Spectacular Women: The Radio City Rockettes from 1925 to 1971

THESIS

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By

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Abstract

The Radio City Rockettes are one of the most famous dance troupes in the United States, having performed at Radio City Music Hall since 1932. This thesis serves as the first stand-alone, expansive history about who they are, what they represent, and how they developed under the leadership of founder Russell Markert (1899-1990). This study will trace how the Rockettes began as an emblem of modernity and developed into a symbol of nostalgia under the leadership of one man from their Missouri inception in 1925 through his retirement in 1971. Intrinsically linked to the design and vision of Radio City Music Hall, the company was a symbol of American ingenuity and national pride. As an embodiment of industry, precision dance was first introduced by the British Tiller Girls, and codified by Markert into a technique that Rockettes still carry on today. Besides their iconic status, Rockettes also benefitted from the familial environment of Radio City Music Hall and paternal affections of Markert, both which contributed to a workplace that offered stability, safety, and a dependable income to the women who sought an independent life in the dance world. This line of thirty-six dancers who perform as one unit will reach its centennial anniversary in 2025, and their longevity demands a closer look at why they remain beloved despite fluctuations in popularity and what they have represented to the American people throughout the decades.
Acknowledgments

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Against all odds, on December 27, 1932 in the middle of the Great Depression, Radio City Music Hall opened its doors. Envisioned by John D. Rockefeller (1839 – 1937) and realized by Samuel Lionel “Roxy” Rothafel (1882 –1936), Rockefeller Center and its theatres exemplified the Art Deco style and symbolized the strength and future of America. A long line of female dancers, hired to personify the optimism of the American people and to celebrate the opening of this ‘Great Stage,’ came to be known as the Radio City Rockettes. The company, which physically embodied the energy of the age, soon gained world-wide recognition for its precision dance style, garnering special accolades for one of its first and now iconic dance specialties, the eye-high kick line.

In 1932, Rockefeller and Rothafel inaugurated their “city within a city,” a physical representation of the modern advancement they imagined America aspired towards and needed as inspiration. The very word modern surrounds much of the writings about the various components of this symbolic city, from the architecture to the interior design to the technical achievements and finally to the new and evocative dance style of the Rockettes. It was not only the dance style that was modern, but the steady employment that was available for the dancers who were among the increasing pools of independent women interested in working outside the home.

Today this image of modernism seems far away from the highly marketed and somewhat kitschy dance spectacle. But while sometimes viewed as an anachronism in the
dance world, the Rockettes are at other times seen as a pinnacle of professional dance. The Rockettes were referred to as “only a museum” in 1978 and “akin to dancing vintage stewardesses” in 2016.¹ Yet in 2014, they were also reviewed as an “extravaganza of synchronized moves and ho-ho-ho enthusiasm” and in 2005, the Rockettes were dubbed “the hardest-working women in show business.”² Although the Rockettes are sometimes lauded and other times disparaged, their fame has remained undiminished throughout the century and their Christmas performances have become a holiday tradition that is emblematic of New York City. Performed on the colossal stage at Radio City Music Hall (RCMH), today’s *Radio City Christmas Spectacular* is seen by an estimated two million people or more annually.

Although initially related to the Ziegfeld Girls and the Tiller Girls of the early twentieth century, the Radio City Rockettes have diverged to represent their own style of commercial American dance. As popular entertainments were emerging that were no longer subordinate to classical European standards, such as tap dance and songs of Tin Pan Alley, the Rockettes gave life to a new type of dance that was an amalgamation of styles that prized exactitude and conformity. Dancers needed to perform high kicks, certainly, but they also went through rigorous auditions to ensure that they were proficient in ballet, jazz, and able to do difficult tap combinations. The Rockettes are a self-proclaimed sisterhood—thirty-six synchronized dancers who revel in the bond

created through their unison dancing. Working together, literally linked together on the
stage as well as spending long hours training, performing, and sharing backstage and
dressing room space, these dancers experience an almost familial connection with each
other on and off the stage. Through their common goal of performing exactly in unison
while restraining any vestige of individuality, each Rockette appears to connect to the
group both physically and in spirit.

The name “the Rockettes” immediately brings to mind a line of interchangeable
and identically shaped women, kicking their lanky gams to the sky in uniform dance
moves designed to bring applause. Acclaimed since their first New York appearance in
1927 as a fledgling company from Missouri, their longevity indicates that there is
something more to learn from their origins and existence than that of just commercial
success. What is it about these women and their precision dancing that has not only
endured but has become iconic? The ability of their performances to sell tickets has
 ebbed and flowed as the company neared extinction in the late seventies and rebounded,
but their status and world-wide fame remained strong.

What can we learn by looking at this distinctive dance company that has been
nearly the same for almost a hundred years? Or if it has changed, how, and more
importantly, why? How did this group capture the heart of the American people during its
first years in the 1920s and how did it manage to survive, despite surges in popularity and
relevance? As a stable and profitable place of employment, what effect did it have on
dance and labor, and what did it offer to female dancers? Looking at the reception of the
Rockettes throughout their tenure helps us examine changes within the culture itself,
iluminating the reciprocal influences that travel between the stage and the audience.
Russell Markert (1899 - 1990)—the founder of the Rockettes—grasped onto something inherent in the mood and appetites of the American people after World War I and articulated it through his dancers. The Rockettes, alternately seen as glamorous or campy with their high kicks and sparkling costumes, connected to something that engaged huge swaths of the mainstream public. Yet when the routines no longer resonated as suggestive of modern industry or innovation, it still had a nostalgic pull on an audience that became one of their strongest assets.

In examining and preserving the history of these world-renowned dancers, the issues of modernism and nostalgia emerge. Despite cultural and societal changes, the Rockettes were kept close to the hearts of New Yorkers, locals and tourists alike. In 1978, Radio City was nearly demolished to clear the land for a parking lot, and although attendance for the shows were near an all-time low, citizens and politicians rallied to save not only the structure of RCMH but the dance troupe specifically. As Sarah Kaufman asked in *The Washington Post* in 2009, “What is it about…those clichéd routines, the repetitive drills that cause such theatrical excitement?”

When the Music Hall first opened, the Rockettes performed multiple times a day and offered an physical parallel to the architectural promise of the building itself. The thirty-six women projected the spirit of America, recalling Michael J. Kammen’s assertion in *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century* that at in the early decades of that century, the people were looking for culture that reflected their national pride and ‘can-do’ identity. Although the dance troupe continues to

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perform today, this thesis will focus on the enduring legacy created under the leadership of Russell Markert, from his conception of the company in 1925 until his retirement in 1971, a time when the relevance of the Rockettes was under fire.

Approaching my subject from both a historical and personal viewpoint, I am able to reflect on the dance style of the Rockettes from my own employment in the company. In 1998, I was hired to be a Radio City Rockette in the annual *Radio City Christmas Spectacular*. At this point, the company was branching out with concurrent productions happening simultaneously in different cities. I was sent to be a member of the Christmas show in Los Angeles, CA, and the following year I again was hired and danced with a company in Myrtle Beach, SC. Even while I was performing high kicks in my three-inch heels in the center of the line, I wondered what it was about the show that kept audiences coming back, returning as part of an annual holiday tradition. Looking around at the faces made up with red lipstick and fake eyelashes in my line, I saw the women I had gotten to know by working side by side, day after day, in our training to become a unit. I viewed them as the athletic, talented, and independent women I knew onstage and off, and wondered how our current show differed from the early days, and how our lifestyle varied from those who danced some of the same numbers years before. Much of our new choreography was more complex than what the Rockettes of the 1930s, ‘40s, or ‘50s were asked to undertake, but their full-time schedule was much more grueling than ours, with ongoing year-round commitment filled with long days of performing and rehearsing choreography.

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5 Starting in 1994, Radio City began residencies in cities outside of New York for their Christmas Spectacular. This abruptly came to an end in 2015, although there is still a touring version of the company, which travels through the holiday season. Dancers are required to re-audition each season.
But where are the details of this rich history of the lives these dancers led? The history of the Radio City Rockettes, one that spans over decades, has fallen through the cracks, studied neither as dance scholarship nor as theatre history. Multiple mentions and reviews of the Rockettes over the past ninety plus years are readily accessible online. Yet at the same time, no comprehensive history of the organization exists. Moreover, no archive from which such a history might be written exists. Costume and scenic design materials—including copious photos—have been retained at the NYPL, but beyond that, records of the sort that might inform a study of business or choreographic practice have been almost entirely neglected. It is as if no one believed these materials might matter, and querying that assumption is at the core of this study.

Some of the fault may lie directly with the commercial nature of the Rockettes. After being helmed by the same team for forty years, the show floundered in the 1970s with changes in personnel and management style. In 1978, after nearly closing, the Rockefeller Group struggled to keep the building profitable, and eventually sold it to real estate developers, the Mitsubishi Estate Company of Tokyo, in 1989. It again changed hands in 1997, when it was bought by Cablevision Systems, Inc., who owns it today. These revolving corporate owners managed the building as well as the production team that kept the Rockettes on stage, but did little to record or preserve its ongoing history. Not even a list of names of the women who have been Rockettes is available. Rockette alumnae have unofficially taken on the challenge of collecting and retaining memorabilia, but it does not lie in one accessible place, and is in danger of disappearing.

Radio City Music Hall, the building of ground-breaking accomplishments and definitive Art Deco style, has been studied and written about both in the architectural
world as well as in mainstream history, where mentions of the Rockettes are often documented as a side note. To begin the job of constructing the timeline of the Rockettes’ growth (and sometimes decline), an expansive and stand-alone history of this group is needed, focusing on the sources of inspiration, a discussion of precision dance, and an understanding of how they became an institution in New York City. For the scope of this thesis, the main analysis will be limited to 1925 through 1971, which are the years under the original director and founder Russell Markert. In addition, the thesis will examine the changes in how the company was received over much of the twentieth century, beginning as reflection of modernity and at times falling into near obsolescence.

**Russell Markert and Rockette Origins**

An early scrapbook—embossed in gold on the leather cover with title *Press Comments on Russell E. Markert, Dance Director Trainer of the 32 Roxyettes, Dec 1927- Oct 1928* and therefore presumed to belong to Markert himself—begins with a sepia toned photo of Markert as a young man. Looking the quintessential chorus boy of the 1920s, he peers earnestly and serenely into the camera. He is wearing a dark suit jacket of the period, buttoned high in the lapels and complete with a pocket square, over a white shirt with evenly spaced thin stripes and dark tie. His short hair, parted on the side and slicked across his head, leaves a wide forehead exposed. His face has a slightly dainty quality to it, with his groomed eyebrows and slightly dimpled chin.

In 1922, this promising twenty-three-year-old dancer sat in the second balcony of the New Amsterdam Theatre and watched the British Tiller Girls perform in the *Ziegfeld Follies*. The Tiller Girls were making continual headlines as they traveled around the
world, showing off John Tiller’s new style of “Tap-and-Kick,” or what came to be called precision dance. Begun in 1889, John Tiller strove for discipline within his chorus line, discovering how linking arms between dancers created a new kind of unison, which led to the now ubiquitous kick line. As Markert watched the new phenomenon of precision dancing unfolding below him, he thought to himself that, “…someday, if I have the chance, I’ll get sixteen American girls — taller — kicking higher and doing lots of tap dancing.”

Seizing an opportunity to do exactly that in St. Louis, Missouri, Markert’s first line of sixteen dancers — taller and younger than the Tiller Girls — had their first performance in October 1925 at the St. Louis Grand Theatre. First named “The Sixteen Missouri Rockets,” the line displayed the characteristics of today’s Rockettes: “When they kicked, they all kicked to the same height. When they tapped, their taps had firing-squad orderliness. Their arms, heads, hands, and legs worked in unison, and whether they moved in ruler-straight lines, circles, or precisely planned patterns to and from the footlights, each girl looked as if she had been made from the same mold.”

Born on August 8, 1899, in Jersey City, New Jersey, Markert attended public schools and had a love of dance. In oft-recounted story of his childhood, Markert, they say, wandered away from his mother at age three, only to be found dancing alongside a jazz band. Apparently, he quipped to his mother, “When you hear the music, you have to dance.” Markert later mentioned this as the title of his planned, but never written, autobiography. At age eighteen, he enlisted in the army, serving in France and also

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8 Roman, “Hide Your Daughters,” 46.
performing in military shows during World War I. Released because of an Achilles
tendon injury, he returned to the States and began a career in finance, but soon turned to
dance where his natural talent was apparent.\(^9\) He auditioned for the *Earl Carroll Vanities*
in 1923, where he was hired as a chorus boy and quickly showcased his aptitude,
becoming the assistant dance director within a year. For fifteen months, he also directed a
group of female dancers in the heart of Harlem for an “all-colored” review at the Cotton
Club. Later in 1924, he landed two promising but conflicting positions: that of the
juvenile lead in the Broadway touring production of *No, No, Nanette* and as that of a
stage producer in St. Louis for the Scours brothers. Torn between the two, he reportedly
flipped an actual coin and opted for the less profitable but intriguing possibilities of
producing shows in Missouri.\(^10\)

Markert went to St. Louis, “to try something I’ve been wanting to do” and formed
many of the hallmarks for his company that would remain unchanged. He set a strict
height requirement: his first ‘girls’ were required to be between 5’5” and 5’8”, with the
tallest always dancing in the center and the dancers tapering down in height on either end,
creating the illusion of equal height.\(^11\) Each woman was trained to kick to her own eye
level, which added to the appearance of uniform height and a uniform kick line. He also
looked for a certain body type, although this was more intuitive on his part. Passing the
first rounds of auditions meant meeting Markert’s vision of beauty and form, as important
to him as the dance itself. While unskilled beautiful dancers were not accepted or were

\(^10\) Roman, “Hide Your Daughters,” 49.
\(^11\) Whether truly teenage girls or older women, dancers have historically and currently been
referred to as *girls* instead of women. The terms chorus girl, showgirl, and dancing girl are
common generic terms, alongside famous dancing groups such as The Gaiety Girls, The Ziegfeld
Girls, and the Tiller Girls.
told to go home and work on their weak areas of dance, those “too ugly or too fat [were] sent on their way.”12 Although being ‘typed out’ is still a practice in auditions, the overtness of the early twenties feels jarring today.

