

Creating a Canteen Worth Fighting For:
Morale Service and the Stage Door Canteen in World War II

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This thesis titled
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Morale Service and the Stage Door Canteen in World War II

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Abstract

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Creating a Canteen Worth Fighting For: Morale Service and the Stage Door Canteen in World War II

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From March 1942 to November 1945, the Stage Door Canteen in New York City provided an estimated 3 million servicemen with companionship, free food, and entertainment. This thesis explores the canteen's work and the meaning assigned to the work by volunteers, servicemen, and the American media. Run by the American Theatre Wing War Service, the canteen provided civilian workers in the entertainment industry with a way to "do their part" for the war effort and repay servicemen for the sacrifice they were making. The canteen was open to United Nations servicemen of any nationality or race, making it an interracial and international contact point. In media, the canteen was frequently used as a symbol of wartime unity and an example of the type of selfless service that American civilians should aspire to. For many canteen volunteers and guests, the canteen incarnated wartime values of American egalitarianism, Allied cooperation, and racial equality. It prompted some civilians and servicemen to think critically about the ideals of democracy, equality, unity, and individual freedom for which the war was purportedly being fought.

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Bottomless thanks to my sister Anne for discovering the great forgotten humorist Margaret Halsey and for insisting on reading excerpts of Ms. Halsey's writing to me over the phone. Thanks also to the late Margaret Halsey for being the sort of writer my sister quotes over the phone. If Halsey had been less clever or insightful, I never would have known about the Stage Door Canteen.

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Introduction

In 1943, military police were assigned to go undercover at the Stage Door Canteen. There were worse assignments a soldier could receive. In the course of their investigation, the agents danced with the canteen's junior hostesses, conversed with volunteers, and saw Ella Fitzgerald and the Andrews Sisters perform. None of the agents reported whether or not they took advantage of the free food and beverages offered by the canteen. The work was not without its challenges: one agent left the canteen early "[d]ue to the vast preponderance of males."¹

In fact, the vast preponderance of males was a constant challenge at the Stage Door Canteen, and other service centers in New York City. Aside from the servicemen who were stationed around the city, there were also those who were leaving port or had just arrived stateside. Providing the influx of American and foreign servicemen with entertainment and food was a logistical difficulty met by charitable organizations, volunteer service, and donations from New York merchants. At the Stage Door Canteen, servicemen were allowed one sandwich, one dessert, and one drink (tea, coffee, or milk). Food was rationed, and so was hostesses' time. Junior hostesses were asked not to spend too much time talking to the same group of servicemen, or to dance with any one man for too long.²

¹ Percy J. Hussakof and W.H. Mulligan, memoranda to Chief, Investigations Branch, Internal Security Division, Coordination Branch, Subject Files Relating to the Internal Security Program, 1937–1946, Stage Door Canteen folder, Records of the Office of the Provost Marshal General, RG 389, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD (hereafter, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA).

² Rules of the Stage Door Canteen, pp. 5, 7, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 11, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

The Stage Door Canteen opened on March 2, 1942, on 44th Street, just off Broadway in the heart of New York's theater district. By then, many similar canteens and service clubs had already been established across the United States to meet the needs of servicemen stationed on bases or in transit. Staffed by civilian volunteers, the canteens took different forms. Some provided places to sleep and shower. At others, servicemen could write letters which would be posted for them or have their clothes mended by volunteers, play cards or pool, rest or read, eat and drink, or dance and socialize. Though Stage Door Canteen volunteers posted the occasional letter and probably even sewed on the occasional button, the focus at the Broadway canteen was on stage entertainment and dancing. It more closely approximated a night club than a mess hall.

Famous for being the Broadway canteen, the Stage Door Canteen was established under the auspices of the American Theatre Wing War Service and managed and staffed by theater personnel. The canteen's executive committee (Canteen Committee) was chaired by actors Jane Cowl and Selena Royle. The Stage Door Canteen was by far the Theatre Wing's best known project of the war, receiving publicity in newspapers and magazines across the United States as the place where stars of stage and screen (but mainly stage) did their humble best to serve the fighting men of all the United Nations. The canteen was also the subject of a popular radio variety show, and a successful musical film, *Stage Door Canteen*. The Stage Door Canteen of film, radio, newspapers, and magazines had a fairy tale element. There, servicemen, perhaps from small towns or poor families, could, for one night, dance with the prettiest girls, be served by the most glamorous actors, and watch the most famous performers for free, until the clock struck midnight. The canteen also offered princes in disguise as dishwashers – a popular piece

of trivia in the papers was that actor Alfred Lunt took out the garbage. The New York City canteen inspired other Stage Door Canteens around the country, in Boston, Cleveland, Newark, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, DC, as well as in London and Paris. The Hollywood Canteen, also modeled after the Stage Door Canteen, was probably the only servicemen's canteen in the United States whose fame matched, and perhaps surpassed, the Stage Door Canteen's.

The canteen was already well known around the country when the War Department first took notice of it and sent MPs to investigate. The reason for the Army's interest was the canteen's policy of allowing enemy aliens to volunteer. Most wartime service organizations, including the Red Cross, the United Service Organizations (USO), and the American Women's Voluntary Services, did not allow enemy aliens to join. As volunteers at the Stage Door Canteen, enemy aliens could have had contact with the thousands of servicemen who came to the canteen every night, and possibly could have gained access to the privileged information those servicemen possessed.

Though enemy aliens first attracted the War Department's attention, the investigators found other causes for concern. Broadway was, of course, rife with leftists, and the investigation found that several of the members of the canteen may have been "extreme Leftists or Communist sympathizers." Antoinette Perry, chairman of the board of the American Theatre Wing, assured investigators that "no subversive influence [had] been exercised on any of the servicemen," and that suspect canteen personnel would not be allowed "to inculcate or indoctrinate their personal political views into the operation of the Canteen." Another concern for the War Department's agents was the canteen's policy of racial integration, which reflected the American Theatre Wing's policy as a

whole. Servicemen of all races were admitted, and white hostesses were expected to dance with any serviceman who asked them, including black servicemen. One MP captain opined that the policy was “bound to lead to trouble” and that “white girls should not be compelled to cooperate.” The greatest danger at the canteen, in the view of War Department personnel, was the risk to military secrecy that existed anywhere servicemen associated with civilians, especially civilian women. Volunteers at the canteen might extract or overhear privileged military information. Even if the volunteers were loyal Americans, they could carelessly repeat the information to those who were not. Young, attractive, non-threatening women would, it was thought, have an easier time gathering information from young male soldiers.³

“[T]he general setup of the Stage Door Canteen is unwholesome from an intelligence standpoint,” one investigator concluded, though they found nothing “indicative of subversive activity.”⁴ The Stage Door Canteen was also potentially unwholesome from a social standpoint: it was a place where sexes and races mixed and danced with minimal chaperonage. The canteen’s much-publicized no-dating policy, forbidding junior hostesses from meeting servicemen outside the canteen or leaving the canteen with servicemen, mitigated the possibility of rumors about canteen hostesses’ virtue. One journalist wrote, almost regretfully, of the canteen’s approach to romance and sex:

³ H. Berkowitz, Internal Security Division memorandum, July 9, 1943; JH Holbrook, memorandum on investigators’ report re: SDC, June 30, 1943; Harold T. Ammerman, memorandum to Joseph C. Breckinridge, July 1, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.

⁴⁴ John A. Pateracki, memorandum to Agent in Charge, June 24, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.

To many out-of-town young men, New York girls, and most particularly girls of the theatre, all live alone in luxurious apartments filled with silk lampshades and those long-legged floppy dolls. If you can get the girl to let you take her home, there's no telling what might happen, you hope.

This kind of thing the Stage Door Canteen simply does not countenance. A hundred years ago there was something distinctly raffish and unconventional about the theatre world. Today it might even be called priggish.⁵

If some writers considered the canteen's approach to romance and sex to be puritanical, its non-discrimination policy did not seem conservative to anyone. The Stage Door Canteen was not the only racially integrated canteen in the United States. Other Stage Door Canteens and the Hollywood Canteen were integrated, as were many service centers run by labor unions. Canteens run by black staff were almost always integrated, but rarely patronized by white servicemen. Integrated canteens run by whites were still the minority. In 1943, a USO committee designated to investigate USO services to black servicemen found that, of almost 3,000 USO centers with white staff, only 109 offered services to black servicemen.⁶ Even among the canteens that were integrated, the theater district canteen was unusual. While most integrated canteens run by whites tried to ensure that black servicemen danced with black hostesses and white servicemen with white hostesses, the Stage Door Canteen's non-discrimination policy mandated that white

⁵ Robert Sullivan, "Stage Door Canteen Serves First Million," *New York News*, March 14, 1943 [clipping], American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, vol. 153, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter, American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks).

⁶ Nina Mjagkij, "The Negro Service Committee and African American Soldiers," in *Politics and Progress: American Society and the State Since 1865*, ed. Andrew E. Kerstin and Kriste Lindemeyer (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 49.

hostesses dance with black servicemen if they were asked. Very few canteens around the country had similar policies.

Despite its policy, the Stage Door Canteen received relatively little public criticism. The canteen's patently charitable and patriotic mission garnered societal approval and discouraged negative comment. Even the War Department agents investigating the canteen frequently tempered their critical observations with comments on volunteers' patriotism and good intentions. As a charitable establishment intended for the exclusive benefit of "the boys" who were fighting the war, the Stage Door Canteen received more leeway during the war than it would have in peacetime, or if it had been a commercial establishment.

Serving morale was not, in and of itself, enough to protect civilians from criticism. Civilian men who appeared to be draft age attracted resentment or open hostility from servicemen and other civilians, regardless of what other contributions they might were making to the war effort. Women who socialized with and dated servicemen apart from work in service organizations and without becoming engaged or married were sometimes criticized, while women who slept with soldiers outside of marriage, for pay or for free, were demonized and pathologized.⁷ There could be a social cost for not being involved in the war effort, but there could also be a social cost for being involved in the wrong way. Thanks to a well-cultivated reputation of generosity, professionalism, and respectability, working at the Stage Door Canteen was one of the right ways a civilian could be involved in the war effort.

⁷See Marilyn E. Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality During World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

Stage Door Canteen volunteers performed other types of service during the war as well, often with the American Theatre Wing. Through the Wing, theater workers raised funds for war relief, attended first aid classes, trained for war production work, and visited servicemen in hospitals. But for many volunteers, working at the canteen was their primary engagement with the war effort. The ways in which canteen volunteers performed their work and prioritized their duties both reflected and shaped their understanding of the war. Some canteen workers considered their sole purpose at the canteen was to honor or repay sacrifices servicemen were making. For others, it was also important that the canteen reflected the values for which the war was being fought.

Civilians, servicemen, and the press treated the canteen as a manifestation of American unity, egalitarianism, hospitality, generosity, selflessness, and maintaining a positive attitude in the face of hardship. This thesis explores the meanings that canteen volunteers, servicemen, and the media assigned to the canteen's work, and the ways these conceptions of the canteens shaped each other and contrasted with each other. These meanings arose out of the canteen's policy of racial integration and non-discrimination, the presence of servicemen of different class, ethnic, and national backgrounds, the gender dynamic based on hostess-servicemen interactions, and the presence of people privileged by virtue of fame, class, or wealth, working and performing at the canteen.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the canteen's work, and examines the assumptions and concerns that shaped the canteen's service. The policies and practices of the canteen were often rooted in concerns about female respectability and popular perceptions of male sexual and social needs. Volunteers' duties depended on whether they were male or female, young or old, famous or unknown. While canteen officials

prioritized servicemen's experience of the canteen, they were also concerned with creating positive public perceptions of the canteen's work and running an efficient, reputable service that would reflect well on the theater industry.

Chapter 2 looks at the Stage Door Canteen in the media, with particular emphasis on the 1943 film *Stage Door Canteen*, and places the canteen in the larger context of popular discourse about morale work, gender roles, and race roles. Canteen self-promotion and other media treatments of the canteen created a second front of morale boosting, reaching civilians as well as servicemen who had never visited the canteen. Popular entertainment based on the canteen boosted morale by presenting appealing and optimistic views about the war, making it, in effect, propaganda. Through selective representation and exaggeration of the canteen's qualities, mainstream media transformed the canteen into a symbol of wartime ideals. The media inspired by the canteen shows the ideals canteen volunteers frequently aspired to, and the messages they received from popular media about their wartime duties. In many cases volunteers expressed the importance of their work using the same rhetorical ideas seen in the media discussed in this chapter. The chapter also looks at the difference between the ideal of interracial unity and cooperation embraced in the white press and in government propaganda, and the idea of democracy – social and legal equality – embraced by the black press.

Chapter 3 focuses on the canteen's non-discrimination policy and the meaning that the canteen's racial and national diversity had for volunteers and servicemen. For some, the canteen provided an example of the democratic equality they hoped they were fighting and working for. For some servicemen, both black and white, the canteen was their first experience of integration, or of interacting with other races on equal terms.

However, racial equality and cooperation was by no means a set fact at the canteen.

Circumstances often defaulted to segregation unless integration was rigorously pursued.

White volunteers passively reinforced segregation through avoiding black servicemen and volunteers, and white servicemen sometimes actively reinforced segregation by cutting in on interracial couples, making black servicemen uncomfortable, and demeaning black hostesses.

Though unpaid, working at the canteen was a job, and a challenging one at that. It called on volunteers to treat all guests equally simply by virtue of their uniform. Whether canteen workers considered the canteen a bastion of democracy, a sanctuary for beleaguered servicemen, or just a place to pass the time and meet people, they were supposed to treat all of the canteen's guests with courtesy, kindness, and without prejudice. Canteen officials wanted to create a place where servicemen felt comfortable and had fun, and they also wanted to offer a service that made military personnel feel like their work was appreciated by civilians. The amount of publicity and media coverage of the canteen extended its morale-boosting mission by reassuring civilians and servicemen alike that American military personnel, far from their homes, were being cared for and honored for their sacrifices. The mission of the Stage Door Canteen to raise morale was carried out through personal, individual interactions, and through its capacity to be a symbol of ideals of democracy, equality, and unity. Civilians and servicemen alike wanted to be reassured that their wartime sacrifices were worthwhile; many found that reassurance at the Stage Door Canteen.

I. “Nothing Is Too Good For Them”: Service and Sacrifice

On March 1, 1943, one day shy of the Stage Door Canteen’s first anniversary, Virginia Kaye reported that *Variety* had printed a “vicious slam” against the junior hostesses.⁸ Virginia Kaye was a young stage actor who, with actor Vivian Smolen, co-chaired the canteen’s Junior Hostess Committee. The contentious *Variety* article stated that some Stage Door Canteen hostesses worried that the toll on their shoes from dancing was “a prohibitive price for soldier entertainment.” Hostesses also complained that their volunteer service was now a chore, rather than being as fun and inspiring as it had been in the early days. Worst of all, the article stated that hostesses thought “that in some cases the soldiers have been spoiled, that they've had such a fuss made over them and have been told so often that they're heroes they've come to believe it.” *Variety* added that some servicemen, for their part, found the hostesses were too full of themselves, and had grown “blasé” about their work.⁹

In response, Selena Royle, Jane Cowl, co-chairs of the Canteen Committee, and Kermit Bloomgarden, the canteen’s business manager, wrote to *Variety*. They informed the editor that the canteen had already received a rationing priority from the government, which allowed hostesses to exceed the normal ration of shoes due to “occupational hardship.” “The girls say the hardship is only on the shoes, not the wearers,” the letter asserted. Hostesses who had been “found deficient in their sense of devoted and joyous service” usually left the canteen, while the hostesses who remained had “a high sense of

⁸ Minutes of the Stage Door Canteen Executive Committee, March 1, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 18, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter, Canteen Committee minutes).

⁹ “Terp Hostesses Feel Pinch of Rationed Shoes (and Unrationed Servicemen),” *Variety*, February 24, 1943, 46.

the privilege of service to our fighting men.... Many of them look at their jobs as such an honor and chance to serve that they ask to come on nights when they are not assigned.”

Canteen personnel did not have a policy of responding to every criticism or slight that appeared in the press, but the suggestion that hostesses were less than enthusiastic, even jaded, about serving the armed forces was unacceptable. While not presuming to speak for servicemen, Cowl, Royle, and Bloomgarden told *Variety* that “attendance totals of service men each evening, and the high number of their return visits to the Canteen, would seem to point to the fact that they have a good time there.”¹⁰

In morale work, maintaining the right tone, appearances, and attitude were crucial. A careless, curt word, a visible lack of energy or enthusiasm, or an attitude of sadness or solemnity could undermine the work. Subpar service might suggest to servicemen that their work and sacrifice were not appreciated or understood by civilians. The proper attitude towards servicemen was not one of charity, or a sense of doing them a favor, but of reciprocity. Volunteers were often motivated by the knowledge that servicemen took on a burden that civilians did not have to. Vincent Lindo, who worked at the canteen as a dishwasher for the duration, expressed the proper attitude when the Canteen Committee extended their thanks to him for his hard work. He demurred, pointing out that if he was in the army, he would “have to work as long as they told [him], or as hard,” and that he was happy to do anything for “the boys.”¹¹ His words were quoted with approval in the Canteen Committee minutes. Places like the Stage Door Canteen were established as a gesture of thanks to servicemen for their difficult and sometimes dangerous work.

¹⁰ Kermit Bloomgarden, Jane Cowl, and Selena Royle, letter to the editor, *Variety*, March 3, 1943, 4.

¹¹ Canteen Committee minutes, August 24, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 22.

The prevailing image of the typical serviceman and the sacrifices he was making affected the canteen's treatment of servicemen, and dictated the services the canteen provided. In the view of the public, servicemen's lives were plagued by a surfeit of discomfort, bad food, and regimentation, and a dearth of mother figures, attractive, *respectable* young women, and good, clean fun. (Civilians did not suppose that servicemen had too little access to the ingredients of un-clean fun, i.e. loose women and liquor.) The canteen was created to serve the ultimate wartime representative of American masculinity, the serviceman – servicewomen were not admitted. The Stage Door Canteen provided a safe, free, and comfortable alternative to local dance halls and restaurants, or streets and parks. The companionship of junior hostesses provided servicemen with a middle-class and chaste (it was hoped) alternative to women of dubious morals, Victory Girls and Khaki-Wackies and other women doing their sexual part for morale.¹² The canteen did not serve alcohol, and canteen officials instructed hostesses not to give their last names or phone numbers to servicemen, or to make dates with them. Canteen volunteers were supposed to give an impression of unadulterated gratitude, but only act on this gratitude within reasonable limits. The canteen's service was circumscribed by concerns about sexual respectability and public reputation, and out of respect for the opinions and requests of military and government officials.

In spite of its aspirations to respectability, visitors and volunteers of the Stage Door Canteen often remembered it as teeming with energy and romantic potential. There “was always this incredible energy,” said former junior hostess Gloria Stroock. “That’s

¹² Meghan K. Winchell, *Good Girls, Good Food, Good Fun: The Story of USO Hostesses During World War II* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 107-108.

what I remember about the canteen.”¹³ Sol Lesser, the independent producer who made the film *Stage Door Canteen*, said he would “never forget the emotional impact as [he] entered the canteen for the first time. The accent was on *youth*.”¹⁴ Louis Kronenberger, theatre critic for the New York paper *PM*, visited the Stage Door Canteen and was impressed by its complete lack of “stuffiness.” “No doubt there are plenty of times when servicemen are grateful for the homey touch and the motherly pat,” Kronenberger wrote, “but it must be fun for a change to drop into a place where they can have any man’s idea of a good time.”¹⁵

The Stage Door Canteen’s potential for staid domesticity was undercut by its location in New York City, near Times Square, its emphasis on dancing and popular entertainment, and the Broadway and New York personalities who staffed it. These traits helped set it apart from the canteens that featured “an abundance of kindly old ladies and raisin cookies.”¹⁶ The canteen was a trendy place to volunteer and to visit. When the canteen was in its planning stages, Jane Cowl anticipated a need for about 600 junior hostesses to work weekly shifts at the canteen.¹⁷ The 40 by 80 foot space was expected to host about 500 servicemen a night; instead, the canteen saw at least twice that many its opening night. The canteen averaged between two and three thousand guests a night for

¹³ Gloria Stroock, interview with author, January 21, 2010.

¹⁴ Sol Lesser, interview by Theodore Fred Kuper, 1970, 111, Oral History Collection, Columbia University (hereafter, Lesser oral history).

¹⁵ Louis Kronenberger, *Going to the Theater*, *PM*, March 30, 1942, 22.

¹⁶ The raisin cookies comment is from a column called “Take a Break” written by Sgt. Hy Baker for the Fort Logan *News and Views*. The column described Baker’s experience of servicemen’s canteens in contrast to their depiction in the movies. Another soldier sent it to *PM*, where it was reprinted. (McManus, *Speaking of Movies*, *PM*, January 2, 1945, 16.)

¹⁷ “Stage Folk S.R.O. for Canteen Task,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1942, 14.

the two and a half years it was open.¹⁸ The number of junior hostesses swelled over this period to 2,200, with about 1,400 working 21 different shifts over the course of a week.¹⁹

The number of hostesses present at the canteen was always much smaller than the number of servicemen. Junior hostesses often found themselves dancing with a succession of partners, as servicemen cut in on each other to have a turn at dancing, and hostesses wore through shoes faster than the No. 17 ration book coupon would replace them.

The various contingents of volunteers were run by committees, including the Kitchen Committee, chaired by Marion Moore, the Junior Hostess Committee, co-chaired by Smolen and Kaye, the Senior Hostess Committee, co-chaired by Osceola Archer and Jane Broder, and the Host's Committee, chaired by actor Tom Rutherford.²⁰ There was also a Publicity Committee and an Entertainment Committee. Committee chairs all sat on the canteen's executive committee (known simply as the Canteen Committee). By 1944 there were an estimated 6,000 registered volunteers at the canteen. Each shift of hosts, hostesses, and kitchen workers was run by a captain.²¹ An Officer of the Day (OD) was the "boss of the Canteen for the day"; all policy decisions and problems had to be referred to the OD.²²

¹⁸ "Canteen Preview Brings Food Pile," *New York Times*, March 1, 1942, 37; Brooks Atkinson, "Curtain's Up at the Stage Door Canteen," *New York Times*, March 3, 1942, 26; "Canteen Disbursements," March 8, 1942 – December 31, 1942, Emeline Roche Papers, box 1, folder 17.

¹⁹ "Barrie Play Back; First Here in 1916," *New York Times*, March 10, 1942, 23; "A New Slant on an Old Song," *Canteen News*, March 16, 1944, 1, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15.

²⁰ Rutherford's name is frequently spelled "Rutherford,"

²¹ *Canteen News*, March 16, 1944, 1, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15. The statistics do not say how many hosts were registered.

²² Rules for the Officer of the Day, in rules of the Stage Door Canteen, 15, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 11.

Unlike the Army and Navy of the time, the Stage Door Canteen put women in positions of authority above men, and African Americans in positions of authority above whites. The canteen hierarchy was integrated; there was no “Negro Hostess Committee,” and no official distinction between the duties of black and white volunteers who held the same position. White hostesses were told to dance and speak with servicemen of any race. Black hostesses were also supposed to interact with servicemen of any race, though some canteen officials may have expected that black hostesses were there specifically to entertain black soldiers and sailors, while white hostesses were supposed to entertain everybody.²³ Osceola Archer, an actor and director, was the most senior black woman at the canteen. In addition to being co-chair of the Senior Hostess Committee, she was also an OD. While Archer was probably the only black person to sit on the Canteen Committee, there were also black junior hostess captains who oversaw white hostesses. There were probably fewer black men in positions of authority than black women, but Writer Carl Van Vechten’s photographs of the canteen document at least one black host captain, Harold Jackman, a friend of Van Vechten’s.²⁴ In other ways, the canteen reflected the conventional job hierarchies of society, with black men working as dishwashers, porters, and janitors at the canteen, probably in paid positions.

