can ally themselves with or find relief in. In reality, the marathon contest is simply an activity in which men and women dance together on a floor. When finished, the men and women retreat to separate quarters where they rest before coming back together to resume the dance. But for the viewer this version of normalcy and gender distinction is hidden behind the artifice of entertainment and spectacle. The blurring of the stereotyped gender roles that characterized the marathons was caused by demands of an event that forced women to take the

¹⁶⁴ Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 114.

initiative, and, it was as well a product of savvy promoters who fostered the breakdown of gender behaviors, which certainly boosted the entertainment values.

In photographs of marathoners shot during the 1930s it is common to see one partner holding up another who is asleep on their shoulder.¹⁶⁵ To remain in almost constant motion for thousands of hours, each contestant had to have strength, endurance, and, perhaps most importantly, the will to continue. Havoc describes a couple supporting one another while barely conscious and drifting in and out of sleep:

One man, dragging behind his sleeping partner, eyes half closed, mouth hanging loosely open, had clasped his fingers tightly together under his partner's stomach. She was bent double, her fingers scraping the floor, head lolling, one foot scraping after the other. Her partner backed around the floor as he held her, and she stumbled along crabwise. It was more restful than any other position because it made the blood run to your head.¹⁶⁶

Showing strength of will was not unique to dance marathoners because for all but the most fortunate, life in Depression-era America required stamina and a "survival of the fittest" attitude. In order to make it with very little, one had to be tough, rough, and ready to withstand anything, whether it was stealing, sleeping in the streets, or fighting for life. Inside the dance arena, life was reduced to a narrower routine devoid of any nonessential activities. The men and women who shuffled around the floor embodied the struggle for survival and nothing else.¹⁶⁷ Havoc describes her own experience holding up her partner, Patsy.

He was asleep. I tied his wrist with a handkerchief and looped his arms over my shoulders. That way we both faced the same direction...Patsy slept so soundly I could stand him up two feet away from me, put my finger under his nose to balance him, and count up to one hundred. When the bell clanged, we who were carrying sleeping boys tottered towards their quarters with our charges, lowered them on to their cots, removed their shoes, then straggled back to our own rest quarters.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 134.

¹⁶⁶ Havoc, 42.

¹⁶⁷ Calabria, 21-22; Martin "Dance Marathons," 325; and Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 87.

¹⁶⁸ Havoc, 51 & 53.

A woman in the dance marathon circuit needed to be tougher than average. She had probably lost everything and had learned to live as best she could below the poverty line. Though she likely valued the shelter provided by the dance marathon, to most middle-class women the marathon was a degrading event that was inappropriate for proper women to attend, let alone participate in. The tawdry nature of the marathon meant a woman put herself and her body on display before an audience in a dehumanizing, even grotesque way. Yet, if she was lucky enough to win, she could be pleased that she had earned the money herself. It may have been an odd form of labor, but most women took pride in the fact that they were providing for themselves and depending only on their dance partner. When women performed in the marathons they publicly displayed and took responsibility for their bodies, minds, and financial support, which demonstrated the liberating functionality of breaking the boundaries of normative female gender behaviors.¹⁶⁹

Competition required a high degree of physical intimacy between a woman and her partner. “The more powerful the women’s performance, the greater the imperative of asserting the masculine frame. Women were both emerging and exploited.”¹⁷⁰ Still, men could not control what the women were achieving on the dance floor. Hour upon hour they held on to one another and shamelessly relied upon each other’s strength. “Personal needs and conditions—hunger; sweat, sleep, wakefulness, bodily functions, pleasure, and sexual desires—that were never actually seen in other performances of the day were on display throughout the marathons.”¹⁷¹ It was exactly these displays that brought in the audiences. Here for the viewing was the tragic, real-life struggle of hapless “performers.” They fought for survival on the dance floor, with no real privacy; they revealed their humanity, their suffering, and their hidden desires for the voyeuristic pleasure of the spectators. This ritual featured the sweating bodies of men and women in constant motion, leaning upon and rubbing against one another.

Not surprisingly, this environment resulted in many sexual relationships. Yet, almost no researchers discuss the sexual encounters that are assumed to have occurred between couples off the dance floor. Researcher and historian Frank Calabria briefly refers to the occurrence of sexual liaisons during the contests stating that, “an undercurrent of eroticism did pervade dance

¹⁶⁹ Bothamley, 199.

¹⁷⁰ Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 79.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

endurance shows. This ambiance of sexuality was partly built into the format of the show and partly resulted from the way contestants were housed separated by gender.¹⁷² It was not unusual for some contestants to break the rules and sneak away in the early morning hours to a dark corner of the dance floor, to the shower, or to storage rooms to engage in sexual acts.¹⁷³

Both Horace McCoy's¹⁷⁴ novel, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, and the 1969 movie of the same name, address the sexual desires of the participants and the use of sexual favors to advance in the competition. The main character, Gloria Beatty, is seduced or seduces the emcee, Rocky. In the movie version, these sexual encounters happen discreetly behind the closed doors of his office during the scheduled fifteen-minute breaks.¹⁷⁵ In the novel, Gloria and Rocky slide under the bandstand together where Gloria's partner, Robert, discovers them as he pulls another girl under the bandstand.¹⁷⁶

Moral leagues, churches, and middle-class women who considered the dance marathons a breeding ground for sex, violence, and inhumane activities, denounced them. Competitions, they said, were degrading, immoral, brutal, and disgusting. Many groups sought to cancel any dance marathons that came to their towns. A constant conflict brewed between the female contestants and female reformers. They represented two different social classes—the lower- and working-class versus the middle-class wives and mothers of “professional” men like doctors and lawyers.

The reformers wished to return to the older morality that had been subverted in the past two decades. The female dance marathoners' apparent rejection of traditional values and their willingness to subject themselves to sexual exploitation for the sake of the competition continued to bewilder the reformers. “When they danced beyond expectation they demonstrated what was survivable and surmountable: they triumphed over the image of the frail, feminine Victorian

¹⁷² Calabria, 73.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁷⁴ Horace McCoy's (1897-1955) novel *They Shoot Horses Don't They?* was originally published in 1935, while marathons were still active. His account, although fictional, represents a primary view of the material, due to the marathons he attended and worked at during the 1930s. Therefore, the motion picture of his novel adapted by James Poe and Robert E. Thompson shows fictional characters with the advantage of the author's view of primary source material of Depression-era America and dance marathon contests.