The Missouri Rockets very quickly gained popularity, and joined the Balaban and Katz Public Theatre Circuit as “The American Rockets” for a time in 1926. These young St. Louis women between the ages of sixteen and twenty then performed as part of the *Greenwich Village Follies* in New York City. Billed as the Missouri Rockets once again, they made a splash in multiple reviews, and were purportedly “destined to be a sensation.”13 Their reputation began to blossom as “[t]heir fame began to spread to every hamlet, town and city in America. Young women who wanted some day to answer the call of Broadway thought about possible dancing careers as Rockettes.”14 Although this may be hyperbolized, there is no doubt that the Rockettes were experiencing a steep trajectory of fame; just three years later in 1929, over five thousand dancers auditioned for two hundred spots.15

The demand for this new sensation continued to rise. By the end of 1927, show business entrepreneur S.L. Rothafel had spotted them and hired Markert to put together a second line of sixteen Rockets to appear in his Broadway show *Rain or Shine*. Soon after, “Roxy” Rothafel announced an indefinite engagement of the once again renamed “Roxyettes” at his movie palace, the nearly-6000 seat Roxy Theatre. Expanding the line to thirty-two dancers, Roxy created the blueprint that would later succeed at Radio City

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13 Scrapbooks, Rockettes Collection, Box 1, Volume 1. *The Morning Telegraph*, Dec 18, 1927.
14 Roman, “Hide Your Daughters,” 86.
Music Hall – an entertainment event consisting of the Roxyettes, the ballet, the orchestra and the chorus, all of which complemented a movie screening. While Markert improved and expanded upon Tiller’s precision dancing, it was Roxy who packaged the evening and continually presented the Rockettes to the movie-going public. This enduring residency that began pre-Radio City is the keystone to the connection of the Rockettes as an icon of New York City.

Roxy was a famous radio star and influential film marketer. A “very modern, even transformative figure in radio,” he was responsible for opening and/or managing a string of impressive movie palaces, including the Strand, Rialto, Rivoli, Capital, and Roxy. Expanding on lessons learned from his radio audiences, he was the first to feature dance in movie palaces. While he saw himself as a mixture of artist and entrepreneur, his business acumen far outweighed his creative expertise. An article in The Herald Tribune of 1928 noted that Rothafel’s interest in dance came out of his “belief that popular entertainment must reflect the trend of public interest and the character or the American scene.” He immodestly took credit for creating a new custom, remarking in a later interview for The Dance Magazine in July 1928 how, because of him, “Today, dancing occupies a spotlight position second to none in the amusement business…[and that] today and hereafter, no director of a large motion picture theatre would think of making a bid for public favor with a program which did not contain two, three or more dance features.” While perhaps he is responsible for influencing its mainstream appeal, the

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17 Scrapbooks, Rockettes Collection, Boxes 1. Volume 1.
18 Ibid.
combination of film and live dance had already been introduced on the stages of vaudeville in the 1910s.

If Roxy’s name was already famous, then Markert’s name very quickly joined him, appearing practically daily in the New York City papers in notices about his dancers, his choreography, and even his jokes. The Herald Tribune noticed his rising star writing that, “We’re hearing more these days about Russell E. Markert, the 28-year-old sponsor of those energetic dancing groups called sixteen Rockets and Roxyettes. We are informed that he began his career as a chorus boy in the Carroll Vanities, but that, ‘different from the average chorus boy, he had dreams and ambitions.’”

During this year, Markert’s various groups fluctuated in name in the press, making some of their timeline difficult to keep clear. Those dancers who were employed at the Roxy Theatre were regularly referred to as the Roxyettes, and the other traveling groups mainly retained the name of the Rockets, having officially dropped the ‘Missouri’. The press also began to claim them as a national group, pitting them against the British Tiller Girls, with references to the Markert’s dancers as the American Rockets, Our Rockets, or Our Sixteen Rockets. This semantic shift is noteworthy, as the Rockets began to be framed as representative of the American spirit.

In 1928, Markert continued his emergence as a dynamo, training a third group to travel to London and perform at the Cinema Palace. In January of that year, the Daily

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19 Referred to as both stoic and funny, Markert was quoted several times a month with a witty saying or joke. “Laugh with Russell” was one example in The Daily Mirror, which ran things such as this joke on June 11, 1928: “Credit Russell E Markert with this one: “You advertised a company,” complained the house manager. “You and your wife don’t make a company.” “Two is a company,” said the head of the vaudeville act calmly. “But how about you? You wrote us you could guarantee crowded houses?” “Oh, well, three is a crowd.”

20 Scrapbooks, Rockettes Collection, Box 1, Volume 1. Herald Tribune Feb 5, 1928.
Graphic recognized this speed in noting how Markert’s fourth troupe of Rockets was performing in vaudeville while just “…five years ago Markert was an Earl Carroll chorus boy.”\textsuperscript{21} Shortly after the arrival of the London dancers, a fifth group arrived in Paris. The Roxyettes were becoming an international sensation, and overtaking the British Tiller Girls in numbers and equaling them in fame. Instead of seeking John Tiller to put together a phalanx of dancers for a particular show or film, producers were rushing to get on the Markert bandwagon.

As the Rockette director and his dancers were rising in their fame and fortune, much of the rest of Manhattan was heading into a tailspin. Although the American people were dramatically affected by the Stock Market Crash of 1929, the Depression was not spurred instantaneously but, “developed like a rolling swell over a lengthy period.”\textsuperscript{22} The very years in which the Rockettes originated and developed were the same years of national economic and social instability and suffering. Despite massive unemployment and the collapse of multiple enterprises, the productions featuring the Roxyettes and Rockets thrived, and others in popular entertainment fared similarly. The impact of and for female dancers in the work force, and specifically the positive environment created for the Rockettes at Radio City and with Russell Markert will be the topic of my fourth chapter.

In the early twentieth century, popular culture in America and of America was blossoming. As Gilbert Seldes wrote in his manifesto heralding the value of the “lively” or minor arts, this era began the “…arrival of America as a point of creative intensity.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Scrapbooks, Rockettes Collection, Box 1, Volume 1.
College programs in theatre were established, independent theaters were founded—such as the Provincetown Playhouse in Massachusetts—and American playwrights such as Eugene O’Neill and Susan Glaspell emerged. In New York City, the Roaring Twenties saw the transition from vaudeville as the predominant genre to the revues such as the Florenz Ziegfeld’s *Follies*, George White’s *Scandals*, and Earl Carroll’s *Vanities*, where Markert had his professional debut. On Broadway, as many as fifty new musicals opened in a single season and a record number of 280 new plays were produced during the season of 1927-1928 alone. A spate of new composers kept theaters busy with productions by Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, and Ira and George Gershwin, and landmark musical productions of the times included *Shuffle Along*, *No, No, Nannette* and *Showboat*.

The audience for performance was changing too. Markert’s dance companies, like many variety shows of their day, were being marketed to and frequented by the middle-class population. Snippets on Russell and/or the Roxyettes were featured almost daily to a range of readers; in one month in 1929, listings were published in *The Morning Telegraph, The Evening Telegraph, The Herald Tribune, The Evening World, The Daily Graphic, Women’s Wear, The Billboard, Variety, The New York Star*, to name some.24 The December 1927 issue of the *Terminal Bus Guide* described the Rockets as “proficient in no less than 65 dance routines, all of them demanding speed, uniformity, grace and dexterity.”25 Richard Butsch traced the changes of the house in his book, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990*, noting that by the

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24 Scrapbooks, Rockettes Collection, Box 2, Volume 2.
25 Scrapbooks, Rockettes Collection, Box 1, Volume 1.
twenties, women made up a large percentage of the audience. He proposed that the acceptance of women as audience members had less to do with the issues of respectability and more to do with a desire for new markets. A deluge of women’s publications at this time that were directly marketed to a female readership added to the influence of women in the public sphere. The female population was certainly included as a target of more budget-friendly popular entertainment, which James P. Cullen claimed “afforded a unique degree of economic, social and even political opportunity for otherwise marginalized constituencies in American society.”

The concept of leisure time was also developing at the turn of the twentieth century with competition from radio and film flooding the market, causing vaudeville and variety shows to struggle to stay current. Women and men alike were questioning the appropriateness of certain venues, and topics of morality and decency found their way into public conversation through mass-media journalism. The emerging motion pictures industry was left to contend with perceptions of picture houses as tenebrous or corrupt. In concordance with other movie palaces that were creating new spaces to contrast to the dark and unhealthy film house image, Radio City created a magnificent and family-friendly space in which to see a hybrid of wholesome entertainment genres. In American Culture, American Tastes, Michael Kammen identifies this era as the “heyday of commercialized pop culture,” when industries were responding to changes in leisure

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27 Begun in the 1910s, the “Big Six” consisted of Ladies’ Home Journal, Woman’s Home Companion, Good Housekeeping, Delineator, Pictorial Review, and McCall’s.
time, social interaction, and the desire for “identifiably American manifestations and
eexpressions of culture.” Throughout the Great Depression, although many forms of
popular entertainment were crippled, still others flourished. The crisis produced an
ongoing desire for escapism, and additionally, themes in entertainment that identified
with the ordinary American.

Rockefeller’s edifice was the peak of opulence—an “American People’s
Palace.” This modern and technical marvel was built not for the elite, but for the
mainstream population, for as Richard Butsch noted, "The essence of the picture palace
was luxury at moderate prices.” Movie attendance grew steadily throughout the Great
Depression and World War II, even becoming, “the second most frequent away-from-
home activity after pleasure driving.” The reassertion of pride and possibility was a key
factor in the survival and growth of some forms of entertainment over others. The
popularity of the Radio City Rockettes can be tied to their ongoing presence in front of
the expanding movie going public, where they offered a shimmering spectacle in the face
of upended beliefs in the American lifestyle.

Recording the History

In 1937, the Radio City Rockettes were chosen to represent the United States in
dance at the Paris International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life because

31 A nickname found on the history page of the current Radio City website www.radiocity.com.
33 Ibid, 169.
34 Cullen, James P. "The Popular Arts."
they were “peculiarly American.” The line of all forty-six dancers performed four routines which incorporated their precision tap steps and kick lines into songs such as Cole Porter’s “Begin the Beguine” and a march finale by John Philip Sousa. They were showcased alongside world-renowned companies such as the Ballets de Monte Carlo who performed the ballets of Michel Fokine as well as the Paris Opera Ballet. Ultimately winning the entire competition, the Rockettes caught world-wide attention, promoting themselves as a tourist attraction for cosmopolitan visitors together with being a must-see for New York locals.

Chosen to embody the nation and symbolize it through precision dance for this World’s Fair, the Rockettes were regarded as modern, American, and skilled. By tracing and recording their history, this thesis will examine the mechanics of precision dance and the role the company and its dance style had in reflecting what was vital to the people of the early twentieth century. The Rockettes have performed nearly continuously since 1925, and although their dance style has changed very little, how they have been regarded in dance and popular culture has changed drastically. Centering on the forty-six years under the original director Russell Markert, this thesis will trace how they began as an emblem of modernity in 1925 and morphed into a symbol of nostalgia by 1971.

The second chapter will center on the creation of the home of the Rockettes, Radio City Music Hall. The building was a remarkable achievement of cutting edge technology and design, and carefully marketed as a testimony of and for the American

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36 At this point, the Radio City line was thirty-six dancers, plus ten dancers who were on vacation at any given time. The line of forty-six dancers for the Paris Exposition was the largest line created by the Rockettes.
public and the values the designers wished to promote. The Rockettes are inextricably tied to the building and with it, its promises of progress, production, and industry, and a belief in entertainment for all classes of people. A thorough discussion of the mechanics of precision dance will begin Chapter Three, which will focus on embodiment. The balance between each dancer’s attention to the individual self and to the group is a key element of the Rockettes movement language, and one that is often overlooked. In addition, the third chapter will re-examine the Tiller Girls, who were the initial inspiration for Russell Markert. Exploring the well-known essays on the Tiller Girls by philosopher Siegfried Kracauer, this section will reconsider his theories of mass ornament in terms of the Rockettes, and take a look at where the Rockettes have diverged from that original precision company.

As one of many all-female dance groups that were choreographed and directed by men, and one for whom a particular body type was imperative to being hired, the Rockettes are nonetheless usually excluded from discussions of “leg shows” from the same time period, neither causing scandal or titillation with their semi-clad dancers. The fourth chapter will look at the image of the women who danced at Radio City and were promoted by the production team as wholesome next-door types, and consider the imbrication of objectification and empowerment that arose around a female dancer on the stage. In the final chapter, the focus will be on the second half of Markert’s administration; by his retirement in 1971, the sheen on the Rockettes had dulled. The dancers, now more famous for their “time-honored traditions” than their innovation, remained a potent status symbol of America but were valued as a nostalgic symbol of New York. Investigating the factors that simultaneously kept the Rockettes beloved and
also caused them to be viewed as relics, this chapter will look into what Radio City as a corporation, and Markert as an aging director, tried—or didn’t try—to do to keep the company in business.

Beyond Markert’s retirement there is a further story to tell, one that includes the near-demolition of RCMH and the demise of the Rockettes in 1978, the restructuring of the production team in the 1980s, and the long overdue inclusion of the first African-American Rockette in 1988. Recent news of the Rockettes performing for President Trump’s inauguration caused great controversy as individual Rockettes took to social media to speak outside the sanction of the corporate behemoth. Although this thesis will only center on the years with its founding father, these dancers are still part of the popular consciousness. 2025 will mark one hundred years since Russell Markert tried to out-kick the Tiller Girls. They may no longer be an emblem of modernity for our 21st century, but they are holding strong as a tradition of precision, glamour, and New York. As a former Rockette, I will endeavor to begin this work, creating a critical and wide-ranging history which can contribute to the record of the Rockettes as dancers and women.
CHAPTER TWO: A Permanent Residence

The Rockettes have had their home in the grandiose Radio City Music Hall since its opening on December 27, 1932. Their ongoing residency is one of the reasons that the Rockettes became mutually linked to this landmark building and widely recognized icons of New York City. Both the dance troupe and the building were created at a time in the United States’ history where they came to represent a much-needed symbol of the indomitable spirit of the people. Performing with Radio City as their background, the Rockettes were set up as a visual representation of the forward-thinking vision that was expressed by John D. Rockefeller and his team of designers, and as the building itself became a beacon of progress and American ingenuity, the dancers became living entities to represent the same promise.

Rockefeller Center, which included integrating entertainment areas with retail space in its massive scope, was claimed by Joanne Reitano as “by far the most spectacular private project of this era.”  

37 RCMH was an innovation of architecture and engineering, which according to Roxy used its “dignity, its refinement, its modern, optimistic note...[as] a challenge to us to do our best.”  

38 Looking at the impetus for the building’s construction as well as the design concept behind it can enrich our

understanding of the Rockettes, who as its mascot embodied the same principles of self-reliance and enterprise.

Because finding a permanent home for any dance company has been and continues to be an immense difficulty, the Rockettes’ association with RCMH has been a powerful asset on additional levels. Besides their connection with Rockefeller’s vision, the Rockettes were viewed as a modern American dance troupe because of their location within Manhattan’s newest architectural achievement. The stability and prominence of their workplace also impacted the production quality as well as the dancers who competed for this highly sought after job. Furthermore, the sheer number of patrons who experienced one of the many daily Radio City shows as well as the cumulative audience over the years created direct and persistent correlation between the import of RCMH and the Rockettes and was hugely influential in the formation of the Rockettes line as iconic of New York City.