The Stage Door Canteen was a convenient way for theater and radio workers to do their bit for the war effort. The canteen was run by actors, producers, and other entertainment professionals who understood the demands of working in the entertainment industry. For example, canteen volunteers could receive calls while they were working,

²³ See chapter 3 for discussion of the canteen’s expectations of black hostesses.

²⁴ Carl Van Vechten, two photographs of Harold Jackman, junior hostess Shirley Booth, and servicemen Bob Moore Irving Spiegel at the Stage Door Canteen, August 9, 1943, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library Digital Images Online, Yale University, <http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/digitalibrary/>.

and the instructions for the volunteers who answered the phones asked that they make particular efforts to deliver phone messages left by the Radio Registry or Telephone Exchange.²⁵ The Radio Registry and Telephone Exchange were answering services that took messages for actors, and a call from them meant a job. Volunteering as hosts, hostesses, or kitchen staff at the canteen allowed men and women working in the entertainment industry to contribute to the war in a way that not only did not interfere with their careers, but in some cases benefited their careers by supplying networking opportunities. Radie Harris, gossip columnist and chair of the canteen's Entertainment Committee, related an anecdote about producer Brock Pemberton working a shift as a busboy at the canteen. "[S]o many actors found excuses to come over and greet him that Ezra Stone piped up, 'Why don't you put a sign on your apron- NO CASTING TONIGHT!'"²⁶ Nonetheless, occasionally canteen volunteers did get cast for parts while working their shifts.

One junior hostess, actor Valerie Hayes, joined the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in 1942. Hayes believed she was the first Stage Door Canteen junior hostess to become a WAAC. "It means giving up the start of a career for which I worked very hard," she wrote, "but I feel that when this whole mess is over, I shall come back and start where I left off."²⁷ Unlike WAACs, junior hostesses and other canteen volunteers could stop volunteering when they were working on a show, and resume volunteering once they were out of a job. Volunteering at the canteen did not interrupt the

²⁵ Rules for the Treasurers' Committee, in rules of the Stage Door Canteen, 26, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 11.

²⁶ Radie Harris, "Highlights of the Stage Door Canteen," *Variety*, March 25, 1942, 23. "Highlights" became Harris' column, American Theater Wing Stage Door Canteen Capers. The column ran in most issues of *Variety* for about six months.

²⁷ Valerie Hayes to Delmer Daves, September 25, 1942, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 7.

basic pattern – or lack thereof – of theater workers’ professional lives. Another junior hostess, Sonya Stokowski Thorbecke, recalled the uncertainty that she and other actors experienced when it came to finding roles. “I would be yanked about. You would get a job... and you could always go back to the Stage Door Canteen when you were in rehearsal.” Sometimes she had to leave town for a job, and “many of the jobs fell through.... The life of an actress isn't easy, because you're always looking for a job. They don't last very long.”²⁸

Working at the Stage Door Canteen created a sense of community for actors and artists just beginning their careers. Lauren Bacall, who volunteered as a hostess at the canteen before her career took off, wrote that the Stage Door Canteen “made [her] feel [she] was still an active member of the theatre” even when she was not appearing in any shows.²⁹ Of course, working at the canteen could also expand volunteers’ social lives. Stroock “made some lifelong friends at the canteen.” Sometimes she would see women at auditions who she had seen at the canteen, and the shared experience would be an entrée into acquaintanceship.³⁰ Writer and photographer Carl Van Vechten, who was a host captain at the canteen, wrote that the canteen “brought people together who never knew each other before and [gave] their lives a new social direction.”³¹

The canteen always had *enough* volunteers, but as the war progressed, canteen officials had a harder and harder time finding the names, the talent, and the type of volunteers they wanted. The momentum of the initial excitement carried the canteen a full year before *Variety* ran its article about flagging enthusiasm among junior hostesses.

²⁸ Sonya Stokowski Thorbecke, interview with author, October 30, 2009.

²⁹ Lauren Bacall, *By Myself* (New York: Knopf, 1978), 45.

³⁰ Stroock, interview, January 21, 2010.

³¹ Carl Van Vechten, “Ode to the Stage Door Canteen,” *Theatre Arts* 27 (April 1943): 230.



Figure 1. (*Left to right*) Junior hostesses Elaine Kent and Helen Tsang, French sailor Marcel Gonthier, Coastguardsman Frank Piro (“Killer Joe,” a canteen celebrity known for his jitterbugging skills), Osceola Archer, and Sgt. Jimmie Daniels. Photograph by Carl Van Vechten, June 21, 1943. (Beinecke Library)

The Canteen Committee began to privately deplore that new canteen workers were of a lower caliber than workers who had signed on when the canteen was first established.³²

In early 1944, actor Horace Braham reported an embarrassing incident when British war correspondents came to the canteen to interview “girls of the Theatre,” and none could be found. The Canteen Committee discussed how to draw theater folk back to the canteen, and also discussed the “urgency” of getting “important actresses and actors of the Theatre

³² Canteen Committee minutes, May 17, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 18.

to serve on regular shifts.”³³ Increasingly, the canteen was staffed by volunteers who were office workers, relatives of theater professionals, or worked in other professions with only a tenuous connection to the theater.

The canteen had a public image as being a prime location for spotting celebrities, a reputation that was fostered by the American Theatre Wing and solidified by the star-studded *Stage Door Canteen* film. An early Theatre Wing press release said that “[g]lamorous names among the senior hostesses, junior hostesses, and kitchen workers” were “the rule and not the exception.” One volunteer’s response to this was “Nutz!”³⁴ Margaret Halsey, a junior hostess captain, remembered few celebrities in evidence at the canteen, and wrote that “the day-to-day operation [of the canteen]...was in the hands of mothers, sisters, wives, cousins and secretaries of people who were in the performing arts, plus a few men who were 4-Fs or too old for military service.”³⁵ Halsey probably overstated the case, but “glamorous names” were certainly the exception. Big-name celebrities were rarely able to come to the canteen for regular shifts.

The absence of big names was a persistent problem for the canteen. In May 1943, Jane Cowl observed that servicemen “still” expected to see celebrities at the canteen, and they were “bitterly disappointed” when they did not.³⁶ In 1944, volunteers reported that the most common question asked by servicemen was where all the celebrities were.³⁷ The canteen’s celebrity shortage became more dire as the war progressed. Many of the better

³³ Canteen Committee minutes, January 3, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 20.

³⁴ Lorella Val-Mery (director of publicity, American Theatre Wing), press release, August 1, 1942, Emeline Roche Collection, box 2, folder 9. The comment “Nutz!” was written in the margin of the press release. The note is initialed “V.K.”, perhaps Virginia Kaye.

³⁵ Margaret Halsey, *No Laughing Matter: The Autobiography of a Wasp* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1977), 111.

³⁶ Canteen Committee minutes, May 23, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 18.

³⁷ Herman Lorber, “Did You Know?” *Canteen News*, March 2, 1944, 2, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15; Canteen Committee minutes, April 24, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 21.

known stars were unreliable workers, and in some cases the “name” volunteers had moved on to other wartime projects, taking part in other American Theatre Wing initiatives, war bond drives, or USO Camp Shows.

Celebrities were an important part of the service that was being offered by the Stage Door Canteen. Famous folk appearing, not just on stage but behind the food counters and on the dance floor, set the canteen apart from most other canteens in the country. Having celebrities work at the canteen was not just a gimmick for publicity. Marlene Dietrich pouring coffee had a different significance than an unknown writer for radio doing the same. Her presence indicated that servicemen were important enough to merit a famous person’s time and energy. The implied compliment was sometimes lost on servicemen, who recognized film stars like Marlene Dietrich (there was “a wild scramble for the coffee line” when Dietrich was pouring) but were highly unlikely to recognize stage actors.³⁸ Visiting journalists and canteen volunteers were more apt to recognize successful Broadway actors, and respond with appropriate awe, than were servicemen. Still, Broadway stars had some cachet. One serviceman, Private Stanley Cosgrove, wrote to Jane Cowl to express his gratitude for her service. He had seen her working hard at the canteen, in uncomfortable conditions, smiling graciously to servicemen. “I guess most of those boys didn’t even know you,” wrote Cosgrove. “It’s swell of all those stars who put on shows and spend their time entertaining service men. But when I see a great lady like you really working that way, it made me realize why your canteen is different from other places.”³⁹ A seaman in the Royal Navy wrote to the *New York Times* that he had viewed Americans as materialistic and ambitious: “But my first night here I visited the Stage

³⁸ Valerie Hayes, “Additional Incidentals,” September 25, 1942, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 8.

³⁹ Stanley Cosgrove to Jane Cowl, February 29, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 31, folder 13.

Door Canteen where I found myself, a comparative Philistine, waited upon by a noted Shakespearean actor, who was ‘doing his bit,’ as we say—and a very big bit it seemed to be.”⁴⁰

Celebrities and stage entertainment were two of the canteen’s major draws; a third was companionship. Hostesses and hosts talked with servicemen, and would sometimes act as their confidantes. Junior hostesses especially would have emotionally intimate interactions with servicemen. Lauren Bacall wrote in her autobiography, “Many of [the servicemen] had girls at home – were homesick – would transfer their attentions to one of us out of loneliness and need.”⁴¹ Hostesses often corresponded with servicemen they met at the canteen, and sometimes agreed to write to servicemen’s family members. Many servicemen were far from home, and the canteen tried to ease the burden of distance. The canteen first offered a weekly prize of a phone call home for one lucky guest. The prize was extremely popular, and later a phone call was awarded nightly.⁴² The canteen offered birthday cake for soldier and sailor guests who were born on that day, and on one occasion, a hostess offered to send a bouquet of roses to the mother of every serviceman in the canteen whose mother had a birthday that day, the day before, or the day after.⁴³ One junior hostess lent \$35 to a serviceman. He never paid her back, so the canteen reimbursed her.⁴⁴

At canteens, hostesses “performed private tasks, previously reserved for their families, for strangers in a public setting.” Historian Meghan Winchell points out that

⁴⁰ Desmond G. Wright, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, December 19, 1942, 18.

⁴¹ Bacall, 39.

⁴² Lorber, “Did You Know?” *Canteen News*, March 2, 1944, 2, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15; Note to Officer of the Day, July 12, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 2, folder 7.

⁴³ Hayes, “Additional Incidentals,” Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 8.

⁴⁴ Canteen Committee minutes, November 22, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 20.



Figure 2. “Birthday parties are a nightly attraction at canteen. Here Estelle Loring cuts a pink frosted cake for admiring soldiers and sailors.” The sailor at the right Killer Joe. (*Life*, April 3, 1944, p. 123)

morale work at canteens across the country often duplicated the work that volunteers had done in their own homes, during peacetime.⁴⁵ Canteens propelled domestic labor and emotional services that women had always performed into the public eye. Domestic labor that before had been invisible and perhaps taken for granted became noble and admirable, a service for America’s fighting man in his time of need, and therefore a service to America in its time of need. At the Stage Door Canteen specifically, women’s previously-invisible services became even more remarkable because they were being performed by women and men who were not associated with domesticity in the eyes of the public. Great actors, after all, could probably afford domestic help. But, as a writer for the *New York Post* observed, “If you think a kitchen bossed and operated by actresses and

⁴⁵ Winchell, 13.

their friends is a scene of temperament, glamour and practical inefficiency, think again.”

Her article described how the canteen’s kitchen staff performed routine, humble tasks, such as cleaning and drying sheets of wax paper for reuse. The article went on to describe how actor Diantha Pattison “saved the night” when the canteen ran out of sandwiches. “Mrs. Pattison glanced nervously at her wrist watch, and she gave a MacArthurian order: ‘Girls, to the slabs.’” Pattison was referring to “the huge slabs of hot-cross buns or other sweet breads,” which were cut to make makeshift jam sandwiches.⁴⁶ While the comparison of canteen service to military service was made slightly tongue-in-cheek, it still evinced an understanding that making sandwiches at the canteen was important wartime work.

For the most part, the work done at the canteen was traditional “women’s work” – cooking, feeding, socializing, sympathizing. Most canteen volunteers were women, but there was a large contingent of male volunteers as well. Before the canteen opened, Jane Cowl requested “strong, stalwart men” to serve as hosts and help with “things that don’t occur to women.”⁴⁷ Duties that ultimately fell to men included “slicing and grinding” meat for the kitchen, checking coats, busing tables, stacking chairs at the end of the night, and preventing servicemen from drinking alcohol in the men’s bathroom. While men who volunteered as hosts had opportunities to interact with servicemen, their primary duties were menial tasks around the canteen. Men also volunteered on the Treasurer’s Committee. Among other administrative duties, treasurers checked the credentials of volunteers and civilian visitors, answered the phones, and distributed food tickets to the visiting servicemen. A Managers’ Committee was composed entirely of men. Managers

⁴⁶ Agnes Adams, “No Glamour at Canteen – But Food Aplenty,” *New York Post*, March 19 1942, 6.

⁴⁷ “Stage Folk S.R.O. for Canteen Task,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1942, 14.

served as assistants to the OD. Some ODs were women, and, in some instances, the manager's role may have been to facilitate dealing with volunteers who preferred not to take orders from women. On one Canteen Committee meeting, costume and set designer Emeline Roche, who was head designer for the canteen, asked if the managers would inform the treasurers of a new policy, as the treasurers "seem[ed] to resent taking orders from the women."⁴⁸

The social and labor dynamic inside of the Stage Door Canteen was shaped by gendered roles. The hostesses' roles changed with age. Junior hostesses, usually women in their late teens or their twenties, had the role of being visually attractive, social, pleasant, and fun; women in their forties and older were assumed to provide a reassuringly maternal, non-sexual presence. Margaret Halsey, who was in her early 30s when she volunteered at the canteen, became a captain of the junior hostesses, rather than a junior or senior hostess, because she was at an "Awkward Age" where she did not fit into either the role of romantic interest or mother. "At thirty-one, almost-thirty-two," she explained, "you are regarded by a canteen clientele which is mostly ten years your junior as too old to be interesting, but not quite withered enough to pinch-hit for Dear Old Mom."⁴⁹ Senior hostesses were not supposed to dance, but to converse with servicemen and facilitate their socializing with the junior hostesses. Sometimes well-known Broadway actors, such as Constance Collier and Katharine Cornell, filled senior hostess

⁴⁸ Canteen Committee minutes, December 28, 1942, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 17.

⁴⁹ Halsey, *Color Blind: A White Woman Looks at the Negro* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), 5-6. I have found no reference to a specific age limit for junior hostesses at the New York Stage Door Canteen. The Philadelphia Stage Door Canteen specified that they had to be between 18 and 30 years old. (Stella Moore [Stage Door Canteen Publicity Committee], press release, June 23, 1943, World War II Collection, USO Series, box 9, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.) The Philadelphia canteen operated more or less autonomously from the New York canteen, but shared some of the same rules and regulations. The New York canteen's hostesses seem to have fallen within the range of 17 to 30 years of age.

positions. For junior hostesses, the Stage Door Canteen drew from a stock of “young, pretty girls of the theater,” something it was assumed that Broadway had in spades in the persons of young actors, singers, and dancers.⁵⁰ Youth and sexual appeal were nearly always equated in media coverage of the canteen hostesses. Though canteen management never said so, the press made it clear that being pretty was part of the junior hostesses’ contribution to military morale.

The Stage Door Canteen was intended to serve as both a home away from home and a nightclub – simultaneously wholesome and sexy, comforting but exciting. Supposedly, junior hostesses provided the sex and senior hostesses the hominess. An article in *Time* about the Stage Door Canteen said there was an “increasing number of ‘senior hostesses’ ... because the Canteen has found that lots of the kids are skirt-shy, and only feel at home with substitutes for Mother.”⁵¹ The canteen regulations instructed Officers of the Day to have a senior hostess on duty as a receptionist because “[t]he boys enjoy being greeted by the older women and the Senior Hostesses can do a lot toward starting the service men out in the right mood.”⁵² Senior hostesses often performed a caretaker role at canteens, “infusing them with the behaviors, amenities, and cuisines of home.”⁵³ French senior hostess Regina Valdy, for example, sought out French sailors at the canteen. She “more or less mother[ed] them,” according to one junior hostess. The French sailors apparently appreciated Valdy’s efforts to make them feel more at home,

⁵⁰ “Stage Folk S.R.O. for Canteen Task,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1942, 14.

⁵¹ “Substitute for Mother,” *Time*, April 6 1942, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,777687,00.html>.

⁵² Rules for the OD, in rules of the Stage Door Canteen, 17, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 11.

⁵³ Winchell, 14.

and “gave her a party at the Canteen” where they sang “The Marsellaise” and “it was a very touching scene.”⁵⁴

Of course, junior and senior hostesses did not always play their expected roles. One of the agents visiting the canteen as part of a War Department investigation found it worth noting in his report that senior hostesses received a great deal of attention from the servicemen. He reported that the most popular were those who mingled with servicemen “on their own level.” He did not see anything motherly in the interactions between senior hostesses and servicemen, noting one of the most popular was an “attractive,” forty-something “former musical comedy comedic actress” who acted like “one of the boys.”⁵⁵

Underneath discussion of the roles of junior and senior hostesses lay the assumption that young servicemen’s interactions with “young, attractive” women were inherently sexual, and that their interactions with women above a certain (perpetually unspecified) age were inherently platonic. James Earle Moore, a doctor who testified before the Joint Army and Navy Committee on Welfare and Recreation, advised the committee that servicemen’s centers should employ young women rather than “mature women.” Moore believed that, unlike the companionship of older women, the companionship of young women provided a safe outlet for servicemen’s sexual desires, and a substitute for seeking out prostitutes.⁵⁶

Despite the purpose that Moore envisioned for canteen hostesses, the Stage Door Canteen, as with many other canteens across the country, forbade junior hostesses from

⁵⁴ S.A. Goldberg, memorandum to Chief, Investigations Branch, July 12, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.

⁵⁵ Goldberg, memorandum, July 10, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA; Goldberg, memorandum to Chief, Investigations Branch, July 12, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.

⁵⁶ Hegarty, 87-88.

dating servicemen they met at the canteen. References to the “no dating” rule were a mainstay in media coverage of the canteen. Eleanor Roosevelt mentioned the rule in her syndicated column “My Day.”⁵⁷ The policy was used as a source of dramatic tension in the film *Stage Door Canteen*, and a source of comedy in both the stage and film versions of *This is the Army*, a hit all-soldier show. In the latter, servicemen dressed as junior hostesses sang, “The rules and regulations are we mustn't be seen/ Outside the canteen with a soldier.”⁵⁸

In fact, the written rules that were distributed to the junior hostesses phrased the famous “no dating” rule in a very specific way. In a list of twenty-one admonishments, it was the only one written with the shift key locked:

NO HOSTESS IS TO LEAVE THE CANTEEN AT ANY TIME – UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES WITH A SERVICE MAN – OR TO MEET HIM OUTSIDE IN THE VICINITY OF THE CANTEEN. WE ARE RESPONSIBLE NOT ONLY TO OURSELVES AND THE AMERICAN THEATRE WING – BUT TO THE NAME OF THE ENTIRE THEATRE!!!⁵⁹

The wording of the rule – that hostesses were not to leave the canteen *with* a serviceman or meet him *near* the canteen – indicates that the concern was not just with the behavior of hostesses, but with whether or not their behavior could be associated with or connected to the canteen. The canteen depended on volunteer workers and donations from New

⁵⁷ Eleanor Roosevelt, My Day, August 10, 1942, United Feature Syndicate, <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/documents/myday/>.

⁵⁸ *This is the Army*, DVD, directed by Michael Curtiz (1943; Passion Productions, 2002).

⁵⁹ Rules for Junior Hostesses Committee, in rules of the Stage Door Canteen, 7, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 11.

York merchants; it could not afford to be seen as a place where servicemen could “procure” women.

World War II had brought prostitution and premarital sex to the forefront of Americans’ minds. Venereal disease among servicemen – and the consequent loss of manpower hours – made servicemen’s sexual behavior into a pressing national concern. The press bemoaned the increase in “Victory Girls,” women who had sex for free with soldiers as their patriotic duty. Former magistrate judge Jeannette G. Brill explained the “psychology” of self-labeled ‘Victory Girls’ to the *New York Times*: “They think the boys may be here today but may be dead tomorrow and they reason: ‘We’ll give them all they want.’”⁶⁰ Historian Marilyn E. Hegarty demonstrates that labels like “Victory Girl” and “Patriotute” were applied broadly by government officials and society; merely interacting with groups of servicemen could cause women to be included into these categories, especially in the case of working class women whose jobs took them to areas full of servicemen, or whose recreation and leisure spots were frequented by servicemen. Women in the wrong place at the wrong time opened themselves up to assumptions about their sexual availability.⁶¹

The Stage Door Canteen requested that a police woman be stationed near the canteen to discourage “‘Victory Girls’ and other sundry people” who were “accosting the men walking to and from the Canteen.” The canteen’s request was met by the police department that same day.⁶² At a time when “female sexuality was both needed and

⁶⁰ “Schools and Mothers Are Urged to Unite To Check Rise in Juvenile Delinquency,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1942, 27.

⁶¹ Hegarty, 125.

⁶² Canteen Committee minutes, April 19, 1945, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 25; Memorandum to the OD, April 19, 1945, Emeline Roche Collection, box 2, folder 7.

feared,” it was important for sites of respectable sexuality such as USO clubs and the Stage Door Canteens, to keep a distance – both social and geographical – from sites where promiscuous women congregated.

For a junior hostess volunteering at the Stage Door Canteen, the canteen was her character reference in her interactions with servicemen; her presence there implied that she had been screened and selected as a representative of the theater. It attested to her middle class respectability, and by extension her sexual unavailability. Of course, the canteen’s implicit testimonial and all the middle- or upper-class markers a woman could muster were not always enough to ward off sexual advances. (Nor, of course, did every junior hostess want to ward off sexual advances.) Hostesses were still propositioned. Black hostesses found that, in the view of some servicemen, their race canceled out other signs of respectability. Junior hostess captain Halsey, who was white, noticed that black hostesses were targets of some the most blatantly sexualized advances. They “occasionally had distasteful experiences of a kind that no white girl who wears clothes when she goes out is called upon to handle.” On one occasion, some white servicemen showed a group of black junior hostesses pictures of themselves having sex with Trinidadian women.⁶³

There were many jokes and off-hand comments about the junior hostesses’ being a sort of prize or reward for the servicemen. Leonard Lyons’ widely read gossip column included an anecdote about a Canadian sailor dancing with actor Eva Langbord at the canteen, and telling his friends “Look what comes with the Lend-Lease Bill.” In another column, Lyons told a story about a French sailor trying to convince a junior hostess to

⁶³ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 6-7, 100.

kiss him. When she refused, the sailor tried to offer her two dollars to kiss him. A senior hostess across the room saw that he had taken out money. “She rushed to him, ordered him to put the money away and warned him: ‘Everything here is free.’”⁶⁴ In the film *Stage Door Canteen*, two sailors ask a senior hostess, “Just how far can we go with these girls?” “Just as far as the door,” she tells them, laughing.⁶⁵ An item in *Variety* related a conversation between two servicemen that supposedly amused canteen officials. One serviceman “asked another whether there were ‘good lookers’ at the Canteen.” The other answered, “There sure are but you can’t get to first base with ‘em.”⁶⁶

Sex was not the only thing on canteen officials’ minds. Maintaining an image of respectability was a priority, but there was more to respectability than chastity. The canteen expected professionalism from all its volunteers – that volunteers would not insult servicemen, fight them, or carouse with them outside the canteen. The rule against leaving the canteen with servicemen or meeting servicemen near the canteen applied to hosts as well as hostesses, and was worded exactly the same way for both groups. Contemporary sources never mentioned that the rule against meeting servicemen outside the canteen was for male as well as female volunteers. Applied to women, the rule could either be reassuring to a public that worried about the morality of young women, or else it could be exciting to a public inclined to imagine mildly-forbidden twelfth-hour romances between servicemen and hostesses. Applied to men, the rule lost the aura of romance that made it a compelling addition to newspaper or magazine articles about the canteen.

Instead, it could be viewed as a practical measure taken to keep a professional distance

⁶⁴ Lyons, Lyons Den, *New York Post*, March 25, 1942; *New York Post*, May 6, 1943 [clipping], American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, vol. 156.