¹⁷⁵ *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* DVD.

¹⁷⁶ Horace McCoy, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, (New York: Avon Books 1935; reprint, New York: Avon Books, 1969), 57-58.

body.”¹⁷⁷ The fact that these women acted out socially independent decisions about their own bodies, their sexuality, and their political, social, and economic welfare was troublesome to reformers.¹⁷⁸

In fact, many of the female marathoners were not attempting to make a political or feminist statement; they were simply trying to survive as long as possible by remaining upright and moving. In order to stay in the competition and progress in the elimination derbies, these women needed to be strong, athletic, and mentally tough enough to deal with the real issue of male-female equality. Outside society was comfortable with the familiar and normative representations of gender but on the dance marathon floor, the roles were changed.

Accustomed to attack by reformers, the marathon women could be vocal in their defense of themselves and of the lives they were living. They did not sit back quietly and take the abuse from those who sought to close down the contest. In *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, Gloria and the head of the Women's Moral League engage in an explosive argument in which Gloria retaliates against the insinuations about the morals of the marathon women.

“The Mother's League for Good Morals has condemned your contest,” Mrs. Higby said. “We have decided it is low and degrading and a pernicious influence in the community. We have decide you must close it---”

“Do you ladies have children of your own?” Gloria asked when the door closed.

“We both have grown daughters,” Mrs. Higby said.

“Do you know where they are tonight and what they're doing?” “Maybe I can give you a rough idea,” Gloria said.

“While you two noble characters are here doing your duty...your daughters are probably in some guy's apartment, their clothes off, getting drunk.” Mrs. Higby and Mrs. Witcher gasped in unison.

“That's generally what happens to the daughters of reformers. You drive 'em away from home with your goddamn lectures on purity and decency, and you're too busy meddling around to teach 'em the facts of life---” Gloria said.

“It's time somebody got women like you told,” Gloria said, moving over and standing with her back to the door, as if to keep them in, “and I'm just the baby to do it. You're the kind of bitches who sneak in the toilet to read dirty books and tell filthy stories and then go out and try to spoil somebody else's fun---”

“You move away from that door, young woman, and let us out of here!” Mrs. Higby shrieked. “I refuse to listen to you. I'm a respectable woman. I'm a Sunday School teacher---”

“I don't move a f----- inch until I finish,” Gloria said.

“You—goddamn—whore!” Mrs. Higby said, furious with passion.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 72.

¹⁷⁸ Martin, “Dance Marathons,” 327.

This quote dramatizes the divide and aggression the marathons engendered. These already marginalized women vehemently rejected the reformers.¹⁸⁰

Others positioned dance marathons as a pastime for working people without other options. Noting the distinction between the dance styles of the working- and middle-classes, historian Kathy Peiss suggests, “working people engaged in a different type of dance from their middle-class counterparts, one which contained much more sexually-explicit forms of dancing (and contact during dancing), and over which the dancers had direct control.”¹⁸¹ Reformers recognized the appeal dance marathons held for young women and girls. They attempted to prevent their exposure to these spectacles and to protect them from, and lift them above, the working-class life style of marathon women. A February 1934 article in *The Survey* referred to marathons as “America’s manifestation of ‘dementia’” and stated that, “to social workers concerned with protective measures for young girls the spread and popularity of this extraordinary form of amusement is occasioning considerable anxiety.”¹⁸²

Yet there were women who attended marathons regularly. They were usually older, possibly widowed, and tended to be poorer with little else in their lives.

They stayed for hours, days. They neglected home, children, work. Breeding, religion, culture—or the lack of it—could not explain the avid interest of the spectators. Their behavior becomes significant only as a sign of the times. They were drawn to us by the climate of cruelty in the world. Our degradation was entertainment; sadism was sexy; masochism was talent.¹⁸³

Havoc describes the late night crowds as being quite rowdy and distinct from the “family entertainment” audiences that certain promoters attempted to bring in. Prostitutes, who drank, swore, and tried to sell their “wares” would attend the shows late at night.¹⁸⁴ These types of

¹⁷⁹ McCoy, 93-94.

¹⁸⁰ Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 85.

¹⁸¹ Charles Stephenson and Robert Asher, ed. *Life and Labor: Dimensions of American Working-Class History*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 15.

¹⁸² Ann Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance, From the Puritans to the Present*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 313.

¹⁸³ Havoc, 46.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

audiences also troubled the moral reformers who worried about both the contestants and the female spectators.

If the reformers sought a return to Victorian and Edwardian morals, the women of the dance marathons remained faithful to their new gender-expression as they asserted their equality. If it developed as a necessity for winning competitions, equality also created alternate representation of women. The “weaker” sex proved they were strong enough to endure a dance marathon lasting for months and they hoped to project this reality beyond on their “stage.”

Women who danced in marathons enjoyed the excitement of the public stage, the glare of the lights, and the approval of the crowd. Morally speaking, they were no better or worse than the men with whom they danced. Their performances of “manual labor” did earn them a certain economic and psychological autonomy. The image of determination they created with muscle and sweat threatened, for a short time, to break some women loose from the status quo.¹⁸⁵

From the time the fad took hold in April 1923, spectators found the novelty of women breaking endurance records intriguing, especially when they competed in the same events as the men. Unfortunately, no extant marathon records tell us whether it was the men or the women who ultimately excelled in stamina and endurance. But women now were on par with men.

The most interesting fact about the pedomania is the superior staying power and perhaps grit of the female contenders...They commonly tired out half a dozen Tom, Dick, and Harrys, their partners in the exhausting shuffle. The ‘gentle sex’ the ‘weaker sex’ have almost been banished from print already. In the interest of truth, it now appears, these phrases should never again evade the blue pencil.¹⁸⁶

Social dances in the 1910s and 1920s changed public ideologies about what was acceptable in the physical behaviors of heterosexual couples, but the dance marathons pushed it even farther. “Because the dancing of this period was the canvas for a new kind of burgeoning public heterosexual behavior, it became a site for a host of controversies that would also come to plague dance marathons”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Martin, *Dance Marathon.*, 86.