**Innovation and Design**

In 1928, John D. Rockefeller signed a lease for twenty acres of midtown land with Columbia College to build a new home for the Metropolitan Opera Company. With the stock market crash in the following year, the opera company dropped out of the project, leaving Rockefeller searching for a primary tenant. Although the opera committee had solicited Rockefeller, they bailed under the pressure of economic uncertainty. Undeterred, but needing to find a defining partnership for his building, Rockefeller settled on the young Radio Corporation of America (RCA) which owned NBC and RKO. With the budding technology of radio, he had chosen a stable centerpiece for his urban
mecca, which was now free to house an entertainment framework outside of the confines of European traditions like opera. Already known to millions through his radio personality, SL “Roxy” Rothafel was a natural fit to join the new entertainment venue. As a showman who knew no limits and was considered “the expert” on movie palaces, pairing his theatrical savvy with Rockefeller’s financial prowess seemed a match made in heaven. Rockefeller’s decision to move forward and create an “aesthetically inspiring city within a city,” was a turning point in his renowned namesake, Rockefeller Center. As the cornerstone of Rockefeller Center, RCMH became the theatre that Roxy pledged would be “quite simply the largest and most spectacular in the world.”

Looking back at the impact of the Great Depression, it is impressive that the architectural plans came to fruition. The physical dimensions of Radio City Music Hall are as colossal as its technical achievements. The building was designed by Edward Durrell Stone, a part of The Associated Architects, but it is clear that Roxy oversaw nearly every aspect of the theatre’s development, from its unobstructed viewpoints from every audience seat to its advanced acoustics. With 6200 seats and shallow mezzanines, the house is mammoth yet cozy, with the furthest seats a mere 160 feet from the stage. The view of the 60-foot-tall and 100-foot-wide proscenium arch brings to mind a sunrise, and while the story goes that Roxy designed it after being moved by the beauty of nature, it is more probably that he was inspired by similar sketches found by designer Joseph Urban. The proscenium is ornamented with the biggest show curtain in existence, a

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great golden cloth weighing three tons with thirteen separate motors that work through cables sewn into the curtain. From the standpoint of design innovation, RCMH was a marvel, especially the “Great Stage” itself, which was designed by technical master Peter Clark. The nearly 10,000 square feet stage was outfitted with three massive hydraulic elevators, precursors to other construction projects such as the enormous elevator systems of aircraft carriers during World War II and years later at the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center. With the ability to be raised thirteen feet above stage level, or lowered to the sub-basement level, the elevators are “considered the most innovative use of immense moving platforms,” and so reliably structured that no changes were made to the elevators until the theatre’s major renovation in 1999. Radio City’s 144-foot wide stage also claimed a 55-foot wide circular turntable and an orchestra bandwagon within a moveable unit. The original 35-piece orchestra (including two grand pianos) could be transported along a track from under the stage. During the show, it could rise from below stage up to pit level, and even up onto the stage proper, with the ability to travel forward up to 200 feet.

The pioneering achievements continued; another technical stunner was the use of air conditioning. A mechanical ventilation system forced fresh air from the storage areas, or plenum chambers, built below the orchestra seats which replenished the air within the hall, keeping the air cool and free from smoke. In addition, located in the auditorium was the largest organ in the world. Designed especially for RCMH, the Wurlitzer organ had

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41 On the opening night performance, the curtain itself had its own billing, and went through a series of choreographed moves that showed off the dynamic possibilities of the curtain to the audience.
its thousands of pipes housed in eight separate rooms. Clark and his team of theatrical architects recreated Hollywood effects with a rain curtain, fog machine, and fireworks effects for what has been considered “the most perfectly equipped stage in the world.”

For an idea of the sheer size of the stage, it can hold a regulation sized basketball court; in 2004 when Madison Square Garden was not available, the WNBA held its games on the stage of Radio City.

For all the cutting-edge technology on the stage and in the building, the “Showplace of the Nation” is heralded today for its interior design more than any other factor. In the spring of 1932, a design competition was held to choose an interior designer who could manifest Rockefeller’s decorative scheme of "The Progress of Man, his achievements through the centuries in art, science and industry." Donald Deskey (1894-1989) was not well known when he won the design competition, but used his first public commission to design what is now considered one of the finest examples of Art Deco design. Deskey contributed to the growing appreciation of the relationship between art and industry, and his unified approach included designs for the furniture, carpets, lamps and wall coverings. While European modernism impressed Deskey, he found it too expensive, and integrated nontraditional and more affordable materials into his design, such as cork, aluminum, and steel. Beth Ram of the Cooper Hewitt Museum points out his rug *Still Life with Violins and Wine Glasses* as a fine example of his cubist style that reflects both his European models and inspiration from the American jazz age.

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now to its original splendor, it is troublesome to think RCMH was almost torn down during its financial woes of 1978. Designated as a national landmark because of Deskey’s interior design, the distinction was in large part responsible for halting its impending demolition, and RCMH remains one of only 117 interiors awarded landmark status in the United States. After a 70-million-dollar restoration, RCMH reopened in 1999, preserving the 60-foot-high Grand Foyer, eight lounges and sitting rooms with carpets and wallpaper flecked with real gold. American architecture critic Herbert Muschamp praised the entire project which created “Manhattan’s version of a natural wonder…our Rainbow Arch, our Old Faithful, our Niagara Falls.”

The week before opening night of Radio City Music Hall, the December 1932 edition of Variety was swollen with articles, advertisements, and notices regarding Radio City and its team of contributors, with over one hundred pages devoted to promoting the considerable achievement. A full-page ad testified to Rockefeller Center’s symbolism as “progress and promise” and hailed its completion as, “a testimonial to the affection in which proper entertainment is held by the people. It represents the economic growth, the current culture, the standards and aspirations of RKO…it is the reflection of the millions of theatre goers, not alone in New York but throughout the nation.”

RCMH was intended as a collective for the best of popular entertainment: a space that respected and promoted the types of theatrical and commercial arts that the mainstream audiences were interested in. In a turn from Roxy’s other endeavors, his original concept for RCMH was not as a movie palace, but as a space to present “sophisticated entertainments, such as

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legitimate drama, ballet, and opera, combined with vaudeville acts, jazz, and chorus girls." By presenting the “popular arts” in the same venue and with the same importance and to the same audience as the “legitimate arts,” Roxy endowed them with equal status.

Opening Night at Radio City

Radio City nearly missed the mark, opening its doors in December 1932 with a program now almost forgotten in its unbridled excessiveness and mismanagement. On paper, the line-up of performers was as impressive as the occasion, with entertainers chosen from the top of their respective fields. Nineteen separate acts were on the bill, including modern dance icon Martha Graham, German expressionist Harold Kreutzberg, American ballerina Patricia Bowman and top vaudeville performer Ray Bolger. Charles Francisco dedicates an entire chapter of his 1979 book The Radio City Music Hall: An Affectionate History of the World’s Greatest Theater to the opening night, which was an evening devoted to international and diverse artistry. Despite being in the throes of the Depression, more than 100,000 people attempted to gain tickets for the gala opening. This left thousands who were willing to gather outside of the new building on the inaugural eve, creating horrendous traffic jams and delaying the start of the show as a “pummelling and hallooing mob” waited in the rain to watch those lucky six thousand plus who had secured seats.

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49 Tickets for the gala were $2.50. In 1933, tickets for the RCMH shows ranged from 35 cents to 75 cents, depending on the time of day. For comparison, the average movie price in 1933 was 25 cents.
50 Scrapbooks, Rockettes Collection, Box 2, Volume 3. American, Dec 28, 1932.
As Francisco describes it, the pre-show audience was “buzzing with praise,” but it wasn’t long before things started to fall apart. The show began almost forty-five minutes late, and while there is no definitive record of the running time, “all agree that it was painfully long.”\textsuperscript{51} The Rockettes were luckily featured in the first act, and were a success as expected in their spot as the thirteenth number. In Ross Melnick’s biography on Roxy, he pointedly calls the evening “a bomb,” calling it “big, massive, gaudy—and completely wrong for the time.”\textsuperscript{52} This critical assessment was not alone, as many critics found the best part of the evening to be the Music Hall itself, and preferred the theatre space to the overlong and overstuffed evening. “It has been said that the new Music Hall that it is so wonderful that it needs no performers,” critic for the \textit{New York Tribune} Percy Hammond published the day after the opening. This proclamation has been often quoted as a testament to the glory of RCMH, however, while it is true he was praising the innovative architecture, the context of his sentiment is routinely ignored in which he disparages the “extravagant and cumbersome” show which he found to be a “long program of song, dance, and tomfoolery.”\textsuperscript{53}

There were a few positive reviews, as in the next evening’s edition of the \textit{Wall Street Journal} which praised the ambitious undertaking for what it presented, although not how it was received:

\begin{quote}
...[I]t probably is the most diversified entertainment yet offered as a single show. It has spectacle, music, drama, minstrelsy, comedy, vaudeville, and dancing. Its talent was furnished by grand opera, the revue, the radio, the circus, the old-time minstrel show, the variety stage and by the cinema
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{51} A program of the December 27, 1932 gala is reproduced in Francisco’s book on Radio City (18). The events of the night are described in chapter two, “Opening Night” and corroborated in reviews of the period, as well as in H. Goldman’s 1978 historical article, \textit{Radio City Music Hall}.


\textsuperscript{53} Qtd in “World’s Biggest Playhouse Opens,” \textit{Literary Digest}, 115 (Jan 14, 1933), 16.
house stage presentation. It has performers from various European countries, from Asia, from Great Britain, and from America. But above all these considerations of theatrical or national origin, the Music Hall show has the Roxy touch of the spectacular.  

Unfortunately for Roxy, much of this “spectacular” was lost on the audience, as many left after the overlong first act, and many more left as the program continued into the early hours of Wednesday morning. For all its buildup, the opening of Radio City Music Hall was a bust.

It was hard for all involved to realize the missteps of opening night, but apparently no one took it harder than Roxy. As evidence of his emotional exhaustion, Francisco recounts the lore of how Roxy collapsed at the performance’s conclusion. The man who envisioned the evening had to be carried out of the theatre on a stretcher. Imagining himself to be a Ziegfeld-like impresario who “cared little about spending (and sometimes losing) gobs of money” in pursuit of lofty theatrical goals, it must have been devastating to realize the limits of his success.  

However, it is also true that Roxy had been suffering health problems since a minor heart attack in 1931, and refused to stop his momentum on the production to take care of his needs. But whether or not his collapse was due to ignored medical issues or emotional devastation, it became clear that Roxy would bear the brunt of the blame for this failure.

Within weeks, the plan for productions changed radically, as motion pictures were added into every bill and accompanying performances were limited to fifty minutes. Roxy’s right hand man Leon Leonidoff (1894-1989) took over the productions, 

55 Francisco, Radio City Music Hall, 22, 34.  
56 Melnick, American Showman, 362.
presumably in Roxy’s absence. However, with drastic changes made to the original plans, when Roxy returned after five months he quickly realized his wings had been clipped, and within the year his now “stormy association” with Radio City ended. Different accounts of what actually transpired, and whether Roxy left on his own accord or was encouraged to leave, ultimately lead to the same conclusion: Markert and Leonidoff were now at the reins. One of the lessons the creative team took to heart after their protracted debut echoed Brooks Atkinson’s *New York Times* review, which was to note that the enormous stage was not built for soloists. Leonidoff concurred, telling reporters “…our stage is so big that you can’t fill it with talk. The effect must be spectacularly visual.” Despite the stumblings of opening night, Leonidoff and Markert knew that the Rockettes, with their undeniable visual appeal, would continue to be a key component of Radio City’s future.

A New York Tradition

It is easier to find documentation on the creation of Rockefeller Center than on the origins of the fabled dance company within it. The transient nature of dance does not lend itself to easily creating a history, plus, as American Studies professor Robert C. Allen recognized, there is far less academic focus on entertainment than on more concrete subjects, which also encounters further limitations on popular culture in comparison to high-brow art. Radio City Music Hall was created as a showcase for a new style of

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entertainment, constructed to present a variety of theatrical elements in an effort to bring the spectrum of social strata together as well as create a new level of intimacy among its patrons. Although the marketing of the ideals of Rockefeller was focused around the architecture of his theatre, the element that was the actual draw was the entertainment.

In its inception, the precision dance formations had a modern energy described by John Lahr of *Harper’s* as one that “simulated…the aesthetic of an industrial society enjoying unrivaled power and prosperity.”\(^{61}\) In the circuitous transfer of inspiration and reflection from stage to audience, the dancers continued to be a mirror for and a model of the industrialism and capitalism of the times. And even though a version of this dance form had appeared in prior decades, the mechanization of precision struck a note that was in tune with the spirit of the city’s post-World War I identity. This “belief in modernity and a mythology of speed, change, novelty, and movement” allowed precision dance’s popularity to surge and perhaps is responsible for creating further investment in the style.\(^{62}\)

To begin to understand the implication of the Rockettes, it is necessary to look at the movement itself. Precision dance is a particular way of moving as a unit that has not heretofore been examined in depth. Beyond the dance moves themselves and the interaction between the dancers lies the spatial formations on the stage. The idea of ‘mass spectacle’ and precision dance was in large part introduced by Siegfried Kracauer’s now well known *The Mass Ornament*, where he explored the relationship between group and the individual and investigated the effect of isolation and alienation in modernity. In his

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study, he applied these theories to the Tiller Girls, and while other scholars have revised his philosophies, studies have remained centered around this British troupe. To fully trace the beginnings of the Rockettes, we need to examine the Rockettes in relationship to their predecessor, the Tiller Girls, and the spectacle of precision.
The American stage of the 1920s was rife with different styles of dance, from burlesque and vaudeville, to the show girls of Ziegfeld and his ilk, as well as dancing and singing choruses put together for musical theatre productions. Precision dance appeared on the scene with the British Tiller Girls, who traveled around the world and are often given credit for originating the style in the 1890s. Dancers who perform in ensembles such as a corps de ballet or Broadway chorus often will work in unison, yet this is not considered precision dance. Precision dance, which is a concept more rigorous than unison, has more elements to it than just group choreography. Dance critic for the *New York Times* Anna Kisselgoff addresses the difference between unison and precision noting that the former “…takes rehearsal and the [latter] takes years of training and practice in the art of dance.”63 Dance is notoriously hard to define, and precision dance, which lies squarely under the oft-dismissed commercial dance umbrella, has only recently been argued for as ‘real’ dance. The idea that the Rockettes are spectacular—with their sparkling costumes and dancers with “full beat” or stage makeup, larger than life visual effects upon a massive stage, and complex group choreography designed to be more impressive from a distance than up close—often draws criticism that the dancing itself is second rate, or at the least, requires less training. However, after examining the practice of this dance style, it will be clear that it requires a level of skill equal to if

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63 Kisselgoff, “Precision Dancing as Art,” 15.
different from ‘higher’ forms of dance, such as modern or ballet, and can be enjoyed as both popular and artistic.