⁶⁵ *Stage Door Canteen*, DVD, directed by Frank Borzage (1943; Digiview, 2004).

⁶⁶ “Volunteer Aides on Rise at N.Y. Theatre Canteen,” *Variety*, April 1, 1942, 4.

between volunteers and guests. (The rule may also have been a tacit admission that some of the male canteen volunteers were gay, though the canteen would never have explicitly acknowledged it.) However, judging by the lowercase letters and lack of exclamation points in the written rule as it appeared in the hosts' rulebook, the concern over hosts meeting servicemen outside the canteen was less prominent than the concern over hostesses meeting servicemen.⁶⁷

Most of the hostesses questioned by War Department agents in their investigation of the canteen reported that the rule against meeting servicemen was frequently ignored, by other hostesses if not by themselves. On several occasions, agents stationed themselves outside of the Stage Door Canteen after closing, and saw junior hostesses surreptitiously meeting with servicemen. On one particular night, an agent reported that he saw at least three hostesses meeting with servicemen that he had seen them with inside the canteen.⁶⁸ The evidence that hostesses were breaking the rule was undeniable, as some hostesses married servicemen they met at the canteen. In an article entitled "Canteen Girls War Brides in Spite of No Date Rule," Vivian Smolen and Virginia Kaye admitted that some junior hostess ignored their warnings about dating. Kaye and Smolen said that they still thought the rule was important.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Instead, rules for the hosts stressed that "SCRUPULOUS POLITENESS AT ALL TIMES TO ALL MEN IN UNIFORMS IS DEMANDED," and that if there was any problem with a serviceman, hosts should not attempt to handle it themselves, but should refer the problem to the officer of the day. The same rule was in the hostesses' rules, but it was not emphasized. The rules for the all-male Managers Committee also stressed restraint and diplomacy in dealing with servicemen, and specifically stated that managers should not "antagonize any service man." (Rules for Manager's Committee, in rules of the Stage Door Canteen, 13, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 11.)

⁶⁸ P. J. Hussakof, memorandum to Chief, Investigations Branch, July 14, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.

⁶⁹ Sally McDougal, "Canteen Girls War Brides in Spite of No Date Rule," *World Telegram*, February 23, 1943 [clipping], American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, vol. 151.

Canteen authorities did not seem to enforce the rule very strictly, though. An item in the *Canteen News* congratulated a recently engaged hostess. She had “found a way of not giving her last name to a soldier, by accepting his.” Confusingly, after stating there were no rules to stop hostesses from marrying soldiers, the item ended by telling volunteers, “Although Spring is here, and all that about a young man’s fancy.... Remember it isn’t Cupid’s Canteen...and obey the rules.”⁷⁰ Volunteers at all levels of the canteen hierarchy seemed to view some canteen rules as loose guidelines. The rule against giving last names to servicemen was ignored by both hostesses and canteen officials in instances where servicemen wished to correspond with hostesses. Canteen officials also had trouble keeping volunteers apprised of canteen rules since volunteers were not required to attend meetings, read the canteen newsletter, or read the rulebook. The rule against dating was probably the best known rule at the canteen, and even so, volunteers told a reporter from the *Baltimore Afro-American* that “contrary to the ideas given in the movie [*Stage Door Canteen*],” dating was not forbidden.⁷¹

Despite numerous examples of the “no dating” rule’s being ignored, many hostesses did follow the rule and did not think dating was rampant. Sonya Thorbecke, who met her husband when he was a guest of the Stage Door Canteen, did not actually disobey the rule by dating him. Instead, they corresponded during the war and only began to date after the war was over. Jane White recalled being visited by a soldier she met at the canteen, but only after she and he had been corresponding for a while, and she had ceased volunteering at the canteen. “The impulse was to meet outside of the confines of

⁷⁰ “Hostesses’ Heart Throbs,” *Canteen News*, April 6, 1944, 1, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15.

⁷¹ Michael Carter, “N.Y. Stage Door Canteen Open to All Servicemen,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 12, 1944, 5.

the canteen, but it wasn't done," White recalled.⁷² Stroock observed that the canteen "wasn't a dating service the way it would be today." Stroock also dated a serviceman she met at the canteen, but only after he was discharged. "But for the most part – somehow it wasn't done that way.... It was that night, that dance."⁷³

White said she was inclined to date servicemen, but she still enjoyed having a space where she could "flirt without consequence." The canteen offered civilian women as well as servicemen a safe site for social interaction and mingling with the opposite sex. The rule was also an excuse to rebut unwanted advances and suggestions from servicemen. "You got, I don't know whether it was downright propositioning, but you got flirted with an awful lot," said White.⁷⁴ The canteen newsletter printed a poem that described some of the perils of junior hostessing. The poem was entitled "Hostess' Lament":

Some are backward, some forward, some nice, but I find
 They all have the same objective in mind.
 But listen! – a whistle, a sharp little howl –
 That's right, you've guessed it, a wolf on the prowl.
 Yeah, this is the guy, that cuts all your dances –
 Saps your strength, repelling advances.
 And, of course there's a lover, a la Mischa Auer,
 "I love you" he whispers (you've known him an hour);
 "I do" he cries, as he climbs your frame.
 "Ah, stow it sailor, I don't even know your name."
 So you throw a half Nelson, politely break away,

⁷² Thorbecke, interview; Jane White, interview with author, February 3, 2010.

⁷³ Stroock, interview, October 20, 2009.

⁷⁴ White, interview.

‘Cause the clock says twelve, the end of the day
 But wait! what’s this? Why here’s something new –
 For the M.C. is waving and motioning to you.
 So they pin on a ribbon, where it can be seen,
 For “Bravery in action, at the Stage Door Canteen.”⁷⁵

Anonymous sources at the canteen told *Variety* that American soldiers were “speediest with requests for telephone numbers, suggestions of dates and drinks after Canteen closing and, occasionally, not too subtle propositions.” English, Canadian, Australian, and Free French servicemen, said the article, were far less likely to “step out of bounds.”⁷⁶

Unlike volunteers, the canteen guests were not individually selected or required to give references. Though all servicemen were admitted, servicemen who did not behave respectfully could be ejected. If a fight started between servicemen, the canteen could fall back on playing “The Star-Spangled Banner,” obliging American servicemen to stand at attention. The canteen rarely, if ever, resorted to this technique.⁷⁷ Drunk servicemen were a frequent problem. Canteen officials instructed volunteers to be vigilant for servicemen attempting to sneak in alcohol. The canteen had volunteer registered nurses who took charge of drunk servicemen; according to the head nurse, caring for drunks occupied most of their time.⁷⁸ If there was a problem with a serviceman that required he be physically removed or restrained, ODs were told to get help from men in the same branch

⁷⁵ Don Munro, “Hostess’ Lament,” *Canteen News*, April 6, 1944, 2, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15.

⁷⁶ “Terp Hostesses Feel Pinch of Rationed Shoes,” *Variety*, February 24, 1943, 46.

⁷⁷ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 14.

⁷⁸ Notes of Meeting of Stage Door Canteen Co-Chairmen, Captains, and ODs, June 8, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 21.

of service. ODs were only to summon Military Police “in case of extreme emergency.”⁷⁹ 41

Servicemen were usually the canteen’s resource for policing the behavior of other servicemen. One night, word was going around among the junior hostesses “to keep their eyes open for a very mawling [sic] soldier” who “tried to make a pass at every hostess.” According to Valerie Hayes, the soldier “was squelched by the other boys who finally escorted him outside and explained to him there the way soldiers know how!”⁸⁰

There were a few circumstances in which hostesses were supposed to police servicemen’s behavior. They were supposed to politely silence servicemen who began to give away military information, and were supposed to ask servicemen not to talk during performances. A few years into the war, a new behavioral problem arose at the canteen. Servicemen at the canteen would sometimes dance with other serviceman. “This is not approved of,” said the *Canteen News*, “even if they are ‘only practicing jitterbug steps.’” Canteen volunteers were expected to behave with “[s]crupulous politeness at all times to all men in uniforms,” but in situations where men were dancing with other men, the canteen made an exception.⁸¹ The *Canteen News* endorsed the approach of two junior hostesses who “met the situation very cleverly with a good dose of laughter and ridicule.” In “laughed ‘stage whispers’ edged with ridicule,” two hostesses mocked two men who were dancing together, and then “nonchalantly cut in” on them.⁸² Canteen officials would never have recommended that volunteers make fun of a dancing serviceman in other circumstances, but when servicemen’s behavior smacked of homosexuality, they

⁷⁹ Rules for the OD, in rules of the Stage Door Canteen, 17, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 11.

⁸⁰ Hayes, “Additional Incidentals,” Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 8.

⁸¹ Rules for Junior Hostesses Committee, in rules of the Stage Door Canteen, 8, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 11.

⁸² “Laugh it Off,” *Canteen News*, April 20, 1944, 1, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15.

forfeited their right to be treated with respect by canteen volunteers. The need to maintain an atmosphere of heterosexuality superseded the imperative to make servicemen feel comfortable and welcome.

The canteen's mission to serve the armed forces did not extend to servicewomen. An article in *Variety* suggested that the canteen barred servicewomen for the same reasons it had instituted a "no-dating" policy. "It is feared that the mixing of the sexes might make the Canteen a pickup spot. [The Theatre Wing] is very careful to avoid that and is very strict with its hostesses to prevent any smirch falling on the Canteen." The Theatre Wing would not be able to prevent servicewomen from making whatever plans they cared to, or from leaving the canteen with servicemen. The Theatre Wing's official explanation for refusing to admit servicewomen was that it was established for the "fighting men" of the United Nations, an explanation that *Variety* found "vague" and insufficient.⁸³

In a meeting of the American Theatre Wing executive board in October 1942, Kermit Bloomgarden objected to admitting women on the grounds that they were members of auxiliary groups, and not a part of the Army and Navy.⁸⁴ However, judging by how the policy was implemented, his reasoning was not shared by other American Theatre Wing decision-makers. Despite Bloomgarden's assumptions, the WAVES were already an official part of the Navy, and had the same status as male naval reservists. The Theatre Wing did not reconsider its rule even after the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps

⁸³ "WAACs Resent Nix By NY Stage Canteen," *Variety*, January 27, 1943, 1, 44.

⁸⁴ Minutes of the American Theatre Wing Executive Board, October 28, 1942, John Golden Papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter, American Theatre Wing Board minutes).

dropped the “Auxiliary” and became an official part of the Army in 1943. The decision to bar servicewomen was based on sex, not military status.

The members of the Canteen Committee and the Theatre Wing Board were not all opposed to admitting servicewomen. Originally, either the Theatre Wing or the Canteen Committee had resolved to admit nurses, but the Theatre Wing rescinded the resolution.⁸⁵ The Canteen Committee raised the topic of admitting other servicewomen several times even after the Theatre Wing had decided against admitting any servicewomen. Finally, a committee member pointed out that the Theatre Wing Board had definitively set a men-only policy, and stated that the topic should not be brought up again.⁸⁶ The Canteen Committee seems to have been more open to the idea of admitting servicewomen than the Theatre Wing executive board, and the Theatre Wing’s eventual solution for servicewoman’s entertainment came from a Canteen Committee member, Emeline Roche.

It is also possible that some military authorities discouraged the Theatre Wing from admitting servicewomen. A volunteer gave a statement to the War Department that explained that the canteen could not admit servicewomen because they could not rearrange their service to accommodate women as it had already been approved by military authorities.⁸⁷ The volunteer did not specify how the canteen would have to be altered for servicewomen. Beyond providing bathroom facilities and perhaps coping with longer lines of service personnel waiting to enter the canteen, there were not many practical inconveniences associated with admitting servicewomen. Furthermore,

⁸⁵ Canteen Committee minutes, January 11, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 17.

⁸⁶ Canteen Committee minutes, January 17, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 17.

⁸⁷ Anonymous typewritten account of American Theatre Wing work, n.d., Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.



Figure 3. A mostly male canteen audience. Admitting servicewomen would have increased the number of dance partners available to servicemen. Photograph by Marjory Collins, August 1942. (Corbis)

admitting servicewomen would have provided more dance partners for servicemen, who often complained of the hostess shortage at the canteen. The volunteer may have meant that the social order of the canteen would have to be changed to accommodate female guests. Military officials may have thought that its lively, nightclub-like atmosphere, with relatively little chaperonage in proportion to the number of guests, was inappropriate for servicewomen.

Ultimately, the Theatre Wing decided to offer tea dances for servicewomen, held once a week from 3 to 6 PM. The tea dances, managed by Roche, were smaller affairs than nights at the Stage Door Canteen, but attendance sometimes reached around 800 servicewomen and men. The dances offered similar refreshments to the canteen's, and

had an orchestra, and live entertainers including Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, blues singer Victoria Spivey, and English dancer Alicia Markova. At the tea dances, servicewomen danced with servicemen, and senior hostesses were on hand to facilitate socializing. Different services and nationalities were represented by both the men and women guests.⁸⁸ Except for the staid and respectable daytime hours and the smaller numbers of guests, the tea dances were not much different than the canteen; but the differences may have been enough to appease any military officials who were concerned about servicewomen’s reputation. The tea dances had “the enthusiastic endorsement of the ranking military authorities.”⁸⁹

The Theatre Wing’s decision to make separate provisions for the entertainment of servicewomen points to a sense that women were not a “real” part of the military, even when they officially were. Women’s units were not integrated within the military, and, even segregated, women could not serve in all positions that men could. Both the Army and the Navy prohibited women from supervising men, and the Navy did not allow WAVES to serve overseas.⁹⁰ Often servicemen and civilians were hostile towards the idea of women in the Army and Navy as anything but nurses, and in 1943 this hostility resulted in widespread rumors of sexual promiscuity in the Women’s Army Corps

⁸⁸ “Shy Soldier Dashes From the Floor As Girl ‘Stags’ Begin Rush at Dance,” *New York Times*, July 19, 1943, 17; Carl Van Vechten to George George, July 18, 1945, *Letters of Carl Van Vechten*, ed. Bruce Kellner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 217-218; John Martin, *The Dance: Events of the Week*, *New York Times*, March 11, 1945.

⁸⁹ American Theatre Wing Board minutes, July 7, 1944, quoted in Robert C. Roarty, “More Than Entertainment: The American Theatre Wing During World War II,” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2002), 190.

⁹⁰ Hartmann attributes this prohibition to political and public resistance, and argues that the military would have made more efficient use of female personnel if they had not been unwilling to upset Congress and the public. (Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 37-38.)

(WAC).⁹¹ Where hostility was absent, there was still a tendency to treat women's military service as an amusing anecdote rather than a wartime contribution on par with men's military service. When Valerie Hayes wrote to a serviceman she had met at the canteen that she was becoming a WAAC, he sent a teasing reply. He could "just hear the girls in the barracks, biting and scratching... 'I know the Sarge dyes her hair. Pvt. Alice, your lipstick is on crooked!'" He gave her words of encouragement, too: "Of course I think it is wonderful... Heard that you are issued two corsets." He also referred to a cartoon he had seen in the *New Yorker*. The cartoon showed a civilian man and a woman in uniform being introduced. The caption read "Mrs. Montgomery, I'd like to present Major and Mr. Vandepeter."⁹² That was the whole joke.

Servicewomen had one important characteristic in common with canteen hostesses: their superiors struggled to maintain an image of chastity and sexual respectability in circumstances that much of the public viewed as potential breeding grounds of impropriety. In the case of canteen hostesses, the USO's publicity campaigns had done much to create an image of the canteen hostess that stressed her traditional femininity and her white, middle-class respectability, and set her apart from women who patronized for-profit dancehalls or mingled with servicemen after getting off work at the factory.⁹³ Canteen work was also inherently feminine; women at canteens were performing their traditional roles, albeit in a different context. Nor were canteen hostesses accused of homosexuality. In these regards, servicewomen had a steeper uphill battle for public acceptance than canteen hostesses. The same femininity that was used to belittle

⁹¹ Hartmann, 39.

⁹² Valerie Hayes, "Canteen Capers," September 25, 1942, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 8; Rea Irvin, cartoon, *The New Yorker*, August 22, 1942, 23.

⁹³ Hegarty, 17-18.

women's military service was also an important element of the *defense* of women in the military in government propaganda. The idea that servicewomen were still womanly (or girly) was a source of reassurance for those who were concerned that women enlisting might subvert gender roles or make women "manly." While the press and the public made jokes about the girls playing soldiers, WAC leadership, under the direction of Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby, strove to present an image of competent, patriotic, feminine womanhood.⁹⁴

The idea that servicewomen were less feminine than other women may have been a part of the American Theatre Wing's unwillingness to admit women into the canteen as guests. Presumably, servicemen came to the canteen to see girls who conformed to familiar ideas of femininity. The New York Stage Door Canteen did not distribute written rules about proper hostess attire, except for requesting that senior hostesses wear "street-length" dress (rather than gowns) and that junior hostesses not wear hats while on duty. But photographs show junior hostesses wearing dresses or skirts and blouses without exception, with their iconic Stage Door Canteen aprons on over them. The rules distributed to junior hostesses at the Philadelphia Stage Door Canteen advised them, "This is your date with the boys. Please wear a dress rather than a tailored suit. A suit coat is not pretty bunched under an apron bow." Philadelphia canteen rules also prohibited sweaters: "Do not wear sweaters. They aren't very festive, and this is a party.

⁹⁴ Lisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 52.

Look your prettiest.”⁹⁵ Cleveland Stage Door Canteen officials gave junior hostesses instructions in poem form:

Your makeup should be subtle – keep it natural, my dear;
And, are your stockings straight if noticed from the rear?⁹⁶



Figure 4. Hostesses dressed for work at the New York canteen, October 25, 1942.
(Corbis)

⁹⁵ Philadelphia Stage Door Canteen, “Junior Hostesses’ Rules,” WWII Collection, USO Series, box 10, Instructions for Personnel folder.

⁹⁶ Elaine Fasciano et al. “Here’s Looking at Ya!” Cleveland Stage Door Canteen, 1943, quoted in Roarty, 159.

Servicewomen might have been thought an unwelcome sight for the male guests, who were there for a homey or fun atmosphere – an atmosphere that might be undermined by the presence of women in uniform. The fact that servicewomen would not be under the Wing's authority meant that servicewomen would not necessarily be there for the benefit of the servicemen, and were not obliged to present themselves in a certain way: dressed-up, made-up, feminine. The canteen had little enough control over its two thousand junior hostess volunteers as it was, but at least they could be relied upon not to show up in military uniform. Volunteer hostesses could also be taken to task and dismissed for being rude to a serviceman or discriminating against servicemen.

Servicewomen did not fit the roles that women were supposed to play at the Stage Door Canteen, nor did they fit easily into the role of canteen guests. Servicewomen, who were barred from combat situations, did not really conform to canteen volunteers' ideas of who they should be serving. The canteen's target guest was the enlisted man, a stranger to New York City, who had been in or was about to be in overseas combat. For example, the canteen received free theater tickets to distribute to servicemen, and ODs were asked to "try very hard to see that they [were] used by wounded men, or by men who had seen overseas service."⁹⁷ Many articles about the canteen falsely stated that the Stage Door Canteen did not admit officers. While canteen officials made sure that volunteers knew that officers were admitted, the Canteen Committee decided not to make any public clarification of their policy. Members of the Canteen Committee thought the rumor that officers were not admitted had been "spread by the boys themselves," or that it

⁹⁷ Memorandum to ODs, June 6, 1945, Emeline Roche Collection, box 2, folder 7.

sprang from the Army and Navy's ban on fraternization between officers and enlisted men.⁹⁸ The Canteen Committee put the comfort of enlisted men above that of officers.

Public conceptions of "the boys" and what was owed them were rooted in the idea that servicemen were making a great sacrifice. Part of this sacrifice was leaving friends and family, everything that was familiar, and giving up the comfort of their home lives. But the physical risks of military service – especially the risk of death – was at the heart of public ideas of servicemen's sacrifice, especially in discourse about civilians' roles in wartime. In the movie *Stage Door Canteen*, a selfish junior hostess gains the proper outlook towards her job and her obligation to servicemen when she is reminded that the boys she's entertaining at the canteen might not return from the war.⁹⁹ At one of the first meetings for canteen volunteers, Jane Cowl told those assembled, "These men are going to the Philippines. They are going to the Burma Road. Nothing is too good for them."¹⁰⁰ She did not motivate volunteers by telling them they would be entertaining servicemen who never left the country or would never see combat.

One Stage Door Canteen hostess wrote a tribute to the canteen's servicemen guests. A group of servicemen had given canteen volunteers engraved cards thanking them for "many fine evenings of dancing and entertainment," signed "The Fighting Men of the U.S. Armed Forces." In response to the servicemen's gesture, junior hostess Edythe Freeman wrote a paean to the guests of the canteen. After a litany of touching and funny canteen experiences, Freeman wrote of the hostesses' sadder experience of saying good-bye to servicemen who "may be sailing the treacherous Pacific on the morrow" or

⁹⁸ Canteen Committee minutes, February 15, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 17.

⁹⁹ *Stage Door Canteen*.

¹⁰⁰ "Stage Folk S.R.O. for Canteen Task," *New York Times*, February 18, 1942, 14.

“flying a Spitfire or be behind a gun at an anti-aircraft station,” or “fitting a gas mask over his face, running full speed and falling flat on his stomach to wait.” Freeman did not simply imagine the hardships of being far from home, bored, scared, unhappy, but the hardships associated specifically with combat. The piece ends by thanking the servicemen for “the sacrifice of life and limb you are making in every part of the world.”¹⁰¹

While many servicemen never saw combat, the idea that American servicemen might die was still an integral part of public and official discourse about military service during wartime.¹⁰² The atmosphere of the canteen was affected by this knowledge. Most of the servicemen who visited “were going to be leaving any day,” recalled Gloria Stroock. “That’s what the intensity was, most of the time. Every time you went you had a lump in your throat, or I did, anyway.” Junior hostess Phyllis Socolof had a similar recollection of the experience: “Almost every night many of us were in tears. We all knew many of the guys we were dancing with were not going to make it back alive.”¹⁰³

Canteen officials instituted policies to manage the emotionally loaded environment, and to make the canteen an escape from military life. Performers at the canteen were requested to avoid “all emotional war songs.” Songs that might remind servicemen of home, that complained of the conditions of military life or were written from the perspective of a loved one who was left behind – songs of nostalgia and loss –

¹⁰¹ Edythe Freeman, “From the Hostesses of the American Theatre Wing Stage Door Canteen to Our Fighting Men,”

August 17, 1942, 5-6, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 10.

¹⁰² During World War II “25 percent of military personnel never left the United States, and only about one in eight actually saw combat.” (Hartmann, 34.)

¹⁰³ Stroock, interview, January 21, 2010; Simi Horowitz, “Once Upon a Dream: The Stage Door Canteen Revisited,” *Theater Week*, June 13-19, 1994, 23.

were discouraged. Performers were specifically asked not to sing “My Buddy,” “Dear Mom,” “Letter from Home,” and “White Christmas.” Other songs that artists were requested not to perform included wistful, hopeful songs that predicted the end of fighting, such as “When the Lights Go On Again All Over the World” and “White Cliffs of Dover.” The canteen also discouraged stirring, patriotic songs, meant to inspire Americans to go to war or renew their commitment to the war effort. “We Did it Before and We Can Do It Again,” “Remember Pearl Harbor,” and the more sentimental “This is Worth Fighting For” and “America the Beautiful” were restricted.¹⁰⁴ The restricted songs were not just apt to inspire homesickness, sadness, and regret, but possibly resentment and anger from servicemen for whom simplistic sentiments about the war had little resonance in the aftermath of their own experiences.