¹⁸⁶ Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 13.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

What ideals survived after the marathon was over is difficult to determine. When marathons began to weaken in popularity, it was due to the improvement of the economy. Once the grimness of the Great Depression lessened and marathon circuits slowly dispersed, many marathon women found themselves back at home, married with children and a house to look after. Maybe their marathon stint was only a survival tool, but the impressions left today are of bold assertive marginalized and independent women, qualities essential for the career woman today, who is taking care of herself and her family. Even those women who saw nothing more in marathon dance competitions than food, money, and shelter, displayed the “anything-you-can-do, I-can-do” attitude of the suffragists and feminists of the Progressive Era, the 1920s, and the 1960s. It proved women were, and are, self-sufficient nurturers for a family or a tired marathon partner.

Despite a lack of research correlating any substantial changes in American society related to the impact and experience of the dance marathons, these events and the behaviors they engendered left their mark on the national self image. As the Great Depression ended, Americans had a more stable society and a recovering economy. Yet, the threat of another world war cast an ominous shadow across the nation’s future. Though Americans were against the country entering another European war, the inevitable would happen. Certainly, the efforts and able performance of women at home and in industry during the war years helped America succeed economically and achieve victory. Women’s undeniable endurance and strength served to propel America through some of its most challenging years, including two world wars and the Great Depression. On and off the dance floor, inside and outside the factory, women had carried their own weight and, when necessary, that of their men.

THESIS CHAPTER 7

PERFORMANCE REALITY OF SOCIAL DRAMA: REDRESSIVE ACTION AND REINTEGRATION

The dance marathon may lack the total fulfillment of what Turner labels the final stage or *reintegration*, (a successful resolution that concludes with reintegration and changes in, and to the larger society). Still, participants had transitioned from one life status to the next. First, they were members of the larger community, then they were objects controlled and regulated by the rituals of the endurance contest, and finally, they were reintegrated into the meta-drama of American society. Turner's social drama theories bring new emphasis and insights to this transitional point in history (1928-1934) revealing there is an inter-play of the influences and narratives between the meta-drama of American society and the marathon rituals. The survival of the fittest imperative prevailed in both the micro-community and in general society as Americans responded to the *crises* phase of the social drama. Existing without the normative stability of pre-1929 America, marathon participants and spectators found fellowship and comfort with each other.

The third phase of social drama, *redressive action*, is an activity or event employed in an attempt to resolve the crisis or problem. The theory of social drama suggests that this action usually takes the form of symbolic ritual. Illustrating this in reference to his research on African tribes, Turner says that the *redressive action* could be something as simple as a peace treaty or a truce entered into by the communities engaged in a battle or argument. In what Turner calls *times of affinity* the "meaning of the social life informs that apprehension of itself, while the object to be apprehended enters into and reshapes the apprehending subject."¹⁸⁸ With the dance marathon phenomenon, the events themselves *are* the *redressive action*. These "performance reality" endurance-dance competitions, in fact, helped many citizens with the reality of their own melancholic circumstances. The Depression meta-drama *was* real for those in the circuit and those who watched, and if marathons were a primary form of entertainment for millions, they provided an emotional and physical connection between what life was, and how it could be performed. These were ritual performances of the 1930s that communicated with and reflected their audiences, thereby serving (consciously or not) a corrective reflexive function.

¹⁸⁸ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 75.

According to Turner the social function of this performative event is arranged with motivation reminiscent of the larger macro-community. The micro-community, which is the dance marathon, was living theatre set within and of the American society of the 1930s.

These liminal areas of time and space—rituals, carnivals, dramas, and latterly films—are open to play of thought, feeling, and will; in whom are generated new models, often fantastic, some of which may have sufficient power and plausibility to replace eventually the force-backed political and jural models that controls the centers of society's ongoing life.¹⁸⁹

While social function and performance exist simultaneously, the audience remained entertained enough -- and distanced enough -- to temporarily benefit from the *redressive action*.

Audience members who attended the show day after day were drawn back by the “relationship” they developed with the performers. They were there to be entertained, but also to support their chosen couples. Personalizing the bond between the audiences and contestants guaranteed repeat attendance. The best way to personalize the experience was to develop character stereotypes. Promoters exploited this aspect of the performance and before entering, contestants were asked questions that helped “identify” a persona. As the contest proceeded these character-types were revealed and developed. On the floor the dancers might simply be themselves or they might play their “character” as identified by the emcee. “These [characters] had to be quickly recognizable types that were flexible enough to be elaborated on in personal and idiosyncratic ways.”¹⁹⁰ A pair of “professional” marathoners with a few contests under their belts might be portrayed unsympathetically as a ruthless or “bad” team. Another better-known stereotype in the marathon community was the “Sweetheart Couple.” This couple was often connected with the promoter in some way or was the local couple that should win it all. The crowds related positively to this stereotype. A young, fairly attractive couple supposedly had put everything on the line to compete. Promoters cherished those times when a hometown pair became the “Sweetheart Couple,” which guaranteed a larger hometown audience rooting for their own kids, and more money in the promoter's pockets.

¹⁸⁹ Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969; reprint, New York: Cornell Paperbacks, 1991), viii.

¹⁹⁰ Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 51.

Such stereotypes remain alive today in the world of professional wrestling and reality-TV shows. Participants combine athleticism, strength, and the ability to be convincing in their performance. “For example, [in wrestling] some performers played the roles of ‘villains’ while others played ‘innocent victims.’ They had to manipulate the audience’s attention, exploiting the emotion of the moment.”¹⁹¹

One famous marathoner, Chad Alviso, worked closely with the floor judges and emcee to anger the audience. Dark-haired and rarely smiling, Alviso would set her sights on the “innocent victim” or the “Sweetheart Couple.” Then as the judge conveniently looked away from the action, Alviso would purposely trip or elbow the (usually) blonde girl, who was only minutes from collapsing with exhaustion. Desperate to aid the victim, the incensed spectators would respond, yelling to alert the judge to Alviso’s bold infraction. But the young girl also was usually in on the play as well and had faked her nearly disastrous fall and possible elimination.¹⁹² Happily credulous, the audience reveled in their emotional turmoil and empathy for the dancers.