Violet Holmes, who began as a Rockette in 1945 and functioned as the Rockette director in the 1970s and 80s, emphasized the way the Rockettes trained in multiple dance styles, and the labor of precision dance.64 A dancer in the Rockette line for twenty-six years, Holmes then became the line captain in 1971 when Markert retired.65 His assistant Emily Sherman became director, and Holmes succeeded her when she retired two years later. Although Markert is often quoted about his relationships with Radio City and his dancers, he does not provide great detail about the specificity of movement which he was in large part responsible for creating. As a dancer who enjoyed a lengthy relationship with Markert and precision dance, Holmes’ comments on this style are perhaps the closest we can get to Markert’s vision. John Alliotts, who interviewed Holmes for *Dance Magazine*, attempted to pin down the elusiveness of this particular dance style, noting, “It is the illusion of perfection that startles, intoxicates, and pulls your jaw down…[precision is] more than one dancer perform[ing] the exact same step, with the exact same timing, and with uniformity of interpretation” (emphasis in original).66 Brooks McNamara, theatre scholar and historian, considered how precision appeals to audiences, remarking that the Rockettes “have a kind of skill that we don’t possess, and

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65 While not under consideration for this thesis, it is of note that like many dance companies of the early 20th century, the group of women who made up the Rockettes were under the artistic control of a male, and with Markert’s retirement and the hiring of Holmes in 1971, switched to women dancing for a female director.
66 Alliotts, “Precision Dancing,” 42.
they are able to present it in a way that makes it highly spectacular. We think it's amazing that they can all kick in the same way at the exact same moment."

To elucidate why this technique has such an affective response in the mainstream, we first need to examine it on the body itself. For dancers, the body is the site of the work and the art, and all performances have an unspoken and reciprocal agreement between the audience and the dancer which is that the body is to be looked at. The next chapter will explore what being a dancer for the Rockette means to the individual as a female performer, but first, a discussion of the practice of precision dance is necessary.

Approaching this practice from three angles will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the style: the way the individual body moves, the manner in which the bodies on stage interact together, and the formations that are created on the stage.

**Precision Dance: A Technique**

A Rockette came to the job with years of training in ballet, tap, and other movement styles. New forms, such as jazz dance, emerged during the twentieth century, and Markert choreographed dances using many of these modes as well as passing dance fads. Walter Terry, dance critic from the 1930s through the 70s, noted that the women needed to be able “to tap, to rhumba, to perform a few ballet steps, to execute military routines, to hula and in fact to do almost any kind of theatrical dancing that their ingenious director may conceive.” Markert concurred, remarking in a speech that while

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his company was famous for the kick lines, they also performed a number of character styles and the new jazz dance. Dancers needed to have a strong technical foundation, an aptitude for learning new styles quickly, and the ability to replicate movement accurately.

In the rehearsal room, Markert did not hold dance class, but directly moved towards creating a single working unit, as auditions made sure that incoming dancers were well versed in tap and ballet vocabulary. The continual drilling to work as a team intensified a dancer’s ability to simultaneously concentrate on their own motion as well as that of the group, until doing both was second nature or “a kind of sixth sense.”

Russell Markert had a regular saying, telling the girls to “toe the line.” This was meant in a number of ways, from being a representative of the Rockette vision both on and off the stage to having a good work ethic. But most often, he used it in the literal sense – as in to put your toes on the line marked out on the stage. The exactitude of placement on the stage is extreme; even sixty years later and under new direction, in my rehearsals we would often pause to note the spatial relationships between ourselves and the others. Our director in 1998, Linda Haberman, would adjust our lineup until we appeared exactly in line from the front of the house, and then we would need to memorize how this felt without actually touching, using our peripheral vision and our kinesthetic sense instead. Adjustments could be as minute as “toe the line” or “arch the line,” meaning the line should fall beneath the arch of the foot. The peripheral vision was the key component to staying in line while in motion, as dancers are instructed to “guide


right,” being responsible for being in line with the person on their right side while facing straight ahead.  

A recent Rockette from 2012 described to a columnist in Timeout New York the sheer amount of detail that is prescribed in the choreography, explaining the attention to “where my elbow needs to be and where my eyeball needs to be and just all of those layers and layers of minutia that people do not realize...No one knows how hard our rehearsal process is in terms of layering on all that stuff to get it to look so effortless.”  

In 1980, and in her fifth decade with the Rockettes, then-director Holmes validated the labor required to appear as if it did not require exertion, insisting that “kicking is an art; you have to do it gracefully, you have to be strong. We require twenty kicks with each leg, and that’s after a routine. You can’t huff and puff; you have to maintain a straight line. That is number one, and that’s where most girls fail.”  

Being limber is required of all dancers, so that they are able to execute the various kicks. However, momentum carries a kick up by the dancer’s head and having to halt the motion of the kick at a certain point—eye-high or waist-high, for example—takes a different kind of muscular control, engaging the hip flexors and muscles of the thigh. In addition, the kicks are choreographed to certain beats in the music, and keeping the kicks in time and in rhythm with every other dancer is physically demanding.

71 When looking straight ahead, a dancer is taught to guide right by using the woman in the periphery of her right side. However, when a line is pivoting, every dancer turns her head in the same direction. Each dancer looks over her shoulder and guides by the chest of the person two dancers from herself.


Although each dancer is required to bring strength and stamina to the line, the Rockettes simply cannot function as a group of unison individuals. Over the many years, the manner in which the line works together has been systematized, with several aspects remaining in place since the beginning. One common misunderstanding is the mechanics involved in the link-up, or how the women interconnect when standing in line together. While it appears a simple line up, it is one of the basics of being a Rockette that is carefully taught and rigorously enforced. Explaining it accurately in Dance Teacher Now, Susan Wershing wrote, “The arm-over-arm formation is precise: Right arm over, Left arm under with the hands directly behind the smalls of the backs of the girls next to you, but exerting no pressure. This position is used for tap choruses as well as the kicks.” Often unnoted is that fact that the Rockettes do not put any weight on their neighboring dancers. Each woman stands in line, using the sensory experience of their bodies touching to assist in the cohesion of movement, but not as a support for their own center. If a new Rockette leans or presses on the dancer to either side of her, she is sure to be dressed down either by that senior Rockette, or by the dance captain. Other than “kicking out”—kicking out of sync or in error—there is no greater faux pas than not supporting your own weight and movement. Although the Rockettes dance together in unison, each dancer stands on their own.

It is the balance between dancing en masse and as an individual that is the crux of precision dancing. Whitney Corliss Fyfè wrote in A Rockette Remembers: Tales from a High Kicking Life (2012) about Markert’s quick censure of any dancer he saw drawing attention. "Every turn-step had to begin and end at the same moment. Each dancer had to

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travel the same distance left and right as if we were connected by an inflexible rod and when we did kicks, even in open formation they had to be the exact height the routine called for: waist high, shoulder high, or eye high.” Markert, like many choreographers, had no qualms about bluntly calling out individuals during rehearsal, and after each show, the dance captains would come around to review their list of corrections with each dancer. Up until his retirement at age seventy-two, Markert demonstrated the moves himself, even the kicks. Wershing explained his rationale adding, “that if every one of the Rockettes did the routine exactly as he did it, there would be absolute synchronization.”

Learning the style of precision dance is likened to a boot camp, with many hours spent in “exacting and strenuous” rehearsals. It is easy to find military parallels, in the way the Rockettes are organized on and off the stage. Much like a marching band, precision dancers use military terminology to describe their configuration and maneuvers. In “Fearful Symmetry: The Rockettes—Conformity on Parade,” author John Lahr finds the similarities between the structure of the dance troupe and the armed forces unsettling, albeit thrilling, writing that “[t]he Rockettes are ‘drilled’, divided into ‘squads’, watched over by a dance ‘captain’ and, like every massed soldier, taught to ‘guide on’ the person beside them.” Returning dancers are “veterans,” while “rookies” begin rehearsals a few days in advance. These references to the Radio City troupe as a soldierly ensemble are boosted by the formation aspect of the production numbers.

78 Lahr, "Fearful Symmetry," 83.
Outside of each individual dancer’s ability and the system by which the women work together, the third layer of precision dance is how it is choreographed to be viewed from a distance. The shapes and dynamics created by the entire line of dancers moving across the enormous Radio City stage are seen as “precise, plotless, abstract” geometric patterns, another hallmark of precision dance.\(^79\) The kicks which traditionally end each number happen in a line of Rockettes facing the audience, but also can be performed in a rotating “kick-circle.” The “big wheel” involves all thirty-six dancers standing shoulder to shoulder, one side facing upstage and the other half facing downstage, and pivoting 360 degrees while remaining in an impeccably straight line. Many of the Rockette choreographers have described the challenge of preplanning the intricacies of moving thirty-six dancers around the stage. Linda Haberman in 2016 described “getting out graph paper and making little X’s all over it” in order to space the dancers correctly.\(^80\) Other formations include the “star” in which the dancers rotate while lined up along six spokes of a pinwheel. “Barn doors’” refer to the main line being broken up into four to six smaller lines, with short sections of the line hinging open as if they were swinging doors.\(^81\) Retaining correct spacing on stage which in turn keeps the formations true is a crucial element for precision dance, but unlike drill teams, this alone does not define this dance form. It is the formations *in addition to* the sharp style of movement, integrated dance such as tap and jazz, and interconnection between dancers that make up this specialized dance technique.


\(^81\) These descriptions are based on my own experience and rehearsals under Linda Haberman.
One of the most famous Rockette numbers is the “Parade of the Wooden Soldiers” which has been performed annually as part of the Christmas show. While its first appearance at Radio City Music Hall is well documented in 1933, as part of Markert’s and Leonidoff’s first staged holiday performance, versions of this number were popular around the United States in the 1920s. In his biography on S.L. “Roxy” Rothafel, Melnick asserted that the number was first run at the Capital Theatre of June 1923, and then again at the Roxy Theatre in July 1928. Since Markert’s Rockettes were not around until 1925, who performed and choreographed this pre-Radio City iteration is open to question.

Markert’s version of “The Parade of the Wooden Soldiers” is still performed today and has been unchanged since its 1933 premiere. The Rockettes are dressed as identical toy soldiers, with starched white pants, vibrant red jackets, and tall shiny black hats adding over a foot to their height. The hat brims are pulled down tightly over each dancers’ forehead and two red cloth circles are stuck to their cheeks. This is one of the few times that the fabled legs of the Rockettes are not exposed, nor is there a kick line.

Videos of the “Parade of the Wooden Soldiers” can be found on youtube.com. In 2007, to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Radio City Music Hall and the Rockettes, a new edition of the *Radio City Christmas Spectacular* was created by Linda Haberman, which was also filmed and is available on DVD. Edited clips of “Parade of the Wooden Soldiers” from this performance can be viewed at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqkL6bh2664](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqkL6bh2664).

According to Ethan Morrden’s book on influences of early Broadway musicals, one of the greatest attractions of the 1920s was Nikita Balieff’s theatrical company *Chauve Souris*, literally the “Shaved Mouse” or more commonly referred to as *The Bat*. Already famous for their “living doll” or live marionette numbers, in 1911 Evgeny Vakhtangov staged “The Parade of the Wooden Soldiers” which quickly became one of their signature numbers. Balieff’s group came to the United States five times in the turn of the century and this number came to New York for the first time in 1922. Although this has never been cited as the source for the Rockettes, it seems highly possible that Roxy, Markert, or Leonidoff were able to see this performance, or at the very least influenced by it. See “Theater: New Plays in Manhattan” *Time Magazine*, Vol. X No. 16, Oct 17, 1927 and Mordden, Ethan. *Sing for Your Supper: The Broadway Musical in the 1930s*, New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2005: 129.
and it is the one number where the choreography specifies unsmiling faces. The dancers are covered almost entirely from head to toe, and dressed so exactly, that it is nearly impossible to tell them apart.

The basics of the movement includes a stiff legged walk; each dancer marches without bending their legs, instead lifting each leg by the hip instead. This odd rigid walk also means that each step is naturally very small in length. The pants have a stripe down either side, and each dancer is instructed to “glue” their gloved hands to the outside of their legs, aligned with the stripe, with all fingers pinned together. All of the hats are positioned so that the vision is limited to below eye level and in order to keep the hats angled in the same direction, no one can raise their chins during the dance. Each of these elements come together to create a doll-like appearance and mechanical movement style.

This dance more than any other consists of formations, which appear, morph, and rearrange before the audience. The Rockettes enter in two lines from either side of the stage, filing through two doorways of matching toy houses. The two lines march towards each other, with two Rockettes coming face-to-face and abruptly turning to continue downstage in pairs. A single line reforms across the front of the stage, only to be broken into smaller lines of four or six dancers who move together pivoting into new shapes, such as a six-spoke pinwheel. The pinwheel then rotates around the stage, stopping as the soldiers turn sharply from the center and march out to a new formation of horizontal lines.

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84The hats are nearly two feet tall, and in order for all the hats to line up along the same angle, each dancer presses the back of her body and hat flat against a wall backstage before the number. With everyone’s hat flush with the angle of the wall, they are equally parallel on stage.
in which they salute in a contagion, or a ripple effect that travels from one side of the stage to the other.

The dance culminates in the soldier fall, which again is an iconic moment within the number. At this point, all of the soldiers are lined up, facing the left side of the stage where a giant cannon is wheeled out. The dancers freeze with their legs shoulder width apart, elbows pressed into their sides, and forearms parallel to the floor at the waist of the person in front of them. The cannon goes off, releasing a puff of smoke. Dramatic winding music begins, without any of the rhythmic beat from the preceding moments as each soldier does a slow-motion fall into the arms of the person behind her. Each Rockette has learned a specific multi-step procedure as the fall comes her way, with the goal being to keep line falling as slowly as possible until at last, momentum takes over and the last soldier falls onto a giant cushion. The fall requires core control throughout the line to manage the speed; each dancer sets themselves as if to receive a

Figure 1. The Radio City Rockettes performing “Parade of the Wooden Soldiers.” December 22, 2005. Hirayuki Ito, Hulton Archive, Getty Images.

85 The soldier fall can be seen on the video referenced above, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqkL6bh2664, starting at 0:52.
punch to the stomach, and lifts up and back keeping their body in a straight line until almost to the floor. At 5’10” tall, I stood in the center of the line where the speed of the line was different every show. In some performances, the momentum took over too early and the line moved with too much speed to control it, slamming the back half of the line uncomfortably to the ground. The most successful group fall required each dancer to maintain their posture and not collapse under the weight of the line before them. Ultimately, the entire line was on the floor and would sit up in unison coordinated to a musical coda, then turn to the audience, salute and smile. After the tension created in the fall, the group unison at the end was a satisfying and crowd-pleasing finish, eliciting predictable applause.

![Figure 2. Rockettes Salute in “Parade of the Wooden Soldiers”](image)

In this detailed description of the long-running number the “Parade of the Wooden Soldiers,” the synthesis of the separate elements that make up precision dance becomes apparent. Each dancer needs to pay strict attention to the details of her own body: her hand placement, chin movement, or hip mobility, for example. But she cannot do this at the expense of alertness to the group. Scrutiny into the mechanics of the soldier
fall reveals some of the same dynamics of a kickline, in that each dancer is both a link in the chain and the chain itself. The Wooden Soldiers number is also one that highlights the formations over any other element. Debuted in 1933, this number has been performed regularly throughout the years, insuring a consistency and regulation of movement style that has remained systematized within the Rockettes as dancers and directors come and go.