Canteen officials tried to insulate servicemen from as many psychological shocks as possible, but were sometimes blindsided. Volunteers distributing tickets to a radio show called “Death Valley Sheriff” found that serviceman seemed to have “a physical reaction” to the show, “or possibly toward its title.”¹⁰⁵ Canteen volunteers were some of the first American civilians to see not just the physical but also the psychological and emotional effects of war. Differing reactions to popular entertainment was just one example of the gulf between servicemen’s and civilians’ experience of the war. The canteen sometimes asked military officials and psychologists to help them anticipate emotional problems with servicemen and facilitate servicemen’s transition into civilian society. Generally, military and government officials only gave input to the Stage Door

¹⁰⁴ Emeline Roche, list of restricted numbers for sign for Stage Door Canteen backstage (handwritten draft), Emeline Roche Papers, box 2, folder 5; John Proctor, “Broadway’s Best Cellar,” *Family Circle Magazine*, July 3, 1942, 17 [clipping], Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 15.

¹⁰⁵ Canteen Committee minutes, November 30, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 23.

Canteen when it was specifically requested. The Canteen Committee and Theatre Wing's requests for information usually related to military security, or the psychological wellbeing of servicemen.

The Canteen Committee and the Theatre Wing voluntarily sought guidance from government and military officials in matters where they legally could make their own choices, such as in the employment of enemy aliens. As an establishment intended to benefit servicemen, the Stage Door Canteen could not be operated in a way that could undermine the prosecution of the war that servicemen were fighting. Beginning in June 1942 the canteen fingerprinted all volunteers at the request of the FBI, from a fear "that some persons asking questions of men in uniform may reveal information that may reach enemy sources."¹⁰⁶ Inspired by widespread propaganda campaigns and their own communications with Army and Navy authorities, canteen officials were sensitive to the risks of "careless talk." Osceola Archer suggested screening a British propaganda film about the potentially fatal consequences of careless talk, *The Next of Kin*, for canteen workers.¹⁰⁷ Canteen Committee members attended a talk given by the Office of War Information (OWI) called "Button Your Lip," in which a representative of the OWI told them that the FBI and Army and Navy Intelligence were relying on civilian organizations to educate people about the need for silence on military matters.¹⁰⁸ Canteen management instructed volunteers to interrupt any serviceman who "consciously or unconsciously" began to give "information as to troop movements, boat departures, or any military

¹⁰⁶ "FBI Playing Safe by Mugging, Fingerprinting N.Y. Canteen Volunteers," *Variety*, June 10, 1942, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Canteen Committee minutes, May 3, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 18.

¹⁰⁸ Canteen Committee minutes, May 10, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 18.

information.”¹⁰⁹ Later, the canteen had “pledge cards” printed up for new volunteers that included a promise not to relay any military information.¹¹⁰ The *Canteen News* included a warning for volunteers:

Curb Gossip Killings

Each day the press reports loss of lives due to CARLESS TALK. 1000 American soldiers were lost recently by the sinking of a troop transport. SOMEONE HAD TALKED!

BE WISE-----BE DUMB.¹¹¹

The War Department’s undercover agents recorded the questions that hostesses asked them, to see if they requested inappropriately detailed military information. They found that most hostesses they spoke to kept the conversation away from privileged military information. However, one junior hostesses asked an agent where he was stationed, which outfit he was attached to, how many men there were in his outfit, how soon he was going overseas, and how large – based on his observations – he thought the army was.¹¹² One of the agent’s superior officers suggested the hostess “should probably be investigated” and “certainly should be told to confine her conversation to ‘small talk’.”¹¹³

Deferring to military authorities sometimes meant limiting the morale-boosting services the canteen might otherwise have offered. Many servicemen wrote to the canteen to request junior hostess pen pals. “[T]he consensus of opinion” on the Canteen

¹⁰⁹ Rules for Host’s Committee, in rules of the Stage Door Canteen, 12, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 11.

¹¹⁰ Canteen Committee minutes, June 8, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 19.

¹¹¹ “Curb Gossip Killings,” *Canteen News*, March 9, 1944, 2, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15.

¹¹² John A. Pateracki, memorandum to Agent in Charge, June, 24, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.

¹¹³ Joseph C. Breckinridge, memorandum, July 2, 1943, Stage Door Canteen Investigation, RG 389, NA.

Committee was that “there could be no harm done, and possibly something in the way of morale building,” but the committee discarded the idea after consulting with military officials. A committee member reported that the Army and Navy “urge[d] complete discouragement of correspondence between unknown servicemen and girls.” The Army and Navy officials expressed themselves as chiefly concerned with the “emotion[al] effect” such correspondence would have on servicemen. Military secrecy was also a concern, but perhaps less so because the correspondence would be censored anyway.¹¹⁴



Figure 5. Some shocks were unavoidable. The news of Roosevelt’s death was announced from the canteen stage. Entertainment was canceled, but the canteen continued to serve food through the evening. (L to R) Sailor Robert Allured, Technical Sgt. William Dougherty, Gun Layer Henry Mercer of Liverpool, England, and Pvt. Sterling Achuff read the news, April 12, 1945. (Corbis)

¹¹⁴ Canteen Committee minutes, January 26, 1945, and February 8, 1945, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 23.

The question of what would have an adverse emotional effect on servicemen was even more difficult to answer than the question of what constituted a security risk. As the war progressed, increasing numbers of servicemen who came to the canteen had served overseas and been in combat, and more wounded servicemen began to visit. When wounded servicemen complained that senior hostesses were paying them “an embarrassing amount of attention,” the canteen decided to appoint a committee to “to work out the problems involving hospitality to wounded servicemen.”¹¹⁵ The senior hostess captains held a meeting where they read an article from the *New York Times* on how wounded servicemen wanted to be treated.¹¹⁶ The key points of the article were “Don’t stare” and “Don’t ask questions.” In the article, a serviceman who had lost an arm complained of well-meaning, but over-solicitous civilians who “always [said] and [did] the wrong things, such as offering pity and sympathy.”¹¹⁷

Canteen officials sought advice on appropriate behavior towards servicemen with injuries and disabilities. The American Theatre Wing’s Speakers Bureau, created to help the federal government educate Americans about the war effort, consulted with the Army and Navy Medical Corps to create speeches and sketches to advise civilians on “proper attitudes” towards psychologically and physically wounded veterans. The Stage Door Canteen held a meeting for volunteers. About a thousand attended. Horace Braham, a member of the Speakers’ Bureau and the Canteen Committee, told the assembly, “We must learn to face the mutilated, the maladjusted, the sightless, the badly burned, or the men with shattered nerves, without ever showing horror, curiosity, morbidness or over-

¹¹⁵ Canteen Committee minutes, July 31, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 22.

¹¹⁶ Canteen Committee minutes, October 12, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 22.

¹¹⁷ “Stares Irk Armless, Legless Veterans; All They Ask Is to Be Treated as Normal,” *New York Times*, September 19, 1944, 23.

emotionalism.”¹¹⁸ Braham drew up a list of recommendations for civilians. It included advice not to “immediately reach for his crutches and, metaphorically, tie pink bows on them.” Despite what women believed, “men loathe being fussed over with a deep and healthy loathing.” The instructions also advised against downplaying the injury or joking about it, even if the serviceman did. Civilians were to listen if a serviceman wanted to talk about his experiences, but not to press him if he did not volunteer information. “Avoid questions about injuries or decorations. Both were bitterly come by and questioning usually recalls scenes the man is trying to forget.”¹¹⁹

The Speakers’ Bureau stressed that the readjustment of injured servicemen to civilian society was not just the responsibility of servicemen and medical services. Braham told canteen workers that inappropriate responses from “families, friends, or even passers-by can break down the magnificent morale and resistance so carefully and scientifically built up in the wounded, disabled or disfigured man by the Army or Navy.”¹²⁰ If civilian society had to cooperate in servicemen’s readjustment, Stage Door Canteen volunteers, especially junior hostesses, were among the advance guard of civilians meeting injured veterans. Hospitals brought groups of convalescing servicemen to the canteen, causing one volunteer to complain that some men from hospitals were brought to the canteen in bathrobes rather than regulation uniform, which was damaging to their morale.¹²¹ A War Department agent overheard a canteen hostess telling a serviceman about the reactions and behavior of “a shell-shocked victim who had been

¹¹⁸ Roarty, 75; “Civilians to Learn Duty to Wounded,” *New York Times*, November 27, 1944, 26.

¹¹⁹ Horace Braham, “Do’s and Don’t’s for Civilians Meeting Returning Servicemen,” Emeline Roche Collection, box 2, folder 6.

¹²⁰ “Civilians to Learn Duty to Wounded,” *New York Times*, November 27, 1944, 26.

¹²¹ Canteen Committee minutes, September 7, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 22.

brought to the Canteen as an experiment, apparently by his superior.”¹²² For some servicemen, the canteen was a first step to reintegration in civilian society, and not always a pleasant step.

Advice to canteen volunteers recommended they “[f]orget the wound – see only the MAN!”¹²³ It was important advice in view of the objectification that servicemen with disabilities often experienced. But hostesses had to be conscious of wounds when they impeded the serviceman’s movements or circumscribed his ability to take full advantage of the offerings of the canteen. Hostesses also had to be sensitive to the serviceman’s feeling about his temporary or permanent disabilities. Phyllis Socolof met a serviceman who was embarrassed to eat because he had lost an arm. It was against the rules for volunteers to eat the food, which was donated for the use of the servicemen, but Socolof told the serviceman she was hungry and could only eat if they shared the food. The two of them split a hot dog.¹²⁴ Canteen officials could make recommendations about behavior, but the application was left to a hostess’s judgment and her assessment of the needs of the serviceman’s individual situation.

Hostesses were recipients of complicated and sometimes conflicting advice. Braham, who had forcefully emphasized that servicemen wanted “to be self-reliant,” and that their self-confidence depended on feeling independent, later complained that hostesses had gone too far in letting wounded servicemen help themselves.¹²⁵ Canteen officials tried to reinforce what they viewed as positive strategies for interacting with

¹²² Goldberg, memorandum, July 10, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA. The hostess’s discussion about the shell-shocked soldier was probably not a conversation topic canteen officials would have approved of. It would have given the listening serviceman a morale-damaging vision of his future, and it objectified the serviceman of whom the hostess was speaking

¹²³ Braham, “Do’s and Don’t’s for Civilians,” Emeline Roche Collection, box 2, folder 6.

¹²⁴ Horowitz, “Once Upon a Dream,” 24.

¹²⁵ Canteen Committee minutes, May 3, 1945, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 25.

servicemen with disabilities. The *Canteen News* contained a story about senior hostess Mary Arnold, who “followed the procedure so clearly and interestingly outlined at the Canteen meeting for continuing the excellent rehabilitative work of the Army and Navy, rather than destroying it by reason of a wrong attitude towards the wounded veterans of this war.” Arnold saw a serviceman with a wooden leg who was not eating because the food line was too long. Arnold fetched food for him, and then asked her daughter Georgia (a junior hostess at the canteen) to dance a slow song with him.¹²⁶ The right actions performed with the “wrong attitude” were meaningless, though. Hostesses had to be cautious not to impose activities or conversation on servicemen when they did not wish to take part.

The physical dangers of combat were at the core of civilians’ debt to servicemen. Stage Door Canteen officials were particularly wary of faltering in their service to men whose bodies were permanently affected by the war. In early 1944 the New York Institute for the Blind asked permission to bring a group of about six blind servicemen to the canteen. On the night the servicemen visited the canteen, there was a “no entertainment emergency.” The canteen called in the American Theatre Wing’s Victory Players, a group of actors who normally performed propaganda plays. Actor June Havoc, who was having dinner at the nearby restaurant, Sardi’s, left the restaurant to dance and talk with the blind servicemen. The servicemen received passes to *Oklahoma!*, and its star Celeste Holm came out in front of the theatre to meet them.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ *Canteen News*, March 8, 1945, 5, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 16.

¹²⁷ Canteen Committee minutes, April 17, 1944, and May 1, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 21.

Canteen volunteers witnessed a variety of emotional and psychological reactions among returning servicemen. Canteen volunteer Natalie Biro wrote in the *Canteen News* of an encounter with a soldier who was wounded in the D-Day invasion. He told her he was filled with hate, and trying to overcome these feelings at the canteen. Biro advised hostesses that many of the servicemen were bitter and that canteen volunteers needed to be aware of these feelings and try to be understanding of them.¹²⁸ In the words of Biro, the Stage Door Canteen provided “soul service.”¹²⁹ Whether they had seen action or not, servicemen could feel profoundly isolated. A private wrote to the canteen that when he went to the canteen he did not want food or dancing – he was happy just to be around people. Being at the canteen “[washed] away the unpleasantness within [him].”

I was no longer alone. I was with people. I became me again—I BECAME ME!----
----- Thank you, Stage Door Canteen, thank you so much—I was lonely.¹³⁰

Millicent Reinold, who worked at the door greeting and checking the identification of visiting servicemen, told the *New York Times*, “I’ve seen men leave their crutches at the canteen. They were physically healed when they came to the canteen but they needed something else they got from us.”¹³¹ Several newspapers ran an article about a similar Stage Door Canteen “miracle.” Private Alfred Cohen had entered the canteen on

¹²⁸ Natalie J. Biro, untitled, *Canteen News*, March 8, 1945, 4, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 16.

¹²⁹ Biro, “Soul Service at the Stage Door Canteen,” *Canteen News*, June 7, 1945, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 16.

¹³⁰ Herbert Chessin, letter to the Stage Door Canteen, March 9, 1944, *Canteen News*, 1, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15.

¹³¹ Robert McG. Thomas Jr. “Canteen Hostesses Recall War Days,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1973, 66.

crutches, and left without them, thanks to a therapeutic dance with junior hostess Marjorie Greenstein.¹³²

One soldier wrote that the canteen was “a refuge” for servicemen “existing between the actuality of war and the impact of re-entering civilian life.”¹³³ The American Theatre Wing and the Canteen Committee recognized the need for services for returning veterans, and made efforts to keep the canteen open even after V-J Day. Isadora Bennett worried that wartime service organizations would “forget the veteran” after the war, as they had been perceived to do following World War I. At the same meeting, actor Madeleine Clive “cited the unfavorable radio comment which has been made about the closing of the Hollywood Canteen and the words of praise that the Stage Door Canteen would continue to operate.”¹³⁴

As it turned out, the Stage Door Canteen would close before the Hollywood Canteen. Volunteer morale was damaged when the canteen’s lease ran out, and the New York Times Company, which owned the canteen building, forced them to find new quarters. The Stage Door Canteen moved to the Hotel Diplomat ballroom, two blocks away. On July 30, 1945, a parade of canteen workers, lead by Jane Cowl and Mayor LaGuardia, carrying a chair, moved furnishings to the new site.¹³⁵ The canteen stayed open two more months, closing on October 31. A volunteer – probably Emeline Roche, who oversaw the move – wrote bitterly two years later that the canteen’s old quarters

¹³² “Dance Cures Wounded GI,” *New York Sun*, June 6, 1945 [clipping], American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, vol. 189; Winfred VanDuzer, “Miracle at the Canteen,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 8, 1945 [clipping], ATW Scrapbooks, vol. 183.

¹³³ Canteen Committee minutes, September 18, 1945, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 24. The canteen had considered admitting discharged servicemen the year before, but the Theatre Wing Executive Board decided against doing so. (Canteen Committee minutes, November 30, 1944, box 1, folder 23.)

¹³⁴ Canteen Committee minutes, September 4, 1945, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 23.

¹³⁵ “Moving Day in Times Square,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1945, 21.

“stood vacant from September on, and [the canteen] had to go out of existence in that stink pot of a hotel, the Diplomat.”¹³⁶ Other Stage Door Canteens had already closed, though the San Francisco and Washington canteens stayed open for two or three more months.¹³⁷

The Stage Door Canteen placed servicemen’s needs at the center of its wartime mission. The canteen provided a way for men and women to contribute directly to the wellbeing of the armed forces – one serviceman at a time – and to stay engaged with the war effort, as well as with members of their profession. The Stage Door Canteen was an uncontroversial undertaking, fitting easily into a wartime atmosphere that appreciated feminine women, the lionization of servicemen, and civilians placing their talents at the service of the war effort. Most female volunteers were expected to be gracious and pleasant hostesses, while male volunteers were expected to do heavy lifting, grind meat, and keep the books. The canteen’s services were also shaped by ideas of social respectability, and canteen authorities created rules to prevent any social smirch falling on the canteen. Canteen volunteers expressed a sense of obligation towards servicemen that lined up neatly with official propaganda about civilians’ responsibilities to servicemen.

If the canteen encouraged a traditional gender dynamic and conservative rules about social interactions, it was at least in part a response to an extremely novel situation. Canteen officials “were dealing with very volatile stuff,” Jane White recalled. “Not only young people, but people involved in war and loss and hurt. Also, nationally the whole

¹³⁶ “Items to be Removed from the Canteen Before Wrecking” (1945), handwritten margin note added in 1947, Emeline Roche Collection, box 2, folder 8.

¹³⁷ “Stage Door Canteens Preparing to Close,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1945, 23.

image of ourselves. And hormones. And music. And heat. It was a very potentially explosive kind of environment.”¹³⁸ At the canteen, American sailors and soldiers were exposed to volunteers of different races and backgrounds, servicemen of other nationalities, and were given an opportunity to see performances and performers that few Americans had. Volunteers were asked to interact with men of different races, classes, and nationalities and to deal thoughtfully with injuries and disability, many for the first time in their lives. Even while it conformed to many social norms of the period and to the ideological requirements of the zeitgeist, the canteen was a challenging and occasionally transforming environment for canteen workers and guests.

¹³⁸ White, interview.

II. “We’re All in This Fight Together”: The Canteen in the Media

The Stage Door Canteen was one manifestation of American consensus about the meaning of the war and servicemen’s and civilians’ roles in wartime. The canteen’s operations were structured around the idea that young men were making mental, emotional, and physical sacrifices on behalf of the folks back home, especially women, and that civilians (especially women) owed them service in return. There was some diversity of opinion about the whos, whats, and whys of the war at the Stage Door Canteen, but ultimately the canteen was founded on the conviction that civilians had a duty to the men who were fighting the war, and the canteen’s work followed popular assumptions about the forms that duty should take. The meanings that Stage Door Canteen volunteers assigned to their work were not created in a vacuum. They were affected by a public discourse about the war

Americans who consumed mainstream media were subject to a constant barrage of wartime messages that told them what they owed to their country and the war effort. These messages came in the form of government propaganda and popular entertainment. The propagandist idea that America was fighting to make the world safe for democracy and the popular idea that it was romantic to date and marry a serviceman were both promulgated through their sheer ubiquity. While the work of the canteen reflected the explicit and implicit messages of mainstream media, it also became fodder for the propagation of these messages. In popular media, the Stage Door Canteen was used to reinforce the same messages that had shaped the work of the canteen.

Media treatments of the canteen were part of a large volume of media that reflected, created, and reinforced popular ideas about the war. An examination of media inspired by the Stage Door Canteen offers a glimpse into some of the social values and pressures that shaped the Stage Door Canteen, and into the ways that morale work in general and the Stage Door Canteen in particular were conceptualized on the home front. Contrasting the Stage Door Canteen with representations of the canteen in media shows the way in which the canteen conformed to the expectations of mainstream society, and diverged from them.

As a nightspot that was racially integrated, frequented by servicemen of many nationalities, and staffed by (it was assumed) attractive young women, the Stage Door Canteen became a symbol of American hospitality to servicemen, both American and foreign. Anecdotes about it circulated widely in the theater community and beyond. One of the popular stories about the canteen's hospitality was included, in altered form, in the film *Stage Door Canteen*. In the film, a young soldier named California (Lon McCallister) is dancing with a junior hostess named Jean (Marjorie Riordan). Jean tells California that she hopes he comes back to visit the canteen because she would "like to be his girl again." After she says this, California has trouble speaking, and Jean asks him if there's something wrong with his throat. "Yeah," says California. "There's a lump in it."¹³⁹

The origins of the lump story are uncertain. Delmer Daves, who wrote the screenplay for *Stage Door Canteen*, probably took the line from an article in *Family Circle Magazine*. In the *Family Circle* version of the anecdote, Jane Cowl was serving

¹³⁹ *Stage Door Canteen*.

food to a serviceman, and asked if he'd like anything else. "The soldier didn't answer, although his lips moved. 'Anything wrong with your throat?' asked Miss Cowl. 'Y-Y-Yes,' said the soldier at last, 'there's a lump in it.'" The *Family Circle* anecdote emphasized Cowl's charitable service, mentioning that ("by the way") she had received a commendation from President Roosevelt for her work at the canteen.¹⁴⁰

Leonard Lyons may have had the first version of the story in print. Lyons told the story as an interaction between Cowl and a black soldier. Just over a week later, Radie Harris included the story in her "Canteen Capers" column in *Variety*. Harris prefaced the story by saying, "The welcome mat extended to the colored clan is directly in line with the American Theatre Wing's policy of an 'open door' to everyone regardless of race, color or creed, and the boys' reaction to this reception is best expressed in the following story." In her version, chairman of the American Theatre Wing Antoinette Perry approached the black serviceman, "extended her hand and said: 'Is there anything I can do for you?'" The serviceman put a hand to his throat, and Perry asked him if he had a sore throat. No, he replied, he had "such a lump in [it] from everyone being so wonderful here" that he could hardly speak.¹⁴¹

A year later, Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP, mentioned the story in his syndicated column. White, like Lyons and Harris, specified that the serviceman was black. The story might have been apocryphal, wrote White, but it was "unimportant whether the incident occurred or not...because it **could** have happened. For

¹⁴⁰ Proctor, "Broadway's Best Cellar," 19 [clipping], Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 15.

¹⁴¹ Lyons, The Lyons Den, *New York Post*, March 31, 1942; Harris, Canteen Capers, *Variety*, April 8, 1942, American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, Gertrude Lawrence Scrapbook (1941).

the Stage Door Canteen has consistently and aggressively practiced complete democracy from the very first day it opened its doors.”¹⁴²

The different uses of the “lump” story illustrate some of the ways the idea of the Stage Door Canteen was deployed in home front media. In each version of the anecdote, the core ideas are the kindness and graciousness of the canteen worker, and deep sense of gratitude of the serviceman. In *Stage Door Canteen*, the implications were romantic. California is overwhelmed by the kindness of a young woman with whom he is going to share his first kiss. Versions of the anecdote in which the canteen volunteer was famous emphasized the condescension and kindness of the theater professionals who worked at the canteen. This meaning was emphasized when the serviceman was identified as black, showing that volunteers’ graciousness extended even to those who might not be so accustomed to good treatment from privileged white people.

Harris and Lyons’ versions of the story left the larger significance of the story open to readers’ interpretations. Readers could have applied different lines of wartime rhetoric to the anecdote. It could be a story about white folks’ generosity to black people, a tale of how blacks and whites could interact harmoniously, an example of American unity, or it could be part of larger narrative of working towards democracy at home as well as abroad. Walter White’s use of the story left less room for ambiguity. For White, the story’s main theme was not romance, kindness, or generosity. It was about “democracy.” In World War II, the black press used “democracy” as shorthand for social and legal equality between blacks and whites, and racial integration. By calling the canteen’s policy “democracy” instead of “non-discrimination,” White invoked one of the

¹⁴² White, People and Places, *Chicago Defender*, August 28, 1943, 15.

central – perhaps *the* central – ideal in public justifications for going to war with Germany and Japan.

Of course, the most basic purpose of news stories and other media treatments of the canteen was to promote the canteen and the American Theatre Wing, and to garner support and donations for the Wing's various activities. But the canteen's life in American media went beyond mere publicity. "Everyone has heard so much about the Stage Door Canteen in New York City," Mary Churchill, Winston's daughter, declared when she christened a B-17 bomber as "Stage Door Canteen" in 1944.¹⁴³ By that point, everyone had not just heard about it, many had seen an accurate reproduction of the canteen interior in the film *Stage Door Canteen*.¹⁴⁴ "Everyone" may have also heard the Stage Door Canteen's popular weekly radio variety show, and they may have seen a sketch about the canteen in Irving Berlin's *This is the Army*, a stage show featuring an all-soldier cast. *This is the Army* toured the country raising funds for Army Emergency Relief, "invariably showing to record, staggering grosses and upsetting [all theater productions] against it."¹⁴⁵ The Stage Door Canteen sketch featured soldiers doing impressions of canteen mainstays Jane Cowl, Lynne Fontanne, and Alfred Lunt, and a chorus of soldiers dressed (unconvincingly) as canteen hostesses, singing regretfully that they were not allowed to "canoodle" with soldiers. The Stage Door Canteen segment of

¹⁴³ "Stage Door Canteen Gets Wings," newsreel, Paramount News, May 14, 1944, issue 74, Paramount Pictures, Inc., Collection, 1951 – 1951, Motion Picture, Sound, and Video Records Section, Special Media Archives Services Division, National Archives.