Another “bit” was to popularize certain marathon couples as engaged, which led to a fair number of marathon weddings. In actuality, the majority of the weddings were mock weddings. However, a few were the outcome of real love that had sprang up between two contestants. “They secured the spectacle of romance in the institution of marriage and declared that men and women each had a role to play”¹⁹³ However, more often, characters developed their “love” right there on the floor, under the watchful eye of the emcee, promoter, judges, other dancers, and audiences. The day of the wedding, festivities would continue as the couple and their wedding party shuffled on the dance floor. Marcia Seligson writes, “couples had to keep continually in motion, walking nonstop from contest arena to marriage license bureau, back to [the] arena where the minister walked backward while pronouncing the vows.”¹⁹⁴ It could be beneficial to participate in a wedding because the wedding gifts brought by adoring fans could be kept or sold. Most marathon newlyweds filed for divorce following the wedding.¹⁹⁵ Calabria writes: “The

¹⁹¹ Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 50.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁹⁴ Marcia Seligson, *The Eternal Bliss Machine*. (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1973), 201.

¹⁹⁵ Martin, *Dance Marathons*, 75-76.

walkathon wedding, because of its popular appeal, was often re-enacted the succeeding evening. Within a six-week period, a second Sweetheart Couple might be married.”¹⁹⁶

In the marathon micro-community, through the use of stereotypes, characters, and “performance reality” that represented the macro-American society, the participants and audiences began to *redress*, thus leading them closer to a completion of social drama. The final phase of Turner’s social drama is *reintegration*. Despite the significant programs launched by the New Deal legislation, America did not experience real economic recovery and relief from the Depression until the country entered WWII in 1941. War production and mobilization ultimately ended the nation’s economic standstill and WWII concluded the meta-drama of the Depression. Most former marathon contestants from 1934 (when this study ends) reintegrated into a situation in the country that had changed little. The conclusion of the dance marathon ritual was defined by contestants’ re-entrance into American society, and, by the finish of the marathons events. In some instances the social drama may drastically change an entire society with the completion of all four phases. A regression may also occur placing the society back to the particular time before the *breach* took place. And in other societies, a newer social drama may transpire due to the previous one.

The seeds of a new social drama may have been sown, even in the soil of the resolution of the present crisis. Nothing remains permanent in human affairs. Nevertheless, some sort of social ‘climax’ has been attained, or better, achieved, since much time, effort, and ingenuity have gone into the resolution of crisis.¹⁹⁷

The final phase of Turner’s theory does not exactly fit the case of dance marathons because, by design, the communities formed, slowly dispersed, and finally disbanded over the course of the contest. No doubt when they re-entered general society, the marathoners had been changed by their experiences and their passages. However, there was no enduring life change for most participants since few passed into a new and different life. The participants were freed from the confinements and regulations of the dance floor and hopefully returned to outside society somewhat wiser.

¹⁹⁶ Calabria, 144.

¹⁹⁷ Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush*, 220-21.

Actual full consummation of the rites occurred for the winners. One trademark of Turner's *aggregation/reintegration* is that the individual regains stability. Perhaps for the majority of the marathoners *aggregation* was limited to their experience in the ritual process, but the winners, because they went through a trial and survived victoriously, came out on the other side more stable. Full *aggregation* evolves when the individual emerges on the other side, changed by the process. For professional marathoners who found *steady* jobs participating in these contests, the entire ritual process became their life. A few secured real "outside" entertainment jobs after their marathon stints. This was the case for June Havoc, Anita O'Day, and Red Skeleton.

There is no one reason that explains why people participated in dance marathons and, in the few extant interviews and memoirs, few participants clearly articulated their personal motivations. One hint may be found in the terse legend on photographs signed by marathoners: "For No Good Reason." Everyone except the two winners were losers in the dance marathon making it the perfect representative ritual and *redressive action* for the meta-drama of 1930's America.

Social dramas are in large measure political processes, that is they involve competition for scarce ends—power, dignity, prestige, honor, purity—by particular means and by the utilization of resources that are also scarce—goods, territory, money, men and women. Ends, means, and resources are caught up in an interdependent feedback, process.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 71-72.

THESIS CHAPTER 8

REALITY-TV AND DANCE MARATHONS: A POSTSCRIPT

In the first decade of the 21st century, popular endurance competitions can be found in “reality-TV” shows and they continue to draw large audiences. Though more sophisticated than earlier promoters could have ever imagined, shows like *Survivor*, *Fear Factor* and *The Apprentice* nevertheless provide participants and audiences with opportunities and diversions similar to those offered by the dance marathons. Young contestants today are more like the marathoners of the 1920s -- they are generally motivated by the lure of fame and celebrity rather than by necessity. A relatively recent phenomenon, reality-TV has quickly gained in popularity since its birth in the late 1990s. No doubt, the correlations between the dance marathons and these newer entries into the category of endurance contest/entertainment will be the subject of future research. As did the marathon audiences of the 1920s and 1930s, the viewers of today’s reality-TV watch risky actions, in comfort, while being amazed and drawn to the performed spectacle.

Some journalists have already compared the dance marathon competitions to reality-TV. One website states, “In a 1920s reality show—*Survivor* with a twist—couples would dance popular dances of the day.”¹⁹⁹ Similarly, a 2005 *Wall Street Journal* article focused on the obvious relationship between the two forms of entertainment. Cynthia Crossen, begins her article, “Today, we have *Survivor*, *The Amazing Race*, and *Eco-Challenge*. In the 1920s and ‘30s, they had dance marathons.”²⁰⁰ It is her contention that the phenomenon of endurance competitions, which swept the nation seventy years ago, is again fascinating modern-day America. Though short, Crossen’s article quotes both Calabria and Martin as she attempts to educate the reader about the relationship between dance marathons and reality-TV, including their historical significance.