**The Tiller Girls: an Industrial Beginning**

In 1927, prior to the advent of the Rockettes, Siegfried Kracauer brought precision dance to critical attention in his essay, “The Mass Ornament.” Erroneously citing the Tiller Girls as an American product, Kracauer nonetheless examined this British precursor of the Rockettes as a product of industry, reproducing in their formations the abstraction and isolation of what he saw as the modern age. In Kracauer’s concept, “mass” has a dual-sided take, referring to both the conglomeration of bodies on stage and also the public consuming the product. In analyzing the mass function of the Hollywood star, Susan Buck-Morss makes a relevant claim, in that the figures on stage (for her the “star” figure, but here also applies to the formations by the dancers on stage) have “simulacrum corporealities… reflecting back to the viewing audience a perception of the mass-as-image which it internalized.” In his article on “Kracauer and his Dancing Girls,” Donald James makes a similar point, in that the “masses spontaneously recognized and responded to the patterns of the mass ornament

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86 Although the Tiller Girls were still officially named the Empire Girls until John Tiller’s death in 1925, they were more times than not referred to as the Tiller Girls on stage and in public.

…as a screen onto which their hopes and fears regarding modernity could be projected.”

This idea that the dancers seen as a whole are able to represent and reflect ideas happening in mass culture ties it powerfully to the idealism espoused by Radio City as well as the experiences of modernity happening outside of the theatre.

Thomas Y. Levin’s introduction to a collection of Kracauer’s essays calls out the friction between the individual and the group in the way that “production becomes the work of an anonymous mass whose individual members each perform specialized tasks: but these tasks take on meaning only within the abstract, rationalized totality that transcends the individuals,” much like Henry Ford’s assembly line. For the most part, Kracauer used the ornamental patterns exhibited onstage as an exemplar of the alienation caused by capitalism. He claimed that the dancers are “no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics” and thus their formations “have no meaning beyond themselves.”

Although he laments the staging of the relationless designs and in doing so equally bemoans communities connected only by their functionality, he does allow that “the aesthetic pleasure gained from ornamental mass movements is legitimate” (emphasis in original).

Kracauer, lamenting the appeal of mass spectacle, recognized the attraction of precision dance. Elements of precision dance have bled into many types of popular entertainment worldwide, from halftime shows at football games to the opening ceremonies of the Olympics. Scientist Steven Strogatz, who has studied the phenomenon

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90 Ibid, 76-7.
91 Ibid, 79.
of spontaneous synchronization in nature, also discussed the affective reaction to persistent sync, which he defines as something done simultaneously for an extended period of time. Strogatz notes how ongoing unison, “for some reason…often gives us pleasure. We like to dance together, sing in a choir, play in a band. In its most refined form, persistent sync can be spectacular, as in the kickline of the Rockettes or the matched movements of synchronized swimmers. The feeling of artistry is heightened when the audience has no idea where the music is going next, or what the next dance move will be.”92 Whether or not the Rockettes are included in discussions of dance or considered art, the “wow” factor of persistent sync has continually intrigued audiences since before the Rockettes’ first kick line.

Within the dance world, there has long been a high/low divide between divisions of dance, for a time demarcated along the binary of ballet versus modern dance. Commercial dance, including dancers in musicals, vaudeville, musical reviews and precision dance, were barely even worth considering in the hierarchy. Mark Franko, in his book The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s (2002), argues against these genre boundaries, interpolating chorus, popular, and ethnic dance into the equation. Adding in the Rockettes to trouble these distinctions of high and low art, he discusses the how the divide between modern and ballet dance left out the chorus dancer in many forms, and asserts that the chorus dancer “although structurally absent from a discourse, participates nonetheless at its defining core.”93 Looking at the regulated movement of the Rockettes and other chorus dancers, Franko proposed that the

“chorine’s demeanor, athletic strength, and collective discipline fostered a positive and entertaining image of unskilled labor under the regime of machine culture.”

The Rockettes have also been seen as an echo of the machine age. There is a clear parallel between the industrial age and Markert’s dancers who “were streamlined, interchangeable parts, pumping like pistons in a well-oiled machine.” It is important to stop here and examine the differences between the Rockettes and the Tiller Girls who served as Markert’s inspiration. The Tiller Girls were examples of that “unskilled labor” that Franko cites, with some girls starting as young as 8 or 10 from towns like Manchester or Blackpool who began their dance education with John Tiller. Although he promoted both children’s and women’s lines, it is unclear whether his touring group of women (who were in their mid-twenties, such as those who came to New York City) had all come through the ranks as child performers. Tiller was a cotton broker who “trained [the girls] in a style of formation dancing that owed more to military drills and displays than to classical ballet.” Specifically seeking to utilize his knowledge from the manufacturing world, Tiller organized lines of kicking and marching dancers out of working-class and inner city young girls and teenagers who were inspected more for their teeth and legs than any dancing ability. Although Tiller trained the young women himself, he clearly lacked any dance expertise as revealed in this explanation of rehearsal by a former Tiller Girl:

We went on for what seemed hours and still none of us understood. Eventually he bent over and told the Head Girl [lead dancer] to kick him; she was amazed but she did so – just stepped forward and kicked him and that was exactly the step he wanted. They call it the strut now.

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94 Ibid, 32.
95 Lahr, "Fearful Symmetry," 83.
96 Donald, “Kracauer and The Dancing Girls,” 49.
In contrast to the skilled dancers that Markert recruited, the women who became Tiller Girls had no previous dance experience outside of their training with Tiller, and went through a lengthy program developed by himself and his wife. The “machine culture” was on display as the girls were more coordinated movers than dancers with Tiller using industrial methods to teach movement and military tactics to coordinate movement on the stage. Creating formations that rearranged themselves into surprising patterns was Tiller’s specialty, as well as the creation of a kick line. Tiller found that by having the females link up together, they could better coordinate their jumping and the kicks would stay in rhythm. Burt Ramsay in his book Alien Bodies, Representations of Modernity, ‘Race’ and Nation in Early Modern Dance (1998), notes that these formations of Tiller’s required little to no dance skill, just the ability for each dancer to do their part in the bigger picture. 98 This is a significant difference from the skilled labor Markert—himself a dancer—hired for his precision troupe.

In Kara Reilly’s exploration of the Tiller Girls and Kracauer, she asserts that for the German theorist, “[T]he energetic and abstract dance style of the Tiller Girls was the perfect analogy for industrialization: dancers were cogs, pistons, moving parts in the larger aesthetic machinery of the dance. The dancer’s estrangement from the total dance paralleled the alienation that the assembly line created between the factory worker and the end product of his labour.” 99 This reading seems to imply that Kracauer was disillusioned by both the automation found in industry and on stage. Yet

four years after writing “The Mass Ornament”, he wrote again of the Tiller Girls, writing that they “radiantly” imitated a conveyor belt, and “joyfully affirmed” the progress of the era. Kracauer was apparently a fan of this stage spectacle, as he ultimately remarked that “when they kept repeating the same movements without ever interrupting their routine, one envisioned an uninterrupted chain of autos gliding from the factories into the world, and believed that the blessings of prosperity had no end.”

There are several sources that discuss the methods to Tiller’s training, and Jane Goodall's 1997 article “Transferred Agencies: Performance & Fear” gives an account that echoes a factory, with the rookies being interspersed between veterans of the line, in order to emulate their movements. “Grime, sweated labor, and poor working conditions were things the Tillers shared with workers in the factory, but they earned about a third more.” But most compelling is her argument that the dancers of the Tiller Girls did not entirely lose their agency. Due to the exposure to a working environment that brought them around the world to multiple theatres, these young women “were also both the machinery and the product.” In an “Escher-loop perhaps” the young dancer was objectified and yet also given agency.

Reilly comes back around to this argument, also exposing the two sides of the empowerment issue that women are often forced to confront:

As is so often the case with professional women performers in the public sphere, the Tiller Girls were both/and. They were both objects of the gaze.

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102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
and represented early opportunities for women to enter the workforce. They were both the automated docile bodies of the kick line and a chance for working-class women to see the world and better themselves. They were both mass ornament and key players in the emerging image of the liberated ‘modern girl’.  

This apt revision of Kracauer is relevant to an analysis of the women in the Rockettes. The Tiller Girls and the Rockettes have both been studied in regards to automation, where the individual dancer is subordinate to the overall effect of the line. Organized and often choreographed in militaristic fashion, it is easy to see the Rockettes only as a unit. In looking more closely at the technique of precision dance, the labor of the individual AND the group emerges as equally important. This “both/and” element was an integral part of their work as dancers; it was also discernible in their role as women. The Rockettes were viewed under a specific lens: women who took to the stage in the 1920s and 30s often had to contend with insinuations that they were not respectable, yet they were emblematic of the self-reliant working woman.

In the next chapter, I will explore the conflicts of independence and objectification that come with working as a female dancer, and how the Rockettes have managed to straddle the line between performing beauty and performing sexuality. Radio City’s mission had a large part in this double-sided issue, as the dancers, who were clearly chosen in part due to their pleasing figures and faces, still presented a very wholesome image as the management sought to create entertainment for a new mainstream market. Radio City offered a safe, independent and well-paid place for talented dancers who fit the physical requirements. Working together as a team onstage, as well as spending an inordinate amount of time together backstage and between shows,

those former Rockettes still speak about being part of a “sisterhood” or family, all while under the singular focus of their male leader, Russell Markert.
CHAPTER FOUR: *An Onstage Sisterhood*

Radio City holds annual open auditions for the Rockettes, continuing with the strict guidelines set by Russell Markert in the years just after he was inspired by the Tiller Girls. The audition requirements today for a Radio City Rockette reads as follows:

[Dancers] must be between 5’6” and 5’10 1/2” and must demonstrate proficiency in tap, jazz, ballet, and modern dance. They need to display a radiant energy that will shine across the footlights to their audience. Rockettes must also be able to sing, and of course, perform those eye-high kicks.

At these open calls, it is not unusual to see hundreds of young ladies from all over the United States fly in from their dance schools for the chance to be seen by the director of the *Radio City Christmas Spectacular*. Dancers are lined up and first measured to see if they are truly within the height requirements before being allowed to dance a single step.

Back when Markert was at the helm it was not much different. Although the height requirement was scaled lower due to the tendency of shorter female heights, Markert was famously ruthless with his measuring stick. A Rockette in the 1950s, dancer Susan Wershing recounted her audition when the height requirement was 5’3” to 5’8” tall, remembering that although Markert rarely worried about a dancer being too tall, he “generally had trouble with too short … he would ask a girl that looked like they might be
too short, even though they had their hair teased up, and he put this stick through the hair on the top of the head” and would measure their true height against a wall.\textsuperscript{105}

Although dancers for the Rockettes have had to submit to stringent guidelines of physicality, personality, and uniformity, most Rockette alumnae would be quick to wax poetic on their years in the line, primarily because of the strong ties that existed among the dancers themselves as well as with Markert. The atmosphere at RCMH was one of family entertainment, not just furnishing an environment for families in the audience, but also creating a behind-the-scenes family. Ubiquitous descriptions of the line as a “sisterhood” and Markert as a father figure are found throughout publications and personal memorabilia alike. Both stamina and dedication were required by their director, who as a stringent task master still would promise some of the youngest dancers’ mothers that he would look out for them.\textsuperscript{106} Markert’s sense of his paternal role was instrumental in creating a safe and respectable place for these young women to dance, and the familial ties that existed backstage saturated their reputations as well as their onstage image. In 1978, critic Anna Kisselgoff recognized the demarcation between the Rockettes and other dancers of the time, remarking on the former’s 1930s innocence and a “firm idea of what the Rockettes are not … They are not chorus girls, chorines or showgirls. They are so different that they have, among themselves, always been the same. They are the Rockettes…”\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{107} Kisselgoff, “Precision Dancing as Art,” 1.
**Thirty-Six Dancing Daughters**

From the first iteration of the Rockettes as the St. Louis Rockets, Russell Markert held artistic and managerial control over the group until his retirement in 1971. He cast the women he thought fit both technically and personally into the line, and he choreographed and taught every number himself. There is no biography that gives a full account of his life and since he was a highly private person with no personal papers or letters apparent in an archive, there is little known about his personal life. Markert, unlike other impresarios of his time such as Florenz Ziegfeld, led a quiet life out of the spotlight and doted on his dancers. His retirement happened with little public fanfare, but he was held in high esteem among the thousands of Rockettes whom he hired in his forty-six years of directing. The Rockettes on the line at the time of his retirement took his well-used tap shoes and had them bronzed for a gift, with the engraving “from your loving daughters.”

Markert, unmarried and publically unattached during his tenure, called the Rockettes his “thirty-six dancing daughters,” a nickname that was picked up by the press. Although his rehearsal pace was “relentless,” he was “known for his paternal instincts, treating ‘his girls’ like daughters.” He recounted the same sentiment from his end, quoted as saying, “[I]n the beginning I wasn’t much older than they were, but I wanted them to come to me with their personal problems.

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109 Markert lived with either his mother or sister his entire life. The only rumors of any relationship or romance involved Lucille Ball, with whom he remained close to most of his life.
That way I could help a girl before the problem started affecting her work on stage.”

Judith Anne Love, in her memoir *Thirty Thousand Kicks: What’s It Like to be a Rockette*, called Markert a “man of integrity, a man to inspire, encourage and trust” who “did his best…to make us feel happy and part of a family.”

Love, a Rockette from the 1960s, did not limit her memories of her Rockette days to glorified moments, also claiming her days at Radio City were ones of “discipline, dedication, and denial.” She gives a detailed account of working as a full-time Rockette, which in the days of year-round employment, meant working seven days a week for four weeks before getting a week off.

Each day could be as long as thirteen hours with up to four shows a day, rehearsals for the next new show, and costume fittings. The Rockettes only performed one number at each movie showing, but learned a new number for every new movie, most of which ran for a week.

At $55 a week, the job of a Radio City Rockette during the Great Depression years included stability and a well-paying salary, one that was the highest income for chorus dancers. Even a famed Ziegfeld Girl dancing in the *Follies* had an average salary of $35 or $40 a week in 1924. By contrast, the average female office worker

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113 Ibid, 8.
114 In the late 70s, RCMH moved away from the daily movie/show format and closed for weeks at a time. The final movie was “The Promise” on April 25, 1979. The Rockettes were then hired for compressed seasons during the Easter and Christmas shows. Some Rockettes worked on small jobs throughout the year, but never again would there be year-round employment.
later in the 1920s was paid $27.57 per week.\textsuperscript{117} But the high wages did not continue to rise evenly with inflation over the next few decades. By 1967, unhappy with the income which one Rockette called “a farce, an incredulity, and an insult” for the number of hours spent on the stage and in rehearsal, dancers began to organize and went on strike.\textsuperscript{118} Ultimately, the Rockettes joined the American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA), the union for entertainers in variety entertainment, which includes circuses, Las Vegas entertainments, and theme shows. Before going on strike for higher pay as well as paid rehearsal time, the Rockette salary had only gone up to $96 a week. After the strike, Rockettes were paid both for rehearsals and extra shows, and their base salary rose dramatically to $140 weekly.\textsuperscript{119} After the new contracts, the Rockettes were making slightly more than the Broadway Production contracts at $130 weekly in New York City, which had also just been slightly increased.\textsuperscript{120}

Despite the pervasive fondness for Markert, it was also understood that he was not thrilled about the strike. According to one Rockette who was working at the time, Markert felt “like we had betrayed him, because…he felt very close to us, and I’m sure he was getting a lot of feedback from the administration to get the strike over with.”\textsuperscript{121} This is a rare acknowledgement of the fact that Markert had loyalties to both the management and “his girls.” While there is no mention of whether Markert was involved

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\footnote{118} Love, \textit{Thirty Thousand Kicks}, 106.