¹⁴⁴ *Variety* predicted that the appearance of the canteen would "prove of absorbing interest to masses of civilians as well as to legions of servicemen who have and who have not been regaled at the canteen." ("Previews", *Variety*, May 12, 1943 [clipping], Motion Picture Association of America: Production Code Administration Records, *Stage Door Canteen* file, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills.) When the canteen was redecorated after the release of the film, canteen personnel reported that servicemen who visited often complained that it was "nothing like the picture!" (*Canteen News*, August 3, 1944, 1, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15.)

¹⁴⁵ Brock Pemberton, "Of the Vanished Year 1942," *New York Times*, January 3, 1943, X1.

This is the Army also included the romantic number, “I Left My Heart at the Stage Door Canteen,” a song which had a life of its own on radio and was on the hit parade. Those Americans who did not see *This is the Army* on stage could see it on screen when, in 1943, it was made into what became the top-grossing film of the war.¹⁴⁶ Profits from the Stage Door Canteen film, radio show, and Berlin’s song went to the American Theatre Wing, which used it to support the New York canteen, other Stage Door Canteens around the country, and other American Theatre Wing projects, such as the Lunchtime Follies, who performed variety acts for war plant workers, the Speaker’s Bureau, which gave talks educating the public on wartime topics, and the Merchant Seamen’s Canteen.¹⁴⁷

The Stage Door Canteen was an appealing subject for wartime media. It was relevant to the war without being a site of hard labor or violence, it offered a heart-warming and potentially romantic image of civilian service, and it came with famous entertainers already woven in to its story. Less than two months after the Stage Door Canteen opened in March 1942, the American Theatre Wing had already received offers for the film rights from Columbia, Paramount, and an independent producer, Sol Lesser, who operated under the United Artists umbrella.¹⁴⁸ Sol Lesser offered the best terms to the American Theatre Wing, agreeing to give them most of the profits from the film. Lesser produced the film from a screenplay by Delmer Daves, with Frank Borzage directing. It was released in June 1943. Proceeds from the film were a prolific source of funds for the American Theatre Wing.

¹⁴⁶ Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 223-224.

¹⁴⁷ According to *Variety*, the money from the film *Stage Door Canteen* alone “made the organization the most financially solid of any participating in war aid work.” (“Theatre Wing’s First \$1,000,000 From Film,” *Variety*, November 24, 1943, 4.) For more on the work done by the American Theatre Wing, see Roarty.

¹⁴⁸ Roarty, 164.

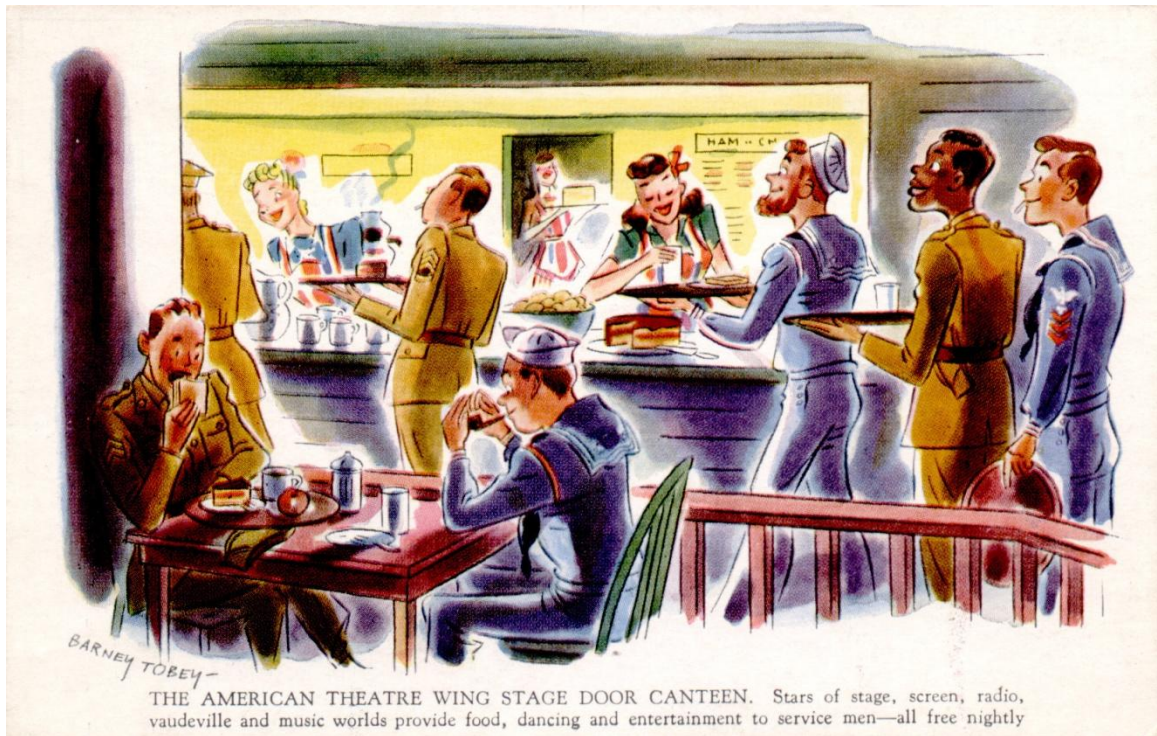


Figure 6. A promotional postcard for the Stage Door Canteen radio show.
(Author's collection)

The film capitalized on themes of civilian service, American unity, Allied cooperation, as well as using romance, humor, and music to appeal to audiences. Lesser and Delmer Daves also cautiously incorporated black servicemen and hostesses into the movie, a choice that had complicated effects on the film's reception, but which supported the themes of unity and cooperation. Critic James Agee thought the film epitomized 1940s filmmaking: "*Stage Door Canteen* is beautiful as a preview of a period piece. Any film is, but this one carries a saturation of the mannerisms of fourth-decade entertainment, patriotism, and sub-idealized lovemaking which could supply almost any twenty others."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ James Agee, review of *Stage Door Canteen*, *The Nation* 156 (June 12, 1943): 844.

Stage Door Canteen is in no danger of appearing on any modern critic's list of "Top Ten Films of World War II," but in 1943 it was well-received by audiences and reviewers.¹⁵⁰ *Time* conceded that the film's overwrought patriotism "may give civilians as well as servicemen a drowning sensation," but gave it a pass as a rich source of entertainment.¹⁵¹ Many reviews were glowing. *Stage Door Canteen* did well at the box office and was popular in army theatres.¹⁵² According to *Film Daily*, it ranked in the top ten in polls conducted nationwide by newspapers and radio stations, as well as in a survey of 439 "representative critics and commentators."¹⁵³ *Stage Door Canteen* was simultaneously a glorification of the canteen and its volunteers, a vaudeville-style variety show, and an enjoinder to civilians to keep up their morale for the sake of the war effort. It had something for everybody: song, dance, romance, comedy, and "patriotism... as torrential as its talent."¹⁵⁴

The film advertised the existence of the Stage Door Canteen to a wide audience of civilians and servicemen alike. While canteen and Theatre Wing officials evinced more

¹⁵⁰ In addition to the reviews cited in this chapter, which are mostly positive, *Boxoffice* magazine's "Review Digest and Picture Guide Index" lists *Stage Door Canteen* as receiving "Very Good" reviews from *Harrison's Reports*, *Film Daily*, *Hollywood Reporter*, *Hollywood Variety*, *Parents Magazine*, and the *New York Daily News*. (*Boxoffice*, July 31, 1943.)

¹⁵¹ Review of *Stage Door Canteen*, *Time*, June 14, 1943, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,851809,00.html>.

¹⁵² In the 1940s, domestic gross was not routinely calculated as it is today. Trade magazines for the film industry reported how films did in individual cities, or even in individual theatres, rather than reporting national box office. Issues of *Boxoffice* and *Motion Picture Herald* from June to August 1943 contain numerous reports from exhibitors stating that *Stage Door Canteen* was doing good business at their theatres. *Motion Picture Herald* estimated that the film made \$1,367,080 in "first-run theatres." ("Picture Grosses," August 7, 1943, 59.) A two page spread taken out by United Artists in that same magazine announced, "In the 24 years of United Artists' history, no picture has equaled the business done by *Stage Door Canteen*." (July 17, 1943, 68-89.) In a 1970 interview, Sol Lesser said, "Altogether, *Stage Door Canteen* received over \$2,000,000," an impressive amount at the time, with few movies making above \$3 million. (Lesser oral history, 118.) For reception in army theaters, see "Army Theatre Box Office Champions," *Film Daily Year Book 1944*, 101.

¹⁵³ "Local "Ten Best" Polls," *Film Daily Year Book 1944*, 127; "The Film Daily Ten Best Pictures of 1943," *Film Daily Year Book 1944*, 105.

¹⁵⁴ Review of *Stage Door Canteen*, *Time*.

interest in the revenue the film brought than the publicity it provided, publicity for the canteen often extended the canteen's mission to raise morale by reassuring Americans about the good work other civilians were doing on behalf of servicemen. *Stage Door Canteen* was targeted at civilian audiences, but its message reached servicemen as well. One sailor wrote to the Stage Door Canteen that seeing the film had brought tears to his eyes. He ended his letter, "I remain the fellow who knows that you are fighting this war, just as hard in the heart of New York, as we are fighting in the middle of the ocean."¹⁵⁵ A soldier wrote to tell the canteen that he had seen *Stage Door Canteen* four times, and asked them for God's sake not to close the joint before he got there.¹⁵⁶

Other servicemen did not appreciate the contrast between depictions of the canteen and their own experiences. An officer in the Entertainment Section of the Army Special Service Division reported that the canteen's radio show "raised a minor morale problem among men in far places who resent[ed] the contrast between the conditions and the word picture of Private Snooks dancing with Betty Grable."¹⁵⁷ Sergeant Hy Baker wrote an article for the Fort Logan *News and Views* complaining about the depiction of servicemen's canteens in movies like *Stage Door Canteen* and *Hollywood Canteen*. The movies gave "the impression that all girls in servicemen's centers are luscious pin-ups with whom a soldier falls in love the minutes he walks through the door. The fellows walk around wide-eyed and happy." In his experience, attractive girls were few and far between at canteens, elderly, maternal women were plentiful, and most of the servicemen

¹⁵⁵ Canteen Committee minutes, September 9, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15.

¹⁵⁶ Frank Tyre to Canteen Board Members, n.d., in *Canteen News*, August 24, 1944, 2, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15.

¹⁵⁷ William Fox, memorandum to Alton C. Miller, July 5, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.

had “that forlorn aspect which suggest[ed] that if they had another half buck they’d walk back to the bar and continue where they left off.”¹⁵⁸

The real Stage Door Canteen was certainly much busier, better funded, and better staffed than the canteens which Sgt. Baker visited, but the film did present an idealized version of the canteen, staffed by starlets and replete with A-list talent. Over forty famous performers appeared in the film, including Katharine Hepburn, Harpo Marx, Ray Bolger, Ethel Merman, and Helen Hayes. “First Lady of the Theater” Katharine Cornell made the only film appearance of her career, reciting Shakespeare opposite the unknown Lon McCallister when he came down the food line. While Screen Actors Guild rules prevented actors from volunteering their services, stars agreed to work on the film for nominal fees since most of the profits went to the Theatre Wing.¹⁵⁹

The film’s story unfolded between star cameos and performances. The story centers on three servicemen, Dakota (William Terry), California, and Tex(as) (Sunset Carson) who are about to go overseas but have three days of leave in New York City. They spend their evenings at the Stage Door Canteen. There, they pair off with three hostesses: Eileen (Cheryl Walker), Jean, and Ella Sue (Margaret Early).

Eileen and Dakota are the romantic leads, and Eileen’s conversion from self-interest to self-sacrifice is the emotional core of the film. Initially, Jean and Ella Sue criticize Eileen for being at the canteen to advance her acting career, rather than for the

¹⁵⁸ Hy Baker, Take a Break, *News and Views*, reprinted in McManus, *Speaking of Movies*, *PM*, January 2, 1945, 16.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas F. Brady, “Facts Behind ‘Yankee Doodle Dandy,’” *New York Times*, January 10, 1943, X3. Lesser was not the first producer to have the bright idea of donating some of his movie’s profits to wartime charities. The Screen Actors Guild instituted its rule against actors making free appearances in films (army training films excepted) in late 1942 in response to a spate of charity films featuring actors who were not paid to appear. The rule may have been timed specifically to prevent *Stage Door Canteen* from doing the same. (Brady, “Charity, Hope and Faith in Film-land,” *New York Times*, September, 20, 1943, X3.)



KATHARINE HEPBURN (left) appears for 99 seconds in scene by Robert Sherwood. With her is Cheryl Walker.



RAY BOLGER appears for 391 seconds, the longest time given to any entertainer. His dancing is picture's big hit.



GYPSY ROSE LEE takes 331 seconds to do a pseudo strip. In an earlier scene she appears completely dressed.

STAGE DOOR CANTEEN

It pays tribute to stagefolk

When it succeeds in sidetracking its routine Hollywood plot, Sol Lesser's United Artists production of *Stage Door Canteen* achieves the stature of an exciting and authentic view of an important wartime institution. Its primary purpose is to show within the framework of a conventional love story the marvelous service that the New York Stage Door Canteen is performing for servicemen who might otherwise know the gnawing loneliness of a stranger in the world's largest city.

Although most of the footage in *Stage Door Canteen* is devoted to many of the hallowed names in

show business, it is significant that Sol Lesser stifled a natural impulse to utilize their histrionic talents exclusively. Instead, he has been content to show most of them as they actually are at the Stage Door Canteen. Thus, Helen Hayes, Ralph Bellamy, the Lunts, Tallulah Bankhead, Judith Anderson and numerous other celebrities appear as waiters, hostesses, dishwashers or doormen rather than as actors or actresses.

Eighty-two performers appear in *Stage Door Canteen*. On these pages *LIFE* shows a few of them and clocks the length of time each appears on the screen.



CHARLIE MCCARTHY and Edgar Bergen appear 248 seconds. Mortimer Snerd, Charlie's rival, has 104 seconds.



ETHEL MERMAN, who sings *Marching Through Berlin*, appears for 95 seconds. In foreground is Bill Terry.



ED WYNN appears at various times for a total of 101 seconds. Here he calls a Scottish soldier "a male Wane."

Figure 7. Most publicity for *Stage Door Canteen* focused on the celebrity appearances. (*Life*, June 21, 1943, p. 77)

sake of the servicemen. They take her to task for treating Dakota, whom she despises, poorly. Eileen ignores them until Jean receives a letter from her brother, a marine, which she reads aloud to Ella Sue and Eileen. The letter is a composite of all the sentiments which a brave young serviceman ought to espouse. He and his fellow marines were “all anxious to do [their] utmost in any engagement.” They knew their equipment was better than the Japanese’s, and each one of them knew that “man for man a marine can outshoot, out-bayonet, outlast, and if necessary, kill any blankity blank Jap he has seen so far with his bare hands.” Finally, Jean’s voice breaks as she reads:

Though neither I nor any of you have mentioned it before, there is naturally a chance that I may not come back from this war.... I remember what Dad said when we all had dinner before I shoved off. He said that other things may not matter, but that I could never live down a failure in my country’s service, and I won’t fail Dad, whatever happens.

Eileen, with tears in her eyes, says, “I guess this is as good a time as any to realize what a heel I’ve been.” The realization that young men might be making the ultimate sacrifice makes Eileen realize how little she is doing, and how much more she should do.

As a result, Eileen has a change of heart in regard to Dakota. On his third and final night at the canteen, Eileen agrees to violate the canteen’s rules (as portrayed in the film) and meet Dakota after her shift ends. The two spend the night talking on the roof of Eileen’s apartment building, and in the morning Eileen proposes marriage to Dakota. However, Dakota ships out the next morning before they can marry. Eileen is crushed, until Katharine Hepburn arrives and gives Eileen an inspirational speech, telling Eileen she needs to keep fighting at home, just as Dakota will be fighting abroad.

According to producer Sol Lesser, Katharine Hepburn intended her speech to be the “key scene – the statement of the picture.” The scene would be “addressed to the wives, sweethearts, sisters, and to every woman in America who had anyone in uniform, fighting for his country.”¹⁶⁰ Hepburn’s speech was written by screenwriter Robert Sherwood, who worked as a speechwriter for President Roosevelt at the time. In the scene in question, Katharine Hepburn is standing nearby when Eileen receives the news that Dakota has shipped out. Hepburn comes to Eileen’s side and grasps her shoulders.

KATHARINE HEPBURN

Why’d you volunteer for this work?

EILEEN

Because I wanted to help.

KATHARINE HEPBURN

Help what?

EILEEN

I wanted to help my country.

KATHARINE HEPBURN

And why do you think your country needs
your help?

EILEEN

We’re in a war, and we’ve got to win.

¹⁶⁰ Lesser oral history, 112

KATHARINE HEPBURN

Yes, that's right. We're in a war and we've got to win. And we're going to win. And that's why the boy you love is going overseas. And isn't that maybe why you're going to go back in there and get on your job? Look, you're a good kid, I don't wonder he loves you. He knows what he's fighting for. He's fighting for the kind of world in which you and he can live together in happiness, in peace, in love. Don't ever think about quitting. Don't ever stop for a minute working, fighting, praying until we've got that kind of world, for you, for him, for your children, for the whole human race. Days without end. Amen.¹⁶¹

According to Lesser, the speech “proved to be a knockout and always drew applause from audiences everywhere.”¹⁶²

Like a lot of wartime media, *Stage Door Canteen* remains vague about precisely what servicemen's work will accomplish, but offers lofty generalities: they are fighting for freedom, democracy, peace, and for their loved ones. If Dakota dies, he will have died

¹⁶¹ *Stage Door Canteen*. The film version of *This is the Army* had a similar message about America's reasons for fighting the war. Corporal Johnny Jones (Ronald Reagan) does not want to marry his girlfriend (played by Joan Leslie, and also named Eileen) before leaving the United States because he is afraid she will become a war widow. At the end of the film, Eileen convinces Johnny to marry her, telling him sternly, “Corporal Jones, I've decided you don't know what the war is all about. We're free people fighting for the right to remain free, to work and to be married and to raise a family in a fine decent country.” By not marrying her, he is acting “like we've already lost the war.” She equates marriage with their having equal parts in the war: “We're all in this fight together, women as well as men. Let's share our responsibilities. I want to be a part of you, Johnny, a part that goes with you on the battlefield, someone to come back to.” (*This is the Army*.)

¹⁶² Lesser oral history, 116.

fighting for a world where he and Eileen “can live together in happiness.” Jean’s brother will have died doing all he could for his country, and, more to the point, he will have died so as not to let down his father. Mostly, the film seems to be saying, the servicemen are fighting on behalf of the people back at home. In return, the folks back home – many, but not all of them, women – must do all they can to make the servicemen’s sacrifice worthwhile, or at least more bearable.

Historian Robert Westbrook notes that being fought for can create reciprocal obligations. The “bargain between protector and protected” could create personal, even romantic or physical, obligations for a woman.¹⁶³ In *Stage Door Canteen*, Eileen’s epiphany about the sacrifice the servicemen are making does not merely cause her to be more gracious and cheerful with Dakota. It leads her to break the rules of the canteen and fall in love with a man she barely knows. Eileen’s newfound appreciation of her obligations towards servicemen, as a civilian, leads directly—and almost instantly—to her becoming engaged to one.¹⁶⁴ Her newfound patriotism is indistinguishable from her newfound love for Dakota. While *Stage Door Canteen* tried to draw a clear line between hostesses’ civilian service and romantic involvement with servicemen, young American women were told, time and time again, that it was romantic, admirable, and *normal* to date and marry servicemen for no other reason than that they were servicemen.

¹⁶³ Robert Westbrook, “‘I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl that Married Harry James’: American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War I,” *American Quarterly* 42 (December 1990): 611.

¹⁶⁴ Had a woman in the audience been inclined to parse the movie’s message about marriage, she would have been left confused as to whether she was being told hasty wartime marriages were ill-advised, incredibly romantic, or, most likely, a bit of both. In one of the film’s subplots, a soldier wishes to use his leave to marry his girlfriend. His commanding officer consents to the marriage because the soldier has known his intended for two years and it is not “one of those before-shoving-off marital urges.” (*Stage Door Canteen*.)

In portrayals of the canteen, it was not the hostesses who stood between the servicemen and romantic or sexual gratification. It was “the rules.” In *Stage Door Canteen*, a serviceman and hostess, who are leaning in closely to one another and grasping each others’ arms, are broken apart only by the intercession of a senior hostess. Early on in the film, a hostess is dismissed for having a date with a soldier – she explains she went on the date because he was so lonely and homesick. Jean “bends” the rules to give California a kiss that he requested, and Eileen breaks the rules in response to Dakota’s request to see her. In Irving Berlin’s *This is the Army*, the servicemen playing the part of hostesses complain that they “could do more for the boys/ And greatly add to their joys” if only they did not have to follow the rules. Junior hostesses seem to want to date, kiss, and caress servicemen, and would do so more freely if only it were not against the rules.

Writing about the “no dating” rule at the Washington, DC, Stage Door Canteen, Pegge Parker stated that “pretty romantic-minded young hostesses” did not want to be protected from the advances of “dashing young marines or tall, brown-eyed sergeants.... Only the gray-haired senior hostesses feel a motherly or sisterly attitude toward susceptible youth in the armed services.”¹⁶⁵ When Kaye and Smolen, co-chairmen of the Junior Hostess Committee, told journalist Sally McDougal that they supported the rule against dating, McDougal thought this “sounded like strange talk” coming from women who described themselves as “struggling young actresses.”¹⁶⁶ Kaye and Smolen’s statements countered the assumption that young, financially independent women would

¹⁶⁵ Pegge Parker, “No Escorts? Hostesses in Rebellion,” *Washington Times-Herald*, January 27, (1943?) [clipping], American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, vol. 152.

¹⁶⁶ Sally McDougal, “Canteen Girls War Brides in Spite of No Date Rule,” *World Telegram*, February 23, 1943 [clipping], American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, vol. 151.

be naturally inclined to pursue romance with servicemen. Junior hostesses were expected to be easily love-struck, especially because they were dealing with young men in *uniform*.

Boy-meets-girl, boy-leaves-girl-to-fight-for-democracy, but-boy-will-one-day-return-to-girl was a common story formula in wartime entertainment. The Stage Door Canteen was subject to several such treatments, the most fundamental being Irving Berlin's song:

I left my heart at the Stage Door Canteen,
 I left it there with a girl named Eileen.
 I kept her serving doughnuts 'til all she had were gone.
 I sat there dunking doughnuts 'til she caught on.