A 2005 *The New York Times* article examines the social significance of dance marathons and reality-TV. “TV’s Busby Berkeley Moment,” by Alessandra Stanley, suggests that 21st century Americans are nearer their 1930s’ counterparts than one might think. To support her

¹⁹⁹ Renée Camus *Dance Marathons*. (Available from <http://www.wunderland.com/WTS/Renee/DanceMarathons.html>) 2.

²⁰⁰ Cynthia Crossen, “Until States Intervened, Dance Marathons Were Earlier Era’s ‘Survivor’” in the *Wall Street Journal* 1 June 2005.

contention, she discusses dance marathons in relation to Donald Trump's currently popular *The Apprentice* TV:

It cannot be a good omen for the American economy that most compelling reality shows echo the class tension and overnight success fantasies of movies produced in, or set, in the Great Depression. But the unquenchable appeal of the "The Apprentice" and "American Idol" lies at least in part in their poignancy; both series combine the preposterous feel-good optimism of "42nd Street" with the desperation of "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?"²⁰¹

While the current economic climate in the United States cannot be equated to that of the Great Depression, Stanley's commentary implies that the popularity of the "reality" segment of American entertainment may indicate a sense of limited opportunities among younger Americans. She also seems to suggest that the false "reality" television programs are part of the problem.

Stanley derides the absurd nature of *The Apprentice* and other reality-TV shows that concentrate on the contrast between the extremely wealthy and the extremely poor in American society. The current preoccupation with celebrity and material wealth, even among the relatively comfortable middle class, is evocative of the fictional portrayal of the extremely rich that characterized motion pictures during the 1930s. In contrast, the 1930s' dance marathons were marketed to a population that was generally at the lower end of the economic scale and could, through watching, somehow feel better about themselves. This difference aside, both forms of entertainment -- dance marathons and reality-TV -- appeal to a sense of possibility, the idea that a single act or event can deliver a life-changing opportunity.

Americans' tastes in popular entertainment styles appear to have changed little since the 1930s. Though the medium has changed from live performance to television, it is the sense of "real" drama and suspense that remains the attraction. It is probably true that the viewer who devours hours of reality-TV programming would never assume the risk of "reality" competition himself. The challenge is best suited to those who have nothing to lose, or those who are desperate for the minute of fame that might come with national television exposure. These are the people who will fight for a chance to compete.

²⁰¹ Alessandra Stanley, "TV's Busby Berkeley Moment" in *The New York Times*, 30 January 2005.

There is something hypotonic about watching ordinary people expose themselves so rawly in pursuit of a better life. In the 1930's, the desperate people danced for a chance at fame and fortune in dance marathons. The only difference now is they can do it on television.²⁰²

Both the dance marathons of the Great Depression and the reality-TV of the new millennium are studies in humiliation and loss. Regardless of the type of reality entertainment, there is still only one winner, winning couple, or team. The losers are numerous. The allure of both the dance marathons and reality-TV may be attributed to the potential for success and the occasion to witness inevitable failure and loss. While the motivation of the spectator demonstrates a consistency -- waiting upon the joys and sorrows of the competitive outcome, the events themselves have been structured to fit into the life patterns and schedule of the audience. These programs need loyal watchers week after week.

Marathons and reality-TV shows specialize in performance of the everyday. In a show, such as *Real World*, audiences are welcomed into the contestants' lives, where they do everyday things, such as shower, work, eat, and socialize with their friends – an ongoing performance of real life. The viewer willingly accepts all this as genuine, as if it were authentic life revealed for his or her voyeuristic pleasure. In actuality the audience is watching a performance of reality. To watch a reality-TV show is to witness a polished product derived from hours of meticulously edited tape. The final product is a carefully constructed portrayal of “reality” conceived by the show's creators, producers, and directors. When it succeeds it can make even life's mundane moments engaging and entertaining.²⁰³

As was true of the marathon floor, reality-TV employs stereotypes for effect. The token gay male, the good guy, the sweet woman, the angry woman, and the naïve southern girl are all characters used to create real-life fictions. And, like the marathoners who capitalized on their personalities, by portraying familiar “types,” today's TV contestants are acting their roles. Ultimately, the financial success of “reality” entertainment requires effective performances, quality production, savvy promoters, and eager audiences.

²⁰² Stanley, 1.

²⁰³ Though it may not be common knowledge to some reality-TV viewers, the drama shown, has been highly produced by a production staff. Most reality-TV program's credits list, not only directors, but also producers and writers who play an integral role in what is chosen to be aired and in what particular context.

For all their differences, there are similarities between the environments that spawned and supported dance marathons and reality-TV. As the 21st century begins, Americans are once again suffering from a shrinking economy. The stock market has not crashed and the nation is not in a devastating depression, but there is a sense of foreboding about the future. Working people are discovering that their money is not going as far as it used to; there is high anxiety about jobs being cut, and salaries leveled out as corporations respond to the demands of investors. Opportunities for young people seem to be limited, the country is at war in Iraq, the national debt is rising, and there is social unrest. And, just as the mass of baby boomers is reaching retirement age, they are witnessing the dismantling of the social and economic supports related to pensions and other entitlements that were long assumed to be secure.

In the 1930s, Americans had little interest in the welfare of the rest of the world; they were focused on the domestic problem of creating jobs and getting people off the streets. Consistent with the internal focus, dance marathons were a palliative performance that was experienced locally and in person. Ironically, it would be involvement in a foreign war that would eventually upgrade the national welfare and signal the end of the marathon circuit. By contrast, today the United States is deeply engaged in deficit spending to fight a foreign war and, yet, the spectacle of endurance contests is thriving. This suggests some commonality between American society today and in the 1930s.

Over seventy years later large segments of the American public can relate to the confusion and sense of vulnerability that plagued society during the 1930s. One way to deal with the situation is to escape into television. Spectacles display humiliation, failure, and endurance, but they also hold out the hope of victory. Martin eloquently summarizes this function.

They were complex performance events that negotiated important culture shifts and conflicts of American life between the world wars. Marathons collapsed the distance between real life and theatre, a reflection of a larger cultural obsession with celebrity, notoriety, endurance, and identity.²⁰⁴

Just as the dance marathons faded away when they were no longer required as redressive and reflexive events, the reality-TV fad will likely continue as long as it is functional, after which it will most likely disappear.