\footnote{121} Koblentz, Belle, interviewed by Adrienne Oehlers, New York, NY, August 6, 2016.
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in lobbying for their rights or salaries at other times, this comment leads us to understand that he was not a participant in the strike for the Rockettes’ raise.

Those Rockettes of the 1950s and 60s, who worked in what one reviewer called the “Sweatshop of the Nation,” had a life that was not always glamorous.\textsuperscript{122} The women spent their waking hours inside the great hall, with little time for an outside life. Rockette alumnae speak of not having time to have a social life yet they rarely record complaints, instead fondly recounting the days of their theatre family in memoirs and alumnae newsletters. Acknowledging the difficulty of their lifestyle and their work hours, the alumnae are also well aware of the prestige and favorable working environment that came with working at Radio City.

Since its introduction, working as a Rockette has been a highly sought after job — originally one of the few dependable places for females to have a dance career, and yet one that also relied heavily on the physical beauty and exposed body of the female. As the instrument of dance is the body itself, it is impossible to get away from talking about the physicality of the women on the stage. Dance and women on stage have a long history of being linked to prostitution and sex, from can-can dancers whose high kicks displayed their underwear or “often no knickers at all” to showgirls who used sex to supplement their incomes or raise their social standings to burlesque dancers who traded in titillation from the safe distance of the stage.\textsuperscript{123} Since rising to prominence in the 1920s, the figure of the chorus girl was a melding of the ballet and the burlesque dancer. Women and Gender Studies professor Linda Mizejewski wrote of the double-bind the

\textsuperscript{122} Love, \textit{Thirty Thousand Kicks}, 107.
\textsuperscript{123} For a lengthy history of the association between dance and sex, see \textit{Dance, Sex, and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance, and Desire} by Judith Lynne Hanna. Ramsay Burt also discusses the tie between prostitution and dance in \textit{Alien Bodies}, 47-53.
chorus girl found herself in, claiming that, “as a figure of modernity [she] was split between cutting-edge and retrograde discourses: on one hand, the new female independence in mixed-sex working and leisure worlds and, on the other hand, the connotations of the oldest profession in the world, a continuation of traditional negative connotations about actresses.”

**Beyond the Showgirl**

Although each Rockette straddled the line of being an independent working women and one whose primary job is to be on display, the RCMH dancers were not objectified in the same sexualized manner of the showgirl. It is of special note that although the extravagant costuming of the Rockettes is similar in many ways to those of the showgirl—tight fitting leotards adorned with sequins and baubles, nude legs, and high heels—the Rockette dancer differs in her lack of sex appeal. This “asexual athleticism” applied to the image of the Tiller Girls as well, and for several critics was one of the elements which tied the precision dancers to the values of modernity. So was this style of dance, which took the individual bodies and molded them into a unified aggregate, the reason the Rockettes were viewed as not having sex appeal?

Certainly, in form and figure the Rockette has much in common with the showgirl, but several factors coalesce to create their becoming-yet-not-licentious stage presence. To begin with, the female precision dancer is deconstructed in a way that is not compatible with being a sexual object, since she becomes instead a piece of the “mass

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125 Donald, “Kracauer and The Dancing Girls,” 50.
ornament” whole. Her body is viewed as part of the machine, which, while aesthetically pleasing as a formation, is no longer recognizable or sexualized as a woman. A second determinant is the athletic nature of the dance itself. In order for dance to be coordinated between thirty-six women, movements are sharp and strong. In contrast to a showgirl, a Rockette’s job does not include graceful walks along the stage to display costumes. Moreover, Rockette tableaux were created for the purpose of revealing a geometric pattern rather than individual physiques. The primary jobs of the precision dancer (to dance as a unit) and the showgirl (to display the body) are not equivalent. Nonetheless, nothing stopped certain patrons from questionable gazes or voyeuristic spectatorship, but their “pistol-leg action”—bare as their legs were—more often invoked the synchronized athletic maneuvers of a collegiate rowing team than the slinky appeal of a burlesque performer.

Two other elements figure in to the discussion of the Rockettes as asexual: the lack of independent identities of the dancers in the press and the respectable environment of the workplace. It is no small matter that RCMH heavily controlled the publicity surrounding both the productions and the women. Rarely allowed to be interviewed, the women were not marketed as individuals, in contrast to Ziegfeld who continually singled out his females for profile pieces in the papers or photo ops for local events. Markert kept his name and his dancers’ names out of the public eye. This held intact yet another barrier

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126 The Ziegfeld Girls, while no longer associated with the bump-and-grind sexuality of burlesque, nonetheless were presented as explicitly sexualized, both onstage and off. For further discussion see Cynthia J. Miller’s “Glorifying the American Girl: Adapting an Icon” in The Adaption of History: Essays on Ways of Telling the Past (2013) as well as Linda Mizejewski’s Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema (1999). Tableaux vivants were a well known tool to allow semi-nude women to be displayed on stage, because in many locales, various states of undress were allowed on stage only if the performers were not moving.

which kept audiences from personifying the Rockettes; in fact, their names were not even listed in the programs. They did not attend society events; management often used a private apartment created within RCMH for entertaining inside their own walls. Radio City has always controlled its publicity with a heavy hand, and throughout the years, reporters have mentioned the inability to interview individual Rockettes. In 1976, Paul Leavin was told it was “not professional” to interview one of the dancers, and in 2005 Mary Beth McCauley noted that “management likes to keep certain things tucked up as tight and unseen as a line dancer’s hair,” specifically talking about the reticence over salaries and weight requirements.

Besides keeping the Rockettes’ identities out of the publicity machine of the 1920s and 30s, Radio City management had a vested interest in creating family-friendly entertainment in order to attract a new audience, as it engaged with the newly emerged concept of mass marketing. Alongside their interest in presenting the equivalent of G-rated movies, RCMH also wanted a wholesome live show. Joining other industries who held an “obsession with terms like ‘pure,’ ‘wholesome,’ and ‘healthy,’” the management team fostered a respectable environment for its dancers, and one that was embedded in Markert’s philosophies. Critic Walter Terry wrote in 1940 that the Rockettes existed on a “high plane of variety, good taste, and healthy spectacle” and that their dancing

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128 Despite the silence, upon retirement, several Rockette alumnae have written personal accounts of their time at Radio City. Interestingly, not a single dancer has stepped forward to offer any criticism of Markert.
131 Erdman, Blue Vaudeville, 67.
possess[ed] the same good spirits and infectious humor that one finds in Markert.” As the “self-appointed second father” to his dancers, Markert was instrumental in keeping tabs on them on and off stage. In 1967, he described his involvement claiming,

I have to keep 46 youngsters living and working together in harmony. That means getting involved in their love live, school work, home problems, marriages, and backstage spats. One unhappy girl or one spoiled brat could ruin a show in front of an audience of 6200 people.

Whether or not the dancers were as agreeably synthesized as they were purported to be, they successfully carried an appearance of such to both the press and the audience. This is noted by multiple critics, such as Doris Hering, who in 1952 noticed their “surprisingly unjaded smiles” and the way “they resemble a row of guileless school girls.” In Rachel Straus’ recent profile on Markert in Dance Teacher Magazine, she credits Markert’s paternal nature and interest in keeping his dancers chaperoned and on the straight and narrow as the source of the sisterhood to which Rockettes lay claim. Making a connection between the respectability of the Rockettes and their symbolism of American perseverance and zeal, Straus wrote that “Markert offered a dancing correlative to American optimism, and his ability to project a highly skilled, innovative and uncomplicated America through the spirited unison of 36 young women was masterful.”

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132 Terry, “Radio City Dances,” 62.
Besides the fact that the Rockettes were regarded as proper by the outside world, they were not allowed the time nor the moral attitude to stray. Although the salary and longevity of the job offered a comfortable standard of living, the social mobility experienced by other dancers who took advantage of offers by “stage door Johnnies” was not a part of the Rockette experience. A Rockette for eleven years from 1959-1970, Patty DeCarlo Grantham claimed her days were “as wholesome as a Doris Day movie,” in part because the dancers had little to no time for a social life outside of her hours at RCMH.\(^{137}\) During the twenty-eight day stretch until the week vacation, it was common to have rehearsals as early as 7:00 am and to work until the last show finished around 10:30 pm. While there were breaks during the day, the dancers would use many of the amenities within Radio City, which had been created as a “livable city unto itself.”\(^{138}\) The building included a dormitory, a cafeteria, and a facility with a trained nurse in addition to their dressing rooms.

Through Markert’s value system and the management’s commitment to mainstream popularity, the Rockettes reflected hard work and industry as well as an innocence that contrasted to the “come-hither appeal of the individual chorus girl” found on other stages.\(^{139}\) In 1977, John Lahr wrote that “the Rockettes don’t bump and wiggle like the big girls on Broadway. Watching them is like watching your sister dance in the living room after dinner.”\(^{140}\) That they did not embody an overtly sexualized figure was a conscious choice by Markert, and one that aligned with the management’s philosophy

\(^{139}\) Kisselgoff, “Precision Dancing as Art,” 15.
\(^{140}\) Lahr, “Fearful Symmetry,” 84.
outlined when they build Radio City. Markert clung to his vision of old-fashioned women, saying in 1967 that, “…believe it or not, the girl who makes the best Rockette is one who knows how to cook, scrub and dust. That’s because a good dancer must acquire a capacity for hard work.”\(^{141}\) By Markert’s retirement in 1971, the Rockettes were outdated in many respects, from the lack of contemporary style of performance to the limited range of women they sought to hire.

The vision for the Radio City Rockettes in their earliest days included attractive and skilled dancers who were necessarily white. In the early days of the 1920s and 1930s, not only was it scandalous to include minority members onstage, but it was illegal. For many years, Markert explicitly stated that his vision of uniformity included uniformity of hue, which remained a philosophy of the Rockettes until the first African-American Rockette was finally hired in 1987, well after his tenure ended. As the dominant voice guiding the image and content of the dancers over those forty-six years, Markert dictated what he wanted. Markert even forbade his Rockettes to get suntanned, as it would undeniably make them “look like a colored girl.”\(^{142}\) Despite the changes in culture and mindset throughout the twentieth century, including the advent of feminism and civil rights, this learned preference was not challenged and was reflected in his casting choices for the entirety of his career.

The women in Markert’s line embodied conflicting views of womanhood in the early twentieth century. In his book, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, Robert C. Allen demonstrates how popular entertainment can be revealing as

\(^{141}\) Scott, “How the Rockettes get their Kicks,” 29.
“sites of multiple, sometimes conflicting meanings.” In this vein, it is worth looking at how working as a Rockette enabled women to work outside the home, in a job with a decent, sometimes extravagant, paycheck, in an environment that did not condone or impress any type of sexual connotations or expectations on or off the job. Yet these dancers were still in a male dominated workplace, hired to fill Markert’s vision of physical attractiveness, and appeal to the audience with their revealing outfits and smiling countenances as much as with their skill in dance. Allen continued his argument—which can be directly applied to the Rockettes—claiming that women who worked in the “liminoid setting of commercial popular entertainment” contributed both to “playing a part in the hierarchy and [also] still trying to transgress that.”

The paradoxical nature of performance was not just for dancers, as Faye E. Dudden argues in *Women in the American Theatre*, considering that, “a pleasing physical appearance...was the essential prerequisite for a successful career in the theatre. This is not to say that attractive and successful female performers lacked talent. Talent, however, was rarely, if ever, enough; good looks were indispensable.” But dancers experienced this to a further degree than actresses in that their bodies were much more scrupulously judged and watched by both their employers and the audience, as evidenced by the job requirement of staying within a weight range. Although the management kept silent on its weight regulations, Markert was quoted in 1977 as saying, “If any girl got wide in the

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144 Ibid, 286.
hips or thighs, I’d have the costume department measure her size. I’d tell her to reduce back to her original Rockette measurements.”

The strict requirements of shape, beauty and uniformity could have caused Markert’s stage to seem a very prescriptive place to work. However, among the few opportunities available for young women dancers, Radio City was a stand out for stability and respectability. Working as a Rockette had cachet, and earning the reputation that went along with the Rockette job was an additional perk to a work life that was all-encompassing. As Dorothy Rompalske summed up in 1992, “A steady paycheck in an unstable occupation, a chance to perform on one of the world’s greatest stages, and the opportunity to be part of a uniquely American institution all combine[d] to make the job an appealing one.”

For Markert’s first Rockettes, he offered steady work which unlike other dance jobs, meant year-round employment at a competitive salary. The Rockette life was a consuming one, which left no time for social maneuvering or dalliances. As the father figure, Markert hired dancers he found had a certain sweetness, set an expectation that “his girls” would be disciplined as well as wholesome, and choreographed numbers that prized unison, but equally valued their image as the “girl-next-door.” Over the years, he hired thousands of women to fit his ideals, and although his concept of what being a Rockette meant remained unchanged, the world moved on.

As the world changed, so did its relationship to art and entertainment. After the forty years under Markert’s direction, the precision dance executed by the Rockettes had

146 Lahr, “Fearful Symmetry,” 84.
become a shell of the boundary-pushing art form it once was. The fifth chapter will trace how the precision dancers began as an emblem of modernity and morphed into a symbol of nostalgia. By Markert’s retirement, the Rockettes appeared as vestiges of an older era, yet still remained a potent status symbol of America and were still valued as a nostalgic symbol of New York. What is it about these dancers with their repetitive performances and references to the past that was worth keeping?” The final chapter will look at the factors that encompass modernity and nostalgia, and investigate what simultaneously kept the Rockettes beloved and also caused them to be viewed as relics by the mid 1970s.
When Russell Markert retired in 1971, there was almost no fanfare or celebration of this seminal figure or his mark on dance culture. Starting in the 1970s, with attendance continually waning and Radio City close to being demolished, reviewers called out Radio City as performing kitsch, or as Ada Louise Huxtable pointedly commented, “Radio City is the Madame Tussaud of the entertainment world …a fossilized anachronism devoted to a myth of family entertainment.”\(^{148}\) During this time the value of the building and the importance of the Rockettes were hotly debated in national periodicals. But when it seemed imminent that the doors would close and Radio City would be demolished, instead people came together and insisted that both be saved. What was it about the Rockettes that inspired such dedication? How had they changed since their auspicious beginnings as beacons of the American spirit, and why, when audiences were “getting their kicks elsewhere,” were the Rockettes still so beloved?\(^{149}\)

**A Modern Exemplar**

One answer to this question lies in the period of the Rockettes’ emergence: in the 1920s, the Rockettes brought forth a new form of dance in America. This form echoed


the modernist promises of Radio City Music Hall, with its emphasis on work towards progress to “tomorrow’s better world.” The Rockettes became synonymous with the steel and stone of their home, their geometrical lines imitating the architecture of the structure, and ultimately representing the economy and growth of New York City.