I must go back to the Army routine,
 And every doughboy knows what that will mean.
 A soldier boy without a heart
 Has two strikes on him from the start,
 And my heart's at the Stage Door Canteen.¹⁶⁷

Life magazine published several features on the Stage Door Canteen, two of which depicted, through pictures, a romance between a hostess and serviceman. Before the release of the film *Stage Door Canteen*, *Life* published a piece on Cheryl Walker, announcing her new star status based on her role as Eileen. Along with pictures of Walker before her big break, the article included three pictures of Walker in character as Eileen. The captions of the first two pictures noted that Eileen is only at the canteen to

¹⁶⁷ *This is the Army*.

further her career, but the last picture shows Eileen kissing Dakota in the store room (not a scene from the movie). The caption says that the kiss “makes Eileen realize that she is in love and that her stage career is a small thing compared to happiness.”¹⁶⁸ A photographic editorial in July of 1942 show actor and hostess Dorothy McGuire and Private Ed Maron dancing, playing games, watching stage shows, and interacting with actor and dancer Ray Bolger, producer Brock Pemberton, and musician Hazel Scott. The accompanying text informed readers that, “[a]lthough late dates and telephone numbers are taboo, romances frequently develop.” In the final photograph, the pair sit alone in the canteen after closing, where, “[a]s quiet epilog to a noisy evening Ed snaps Signal Corps insignia bracelet on Dorothy’s wrist.”¹⁶⁹

Popular media presented real life hostesses little incentive to abide by the rule against dating, especially inasmuch as dating could lead to marriage. In *Stage Door Canteen*, when Eileen breaks the rule against dating, her engagement vindicates her disregard of the rules. Instead of losing her hostess position, Katharine Hepburn intervenes and tells her to continue on with her job of hostessing while her fiancé carries on with his job. When Eileen first arrives at the canteen after her night with Dakota, her canteen pass has been revoked, but Selena Royle and Hepburn admit her anyway because they believe that “brides” should not “have to wait on sidewalks.”¹⁷⁰ In an earlier draft of the screenplay, Daves made it even clearer that Eileen’s engagement retroactively justified her infraction. In that version, actor Gertrude Lawrence sees Eileen and Dakota together outside the canteen. Someone reports Eileen to Antoinette Perry and Selena

¹⁶⁸ “Stage Door Canteen Girl,” *Life*, February 22, 1943, 77-78.

¹⁶⁹ “*Life* Goes to a Party at Stage Door Canteen,” *Life*, July 27, 1942, 86-89.

¹⁷⁰ *Stage Door Canteen*.

Royle, but Lawrence asks them not to dismiss her from the canteen. “I don’t think they were making a date for last night,” she explains. “I think they were making a date for the rest of their lives!”¹⁷¹

Arguing against the Stage Door Canteen’s no-dating rule, Pegge Parker pointed out that “[e]ven [the] strait-laced moral-minded USO club at YMCA and YWCA” allowed hostesses to leave the club on the arms of servicemen, and nothing “worse” had happened to any of the USO hostesses than marriage – the joke being, of course, that marriage was desirable, not “worse” but *better*. The entertainment industry celebrated the romance and excitement of youthful soldier-civilian romances even while condemning hasty wartime marriages between men and women who had not known each other long. “That women married soldiers and sent them overseas happy was hammered at us,” said Dellie Hahne, interviewed by Studs Terkel in “*The Good War*.” In radio plays, magazine fiction, and movies the same story played out: “the girl meets the soldier, and after a weekend of acquaintanceship they get married and overcome all difficulties. Then off to war he went.”¹⁷²

The emphasis on romance between servicemen and civilian women could make stories more intriguing and engaging; it also had the effect of blurring the line between young women’s personal lives and their civilian service towards soldiers. The blurring had a function. The romance in war stories was a tactic for recruiting civilian women to the war effort. It made the war personal: it was about marriage, and future offspring, and

¹⁷¹ Daves, *Stage Door Canteen* (original screenplay, October 2, 1942), 139-140, Correspondence Relating to Motion Pictures with Military Themes, Motion Picture Scripts 1942-1945, box 27, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, RG 107, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD (hereafter, RG 107, NA).

¹⁷² Dellie Hahne, interview by Studs Terkel, “*The Good War*”: *An Oral History of World War II* (New York : Pantheon Books, 1984), 117.

keeping the men in their lives safe. In these stories, women's work on the home front was rewarded by their finding that one man to marry, or by helping to bring him back from the war as soon as possible.¹⁷³ Relating the war effort to romantic love or other personal relationships was one way that propagandists convinced American civilians that they had a stake in the war effort. The emphasis on "private obligations—to families, to children, to parents, to buddies, and generally, to an 'American way of Life' defined as a rich (and richly commodified) private experience" was "a crucial element in the campaign to mobilize Americans for World War II."¹⁷⁴

It is important to note that, although media treatments of the Stage Door Canteen did encourage civilians to contribute to the war effort, they were not doing the OWI's dirty work. The film did not contain lectures about rationing or the black market. Articles about the Stage Door Canteen did not encourage civilians to perform unglamorous but much-needed work in factories, or ask women to give up their personal lives for the duration and join the WAACs or WAVES. The idea forwarded by media coverage of the canteen was that a woman could have everything the woman of the war years could possibly desire, as long as she put winning the war first: she could contribute to the war effort while continuing her (potentially glamorous) career and finding romance and a husband. Contributing to the war effort facilitated achievement of the other two goals. During the course of *Stage Door Canteen*, Eileen gets a good part in a Broadway play and acquires a fiancé. She realizes that her work at the canteen, and specifically her

¹⁷³ See Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 77-78.

¹⁷⁴ Westbrook, 591.

relationship with Dakota, is more important than her career – but she still has that career.¹⁷⁵

It was in the entertainment industry's interests to show that men and women in the theater (and in radio and film) could continue their careers while contributing to the war effort and that their careers could themselves constitute a contribution to the war effort. The entertainment industry felt it had to sell the idea of morale building as war work. While Americans continued to consume entertainment of all kinds, entertainers were sometimes criticized for continuing to work in their supposedly cushy prewar occupations. President Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, and high-placed military officials spoke on the importance of the entertainment sector in maintaining morale, but people working in film, theater, and radio still felt under attack by some members of Congress, and unappreciated by the American public. Major General Lewis Hershey, director of Selective Service, explained to *Variety* that prominent entertainers could not receive draft deferments based on their occupation because the American public was not ready to accept morale-building as essential war work, and in a democracy, "you can't get too far head and too far behind what the public thinks." *Variety* lamented that "the public doesn't realize [entertainers] are as much a part of the war effort as the industrial or mercantile exec parked behind a desk in Washington as a dollar-a-year man."¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ In contrast to my interpretation, Meghan Winchell believes that *Stage Door Canteen* "served as a warning to young women who might have become involved with servicemen by teaching them through Eileen and Dakota's lost romance that disobeying club rules could only come to a bad end." (Winchell, 162) Though a viewer might well have taken this moral away from the film, I imagine it was not the intended interpretation. Eileen's romance is identified with her personal growth and her increased devotion to wartime service – things that would have been viewed as net positives in the context of an American wartime film, even at the price of a broken heart. Furthermore, it is implied that Eileen and Dakota will marry after the war, possibly rewarding both of them for breaking the rules.

¹⁷⁶ "The Whipping Boy," *Variety*, April 7, 1943, 3. The wording is *Variety*'s interpretation of what Hershey said rather than a direct quotation.

All media coverage of the Stage Door Canteen was in some degree an advertisement for the good work being done by the theater world, but *Stage Door Canteen* in particular was a paean to the importance of entertainment during wartime. *Life* declared the film's "primary purpose [was] to show... the marvelous service that the New York Stage Door Canteen [was] performing for servicemen who might otherwise know the gnawing loneliness of a stranger in the world's largest city."¹⁷⁷ The film showcased both extravagant performances and personal interactions between stars and servicemen and showed stars performing menial tasks as well as songs and comedy routines.

Stage Door Canteen's message about the good work being done by Hollywood and Broadway entertainers went over well with critics and audiences. In a review of the film, *Boxoffice* waxed poetic about "the inspiration to be found in the spirit of service which prompts the leading men and women of the theatre, radio and screen to attempt to lift the boys of the armed services into a mood of happy abandon."¹⁷⁸ Echoing the *Boxoffice* review's emphasis on the selflessness of show people, Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* wrote that *Stage Door Canteen* "is a true glimpse of that little corner of New York where the people of the theatre and the show world are making lonesome youngsters happy for a spell. No matter how you look at it, there is poignancy and bravery in the scene."¹⁷⁹

Film critics found *Stage Door Canteen*'s depiction of selfless showfolk palatable despite the implicit self-congratulatory messages, because *Stage Door Canteen* and other

¹⁷⁷ "Show Business at War," *Life*, June 21, 1943, 77.

¹⁷⁸ Review of *Stage Door Canteen*, *Boxoffice*, Showmandiser Section, May 15, 1943, 15 [separately paginated section].

¹⁷⁹ Bosley Crowther, review of *Stage Door Canteen*, *New York Times*, June 25, 1943, 13.



Figure 8. Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne banter while serving food and clearing dishes.
(*Stage Door Canteen*)

media treatments of the canteen were in line with the national American wartime value of esteeming (or at least appearing to esteem) the contribution of the everyman–serviceman above all else. *Stage Door Canteen*’s story centers on a civilian realizing how selfish she is and how much she owes to servicemen. Stars are shown balking at the idea that servicemen would thank them, or that they deserve to be recognized as famous faces. (When Dakota apologizes to Judith Anderson for not having known who she was, Anderson replies, “No apologies necessary. I didn’t know who you were, either.”) The end result of the film’s calculated humility was to make the stars look even more admirable. The film acknowledged that it was a thrill to see famous faces, but showed that their fame was dwarfed by the momentous task before the servicemen.

Two groups of servicemen are singled out in the film for the most pointed praise: a group of Soviet sailors and a group of Chinese airmen are feted as representatives of heroic nations, essential to American victory. The Russians are brought onto the canteen's stage while actor Sam Jaffe praises their courage, and the Chinese airmen are carried around the canteen on the protagonists' shoulders. Afterwards, actor Merle Oberon speaks passionately about how much America owes to China. In the scene featuring the Russian sailors, the fictionalized canteen proved more progressive than the real canteen. The Soviet sailors include a female sailor (Valentina Orlikova, third mate in the Soviet merchant marine, playing herself), who would not have been admitted to the New York canteen due to her sex. The scene with the Chinese airmen, meanwhile, features a young air cadet (played by Chinese American actor Kim Wong) who gives sharp, clever responses when American soldier Tex tries to patronize him.

Compared to the lengthy sequences featuring the Russians and Chinese, both of which end in the entire canteen applauding, the film's tribute to black American servicemen is brief and subdued. *Stage Door Canteen* includes one black American soldier with a speaking part, a soldier named Johnny Jones (Caleb Peterson, in an uncredited role). An Australian serviceman introduces Jones to Dakota as "a real fighting man fresh and hot from Australia." Jones has already seen action, and has been decorated. The Johnny Jones scene was filmed entirely in wide-shot, a stylistic choice that maintains an emotional distance from the character. The scene was written to have more significance than it did in its final form. According to Daves' original stage direction, Dakota "looks after [Jones] with warm eyes as he realizes he's met his first



Figure 9. Dakota meets Johnny Jones, who is quickly pulled away by a junior hostess.
(*Stage Door Canteen*)

heroic veteran;” in the film, the scene ends abruptly, giving no indication that Jones impressed Dakota.¹⁸⁰

Osceola Archer pushed to have African Americans “integrated in mass scenes,” and some were, but probably not due to Archer’s intercession.¹⁸¹ The American Theatre Wing had little control over the picture, and the Canteen Committee even less. Lesser expressed a desire to cooperate with canteen personnel but made few concessions to their requests beyond letting some appear in the film. American Theatre Wing officials who

¹⁸⁰ Daves, *Stage Door Canteen*, original screenplay, (Hollywood: RKO Pictures, January 4, 1943), 71.

¹⁸¹ Canteen Committee minutes, January 17, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 17.

had more influence showed no interest in pressing the point of including African Americans in the film.

The appearance of blacks in *Stage Door Canteen* was probably attributable in great part to the work of Walter White. White, with Wendell Willkie, had lobbied Hollywood directors – Sol Lesser among them – to improve the portrayal of African Americans in film. White was not only invested in improving the portrayal of blacks in film, but he was also interested in the real Stage Door Canteen. He had praised it in print for its nondiscrimination policy, and his daughter, actor Jane White, worked there as a junior hostess. In February 1943, White wrote to Lesser about concerns that there were no blacks in scenes being filmed in New York. Lesser responded to White that there were blacks in the scenes being filmed in Hollywood, but if White felt “it would be a good gesture,” black people would be incorporated into the scenes shot in New York.¹⁸² In May 1943, White wrote in his syndicated column, “Sol Lesser assures me that in ‘Stage Door Canteen’ ... the Negro is treated in keeping with the facts of [that] remarkable service [club].”¹⁸³

In his autobiography, Walter White recalled that he and Willkie “were confronted constantly with evidence of the terrifying power to intimidate Hollywood which a few people possessed. Repeatedly producers told us frankly that they dared not risk offending boards of censorship in Southern states.”¹⁸⁴ African Americans were often relegated to isolated scenes that were irrelevant to the storyline, so the scenes could be removed easily

¹⁸² “New York, Not Hollywood Slipped Jim Crow In ‘Stage Door Canteen,’” *Chicago Defender*, February 6, 1943, 19

¹⁸³ Walter White, *People and Places*, *Chicago Defender*, May 8, 1943, 15.

¹⁸⁴ White, *A Man Called White*, 202.

for Southern exhibition. The net effect of the tyranny of the Southern box office was that black story characters were few and far between.

Though the film only did so in a small way, the black press appreciated it when *Stage Door Canteen* violated this line of segregation. Caleb Peterson's character is a combatant, not a mess attendant. The *Pittsburgh Courier* praised the "short but inspirational bit." Johnny Jones was on the screen for less than thirty seconds, but it was thirty seconds in which he spoke "only straight lines and without any trace of mimicry or clowning."¹⁸⁵ He and Dakota shake hands when they are introduced. Jones is Dakota's superior in experience, and he is also his superior in rank – though Jones' rank is never named, his sergeant stripes are visible on screen at one point. Beyond the text of the film, the character congratulating Jones is the romantic lead, not merely a peripheral character, a fact which both the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Chicago Defender* considered worthy of note.¹⁸⁶

McManus admired *Stage Door Canteen*'s "disregard for Hollywood's ironclad racial rules." He guessed that because *Stage Door Canteen* was made for charity, there had been "no shaking of production heads over the 'problem' of the Southern market."¹⁸⁷ McManus was mistaken. Before the film's release, Sol Lesser and United Artists had collaborated to delete some shots of black people in the film "[i]n order to alleviate further censorship," in the words of Lesser's editor, Hal Kern.¹⁸⁸ To avoid bad press for the edits, Lesser decided it would be better to make changes to all prints of the film,

¹⁸⁵ Herman Hill, "'Stage Door Canteen' is Great Film," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 16, 1943, 20.

¹⁸⁶ Hill, "'Stage Door Canteen' is Great Film," 20; La Mar, "Bigwigs Praise Film 'Stage Door Canteen'," *Chicago Defender*, March 14, 1943, 19.

¹⁸⁷ McManus, review of *Stage Door Canteen*, *PM*, June 25, 1943, 26.

¹⁸⁸ Hal Kern to Robert Hilton, June 10, 1943, Robert Hilton Papers, United Artists Corporation Records, box 23, folder 4.

rather than just altering the prints being shown in the South. “Otherwise somebody may raise a yell about it,” he wrote.¹⁸⁹

The shots that the producers replaced included “one cut of negroes watching” and some shots of black couples dancing, including a “medium shot of negroes dancing amongst white people.”¹⁹⁰ Lesser and United Artists retained shots of black couples dancing in the crowd shots, but the medium shot – a type of shot that would emphasize the individual figures of the black couples dancing – was too close for their comfort. Lesser and United Artists were reluctant to show black and white couples dancing *near* each other; showing racially mixed couples was out of the question. Daves had gone to the canteen to do research before writing his screenplay, and observed in his notes, “Girls will dance with negro if asked – but most colored boys are tactful [and] dance with [a] colored hostess.”¹⁹¹ In the movie, African American servicemen are shown dancing only with African American hostesses. While Chinese servicemen are shown seated with white hostesses, black servicemen are not.

During the war, mainstream media, guided in part by the OWI, had begun to include more positive portrayals of African Americans. The purpose of these portrayals was to enlist African American participation in the war effort. Barbara Dianne Savage describes the dilemma faced by federal propagandists: they “wanted to build up black morale by integrating a more visible ‘Negro’ into the public sphere of patriotic rhetoric, but... did not want to endorse the racial reforms blacks sought for fear of offending

¹⁸⁹ Sol Lesser to Louis Hyman, June 18, 1943, Robert Hilton Papers, United Artists Corporation Records, box 23, folder 4.

¹⁹⁰ Hal Kern to Robert Hilton, Robert Hilton Papers, United Artists Corporation Records, box 23, folder 4.

¹⁹¹ Daves, Research and Notes Made at the Stage Door Canteen, August – November 1942, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 5.

whites, especially southern congressman.”¹⁹² The trick for propagandists and morale boosters was to show positive images of blacks without making any definite statement about integration or equality. According to George Roeder Jr., “Wartime imagery urged blacks and whites to work harmoniously in the common cause, but it reassured the white majority that this did not require violating widely accepted social norms.”¹⁹³ Though *Stage Door Canteen* contains a scene with a black soldier, it contains no overt political statements about integration or social equality, aside from the implicit message that blacks and whites can fight the same war and socialize in the same room without any major problems arising. While audience members who objected to this message might have considered the Johnny Jones scenes to be blatant pro-integration propaganda, the scene was brief and understated enough that they probably would not have left the theater feeling lectured. At the same time, black audience members could see themselves portrayed as courageous, dignified, respectable and respected.

White media and government propagandists shied away from showing or implying physical contact between whites and blacks, specifically between black men and white women. *Life* received angry responses from disgusted readers when it published pictures of a performance of *Othello* starring Paul Robeson, including an image of Robeson with his arm around the white actress playing Desdemona. Negative responses in the United States to images of African American soldiers dancing with white British women led the War Department’s Bureau of Public Relations to order “military

¹⁹² Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 107.

¹⁹³ George H. Roeder Jr., “Censoring Disorder,” in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 56.

censors to stop all photographs showing blacks mixing socially with white women.”¹⁹⁴

Publishers and military authorities proved very responsive to public complaints. So did film producers. This responsiveness sometimes worked in favor of African Americans agitating for improved media portrayals of themselves, and sometimes worked against them, as the history of *Stage Door Canteen* shows.

Published images of the Stage Door Canteen often did not show any black servicemen or hostesses. When they were shown, it was often in separate photographs from whites. *Life* took the route of visual segregation for its photographic essay “*Life Visits the Stage Door Canteen*,” as did the *New York Post* when it printed several photographs of the canteen to “[acquaint] service men with the canteen's invitation to them” and to “reassure the folks back home that their boys are being provided with good, clean fun during their stay in New York.”¹⁹⁵ There were exceptions – an Al Hirschfeld drawing that accompanied a *New York Times* announcement of the opening of the Stage Door Canteen showed not only a black soldier and a black hostess dancing in the foreground, but also showed a black soldier seated with two white hostesses (figure 10). Even the boldest white publications did not broach the topic of interracial dancing, however. That was left to the black papers.

While the white-run media portrayed racial unity but not necessarily racial equality, most black papers were encouraging African Americans to embrace a “Double V” approach to participation in the war effort – combining the struggle for equality at home with the United States’ fight abroad. Many prominent black newspapers took

¹⁹⁴ Roeder, “Censoring Disorder,” 46, 56.

¹⁹⁵ “*Life Visits the Stage Door Canteen*,” *Life*, April 3, 1944, 122-126; “One Year of Fun at the Canteen,” *New York Post*, February 27, 1943, American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, vol. 153.



Figure 10. Stage Door Canteen opening night. (Al Hirschfeld, *New York Times*, March 1, 1942, p. XI)

editorial stances that encouraged blacks' whole-hearted participation in the war effort and encouraged blacks to enlist and to press for combat duty, rather than to resist the draft or become conscientious objectors.¹⁹⁶

As used by some black newspapers, the Stage Door Canteen offered a small example of the prosecution of a "Double V" campaign by both whites and blacks. Black servicemen could rest assured that the folks at the Stage Door Canteen would continue the fight for democracy at home just as they would be fighting for democracy abroad. In his column in the New York paper, the *People's Voice*, Harlem politician Adam Clayton Powell Jr. declared the Stage Door Canteen "one of the few strongholds of practicing

¹⁹⁶ Lee Finkle, *Forum For Protest: The Role of the Wartime Black Press* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975), 120-123. Finkle provides examples from the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *New York Age*, and *People's Voice*.

democracy.”¹⁹⁷ The canteen’s success “effectively squelched all protests against the idea of a mixed soldier-service,” said the *People’s Voice*. Leftist papers such as the New York *Daily Worker* and *PM* also touted the idea of the Stage Door Canteen as a bastion of democracy. The *Daily Worker* printed a handful of articles about the canteen during the war, all using the canteen as an example of American unity and democracy. “Democracy laughs at fascism at the Stage Door Canteen,” a *Daily Worker* article declared. The Stage Door Canteen was the American Theatre Wing’s “response to Axis propaganda about divisions among Americans.”¹⁹⁸

Black publications cited the Stage Door Canteen, the Hollywood Canteen, and other racially integrated canteens as a refutation of contemporary arguments against black and white servicemen mingling socially. Refusing services to black servicemen was often justified on the grounds that the black servicemen themselves would be uncomfortable in a racially integrated environment, and interracial USO centers would cause tension that went against everyone’s interests, black and white. To counter these rationalizations, the black press presented anecdotal examples of successful interracial canteens and clubs, where blacks, whites, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and servicemen from other countries socialized harmoniously. Civilian centers for servicemen were also one of the few places where the black press *could* find examples of black and white servicemen mixing, since the Army and Navy were segregated.

The inclusion of African Americans as volunteers and guests at the Stage Door Canteen set it apart from what was considered broadly acceptable in American society.

¹⁹⁷ Adam Clayton Powell, “Last Dance at the Canteen,” *People’s Voice*, January 8, 1944, excerpted in *Negro Digest* 2 (March 1944): 3; David Platt, “Stage Door Canteen Doors Wide to Negroes,” *New York Daily Worker*, June 21, 1943 [clipping], American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, vol. 194.

¹⁹⁸ “Canteen Solid!” *People’s Voice*, April 18, 1942, 28.

Among the distinct features of the Stage Door Canteen that were highlighted in mainstream media, especially in *Stage Door Canteen*, the canteen's policy of non-discrimination to black servicemen was deemphasized, while the presence of celebrities, the rules of hostess conduct, and the presence of servicemen from around the world were exaggerated. Images of the Stage Door Canteen were altered in order to make them a better fit for the national, mainstream discourse about the war.

While the real canteen differed from the media-created canteen in some ways, canteen volunteers were not detached from media representations of the war effort and civilian duties. The attitudes of canteen volunteers and the policies of the Stage Door Canteen were both a reflection of the national discourse and a part of it. Canteen organizers and many volunteers embraced the oft-repeated idea that the war was being fought for democracy, personal freedom, and equality. The canteen's non-discrimination policy was also based on the idea that America's allies were equal partners in the war, and deserved the same consideration.¹⁹⁹ The Stage Door Canteen was shaped by propaganda and mass media, and mass media and propaganda were influenced by the Stage Door Canteen and places like it.

¹⁹⁹ Volunteers' views of the canteen as an expression of international unity and democratic ideals is examined in chapter 3.

III. “Bullets Don’t Discriminate – Nor Does the Stage Door Canteen”: Diversity and Democracy

“Theatrical people” were “among the most democratic of any,” according to the *Pittsburgh Courier*.²⁰⁰ Many people considered the theater more liberal and egalitarian than other segments of society, not least theatrical people themselves. Helen Hayes, who also sat on the American Theatre Wing executive board, gave a talk in which she held the theater up as “living proof” that racial equality could and would be realized. Racial equality was “practically an unwritten law of the theatre.” “Race differences have stopped being a problem with us,” she said.²⁰¹ In a 1944 radio program presented by the Entertainment Industry Emergency Committee, an interracial group of actors who promoted ideas of racial cooperation, white actor Paul Muni echoed Hayes’ words. He asserted that the theater and entertainment industry in general had “a history of working in accord with the Negro” and had found this to be a positive thing. “[W]e feel it our duty at this particular time to call [our experience] to the attention of all Americans, especially to those who for any reason want to hold on to unnatural prejudices and undemocratic ideas of superiority,” said Muni. “We are all in this war together.”²⁰²

Black actors did not make such sweeping statements about equality having been achieved in the theater, because black performers, directors, and writers knew they were not completely integrated into commercial theater. The 1940s did see some modest progress towards integration, though “significant black employment on Broadway

²⁰⁰ “The American Way,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 18, 1942, 24

²⁰¹ “Writers’ War Board Stresses Helen Hayes’ Race Equality Talk,” *Variety*, November 17, 1943, 1, 48.