²⁰⁴ Martin, *Dance Marathons*, xxv.

CONCLUSION

The dance marathon is one of many human events that seem to beg the question, “Why?” Why would individuals choose to spend hours, days, or weeks engaged in an activity that challenges them physically, restricts their behavior, and even degrades them? Why would other individuals spend money and time to watch an event that has no predictable end date and is sure to display some level of human suffering? What underlying human needs are evidenced by the dance marathon? Regardless of any speculation regarding personal motivations, we can assume that, like all human behavior, participation in or attendance of dance marathons was purposeful for those involved, and was thus representative of Victor Turner’s idea of social drama. The fact that dance marathons were functional for a segment of American society accounts for their long and successful run.

The reason for participation in the dance marathons and walkathons changed over time. Contestants in the 1920s appear to have been motivated mostly by the challenge and competition of the event.²⁰⁵ In keeping with the rebellious and occasionally flighty image of the “roaring twenties,” the dance marathon was another bit of irrational behavior, made less shocking, perhaps, by the early 20th century fascination with psychoanalysis.²⁰⁶ In an age noted for excess and fueled by alcohol – which was made more exciting by its outlaw status under prohibition, wacky diversions were simply part of the fabric of society. The 1920s witnessed the emergence of spectator sports as a form of mass entertainment, the birth of radio, “Madison Avenue” advertising, and the spread of consumer credit. An era that sensed its own modernity, it was an economic boom time that could imagine no limits to its prosperity.²⁰⁷ Flagpole sitting and dance marathons were part of the milieu that gave the period its flavor of “anything goes.” Through these fads and activities, Americans demonstrated their determination to prove themselves to each other and to the rest of the world.²⁰⁸

By contrast, America in the 1930s was characterized by economic depression. There was little appetite for frivolous endeavors; activity for millions of Americans had to be purposeful,

²⁰⁵ Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 6.

²⁰⁶ Calabria, 167.

²⁰⁷ Blank, 94-95.

²⁰⁸ Martin, *A History of the American Dance Marathon*, 6.

especially in an economic sense.²⁰⁹ The “challenge” of the dance marathon and the opportunity – no matter how unlikely – for celebrity was soon lost behind the very basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. In this environment, individuals who would never have entered a dance marathon or walkathon for diversion made a rational decision to take on the challenge as one would take on a job. The question was which option had more potential for payoff: selling apples or dancing for a month?

If the participants were motivated by fame or economics, what brought the audience to these events? Certainly, for Depression-era Americans with little money, the dance marathon was relatively inexpensive entertainment that could last for days, weeks, and, sometimes, months. Many Americans were without jobs and, therefore, had the time to spend watching dance marathons.

Based upon the relative economic and social environments of these two very different decades it is easy to categorize the dance marathon participants as products of their respective eras. With the radical downturn in the economy, American life during the 1930s was drastically different than it had been during the preceding decade. The dance marathons offered the downtrodden and depressed a respite from their boredom and a diversion from their problems. It did not matter that for the participants the dance marathons were a grinding reality, carefully staged and dramatized to pull in an audience.²¹⁰

For a minimal financial commitment and without personal risk, the spectator could witness the drama and heartbreak of someone else’s reality. This fascination with human struggle appears to be part of a human behavioral continuum that includes those who filled the Roman Coliseum to watch gladiators risk their lives, and those who, during the Civil War, perched on hilltops with a picnic lunch, watching young men die in battle. They may be part of the group of individuals who attend public hangings, boxing matches, hockey, and the choreographed and predictable professional wrestling matches. Attracted to the unseemly fringe of spectator sports, these are the individuals who secretly, or even openly, attend such events in the hope of witnessing a little blood and or misery.

Horace McCoy’s novel *They Shoot Horses Don’t They?* was probably the first to document the dance marathon and it’s contestants in their shame and magnificence, and bring

²⁰⁹ Blank, 130.

²¹⁰ Melissa Allen, 39.

literary and fictional insight to the phenomenon. The choice of a dance marathon as the setting for his literary noir murder mystery infused McCoy's story and characters with a currency and relevance that must have resonated with its early readers. The story of Gloria and Robert would have seemed palpable to anyone who had attended a dance marathon. Written in 1935, while marathons were still running, though weakening in popularity, McCoy "depicted the dance marathon as a symptom of the era's social upheaval and personal deprivation."²¹¹

With dance marathons seemingly forgotten, McCoy's novel was turned into a movie in 1969. Interestingly, Charlie Chaplain was the first to buy the movie rights, and had hoped to make the film himself. Unfortunately, movie executives during the 1940s believed that not enough time had passed and refused to make the film. It is likely that Chaplain was not only attracted by the dramatic murder mystery, but also by the pathos of a truly American story that expressed the hardship endured by ordinary people during the Great Depression. When McCoy's story was finally released on film, it captivated both audiences and the Academy, earning it nine Oscar nominations in 1969. The dance marathon had been resurrected as a symbol of Depression-era life and an enduring part of American 20th century culture.

In 2001, Rick Sparks attempted to bring McCoy's novel to the stage. He is quoted as saying, "...even though the dance marathons took place in the 1930s, some things haven't changed."²¹² Though, the United States is more economically viable than it was during the 1930s, the national mood is undermined by a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty that contributes to the public fascination with the current-day version of endurance contests, reality-TV. In an interview with NPR, Sparks spoke candidly of,

...the success of 'Survivor,' all of the voyeuristic shows on television dealing with people loving to see who's going to last, that treadmill, that experience of watching people try to last, beating down each other, who will survive, our fascination for seeing lives that are possibly harder than our own; that experience of maybe feeling much better about our own life when we see other peoples foibles.²¹³

²¹¹ Judd, Jackie. Profile: Play "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?" About Depression-era Marathon Dancing is Receiving Rave Reviews. (Morning Edition of NPR, June 1, 2001, Verbatim copy of broadcast by Iris Mann), 1.