If the Rockettes reflected the modernity of their contemporary society, then what did modernity meant at its historical moment, and how was that portrayed on the stage? In the article “Machine-Dance: An Intellectual Sidelight to Busby Berkeley’s Career,” Richard Striner posits that “In the 20s, everyday life was increasingly affected by the moods of the modern metropolis.” Movement which echoed this mood was introduced on the stage, he argued, bringing with it faster speeds, new rhythms and “actual machine choreography.” An oft-quoted passage from “Girls und Krise” demonstrates this percussive choreography in Kracauer’s impression of the Tiller Girls:

When they formed an undulating snake, they radiantly illustrated the virtues of the conveyor belt; when they tapped their feet in fast tempo, it sounded like ‘business business’; when they kicked their legs high with mathematical precision, they joyously affirmed the progress of rationalization; and when they kept repeating the same movements without ever interrupting their routine, one envisioned an uninterrupted chain of autos gliding from the factories into the world, and believed that the blessings of prosperity had no end.

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152 Ibid.
In the years since the publication of *The Mass Ornament*, scholars have continued to investigate Kracauer’s theories, which proposed mass ornamentation as a physical embodiment for the remoteness of modernity and technology.

The question of what dance does and what it can represent is central to dance scholar Mark Franko’s book, *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* (2002). Claiming the chorus girl as the “…dominant performative trope of capitalist ideology: spectacle,” Franko demonstrates how precision dance echoed the consumerism of everyday life. The Rockettes, as the bodies executing the choreography, are therefore representations of the values of the times, which included issues of capitalism and labor as well as the “individualist versus the collectivist ethos of the period.”

Franko goes one step further, offering precision dancing as a possible historical source for Guy Debord’s theory of spectacle as illustrative of consumerism in everyday life. Yet, as the previous chapters have noted, precision dance was not simply the choreography of a mass formation that washed over audiences and thrilled them. To use Frederic Jameson’s definition of modernity as it is directly tied to industrial progress and efficiency, then certainly, the Rockettes were emblematic of such. Their connection to industry via mass ornamentation has been stressed, but they also introduced

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a new construction of woman through this display of spectacle. The “both/and” aspect of female bodies on stage, which was addressed in chapter three, continued to present women as objects of the gaze, but it also gave these same women a chance to liberate themselves in the public eye with a sense of autonomy and pride. The paradox of the female chorus dancer’s work often included the freedom to perform on stage, to make money independently of a man, to work outside of the home, and to become active in a previously inaccessible social sphere, but still limited them to the realities of working in a male dominated field, performing a man’s vision and his choreography. While today’s feminist might only see this work as perpetuating oppression, it is important not to dismiss the sense of empowerment that many women were experiencing for the first time. As Ramsay Burt noted in his 1998 book on the “alien body” and early modern dance, the mass ornament showed “…women happily internalizing power over their bodies, power that has manipulated their desire to be part of a community.” 156 At this time, the images of women dancing in a formation which denoted equally powerful aspects of industry and progress was liberating.

But if power in dance stems from its ability resonate with the era in which it exists, then what happens when the dance no longer changes with the passing of time? One of the hallmarks of the Rockettes in their later years was the claim that certain numbers, such as the “Parade of the Wooden Soldiers,” had been performed regularly

156 Burt, Alien Bodies, 115.
since its first performance in 1929. It is highly unlikely that executing the identical steps forty, fifty or sixty years after its origin could connect to the audience in the same way. No longer mirroring the world for which it performs, the dance instead became a time capsule.

Precision dance has fallen under the umbrella of commercial dance, and as its purposes include both making money and appealing to a mass audience, has been seen as entertainment more often than as art. Michael Kammen articulates much of early twentieth century society’s viewpoints on mass culture in his book *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century* (1999), noting that 1925, when Markert was beginning his dance group, was a time when there was a “desire by citizens of the U.S. for identifiably American manifestations and expressions of culture.” But, while it was important to create culture that was a “reflection of national pride,” art forms that were newly and locally created were viewed more as folkloric and populist, and therefore less important than longer standing highbrow traditions such as opera and ballet, explaining the opposing viewpoint that “art that represented America…was culturally less desirable.” Imported cultural forms from Europe still held sway with the elite societies; for example, the Russian touring ballet company, Ballet Russes, first came 

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158 Ibid, 65.
to the United States in 1917 and was the impetus for the major ballet companies which began in New York City in the 1930s.159

The appearance of the Rockettes at Radio City fit the gap. They appeared as a uniquely American cultural fixture. They were loved as entertainment though discounted as art. They embodied the beliefs originally put forward by Rockefeller—their very name even resonated with his—of enterprise, industry, and mass appeal. Despite the widespread viewpoint that commercial dance is less artistic than other genres, such as ballet or modern dance, its popularity is generally agreed upon. The Philadelphia Inquirer of 1929 wrote on the first iteration of Markert’s Rockets remarking that, “[t]he clockwork precision of their dancing is the result of hours of rehearsal, but its value is evidenced by the applause which greets their every appearance.”160 While determining the cause of uniform spectacle’s crowd-pleasing appeal is perhaps beyond this thesis, it stands as the core of how the Rockettes, who as the sometimes denigrated poster children for commercial dance by the 1970s, could evoke such adulation alongside belittlement.

Spectacle has been disparaged since Aristotle ranked it as the lowest of his six essential elements of theatre—and the Rockettes have no shortage of the spectacular. Radio City, with its considerable stage and mammoth house, was no place for intimacy;
the spectacle was created in large part by the proportion from the stage to the audience as well as the separation created by the vast space. The ever-changing costumes were created to represent contemporary icons and themes, albeit transformed by beads and sequins, like the tasseled red, white, and blue sailor outfit for the Fourth of July in 1940 (Figure 3), or the astronaut outfit of the 1960s with bright blue unitards bedecked with pearls and a space helmet of sorts (Figure 4).¹⁶¹

Costumes were an essential component of the Rockette experience, with new designs created on a nearly weekly basis by different well-known designers such as Bob Mackie, Erté, and Vincente Minnelli. Each new number was based around a theme which rested heavily on the visual spectacle of costuming. The thirty-six matching outfits also contributed to the appearance of unison. Every number had a hat or head gear, and when witnessed from the majority of the seats in the house, it became nearly impossible to distinguish the dancers from each other.

In opposition to the realities of the Depression in which the Rockettes originated, the glitzy spectacle created a magical escape, and the sheer profusion of dance numbers required frequent invention. As the years passed, the costumes recreated the female body into “sailors, mannequins, dolls, steelworkers and riveters or any group you care to name

¹⁶¹ More than any other element of the Rockette history, the costumes have been saved, archived, and featured in retrospectives such as James Porto’s *The Radio City Rockettes: A Dance Through Time* in 2006.
as they transformed the assembly line motif into theatre art"162 Markert proudly itemized a variety of character routines seen on the Radio City stage, such as “Hawaiian, Farruca, (Spanish) Cowboy or should I say Cowgirl, Scottish, Irish, Greek, West Indian, (Beguine & Marinque), American Indian, Mexican, many Marches, also Clowns, CanCan, Dutch,

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With each unique visual theme, Markert would create stylized choreography that coordinated the precision dancers with a particular flavor. The dance troupe regularly anthropomorphized animals, buildings, and themes that directly correlated to their current climate. While some costumes—thirty-six women dressed as zebras complete with tails and ears—did little to offer images of a

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progressive woman, other images—for example, the dancers as astronauts at a time when
the reality was unthinkable—set visual standards that were broad-minded.

Nadine Wills, writing about Hollywood costumes of the thirties, positions the
recreating of the female body with costumes as “not only reactions to shifting gender
identities in the 1930s, but also to discourses surrounding modernity and metaphors of the
modern body as a robotic body.”

Although the leggy appeal of the dancers cannot be
denied, the costumes and choreography were not designed to accentuate their sex appeal
in an overt way. Markert downplayed the showgirl status through the inspirations that he
chose, and the costumes primarily served to transform each woman into an identical
component of the line, in an innovative and spectacular manner.

Critics in the major newspapers of the twenties through the sixties found much to
applaud, enjoying the “display of excess” in which individuals on the stage were
“transmuted into special effects.” Reviewers have always been quick to praise the
Rockettes’ performances as entertainment, but often with a low opinion of their artistry,
or more commonly, not consider it art at all. Thinking of how John MacAlloon defines
spectacle as a genre of performance—one in which the “‘realities’ of life” are softened

164 Wills, Nadine. “Women in Uniform: Costume and the ‘Unruly Woman’ in the 1930s
326.
165 Kershaw, Baz. “Curiosity or Contempt? On Spectacle, the Human, and Activism” Theatre
into “appearances to be played with like toys”\textsuperscript{166}—the Rockettes are often not considered ‘real’ dance because their “content appears neutral, merely entertaining, and therefore impotent.”\textsuperscript{167} In this generally positive review of the Rockettes, critic Susan Dominus finds the value in their labor, and sums up many of the conflicting viewpoints of the dancers at Radio City:

The Rockettes are instantly recognizable symbols, but what they represent depends on who is doing the interpreting: to some they’re Stepford dancers, objectified women reduced to nothing but legs and teeth; to others they’re glamour personified, the last, cherished remnants of a “Guys and Dolls”-style nightlife; and to yet another part of the audience they’re glorious kitsch, as amusing as they are entertaining. But one thing is constant: their sheer physical accomplishment. Even in a city of sweating, striving talent, the Rockettes may well be the hardest-working women in show business.\textsuperscript{168}

In the first few decades of the Rockettes appearance, it was rare to find a negative word about the precision dancers. In a 1936 article entitled “Fear over Europe: Hope Here,” author Anne O’Hare McCormick spoke of the American production of “spectacle, pageant, and ballet” as a point of pride and nationalism. Claiming that “[t]he Rockettes are the real American Ballet,” she points to this “native and characteristic” style as representing an America which was “…more astonishing than ever, governed by hope

\textsuperscript{167} Drewal, “The Camp Trace in Corporate America,” 143.
instead of fear.” While much of the early press surrounding the creation of Radio City Music Hall was generated by the publicity department itself, both the building and the dancers themselves grew to represent the self-reliance of a country that was still defining itself between wars and after the Great Depression.

There is distinctly less press in the 1950s and 1960s about the Rockettes than at any other time. Rarely surfacing as innovative or current news, the troupe can be found subsisting week after week, but with little attention. As Hollywood and then the advent of television took over leisure time, the Rockettes’ performances in coordination with a multi-pronged performance became more of a fond diversion than an astonishing display. Their strike and subsequent unionization in 1967 was regarded as the final “disillusion of glamour” as the illusive dancers became headlines in a very real and gritty financial dispute.\(^\text{170}\)

Becoming more of a gateway for nostalgia than modernity as the years went on, the Rockettes could still draw people to their shows, although in the 1960s and 70s, their popularity seemed to be waning. In Eddy, a short-lived dance journal from the 1970s, Paul Leavin reported that attendance peaked in 1946 with over seven million customers. Because of the changes in “times and tastes,” audience population fell to five million by 1954 and to just two and a half million by the 1970s.\(^\text{171}\) Markert’s career ended in 1971,


\(^{170}\) Scott, “How the Rockettes get their Kicks,” 29.

yet the circumstances surrounding the show’s declining popularity were already in full effect.

In 1978, due to strained finances and dramatically smaller audiences, plans were made to tear down Radio City and retire the Radio City Rockettes. Dozens of articles were written, some lamenting the death of a classic and beautiful building and the American legacy that was the Rockettes, and others that acknowledged that perhaps it was just the fate of a “relic of an era that ended long ago—an era when Americans were far more innocent in their passion for moving pictures, an era when the public was more easily beguiled by the kind of shimmer and bigness that the Music Hall embodied.”  

But the dancers were the first to band together, led by ballerina Rosemary Novellino who created the Showpeople’s Committee to Save Radio City Music Hall. Although one might expect the Radio-City-going public to let the Rockette era come to an end its financial losses clearly were indicating, instead large swaths of the American public got behind the dancer coalition and joined together to halt the seemingly inevitable destruction of the “Showplace of the Nation.”

One of the most remarkable elements of the Rockettes’ story is that it would have been easier to let the iconic group close down and be relegated to the history books, as ticket sales did not support the continuation of the seemingly outdated dance form. Yet

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thousands of people, including recognizable figures such as John Belushi of *Saturday Night Live*, as well as government figures from city and state, went to bat for the symbols of yesteryear, and over 150,000 signatures were garnered for the petition organized by the dancers to preserve the historic building. The Rockettes, who were once marketed to represent wholesome family values of the day, were held up as evocative stand-ins for a stereotype of an earlier time.

The March 6, 1978, “Talk of the Town” column in *The New Yorker* addresses the pull of familiarity and tradition, specifically examining how the Showpeople’s Committee to Save Radio City Music Hall and those who joined them had started to “cherish with a new intensity things that, like Radio City Music Hall, are distinctive, unrepeatable, and rooted in their time and place, and are therefore hospitable to notice, affection, and a place in their memories—or, if you will, in the national consciousness.”^175^ The Rockettes were instrumental in stirring up a visual reminder of this past connection, appearing on the streets outside of RCMH and performing a kickline on the steps of City Hall on the day of the Landmark Hearing, all of which attracted national news coverage. Two weeks later, the interior was designated as a National Landmark of Historic Places, and two hours after performing what they had been told would be their final show on April 12, 1978, the Rockettes and all involved were informed that the crisis had been averted and they would stay to kick another day.

Keeping Ties to the Past

The Rockettes were reinstated at Radio City, but although they remained a paradigm of precision dance, they no longer exuded the innovation which was a hallmark of their origins. The criterion for precision dance had changed little during the Rockette timeline, but other aspects of life had undergone dramatic changes, from views on sexuality, women in the workplace, and even the essence of what constitutes art or entertainment. But at their outset and still today, the Rockettes’ synchronization of individual movement to produce a mass effect is the main component which heralds the dancers as outstanding in their field.