²⁰² Fredi Washington, “Entertainment World Fights Jimcra,” *People’s Voice*, May 27, 1944, 27.

remained mostly in shows with all-black casts.”²⁰³ Paul Robeson played Othello on Broadway to a positive critical reception and enthusiastic audiences – but in 1943 he was the first black man to do so.²⁰⁴ Set against the background of a segregated military and segregated USO Camp Shows, and the servants, gamblers, and happy-go-lucky, childish types that comprised black roles in film, Broadway was racially progressive. Theater provided Americans with a venue through which to combat segregation, but it was not an arena in which that battle had already been won.

World War II offered a new impetus for combating segregation, racial inequalities, and prejudices towards non-white races and non-American nationalities. The racism that existed in American society, and by extension, American theater, was of long standing, and did not vanish during the war. However, World War II did introduce “an official ideology of pluralist inclusion that facilitated the transformation of the foreign born into the American but also delegitimated racism in the face of Nazism.”²⁰⁵ The Stage Door Canteen was one place where this new ideology was in evidence. For Stage Door Canteen volunteers, and some servicemen guests, the canteen was not just a convenient symbol of wartime unity and democracy. It was the place where these values were tried and tested, and found worthy or found wanting.

If actors such as Hayes and Muni had an inflated sense of the egalitarianism of the theater, the belief that the theater was inherently democratic at least created the foundations for integrated ventures such as the Stage Door Canteens and Hollywood

²⁰³ James V. Hatch, “Creeping Toward Integration,” in *A History of African American Theatre*, ed. Errol G. Hill and Hatch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 341-342.

²⁰⁴ Hatch, 347.

²⁰⁵ Eileen Boris, “‘You Wouldn’t Want One of ‘Em Dancing With Your Wife’: Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II.” *American Quarterly* 50 (March 1998): 97-98.

Canteen. Some members of the New York Stage Door Canteen may have opposed the non-discrimination policy (the *People's Voice* reported that integration at the canteen “was accomplished only after a behind-the-scenes battle with biased die-hards”), but the American Theatre Wing Board presented a united front to the world on all aspects of the policy. When the New Orleans Council of Civic Club Presidents wrote to request permission to establish two Stage Door Canteens in New Orleans, one for whites and one for blacks, the Theatre Wing Board’s answer was “no – no.”²⁰⁶ When the Theatre Wing was in the process of establishing its Washington, DC, canteen, they refused offers to be associated with the Community Chest, in part out of concerns that the fundraising organization “might try to have something to say about” the non-discrimination policy. On the advice of Eleanor Roosevelt, the Theatre Wing avoided giving the policy “undue publicity” until after the Washington, DC, Stage Door Canteen opened, “so that Congress could not attempt to stop [their] activities.”²⁰⁷

Even without Eleanor Roosevelt’s input, Theatre Wing publicity rarely emphasized the non-discrimination policy. But Theatre Wing representatives expressed it clearly and uncompromisingly when correcting misconceptions about the policy in print or in person. When Theatre Wing member Lloyd Pinkney found that few Harlem servicemen made use of the 44th Street canteen, he suggested a separate Harlem Stage Door Canteen. Several black papers quoted him. Isadora Bennett, the Theatre Wing’s director of publicity, released a statement clarifying that Pinkney was a Theatre Wing

²⁰⁶ American Theatre Wing Board minutes, December 15, 1943, John Golden Papers. It was apparently an adamant “no – no,” because the minutes of the meeting then record that one of the board members thought the Council should have a “nice answer.” Originally the minutes read “nicer answer,” but the “r” was crossed out.

²⁰⁷ American Theatre Wing Board minutes, August 24, 1942, John Golden Papers.

member, but not a Theatre Wing representative, and that the Wing had no intention of establishing a Harlem unit:

We have never at any time contemplated a special neighborhood canteen – in Harlem or anywhere else. It would be an absolute violation of basic policy. All of our canteens are open to all the servicemen of the Allied Nations. We would never single out a special group – even for special benefits. Certainly we would do nothing that would tend to segregate the Negro serviceman.

Bennett emphasized that “LARGE NUMBERS” of black servicemen frequented the Stage Door Canteen, but they were from all over the country, not just Harlem.²⁰⁸

While the Theatre Wing Board oversaw the establishment of new canteens and managed canteen publicity, the Canteen Committee was responsible for on-site enforcement of policy. The Canteen Committee found that ensuring that all servicemen in uniform were admitted was the very easiest part of carrying out the non-discrimination policy. After that, a serviceman’s experience of the canteen could be ruined by snubs or insults from any of a hundred volunteers, including hosts, junior hostesses, senior hostesses, kitchen volunteers on the food line, or by an offensive performance by a stage performer.

Stage entertainment posed a persistent problem when it came to enforcing the spirit as well as the letter of the non-discrimination policy. Specifically, comedians were a problem. Osceola Archer complained in late 1943 that many performers at the canteen

²⁰⁸ “[American Theatre Wing] Kills Idea for Harlem Canteen,” unidentified clipping, n.d., American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, vol. 159; “Theatre Wing Says One Canteen to a City,” *People’s Voice*, August 7, 1943 [clipping], American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, vol. 181; Isadora Bennett, letter to the editor, *New York Age*, August 7, 1943, New York Age, American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, vol. 181; “American Theatre Wing Hits Discrimination,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 7, 1943, 21.

were telling “anti-Semitic and anti-Negro jokes.” The committee decided to place a sign backstage requesting entertainers not make “offensive racial jokes,” but next year Archer found herself making the same complaint. An MC at the canteen had told racist jokes “unfit for even a burlesque show,” and Archer “would not have blamed any Negro girl in the place for leaving immediately.”²⁰⁹ Previously, the Canteen Committee had decided that MCs should be responsible for interrupting comedians who were telling “rough jokes” of any sort, racist or not, but such a practice had little effect when it was the MC telling the jokes.²¹⁰ The Canteen Committee never developed a reliable system for ensuring performers did not make racist comments. Their tepid response may have been due in part to an unwillingness to antagonize entertainers who were volunteering their services.

On May 17, 1943, the Canteen Committee discussed how to ensure its policy was understood by all canteen volunteers. Vivian Smolen and Virginia Kaye made a particular effort to talk to junior hostesses about the policy and to meet with the black junior hostesses about problems they had at the canteen. Other committees reported that, though they made new volunteers aware of the policy, they “felt it was wrong to dwell too greatly on the subject. They said it was not only awkward but unwise to make an issue of it when interviewing prospective workers for their committees and outlining their duties to them.” The discussion ended on a self-congratulatory note: “It was stated that the Negro question was a very complicated one and that the Junior Hostess Committee and the Canteen as a whole was to be commended on the contribution they had made

²⁰⁹ Canteen Committee minutes, November 6, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 20; Canteen Committee minutes, July 17, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 22.

²¹⁰ Canteen Committee minutes, March 15, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 18.

toward trying to solve it even to a very small extent.” At the next meeting of the Canteen Committee, Kermit Bloomgarden expressed surprise that no action had been taken about race discrimination at the preceding meeting. Bloomgarden wanted to make a motion that the chair of each of the canteen’s committees had to speak to each member and explain the policy; instead, the committee decided to create “pledge cards” that each new volunteer would have to sign, promising to abide by the non-discrimination policy.²¹¹

The Canteen Committee remained committed to enforcing and practicing non-discrimination when infractions were brought to their attention, but they differed on how aggressively to promote the policy and what, if any, preventative measures to take against violations of the policy. Committee members worried that requiring new volunteers to sign a pledge might cause friction; actor Nancy Douglass believed that any solution to problems with race relations had to be the “outgrowth of an honest, sincere desire for better understanding and that it could not be achieved by demanding that everyone be as tolerant as others.” By demanding tolerance of all volunteers “an issue is made and an antipathy is created that does more harm than good.” Tom Rutherford, chair of the Host Committee, agreed with her.²¹²

Nonetheless, the committee passed the proposal for a pledge card. The initial wording, proposed by press representative Leo Freedman, read:

I hereby pledge to uphold and further all principles of the American Theatre Wing Stage Door Canteen in my capacity as a Canteen worker. I will not pass on any

²¹¹ Canteen Committee minutes, May 17, 1943, and May 23, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 18.

²¹² Canteen Committee minutes, June 8, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 19.

military information and I will not practice nor permit any discrimination as to race, color or creed.²¹³

The pledge cards were suggested around the time that the canteen was under investigation by the War Department. In the opinion of one of the agents, the wording of the pledge “could raise political implications.” Antoinette Perry, herself opposed to the creation of pledge cards, spoke with investigators at the canteen and assured them that the Theatre Wing would “closely supervise the solution of this problem.”²¹⁴ Ultimately, Perry told the Canteen Committee to reword the pledges, asking them to omit the phrase “nor permit.”²¹⁵

Among the hostesses, the War Department’s undercover agents encountered a variety of reactions to the non-discrimination policy. One junior hostess, a radio actor, told an agent that she had not yet danced with a black serviceman “and would not care to do so”; another junior hostess told an agent “she never refused to dance with anyone regardless of color.” A senior hostess, stage and film actor Hilda Vaughn, said there was no reason why junior hostesses should refuse to dance with black servicemen, and that they could choose not to volunteer if they did not wish to.²¹⁶ In an article titled “Bullets Don’t Discriminate – Nor Does the Stage Door Canteen,” John Meldon wrote that the surprising truth about the junior hostesses was that “the chorus girl turns out to be a cultured, intelligent person in whose heart burns an abiding love and understanding of

²¹³ Canteen Committee minutes, June 8, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 19.

²¹⁴ H. Berkowitz, Internal Security Division memorandum, July 9, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.

²¹⁵ Canteen Committee minutes, August 9, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 19.

²¹⁶ Harry A. Klein, memorandum to Agent in Charge, June 24, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.

Democracy.”²¹⁷ Certainly there were those who were passionately devoted to democracy as expressed through the canteen’s non-discrimination policy – but with an estimated 5,000 “chorus girls” serving as hostesses at the canteen over the course of the war, it was hardly possible for all of them to be dedicated to racial equality.²¹⁸

In 1944, when several junior hostesses expressed concern that the non-discrimination policy was not being fully practiced at the canteen, the Canteen Committee decided to create a racial subcommittee “for the purpose of editing and vitalizing the non-discrimination policy of the Canteen.”²¹⁹ The subcommittee included Virginia Kaye, Peggy Clark, Osceola Archer, Emeline Roche, and Kermit Bloomgarden. Their proposals included quarterly meetings with canteen workers to discuss and reinforce their knowledge of the policy and interviews with new senior hostesses to discuss the policy. Emeline Roche and Peggy Clark suggested the canteen display a sign with the “Entertainment Industry credo” on it, stating that the canteen was “created by the entertainment industry for all men in uniform, for all our allies, regardless of race, creed, color or religion.” The Canteen Committee approved these suggestions.²²⁰

According to Margaret Halsey, she and all of the other junior hostess captains worked to bring the white hostesses on their shifts in line with the canteen’s racial policy, by dealing with white hostesses who “side-stepped their responsibilities to Negro servicemen,” and by holding meetings to discuss the policy and allow hostesses (black

²¹⁷ John Meldon, “Bullets Don’t Discriminate – Nor Does the Stage Door Canteen,” *New York Daily Worker*, May 7, 1943 [clipping], American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, vol. 184.

²¹⁸ Canteen Committee minutes, October 2, 1945, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 24.

²¹⁹ Canteen Committee minutes, May 15, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 18.

²²⁰ Canteen Committee minutes, May 29, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 18.

and white) to air their concerns.²²¹ Halsey's work with the hostesses on her shift demonstrates the ways in which individual volunteers with relatively little authority at the canteen could work to foster integration. Halsey held a meeting specifically for white hostesses to air and explode the "insistent folk myths about the Negro" which they held. Before one meeting with her hostesses, Halsey, already a successful author at the time, mailed each of them a memorandum about dancing with black servicemen.²²²

The memorandum began by stating that the canteen's policy was based on the Declaration of Independence and Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

One hears a good deal of talk, in some circles, about the reds and long-haired radicals who want to tear down the Constitution. The reds and long-haired radicals only *want* to tear it down. The people who deny Negroes democratic equality actually *are* tearing it down.

In the memorandum, Halsey addressed hostesses who had difficulties abiding by the canteen's racial policy. She wrote, "You can't be blamed for having that prejudice in the first place. It was taught to you when you were too young and helpless to be critical." But, she told them, they could be blamed for holding on to that prejudice, especially when they had "a golden opportunity to come into contact with Negroes under the best possible circumstances and to find out what they are really like." The rest of the memorandum addressed a variety of specific myths. It challenged the idea that black people were intellectually inferior: "There is no scientific basis for the notion." It addressed the fear of rape: "You unconsciously, but very arrogantly, assume that no male

²²¹ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 27-28.

²²² Halsey, *Color Blind*, 50, 52-53. Halsey did not specify whether she sent the memorandum only to white hostesses, but it was specifically addressed to the concerns of white hostesses, and it is possible she only had non-black hostesses on her shift at the time.

Negro can so much as glance at you without wanting to get you with child. The truth is, that while you are an extremely attractive group of young women, there isn't a single one of you who's *that* good." It countered Southern fears of black uprising: "[T]here's one way to make absolutely certain that neither the Negroes nor any other section of our population feel impelled to rebel. That is to see that they have nothing to rebel about." And it addressed concerns about white women's honor: "The way to protect your honor is to be honorable." "If we have any secret yearning to think of ourselves as a Master Race," Halsey wrote, "we have only to pick up a newspaper to see that nobody is giving odds on Master Races these days."²²³

The memorandum ended with a plea to show understanding to black servicemen at the canteen who might be "sullen and unresponsive" or "aggressive and too responsive."

Try to be a little imaginative and put yourself in the Negro's place. When you go into the canteen, nothing worse can happen to you than getting tired or being bored. When a Negro goes into the canteen, he has no reason to suppose he won't be snubbed by one of the girls on our shift or openly insulted by a white soldier whose "superiority" has not been noticeably enhanced by rye and beer chasers.

Black servicemen, she pointed out, were not "under any obligation to behave better than" white people.²²⁴

The audience for the memorandum ultimately extended beyond the junior hostesses on Halsey's shift. It was printed in *PM* and *Negro Digest*.²²⁵ Halsey stated that

²²³ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 53-58.

²²⁴ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 58.

²²⁵ *PM*, August 15, 1943, 19; *Negro Digest*, October 1943, 51-53.

it was also printed in another newspaper and *Magazine Digest*.²²⁶ In 1945 it was included in *Primer for White Folks*, an anthology by black and white writers about being black in America.²²⁷ Walter White called the memorandum “the clearest, most unequivocal statement of human decency and democracy” he had read in a long time. He advised his readers, “Get it and read it and thereby learn that there are decent, clear-thinking white people in the United States who really mean and practice what they say about democracy.”²²⁸ *PM* printed three letters in response to the memorandum. One was from an American soldier who “had the article posted on the bulletin board for all to peruse” and planned to have “mimeographed copies sent to all the companies in my outfit.” Another was from a civilian woman who thought Halsey’s piece was “one of the best statements on the subject and should be widely circulated.” A third was from a reader who thought the piece was “the consummation of the degraded thought that is contaminating our country.”²²⁹ For her part, Halsey said she received some “long, single-spaced typewritten documents designed to justify the South’s traditional arrangements for its Negro citizens,” but overall the mail was positive.²³⁰

Halsey said she only received one overtly abusive letter in response to the article, calling the canteen a “cess pool of iniquity and degradation,” signed, “A real pure white American.” The anonymous writer wrote, “I have been shown your vulgar article.” This was perhaps an indication that the article was being passed around among indignant

²²⁶ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 62.

²²⁷ Bucklin Moon, ed., *Primer for White Folks*, (Garden City, NY: Double Day, Doran and Co., 1945).

²²⁸ White, People and Places, *Chicago Defender*, August 28, 1943, 15.

²²⁹ Letters to the editor, from H. Brooks, Georgiana Birch, and RJ Divine respectively, *PM*, August 22, 1943, 19.

²³⁰ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 63-65.

white Southerners.²³¹ The memorandum did at least make it into the hands one of the most prominent Southern segregationists of the period, Senator Theodore Bilbo. In his book *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization*, Bilbo devoted a few paragraphs to Halsey and the Stage Door Canteen. He wrote, “Action which could only be designed to promote the mongrelization of this country has been demanded of the Junior Hostesses at the Stage Door Canteen.... Margaret Halsey, captain of the Junior Hostesses, ordered the white girls serving as hostesses... to dance with Negro soldiers and to accept them as their social equals.”²³²

Proponents of racial equality and integration pointed out the irony of American servicemen supposedly fighting and dying for democracy while America refused to grant its own citizens democratic equality. Bilbo looked at the same fight and came to a different conclusion: “While our fighting men were dying and facing the enemy's bullets all over the world so that mankind could again know peace, Miss Halsey attempted to destroy the social customs in this country so that they may return home to find the way prepared for the mongrelization of the Nation.”²³³ For Bilbo, socializing and dancing with blacks was a slippery, steep, and very short slope to interracial sex, and the inevitable interracial babies. He feared “the great drive for social equality, social commingling, social intermingling, intermarriage – interbreeding, if you please!”²³⁴ The weak point in white America’s defenses against “mongrelization” was white women, who, if not raped

²³¹ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 62-63.

²³² Bilbo mistakenly understood Halsey to be *the* captain of the junior hostesses, rather than *a* captain. See Theodore Bilbo, “Astounding Revelations to White America,” in *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization* (Poplarville, MS: Dream House Publishing, 1947) , Internet Archive, <http://www.archive.org/details/TakeYourChoice>.

²³³ Bilbo.

²³⁴ Bilbo, quoted in Eileen Boris, 86.

by black men, could be seduced by them. This specter stood behind objections to interracial dancing, which was particularly alarming because it entailed physical contact.

While whites, including the more liberal ones, were concerned about black men dancing with white women, few people, if any, raised concerns about white men dancing with black women. These interactions did not upset the American hierarchy of power and control, in which white superseded black and male superseded female. Concerns about the safety of white women in the presence of black men – and responses to these concerns from proponents of integration – directed attention away from dangers facing black women. Eileen Boris writes, “The rhetorical protection of white women continued to mask attacks on black women into the 1940s.”²³⁵ Margaret Halsey observed these dynamics in the canteen, when black hostesses of “unmistakable respectability” were subject to blatant propositioning and verbal sexual harassment by white servicemen. “Our no-discrimination policy certainly meant that we had to be alert to protect young girls,” Halsey noted. “But not young white girls.”²³⁶

Whites assumed that black men wanted physical contact with white women, and that they wanted to dance with them. At the Stage Door Canteen, this was sometimes the case, but not necessarily for the reasons whites believed. At the most practical level, there were not always enough hostesses to go around, black or white, and a man who wanted to dance had to ask whom he could. But for black servicemen, many of whom were politicized by their experiences in the service, dancing with a white woman could also be a political statement, a way to test and push social boundaries, or a symbolic statement of his belief in his own equality. When a white serviceman at the Philadelphia Stage Door

²³⁵ Boris, 91.

²³⁶ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 101.

Canteen told a black serviceman to leave, “[t]he soldier replied that he had been fighting overseas for 3 years, and thought he was fighting for Democracy.”²³⁷ A black serviceman’s dancing with white hostesses made a statement to observers. In a letter to Langston Hughes, Carl Van Vechten wrote gleefully of a night at the canteen where he had watched as a black sailor (“he couldnta been blacker”) cut in on a number of white servicemen to dance with white hostesses. Between dances, the sailor would chat with white servicemen. He “was not fresh” but “he behaved naturally as if he were used to dancing with white girls every night.” For Van Vechten, it was an example of what blacks could do in the north if only they had more “NERVE and initiative.”²³⁸

Not every black serviceman at the canteen had the sort of moxie or motivation it took to face the potential backlash of socializing with white women. White volunteers often had to win over black servicemen – though some, of course, had no desire to do so. Selena Royle wrote in distress to Jane Cowl because she had heard that a white socialite who volunteered at the canteen had told a black soldier, “Colored boys don’t dance with white girls.” Royle told Cowl that a white junior hostess who had heard the exchange “was in a frenzy” as the junior hostesses “spent so much time and energy trying to win the confidence of the colored soldiers and sailors it was distressing to have it undermined!”²³⁹ Black servicemen from the South, especially, needed special encouragement to interact with white hostesses. Osceola Archer told the *Baltimore Afro-American* of one “technique” hostesses used to encourage black servicemen to dance with white hostesses: a black hostess would sit with a black serviceman. After an interlude, a

²³⁷ Report of incident, n.d., World War II Collection, USO Series, box 9, Mrs. Favorite’s file.

²³⁸ Van Vechten to Hughes, October 8, 1942, *Remember Me to Harlem: the Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925–1964*, ed. Emily Bernard (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 211.

²³⁹ Selena Royle to Jane Cowl, n.d., Emeline Roche Collection, box 31, folder 13.

white hostess would walk past. The black hostess could then introduce the white hostess to the serviceman, and suggest that the two of them dance while she attended to something.²⁴⁰

An officer involved in the War Department's investigation of the canteen was concerned about the problem of "Negro soldiers who wish to dance with white hostesses, for as far as is known there are no Negro hostesses."²⁴¹ The officer was mistaken that there were no black hostesses, but his description of the problem reflects a common assumption that white hostesses would only be expected to dance with black servicemen if there were no black hostesses. Many servicemen's centers which, for whatever reason, did not feel they could blatantly refuse admission to African Americans, would hire black hostesses for the express purpose of avoiding interracial dancing. The hostesses' presence could ensure that blacks and whites were only dancing near each other, rather than with each other.

As a result, hiring black hostesses for servicemen's canteens could be viewed as an act of racial exclusion as well as inclusion. The *Pittsburgh Courier* reported on the Stage Door Canteen's hiring black hostesses as an inherently discriminatory practice. The canteen had started off well, the *Courier* article explained, with white hostesses expected to dance with all servicemen, but as more black servicemen began to visit, the canteen had hired more black hostesses. "Until this latest development," the canteen "had been

²⁴⁰ Carter, "N.Y. Stage Door Canteen Open to All Servicemen," *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 12, 1944, 5. This interview probably never would have appeared in a white paper, unless it was the sort of white paper that liked to exacerbate racial tensions.

²⁴¹ William Fox, memorandum to Alton Miller, July 5, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.

among the few places which showed no discrimination whatsoever.”²⁴² *Variety* reported that the canteen’s new black hostesses would “cater” to black servicemen:

For a time Jane Cowl...had ofay [white] showgirls dancing with any soldier, as part of their patriotic duty, with few squawks resulting. Recent addition of young colored choristers, however, it is hoped, will eliminate any possibility of an incident.²⁴³

Delmer Daves, too, believed that the black hostesses were there to dance with black servicemen, and the white hostesses to dance with white servicemen. “[Although] white girls are required to dance with [a] colored man in uniform rather than make an issue, there are colored girl hostesses there for that purpose,” he wrote.²⁴⁴

Even with the early addition of black junior hostesses, there were still relatively few of them. Independent of the Canteen Committee, Osceola Archer engaged to find more black hostesses. Archer approached Ellen Tarry, a journalist who was staying at the Harlem YWCA, about finding hostesses among the women living there “since many of the Negro actresses were on the road most of the time.” Tarry ended up volunteering at the canteen.²⁴⁵ In January 1943, Van Vechten wrote to a friend of his surprise at seeing two black junior hostesses on a shift that previously had none. When he saw Archer, he asked her how it had happened. “[S]he smiled that mysterious smile of hers and

²⁴² “The American Way,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 18, 1942, 24

²⁴³ “Negro Hostesses Now Cater to Colored Boys at NY Stage Door Canteen,” *Variety*, April 8, 1942, 4, 20.