²¹² Judd, 1.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

Spark's production of *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* opened in Los Angeles and was performed in the theatre-in-the-round to give the audience the sense of actually attending a dance marathon. Sparks recounted that some audience members even shouted encouragement to the dancers and tossed coins, just like in the actual contests.²¹⁴

Supposedly based upon his own experience as a bouncer at marathons in California, McCoy's image of the dance marathon is that of an exploitative commercial venture. When this depiction is compared to Carol Martin's assessment, McCoy's presentation appears to suffer from a lack dimension. Where McCoy's novel highlights the humiliating and unbearable side of the marathon floor, Martin's interviews with surviving marathoners confirm that "marathons were actually extremely complicated performative events...they were modeled on a radical version of social Darwinism."²¹⁵

Other contributions to the literature on dance marathons have been in the form of personal reminiscences. Though the memoirs of June Havoc and Anita O'Day shed some light on the topic, they could not generate a sense of the marathons' importance or establish an emotional connection with the current day population. In 1963, six years prior to the release of *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, Havoc's *Early Havoc* was converted into a play entitled *Marathon '33*. Unfortunately, the theatre community considered it relatively mediocre and it was quickly forgotten by the general public. Theatre reviewer Richard P. Cook of the *Wall Street Journal* was unenthusiastic about *Marathon '33* and wrote, "But as 'Marathon '33' is presented, it is neither satire nor the sort of realism which can evoke genuine interest in these unfortunate, if durable, dancers in the dark. The play is literal, but not compelling."²¹⁶

Thankfully, the body of work on the subject of marathons is not without excellent offerings. Through their respective books, Carol Martin and Frank Calabria have contributed substantially to our understanding and appreciation of the marathons. *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture in the 1920s and 1930s* and *Dance of the Sleepwalkers: The Dance Marathon Fad*, both published in the 1990s, should help to stimulate a renewed interest in the marathon phenomenon. Whether the books are read only by academics or reach the general public, their importance is undeniable. The research, including interviews with surviving

²¹⁴ Judd, 4.

²¹⁵ Martin *Dance Marathon*, xvi.

²¹⁶ Richard P. Cook, "The Theatre: Fatigue Derby" in *Wall Street Journal*. 24 Dec 1963, 6.

dancers and others involved in the community, is likely the most accurate documentation of these contests and will enhance any study of 20th century American society.

As Turner has documented, social drama is ever present in human life, and its role in the dance marathon elevates these contests from mere entertainment to performative events that reflect the macro drama of the greater American society in the 1930s. They were live theatre in which all those present were performers. Despite their often rigid structure, they were protean and pragmatic, easily co-opting and employing even unplanned events. Of necessity, they furthered the long term erosion of fixed gender roles. They were cynical and hopeful, perfectly reflecting the attitude of the initiates as they shuffled through the Depression.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, Frederick Lewis. *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties*. New York: Harpers & Brothers Publishers, 1931.
- _____. *Since Yesterday: The Nineteen-Thirties in America*. New York: Bantam Books, 1965.
- Allen, Melissa Spencer. *The Roles of Popular Entertainment Dance During the Great Depression*. MA thesis. Brigham Young University, 2000.
- America Dances! 1897-1948*. A Collector's Edition of Social Dance in Film. Produced by Dancetime Publications, 2003. Videocassette.
- Ames, Mildred. *Dancing Madness*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1980.
- Becker, Paula. *Dance Marathons of the 1920s and 1930s—A Snapshot History*. 25 August 2003. Available from http://www.historylink.org/output.cfm?file_id=5534.
- Blank Carla, ed. *Rediscovering America: The Making of Multicultural America, 1900-2000*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003.
- Bothamley, Jennifer. *Dictionary of Theories*. Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 2002.
- Boyum, Joy Gould. "Patching Together Some Instant History." *Wall Street Journal*, 18 August 1975, 9.
- Broun, Heywood. "Waltz Me Around Again, Willie." *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 31, No. 1. (September 1928): 48 & 108.
- Brown, Norman O. *Life Against Death*. Middletown CT: Wesleyan Press, 1959.
- Buckman, Peter. *Let's Dance: Social Ballroom and Folk Dancing*. New York: Paddington Press, 1978.
- Calabria, Frank. Book Review of *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture in the 1920s and 1930s*, by Carol Martin. *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 28, Issue 4 (Spring 1995): 259-260.
- _____. *Dance of the Sleepwalkers: The Dance Marathon Fad*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993.

- Camus, Renée. *Dance Marathons*. Written for the "USA Twenties" Encyclopedia. Grolier Publishing, 2005. Available from <http://www.wunderland.com/WTS/Renee/DanceMarathons.html> .
- Chicago Daily Tribune*. 8 June 1928; 10 June 1928; 16 March 1930; 14 March 1931; 17 May 1935.
- Cooke, Richard P. "The Theatre: Fatigue Derby." *Wall Street Journal*. 24 December 1963, 6.
- Crossen, Cynthia. "Until States Intervened, Dance Marathons Were Earlier Era's 'Survivor.'" *Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition*, Vol. 245, Issue 106 (1 June 2005): B1.
- Dance Marathon Clippings from 1930's News Reels. New York Public Library, Performing Arts Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. Videocassette.
- Dance Marathons*. Available from <http://www.badfads.com/pages/events/marathon.html>.
- Dance Marathons: Pageant of Fatigue*. Available from <http://www.streetswing.com/histmain/d5marthn.htm>.
- Driver, Ian. *A Century of Dance*. London: Octopus Publishing Group Limited, 2000.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*. New York: Harper Torch Books, 1958.
- Erenberg, Lewis A. *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981. Reprint Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Farrell, James. *Studs Lonigan: Judgment Day*. 1935. Reprint, Garden City, NY: International Collectors Library, 1978.
- _____. "The Dance Marathons." *MELUS, Vol. 18, No. 1, Irish-American Literature*, Spring 1993, 133-143. Previously unpublished paper, from the Department of Special Collections at the University of Chicago Library. Original date of work is unknown.
- "Fashion Marathon: Marathon Dance," *Vogue, Italia*, March 1997, 436-463.
- Green, Abel and Joe Laurie, Jr. *Show Biz from Vaude to Video*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1951.
- Havoc, June. *Early Havoc*. London: Hutchinson & Company, 1960.