One condition of being a precision dancer that has elicited conflicting responses is the requirement to excise any individual quirks or distracting allure. The uniformity that was enforced in auditions, with strict attention to height and body size, included how the dancers took to the style and how they fit into the line. Markert generally knew within a few weeks if a newcomer wasn’t able to blend in, and she was quickly let go.\textsuperscript{176} A 1995 article detailed this key component as the “willingness to be part of a group, and not to want to shine on your own…[i]t means, onstage, at least, anonymity in the quest for symmetry.”\textsuperscript{177} Although a similar blending in is required in other choruses or corps de

ballet, the homogeneity pressed upon each Rockette has been viewed as mechanical in a way that was different from other dance genres.\footnote{Some who complained of the dancers being “swallowed up in the dances’ vast geometry” found reprieve in Busby Berkeley’s close-ups of the repeating beautiful faces within the large scale extravagant abstract designs in his Hollywood pictures of the 1930s. "Machine-Dance: An Intellectual Sidelight to Busby Berkeley's Career." \textit{Journal of American Culture} (01911813) 7.1/2 (1984):67.} Occasionally, this submission to being one in the crowd has been criticized as being so automated that there is a “complete absence of human personality.”\footnote{Shirley, Don. “Rockettes: Just Kicking Around.” Los Angeles Times, latimes.com, 12 December 1998.}

One of the few writings that probes the popularity and interpretation of precision dance is John Alliotts’ 1982 article in \textit{Dance Magazine}, where he puts forward that it is the “lack of interpretive input on the part of individual precision dancers that has relegated the form—in many eyes—to an antiseptic, expressionless realm of art.”\footnote{Alliotts, “Precision Dancing.”} Even as he strives to claim precision dance as an art form, he acknowledges the perception of its robotic, and potentially soulless, movement quality. Yet in the same year, critic Walter Terry noted in \textit{Ballet News} that the dancers are “absolutely precise in their drills but never rigid. They do not look like automatons cowed into uniformity but rather like fresh and lively individuals who cheerfully meet, and even relish, the challenge of displaying the solidarity of their disciplined sisterhood.”\footnote{Terry, “One Two Three Kick,” 17.} One critic from \textit{The New York Times} in 1928 lamented the “invasion” of precision dancing, claiming the “[p]rinciple evidently being that if you cannot find one girl who can dance sufficiently oneself triangle, the homogeneity pressed upon each Rockette has been viewed as mechanical in a way that was different from other dance genres. Occasionally, this submission to being one in the crowd has been criticized as being so automated that there is a “complete absence of human personality.”

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well to be interesting, you can take 16 girls who cannot dance at all and by working them into a composite unit create a sort of super-girl who by sheer force of volume can compel attention.”\(^\text{182}\) Not only do dance experts disagree on whether precision dancing is art, they also are at odds as to the nature and the reception of the automated style.

But the power of the collective is what is unique about precision dance and the Rockettes in particular. Margaret Thomason Drewal’s essay “The Camp Trace in Corporate America: Liberace and the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall” claims that “[s]pectacle derives power from its potential to move its audience \textit{en masse} and to stimulate a collective sense.”\(^\text{183}\) Of course this leads us to ask, what is that collective sense, or what do the Rockettes represent? How has what they represented changed over time and is this the key to how they have been received more as a touchstone to the past than a channel to the future?

Paul Grainge, a film and television scholar who looked closely at nostalgia in America, proposes that theories branch into two conceptual poles. Dividing ideas of nostalgia between mood and mode, he explains that, “the nostalgia mood is a feeling determined by a concept of longing and loss, the nostalgia mode is a consumable style.”\(^\text{184}\) The Rockettes were a highly consumable form of memory—as Grainge’s defined nostalgia mode—performing steps that were evocative of the machine age and

\(^{183}\) Drewal, “The Camp Trace in Corporate America,” 144.
creating a pleasurable affect that spectators kept seeking. They created a physical embodiment of the past, something that could be experienced when the nostalgia mood struck. The familiar rhythm and blueprint of the Radio City shows created a tradition for many audience members who came not for the modern experience of the performances’ early days, but for one that recreated the same spectacle year after year. With the longevity came a sense of dependability, and the Rockettes had carved out a niche in the tourist arena, even though the niche started to shrink after 1950.

If, as dance scholar Mark Franko claims, “[t]he chorine’s demeanor, athletic strength, and collective discipline fostered a positive and entertaining image of unskilled labor under the regime of machine culture…” then keeping this unchanged well past the end of the industrial boom meant that the dancers served no longer as a harbinger of things to come but as a reminder of what had transpired. The re-enactment of the same type performance helped solidify the Rockettes as a metonymic stand-in for New York City itself. The dancers at Radio City became a stalwart of the entertainment industry, unchanging and reliable—but to some as prosaic as a chain restaurant.

This never-ending sameness was a factor that caused the production to lose touch with the current trends in society, for example falling embarrassingly out of sync with issues of racial integration or the feminist movement. This paradox of compatibility was studied by cultural historian Michael Kammen, who remarks that “[d]eparting too

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radically from convention runs the risk of rejection and abject failure. Yet rigid adherence to convention also entails the risk of stagnation and alienation.”186 By Markert’s retirement, the Rockettes were an iconographic leftover, albeit an enjoyable one, that seemed to have run its course.

But nostalgia is a strong driving force, with its own pull that lands between kitsch and tradition. Creating an enduring affection, two staples of nostalgia can be identified as impacting the attitude of the populace towards the emblematic dancers. The first element includes what American historian David Lowenthal describes as “…the search for a simple and stable past as a refuge from the turbulent and chaotic present,” which accounts for the pleasing affect that occurs when the encounter lines up with an expectation.187 The other aspect is the collective response, or the wash of good feeling that comes from a group experience, which temporarily creates a sense of “we” and minimizes differences in the audience.188 These two facets worked together to create the movement which held that the Rockettes were a national treasure worthy of saving.

It seems that critics found pleasure in their un-remarkableness, and the way that there was “…not a new idea to be found in the Rockettes’ Radio City Christmas Spectacular…that’s the beauty of it. It’s all retro glamorous, retro charming, retro cute at

186 Kammen, American Culture, American Tastes, 13.
every sharp half-turn."\(^{189}\) The Rockettes of the 1970s still had some cachet, and continued to have ties with the tourism industry. The dancers had “survived the changeover from theatrical innovation to High Camp institution without missing a beat,” and even though New Yorkers hadn’t spent their money on tickets in several years, they were not willing to let this connection to the old New York die off.\(^{190}\)

Even without Markert, who had retired in 1971, the Rockettes and Radio City still meant something to the populace. By 1978 the Rockettes had lost their financial pull, but not their emotional one. Radio City was still viewed as an achievement and dedication to nation building, and the Rockettes were a tangible portrayal of early America. What emerges in performance, according to Susan Bennett, “is a powerful demonstration of the currency of the past in an embodied form”.\(^{191}\) The ideals espoused by Rockefeller—hard work, industry, ingenuity, and beauty—were translated into movement by Markert in his line of precision dancers.

Although the machine-like choreography of the Rockettes has drawn fire from scholars and theorists who claim their movement is robotic and depersonalized, most frighteningly recalling the mass spectacle of Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*,\(^{192}\) writings from the era illustrate that the dancers had the ability to stir affection and pride with their group spectacle. As critic Sarah Kaufman writes,
“there's something deeply moving about them....[for if] [p]arts could be perfected, time and motion could be perfected--couldn't society, and man himself, be perfected? And who embodies that optimism more than a line of radiant look-alike showgirls moving as one beautiful unit?”

Looking back at the history of the Rockettes from this vantage point, its peaks and valleys are revealed, but has here-to-fore not been recorded. 2025 will mark the 100th anniversary of Russell Markert’s first iteration of the dancers as the St. Louis Rockets, and many of the women who worked under Markert have since passed away or are elderly. Their stories, as well as this scholarly look at the first forty-six years under Markert’s direction, are an important part of our American history and culture, and should continue to be written.

193 Kaufman, "This show has legs," n.p.
CONCLUSION: An American Institution

The Radio City of the 1930s provided a rare steady job that included good pay, a work environment where the women were respected and not seen or displayed in an overtly sexual manner, and an independent lifestyle. Rockettes were held in high esteem, as a new sensation which was well regarded by critics and loved by audiences. As the years passed, the excitement wore off as the Rockettes retained the structure of movie/performance, and while changing the choreography and inspiration of each week’s seven-and-a-half-minute number that they performed multiple times a day, they kept the basic format intact. Movie-going audiences shifted, social issues arose, and the cost of living inflated, and the Rockettes persisted in their traditional ways. However, the near elimination and subsequent rally to preserve them in the late seventies requires us to recognize that there had been something more to the public’s connection to the Rockettes than simple admiration.

Life Without Markert

Since Markert’s retirement, Radio City has been owned by several corporations, currently operated by the Madison Square Garden Company. After nearly being razed, the managing companies of RCMH decided to revamp the production structure and marketing plan in order to create a solvent business. Finding the need to close the theatre for extended periods of time, they ended the traditional format of a movie and a live show.
and the Rockettes found themselves only working intermittently. The eighties were a time of trial and error, with the dance troupe branching out into TV and film specials, Vegas performances, fitness instruction and even commercials. Also in 1985, the exterior of RCMH was finally marked as a NYC landmark as part of Rockefeller Center’s designation.

By the 1990s, the troupe had begun its revitalization, although for most, employment as a Rockette meant only part time work during the holiday season. Being part time work, some women worked as Rockettes for only one or two seasons, but many more stayed five to ten years, with some lasting as “career Rockettes.” A select few worked on and off through the year, doing promotional work or workshopping new numbers. The new director, Linda Haberman, expanded the show in 1994, opening in multiple cities across America simultaneously, under the heading “Christmas Across America” or CAA. Even though she pushed the boundaries of what it meant to be a Rockette, the show continued to showcase two numbers that had been part of each Christmas performance since 1932—the “Parade of the Wooden Soldiers” and the “Nativity Scene.”

In 1999, parent company Cablevision Systems invested in a seventy-million-dollar renovation of the aging theatre. Echoing the messages of Rockefeller of the 1920s, Hugh Hardy, the architect in charge of bringing back the building to its original luster, felt it only appropriate to “go for broke” on this renewal of the “monument to the myth of the American capitalistic system.”

The work was thorough, including restoring each work of art, recreating the 3000-pound gold curtain, and re-gilding the ceilings with

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720,000 sheets of gold and aluminum leaf. State of the art technology was added to the backstage, bringing a modern infrastructure to complement the refurbished glamour of the theatre.

Today, the Rockettes have recaptured some of their early glory, bringing in over two million spectators annually to their Christmas Spectacular. Their style of dance, while still quite traditional—and keeping on in the tradition of presenting some of Markert’s choreography—now highlights the strength and athleticism of the dancers. Haberman, who took over as permanent director and choreographer of both the touring and New York productions, claimed to have “raised the bar on what they did dancewise, because I felt they had been a bit underused. They’ve been around for a long time, but in order for them to stay relevant they need to evolve. I also focused on using all the new technologies we have to raise the bar on the whole production.”

Alongside using the female dancers in a bolder way and demanding a higher skill level than ever before, the Rockettes have been modernized in how they are marketed. No longer relegated to appearances solely tied to a movie showing, they have continued to appear in venues that attract a new younger crowd next to the traditionalists. In 2010, management launched new website—www.rockettes.com—which shared information on auditioning for the troupe, the dance education programs offered by the organization, show schedules, vintage photos, archival costume sketches, and behind-the-scenes access. Using new tools of technology on stage as well as social media accounts offstage,

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plus appearances with contemporary stars such as Pitbull, the Rockettes have become more relevant to today’s audience.

No discussion about the recent years of the Rockette trajectory would be complete without touching on the most recent hubbub concerning the dancers appearing at the Presidential Inauguration of Donald Trump in 2016. Initially speaking privately through her Instagram account, Rockette Phoebe Pearl wrote words of dismay about this planned appearance, which were then picked up by celebrity blogger Perez Hilton. Quickly going viral, Rockettes and management alike were thrust into the public eye as to whether or not each individual dancer would be allowed to choose to perform for the incoming president, who had been under scrutiny for objectifying women. As Katie Rogers and Gia Kourlas of The New York Times realized, this polarizing argument “has reignited sensitivities within the corps that they are seen as beauty pageant contestants more than skilled performers” as well as a key issue regarding the fact that it is frowned upon for a Rockette to publically disapprove of her employer.196

The inauguration topic is one of several that spotlights concerns for the continued success of the Rockettes. Of primary concern to this thesis is what the Rockettes have represented over time; by presenting the elite dancers as a backdrop to a controversial figure who has been criticized for verbally disparaging women, RCMH management complicated their latest attempts to show their dancers as more than just pretty stage dressing. Commercial dancers become branded, and having the Rockettes dance at the

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inauguration brought charges that the dancers were again a throwback to an earlier era, instead of manifesting the promise of staging strong, athletic, and independent women.

The other facet which has only been touched upon in the scope of this thesis is the control the management has had over the publicity throughout the history of the Rockettes. Pearl’s unauthorized opinion divulged via social media brought to light the practice that individual dancers were not allowed to voice their beliefs independently of the packaged script, nor do anything that didn’t tout the party line. Suddenly in 2016, this unofficial manner of administration was revealed, which opened the Rockettes to more criticism in these post-feminist days, as it seemed a dated and manipulative marketing practice.

Regardless of the recent firestorm concerning the Trump event performance, RCMH has begun to restore the image of the Rockettes and may have managed to repackage precision dance. Much of the dance style has remained the same, although Haberman admits to wanting “to see how much I could deconstruct the Rockettes and still have them be the Rockettes,” adding more technical dance moves to complement the precision dance structure. But with Haberman leaving the company in 2014 for unknown reasons, the Rockettes continue to struggle to find a leader with a defining voice who can take them with all their history and traditions and refigure them to remain a modern and viable emblem for Manhattan, for women, and for dance.

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Recognizing a “National Treasure”

This thesis is a step towards identifying what it is about these precision dancers that have kept them in the forefront of American entertainment for nearly a century. Their early ties to industry and ingenuity placed them as figureheads of the wave of American progress. In order to examine the link between the Rockettes and modernity, Kracauer’s essays on the Mass Ornament regarding the Tiller Girls can be used as a blueprint, but his remarks on the alienation of the individual are less suited to an analysis of Markert’s dancers due to their sense of comradery on and off the stage. Rather than the automatons that Kracauer described, the Rockettes have uniformity with a sense of sorority—a “one-for-all, all-for one philosophy is critical to their cohesiveness onstage and off.”

Russell Markert, as the self-appointed father figure, insisted upon rigor in dance and decorum, yet for all his exacting demeanor in the rehearsal rooms, he inspired great love among his “dancing daughters.” This interrelationship between the director and dancers set up the working atmosphere that would permeate the professional life of Rockettes for years to come.

Markert took elements of John Tiller’s celebrated precision dance style of the late 19th century and codified it into a repeatable and enduring genre. The Rockettes popularized precision dance over the many decades, and key elements of this style seen by millions over the years have infiltrated American culture. The company’s influence echoes through military drills, half-time shows, Fourth of July Parades, and Olympic

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199 Kisselgoff, “Precision Dancing as Art,” 15.
Spectacles, among others, and the widespread appeal of this style has only grown over the past century.

Precision dance as Markert envisioned it, with the primary components of spectacle, precision, and sorority, continued upon the stage of Radio City Music Hall through his retirement in 1971. Although the attendance had languished, the appeal of the Rockettes remained, both as a nostalgic reminder of an earlier era and as an icon of American ideals that were still deeply valued. Today the Rockettes have been restructured in format but retain those pivotal aspects of Markert’s vision, and their popularity has resurged after many uncertain years. As a form of art and entertainment that has survived nearly a century, the Rockettes and the choreography of Markert are a fascinating fixture of American culture in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, and should be regarded with distinction.
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[https://cup.columbia.edu/author-interviews/melnick-american-showman](https://cup.columbia.edu/author-interviews/melnick-american-showman)