- _____. *More Havoc*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980.
- Horace McCoy. Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia. Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace_McCoy.
- J, PB. "The Theatre: Footwork." *Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 1933, 3.
- Judd, Jackie. "Profile: Play *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* About Depression-era Marathon Dancing is Receiving Rave Reviews." Morning Edition of NPR, 1 June 2001. Verbatim copy of broadcast by Iris Mann.
- Kaye, Joseph. "Dance of the Fools." *The Dance Magazine*, February 1931, 12-13, 54.
- Kennedy, John B. "Good-Night Lady." *Colliers*, Vol. 90, No. 4.(23 July 1932): 27-28, 44.
- Los Angeles Times*. 8, 26 April; 1 May 1928.
- Malone, Jacqui. *Steppin' on the Blues*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996.
- Marathon Dancing*. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dance_marathon.htm.
- Martin, Carol Joyce. *A History of the American Dance Marathon*. Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1991.
- _____. "Dance Marathons 'For No Good Reason.'" *The Drama Review*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 1987): 48-63.
- _____. "Dance Marathons." *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, ed. Selma Jeanne Cohen. Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1998, 324-328.
- _____. *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture in the 1920's and 1930's*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- _____, ed. "Life on the Floor, Art, Sport, and Scam: Dance Marathons of the Twenties and Thirties." *New Observations*, No. 39, 1986, 3-23.
- Mathews, Lawrence. Personal Scrapbooks of photos, clippings, correspondence and advertisements, 1929-1942. New York Public Library, Performing Arts Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division.
- McCoy, Horace. *The Shoot Horses, Don't They?*. New York: Avon Books, 1935. Reprint New York: Avon Books, 1969.

- McDonagh, Don. *Dance Fever*. New York: Random House Inc., 1979.
- Near Beer*. Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia. Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Near_beer.
- Neumann, Arthur E. "The Marathon Dance." *The Debunker*, Vol. IX, No. 2. (January 1929): 44-49.
- Nolte, Eugene. "The'-Thon'Suffix." *American Speech*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (October 1954): 229.
- O'Day, Anita. *High Times, Hard Times*. New York: Proscenium Publishers Inc., 1981. Reprint, New York: Proscenium Publishers Inc., 1989.
- "On With the Dance" *The Nation*, Vol. CXXVII, No. 3288 (11 July 1928): 32.
- Peiss, Kathy. *Cheap Amusements, Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986.
- Richmond, Lee J. "A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance: Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horse Don't They?*" *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (April 1971): 91-100.
- Rogers, Agnes. *I Remember Distinctly: A Family Album of the American People 1918-1941*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1947.
- Sann, Paul. *Fads, Follies and Delusions of the American People*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1967.
- Schwarz, Frederic D. *American Heritage*, Vol. 49, Issue 2 (April 1998): 116-117.
- Seligson, Marcia. *The Eternal Bliss Machine: America's Way of Wedding*. New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1973.
- Skerrett, Ellen. "James T. Farrell's 'The Dance Marathons.'" *MELUS*, V. 18, No. 1, *Irish-American Literature*, Spring 1993, 127-131.
- Snowman, Daniel. *America Since 1920*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968.
- Stanley, Alessandra. "TV's Busy Berkeley Moment." *The New York Times*, Vol. 154, Issue 53110, Section 4, 30 January 2005, 1-3.
- Stearns, Marshall and Jean Stearns. *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1968. Reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1994.

- Stephenson, Charles and Robert Asher, ed. *Life and Labor: Dimensions of American Working-Class History*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1986.
- Stern, Harold. "Dance Marathons...Look Back in Horror." *Dance Magazine*. February 1970, 68-71.
- Sue's Leg/Remembering the 1930s*. Dance in America Series, PBS. Choreography by Twyla Tharp, 1986. Videocassette.
- Sueur, Meridel, Le. "The Sleepwalkers." *The New Republic*, Vol. LXXV, No. 974, (2 August 1933): 313-314.
- Sullivan, Mark and Dan Rather, ed. *Our Times: America at the Birth of the Twentieth Century*. New York: A Lisa Drew Book, Scribner, 1996.
- Susman, Warren I. *Culture as History, The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. Reprint, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003.
- Swados, Harvey, ed. *The American Writer and the Great Depression*. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966.
- Terkel, Studs. *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1970. Reprint, New York: Pocket Books, 1978.
- _____. *The Spectator: Talk About Movies and Plays with Those Who Made Them*. New York: The New Press, 1999.
- Téten, Carol. *Dancing the 20th Century*. Presented by Dance Through Time. Dancetime Publications, 1999. Videocassette.
- "That's Entertainment!" *Kids Discover*, Vol. 11, Issue 8 (August 2001): 8-9.
- The New York Times*, 15 April 1923-27 July 1930.
- They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* Directed by Sydney Pollack, produced by Irwin Winkler and Robert Chartoff. ABC Pictures Corp presents A Palomar Picture and A Chartoff Winkler/Pollack Production. Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1969. DVD.
- Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1982.
- _____. *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1985.
- _____. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1987.

_____. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969. Reprint, New York: Cornell Paperbacks, 1991.

_____. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969. Reprint, New York: Walter de Gruyter, Inc. 1995.

Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage, A Classical Study of Cultural Celebrations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

Voget, Fred and Mary Kay Voget. "The Butte Walkathon." *Montana* 1998, 48(3), 54-61.

Wagner, Ann. *Adversaries of Dance: From the Puritans to the Present*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997.

Ware, Susan. *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930's*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982.

Watkins, T.H. *The Great Depression, America in the 1930s*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Chelsea Dunlop is completing her Master of Arts in American Dance Studies at Florida State University. She came to the program after attaining a four-year Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Specialization in Dance from Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan. Ms. Dunlop was born and raised in Royal Oak, Michigan, where she resided until her acceptance to Florida State University. While attending FSU, she participated in the Department of Dance program, FSU in NYC. While studying in New York City, she held an internship at Mark Morris Dance Group, one of the top Modern Dance companies in the world. After the completion of her MA degree, she would like to employ her education and experience in dance and history teaching American social and cultural history. Ms. Dunlop plans to continue her studies and pursue a Ph.D. in history.