²⁴⁴ Daves, Research and Notes Made at the Stage Door Canteen, August – November 1942, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 5.

²⁴⁵ Ellen Tarry, *The Third Door: The Autobiography of an American Negro Woman*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1966), 190.

whispered, ‘I’ve been working.’”²⁴⁶ Later that year, Archer and another member of the Canteen Committee, Consuelo Hermer, contacted the Negro Actors’ Guild about furnishing canteen volunteers.²⁴⁷ Generally, the number of black hostesses seems to have increased over the course of the war. “Later,” Ellen Tarry wrote, “when the cream of Negro society was flocking to the Stage Door Canteen to work as hostesses and hosts, I remembered those nights when there were only three or four of us to provide our boys with dancing partners.”²⁴⁸ In 1944, a year after Osceola Archer began her recruitment efforts in earnest, she was able to tell the *Baltimore Afro-American* that the canteen had around two hundred black hostesses, and of the twenty-one shifts of junior hostesses, two were captained by black women.

Archer does not appear to have faced any opposition from the Canteen Committee in her efforts to recruit black hostesses, but aside from the help given her by Consuelo Hermer, she probably faced disinterest. To some extent, the Stage Door Canteen management seemed to share the view that hiring black hostesses was a type of discrimination against black servicemen that led to de facto segregation. When a junior hostess suggested that the canteen needed more black hostesses, Bloomgarden asked the Junior Hostess Committee to explain the canteen’s “democratic” policy to her.²⁴⁹ The implication was that hiring more black hostesses went against this democratic policy and that more black hostesses were not needed because white hostesses could perform the perceived duty of black hostesses – to dance with black servicemen. No one at the

²⁴⁶ Van Vechten to Dorothy Peterson, January 26, 1943, *Letters of Carl Van Vechten*, 190-191.

²⁴⁷ Canteen Committee minutes, May 23, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 18.

²⁴⁸ Tarry, 191.

²⁴⁹ Canteen Committee minutes, February 8, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 17. It is not clear from the phrasing of the minutes if the junior hostess’ suggestion made any explicit reference to needing more black junior hostesses so that white ones would not have to dance with black servicemen, or if Bloomgarden simply interpreted it to mean that.

Canteen Committee meeting suggested that black hostesses should be present because black servicemen *wanted* them there or because they were talented young women of the theater who could be capable hostesses.

In many discussions of the canteen nondiscrimination policy, black women were reduced to a tool of segregation. They could not contribute to integration the way white women and black men could. If a black hostess danced with a white man, she was being a snob or a racist. If she danced with only black men, she was reinforcing the color line. From the perspective of both its proponents and opponents, racial integration was most potently represented by the intermingling of black *men* and whites. The canteen was a strong example of integration because it violated an obvious, widely-recognized taboo of black men dancing with white women, not because black women danced with white men.

Some guests and canteen officials viewed black hostesses dancing with white servicemen as a problem. A black serviceman complained to Van Vechten about the lack of black hostesses at the canteen, but concluded, “Well, I guess it doesn’t matter anyway. When they DO come they always jump with the white boys.”²⁵⁰ An article in the *Baltimore Afro-American* told of how “hostesses and officers of the day” kept an eye out “for evidences of hatred.” Canteen volunteers had been prepared to lecture white women about dancing with black men, but they had “never suspected that they would have to lecture colored girls on the rightness of dancing with soldiers, even if they were darker.”²⁵¹ Halsey wrote that the canteen experienced problems with “very light-colored Negro girls who were popular with white servicemen and tried to avoid dancing with

²⁵⁰ Van Vechten to Hughes, October 8, 1942, *Remember Me to Harlem*, 211.

²⁵¹ Carter, “N.Y. Stage Door Canteen Open to All Servicemen,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 12, 1944, 5.

boys of their own race.” Halsey was in sympathy with what she saw as these women’s desire to distance themselves from the maltreatment faced by black people. “But for the sake of the general *esprit de corps*, these instances of discrimination, though easily understandable, had to be coped with.”²⁵²

Jane White was one of the light-skinned hostesses who was “coped with.” White was called before a special race relations committee, which she recalled included Margaret Webster, who had directed Paul Robeson in his barrier-breaking performance in *Othello*. The committee accused White of discriminating against black men and dancing chiefly with whites, and dismissed her from serving at the canteen. At the time, White recalled, she was distraught, and for a long time blamed herself. In hindsight she wondered whether it was her own behavior that was at fault, or if they dismissed her because of “their perception of what a black hostess should be doing.” The racial “mixing and blending” that occurred in the canteen, occurred “within limits,” said White. The canteen was a sort of “island” of integration, “but within that little island there still was the expectation that... black hostesses were there for the black servicemen,” and that dancing with blacks was not a duty that automatically fell to white hostesses.²⁵³

Stage Door Canteen personnel could act with egalitarian motives and democratic intentions, yet still reinforce a racist or discriminatory dynamic. In White’s words, the “subtle gradations of racial exclusion” did not stop at the canteen doors, even when the more obvious forms of segregation did. Some aspects of segregation were not “so much conscious as just assumed,” Jane White recalled. “And that was one of the great poisons of our country.” Many instances of racial discrimination were not clearly that. Recalling

²⁵² Halsey, *Color Blind*, 91-92.

²⁵³ White, interview.

her father Walter White's lack of a reaction to her dismissal, White reflected, "The fact that my father, who was such a pugnacious seeker of equality, did not come down on them – or on ME – with a mallet, says something about the ambiguity of that decision on their part."²⁵⁴

At the time she was volunteering, White professed herself "profoundly impressed" by "the way white and colored fraternized at the canteen," but White did not volunteer at the canteen with the intention of fostering interracial relations or working for



Figure 11. Jane White with busboy Robert Carleton and Pfc. Oriton Williams.
Photograph by Carl Van Vechten, August 9, 1943. (Beinecke Library)

²⁵⁴ White, interview.

a better world.²⁵⁵ Many hostesses did not give much thought to the integration policy, but instead focused on doing what they saw as their primary work, being polite and enjoyable company for Allied servicemen. Dancing with black servicemen was just one component of this job. Halsey was particularly impressed by a white Southern girl who was “desperately frightened” of dancing with black servicemen, but nonetheless followed the canteen rules and interacted with black servicemen without giving any outward indication of her inward discomfort. She acted from good manners, rather than a deep-seated passion for equality. Other hostesses did not think much about dancing with black servicemen at all. Gloria Stroock “never saw a black soldier that wouldn’t dance with [her] or a soldier that [she] wouldn’t dance with.” “We were just all in it together.” But Stroock added that she may not have been sensitive to any conflict or tensions that did arise from the racial mixing.²⁵⁶

Halsey thought that most white hostesses were “neither prejudiced nor unprejudiced”; they simply “had no conception at all of the difficulties with which Negro Americans have to contend.”²⁵⁷ Those white volunteers to whose attention racial conflict and racist behavior did come were often contending with it for the first time in their lives. Halsey said she had the same combination of “innocence, ignorance, indifference and inexperience” as many white Americans before she went to work at the canteen.²⁵⁸ It was not until she was working at the canteen that she began to have an idea of what daily discrimination entailed. Halsey was once talking with a black sailor, when a white soldier

²⁵⁵ Naomi Jolles, “Smith Shows How,” *New York Post*, April 3, 1943, condensed in *Negro Digest*, June 1943, 21-24; White, interview.

²⁵⁶ Stroock, interview, October 20, 2009.

²⁵⁷ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 59-60.

²⁵⁸ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 4.

stopped near them and looked at them “with pure, blazing, animal hatred.” Halsey was terrified, but her conversational companion went on talking with her as if they were not being violently glowered at.²⁵⁹ For Halsey this was an isolated experience; for the sailor it was probably not, and his response was probably a practiced and tested one.

Sometimes racist hostility was more overt and required an active response. Canteen volunteers who were confronting racist servicemen had to be creative, especially in situations where there was the threat of violence. Halsey told a story of a junior hostess captain who was called over to a table where a white hostess sat with several black American soldiers. Near them was a group of white American soldiers who were “allowing it to be known that where they came from, it only costs thirty-five dollars to kill the bastards.”

The captain used her head. With the speed of light, she rounded up every white hostess she could lay her hands on, and then she and the other white girls descended on the Negroes’ table like rooks coming home at twilight. The Negro soldiers virtually disappeared from view in a cloud of white girls.... [The white soldiers] stared in utter incredulity at this “white tide.” Then, without a word they got up and walked out of the canteen.²⁶⁰

At the Stage Door Canteen, blacks were always in the minority; but so, fortunately, were nakedly racist and violent whites.

Though it was the most frightening, overt racism was also in some ways much easier to address than the subtler forms. Black servicemen and hostesses could be

²⁵⁹ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 32-33.

²⁶⁰ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 31-32.

slighted, insulted, and marginalized without there ever being a clear infraction of rules or even manners to which canteen personnel could respond. For example, cutting in on dances was normal practice; but white servicemen would cut in on black men dancing with white hostesses to “rescue” or rebuke the hostess. Ellen Tarry, the journalist who volunteered as a hostess at Archer’s request, had white servicemen cut in on her dances. Tarry was a very light-skinned black woman. “Several times” she wrote, “white servicemen cut in and asked me why I was dancing with Negroes.”²⁶¹

Tarry remembered the incident with amusement: “[W]hen the colored boys saw what was happening, they started cutting in on the white boys and it all passed off in a spirit of fun.”²⁶² Not all servicemen were able to make light of the experience. A private named Henry L. Hall wrote to the canteen about his experiences:

While serving overseas I visualized the United States as a better place to return than the United States that I had left. This vision gave me inspiration. In a sense the Canteen has fulfilled that vision.... Unfortunately I have discovered an evil whose sole aim is to destroy the very foundation upon which the Canteen is founded. Service men from the South are not in accord with the democratic principles advocated at the Canteen. The Southerners are using the policy of tag dancing as a means of destroying racial contact; thereby eliminating racial understanding.²⁶³

According to Halsey, the canteen expected white hostesses to tell white servicemen that they did not need to be saved from dancing with blacks.²⁶⁴ The press reported

²⁶¹ Tarry, 190.

²⁶² Tarry, 190.

²⁶³ Henry L. Hall to Executive Board of the Stage Door Canteen, August 4, 1945, Emeline Roche Collection, box 31, folder 13.

²⁶⁴ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 30.

approvingly that junior hostesses had developed a retort for servicemen who questioned their dancing with black men: “I dance with the uniform of my country.”²⁶⁵

One could address canteen volunteers *en masse* (that is, if they showed up for meetings or bothered to read the bulletin board) and inform them of the sort of behavior that was expected of them. Servicemen were a different matter. Some canteen volunteers took the time to talk to white servicemen who expressed hostility towards racial integration. As a white Southerner, Tom Rutherford, chairman of the Host Committee, was able to counter Southern servicemen who argued that the canteen’s racial policy arose from a purely Northern way of thinking. Osceola Archer told the *Baltimore Afro-American* of a time that Rutherford had dealt with a white serviceman who was trying to stop a black soldier from dancing with a white hostess. Rutherford took the white serviceman aside and talked with him in private. Then he had the black serviceman join them. “When they all emerged they were arm in arm,” Archer told the *Afro-American*. “Rutherford [sic] never told us what he said or how he managed it.”²⁶⁶ Virginia Kaye told the *Daily Worker* of an incident where a Southern soldier seeking information was referred to a junior hostess captain. The soldier was horrified to find that the captain in question was a black woman, Dorothy Williams. According to Kaye, Williams maintained her calm and poise and talked with the soldier until he had calmed down from the shock of seeing a black woman in a position of authority. Before he left, he told her he was going overseas soon, and asked her if she would write to him. Williams agreed. Kaye furnished the newspaper with a copy of the letter that the serviceman later wrote to

²⁶⁵ See, for example, Carter, “N.Y. Stage Door Canteen Open to All Servicemen,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 12, 1944, 5; and Walter White, People and Places, *Chicago Defender*, August 28, 1943, 15.

²⁶⁶ Carter, “N.Y. Stage Door Canteen Open to All Servicemen,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 5.

Williams. In it, he apologized for being foolish and told her he had since made friends with black servicemen. The letter ended, “I will join your army any day in bringing better democracy back home.”²⁶⁷

Despite a segregated military, the experience of war altered both black and white servicemen’s perceptions of race relations in America. Halsey believed the canteen received fewer objections to the non-discrimination policy from white servicemen who had served abroad and had experiences working and fighting with black men.²⁶⁸ For their



Figure 12. Hostess captain Dorothy Williams with (*left to right*) Pfc. Herbert Coburn, busboy Coby Ruskin, and Cpl. Bobby Evans. Photograph by Carl Van Vechten, April 19, 1943. (Beinecke Library)

²⁶⁷ John Meldon, Your Home Town, “When Boy Meets Girl – But Not the Hollywood Way,” *New York Daily Worker*, April 24, 1945 [clipping], American Theatre Wing Scrapbooks, vol. 194.

²⁶⁸ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 16.

part, some black servicemen became increasingly assertive in white society and more comfortable at the canteen. But sometimes it was not the experience of shared hardship, but shared enjoyment, that changed minds. In England, a white American soldier told Walter White that he had been angry and shocked when he first went to the Stage Door Canteen in New York City, and had left immediately. However, he returned because it was one of the best known recreation spots for servicemen from out of town. After several visits, he realized he was no longer bothered by seeing blacks and whites mingling. He asked White, "If we can play together, why can't we fight together?" He told White he felt like a hypocrite "when people [in England] ask why, in fighting a war for democracy, the United States sends over one white and one Negro army."²⁶⁹ Osceola Archer told the *Baltimore Afro-American* the canteen helped black servicemen, frustrated and furious from the experiences in the Southern army camps, "to visualize democracy. Many of them are experiencing it for the first time in their lives at the Stage Door Canteen."²⁷⁰ So were many white servicemen.

The education provided by the canteen was not confined to black-white relations. Actor Mildred Clinton recalled a conversation with a pair of white servicemen who had been offended to see white hostess dancing with a black serviceman. While Clinton was talking to them, she mentioned she was Jewish. The servicemen were stunned, and one asked her to stand up so he could get a look at her. They studied her "from head to foot," and one of them said, "You're not bad for a Jewish girl." Clinton said she did not find the interaction offensive. "They were expecting to see horns on me and when they didn't—it

²⁶⁹ White, *A Rising Wind* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1945), 36-37

²⁷⁰ Carter, "N.Y. Stage Door Canteen Open to All Servicemen," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 5.

was a new experience, an insight.” They chose not to leave the canteen as they had originally intended, but to stay and talk with her.²⁷¹ The canteen offered servicemen a chance to interact with members of racial and national groups they had not encountered before, in favorable circumstances. Working at the canteen attested (truthfully or not) to a volunteer’s patriotism, loyalty, and kindness. For their part, volunteers’ ability to educate servicemen at the canteen depended on their knowing that they were in an environment where they had the support of canteen officials and canteen policy.

For many servicemen the canteen was just a good time; it served no higher purpose than a break from boredom and represented no higher cause than keeping morale high. But some servicemen professed themselves profoundly affected by the experience of visiting the canteen. One soldier told a hostess that the canteen was “like the door spoken of by St. John: ‘Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and will open the door, I will come in and will sup with him and he with me.’”²⁷² Tai Solarin, a Nigerian serving in the Royal Air Force, who later became a prominent educator and writer in Nigeria, wrote to the Canteen Committee that the canteen represented Christianity “made practical.” “It is unfortunate that it took so much as a war to make mankind with all its races and creeds turn its life together.”²⁷³ The *Canteen News* reported that an airman asked the OD if he could use the distinctive Stage Door Canteen junior hostess apron as his “flag”: “It has been the insignia of all that is worth fighting

²⁷¹ Horowitz, “Once Upon a Dream,” 25-26.

²⁷² *Canteen News*, October 12, 1944, 1, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15; Bible verse is Revelation 3:20.

²⁷³ Tai Solarin, *Canteen News*, November 16, 1944, 1, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 16.

for—hospitality, humanity, and true ideals of democracy. For here I’ve seen ideals in practice—no race or creed prejudices.”²⁷⁴

Some volunteers looked at the diversity in the canteen and saw the future. In her memorandum to the junior hostesses on her shift, Margaret Halsey spoke of the canteen as a preview of the postwar world, in which Americans would increasingly have to interact with people from other parts of the country, of other backgrounds, and from other counties. “You might as well get used to it here and now, on Sunday nights at the canteen.”²⁷⁵ Carl Van Vechten saw in the canteen “a new kind of spirit... which might be utilized profitably in another field in the post-war era.”²⁷⁶ A hostess named Elinor Ventura wrote a poem called “Postwar Suggestion,” holding up the Stage Door Canteen as a template for postwar life. In Ventura’s ideal society, artists worked for only applause, food was free and there were no bills to pay, and everyone had “equal power, equal right.” The canteen, wrote Ventura, was “proof/ That we can live beneath one roof.”²⁷⁷

Though white Americans comprised the majority of guests, volunteers and visitors were impressed by the diversity of canteen-goers. Frances Paelian, an artist who drew portraits for servicemen at the canteen, described the canteen’s guests in a talk given to the Women’s Press Club: “Young Chinese flyers, be-turbaned bearded Hindus in R.A.F. uniforms, and Negro sailors mingle with American-Japanese soldiers from Hawaii, Polish aviators, blond Dutch seamen and American boys from Texas, Missouri

²⁷⁴ “Canteen Apron Stripes of Honor,” *Canteen News*, March 23, 1944, 2, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15.

²⁷⁵ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 57.

²⁷⁶ Van Vechten, “An Ode to the Stage Door Canteen,” 230.

²⁷⁷ Elinor Ventura, “Postwar Suggestion,” *Canteen News*, March 23, 1944, 1, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15.

and your home town.”²⁷⁸ (Presumably many of the Negro sailors Paelian referred to were also American boys from Texas, Missouri, and your home town.) Van Vechten trotted out a similar list when describing the canteen’s international atmosphere: “English soldiers, sailors and RAF men dance beside, mingle and eat with Chinese airmen, Americans from every branch of the service, including Negroes and Indians, Canadians, Australians, South Africans, Dutch and French sailors...occasionally Russians: all are a part of the Stage Door Canteen.”²⁷⁹ The point was not just that these races and nationalities were present at the canteen, but that they interacted. Occasionally they got to



Figure 13. Royal Navy and American sailors at the Stage Door Canteen.
(HMS. Vengeance web site, www.hms-vengeance.co.uk)

²⁷⁸ “Frances Paelian Makes a Speech at the Press Club,” *Canteen News*, March 30, 1944, 1.

²⁷⁹ Van Vechten, “An Ode to the Stage Door Canteen,” 230.

know each other. One junior hostess wrote excitedly of how she introduced two Englishmen of the RAF to “two American Indian boys in Uncle Sam’s uniform.” “Thereupon questions were asked right and left and it all ended with the four boys leaving the canteen the best of friends. They left together!”²⁸⁰

Encountering “real American Indians” was a particular treat for canteen volunteers. Sources noted when the soldier in question was “full blooded” or “a quarter Indian” (they did not specify whether the canteen workers had asked for a pedigree or the information had been volunteered). Even while identifying American Indians as exotic and unfamiliar, volunteers emphasized their shared American identity and their stake in the current war. Edythe Freeman “would never forget... Bill, the full blooded Cherokee Indian, glad to have the opportunity to fight for the land of his ancestors, the home of his descendants.”²⁸¹ The *Canteen News* described a visit from one of the “‘First Families’ of America” as an honor for the canteen:

Not a single feather in her cap, but one in ours, when Edna Booth and her husband Ira C. Booth [Storekeeper 2nd Class] visited the canteen recently. Full-blooded Indians of the Tsimphean Tribe of Alaska, she looked as though she had stepped from the pages of Vogue, and he was truly the typical American sailor.

Edna and Ira Booth were singled out for mention in the *Canteen News* because they were Alaska Natives, but they were described in a way that downplayed their cultural and

²⁸⁰ Valerie Hayes, “Additional Incidentals,” September 25, 1942, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 8.

²⁸¹ Edythe Freeman, “From the Hostesses of the American Theatre Wing Stage Door Canteen to Our Fighting Men,” August 17, 1942, 4, Delmer Daves Papers, box 14, folder 10; “real American Indians” from Hayes, “Additional Incidentals,” folder 8.

physical differences; she represented a high standard of American beauty and fashion, and he represented unpretentious American masculinity.

In other instances, volunteers emphasized difference rather than commonalities. Cultural differences were part of what made the canteen an exciting place to work, and they also served as a reminder that America's cause was shared by people all over the world. Edythe Freeman said she and other junior hostesses felt "happy all over" when

-- The Aussies visit us, so different in their khaki shorts and large felt hats with swirled brims always perched at a natty angle.

-- We hear the R.A.F. pilots and navigators promise to "give Jerry the lickin' of 'is bloomin' life'....

-- Our sailors and the British tars get together, slap each other across the back and boast of the respective strength of their navies.

Though some of the volunteers, both as New Yorkers and members of the theatre world, may well have been more cosmopolitan than the average American, they were not immune to the thrilling novelty of hearing British slang, or seeing Chinese fliers forming a conga line.

Canteen volunteers' efforts to recognize all Americans and American Allies as equal partners in the war effort often superseded but rarely erased existing stereotypes and underlying racist assumptions. While the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures entreated Americans to overcome their "traditional patronizing attitude" towards the Chinese, the *Canteen News* still printed a story about a Chinese serviceman being "fooled" by "Foo Ling Yu," a white magician who wore yellowface for his act. According to the article, the Chinese serviceman "could not believe his eyes, when he beheld the Chinaman changed

into an American. What magic was this?”²⁸² A similar tone was adopted in a *Canteen News* article about a group of Indian servicemen whom Rachel Crothers admitted into the canteen even though they were not in uniform. The “huddling Hindoos” were “thinly clad, and an icy wind was tugging at their tatters.” They reminded a volunteer of the rhyme, “Poor bare little Hindoo,/Had to make his skin do.”²⁸³ A spirit of friendship and appreciation did not preclude finding foreigners quaint and strange.

The canteen’s stage was a venue for honoring American allies. The Theatre Wing Board asked Stage Door Canteens around the country to have the USSR’s anthem performed on February 23, 1944, Red Army Day. When Antoinette Perry made this request to the Philadelphia Stage Door Canteen, she received a reply that the canteen was already planning an entire program “in commemoration of the 26th Anniversary of the Founding of the Red Army.”²⁸⁴ When black entertainer Paul Robeson performed at the canteen, he sang a Chinese and a Russian song – “both fighting songs of our gallant allies,” noted Radie Harris. Robeson himself was a symbol of international unity: when he performed at the canteen, which he did alone and as part of the *Porgy and Bess* company, he “was besieged by service men of all nations who wanted to shake his hand and to get his autograph.”²⁸⁵ The *Pittsburgh Courier* recorded that “Robeson was of greater interest to one RAF sergeant pilot from Blackpool. Engaging in a lengthy conversation with the sergeant, the singer, who had appeared many times at that seaside resort in Lancashire where RAF pilots are trained, was taken as a symbol of home by the

²⁸² “Foo Ling Yu, Fooled Him!” *Canteen News*, April 6, 1944, 2, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15.

²⁸³ *Canteen News*, March 16, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 15.

²⁸⁴ Antoinette Perry to Charles Ward, February 17, 1944, World War II Collection, USO Series, box 14, American Theatre Wing New York Correspondence folder; Ward to Perry, February 23, 1944.

²⁸⁵ Harris, Canteen Capers, *Variety*, August 5, 1942, 63.

English sky fighter.”²⁸⁶ Members of the entertainment industry liked to believe that music and performance were an international language that transcended national boundaries, and sometimes the reactions of canteen audiences confirmed this belief.

In 1944, the Canteen Committee was confronted with the question of whether or not to admit Italian “visitors,” prisoners of war who had agreed to join “Italian Service Units,” performing war-related work for the United States. The committee wondered whether they still had the status of prisoners, or were now part of the American forces. Committee members decided to wait on a ruling from the Theatre Wing, though one member of the committee expressed the hope that the board’s ruling would take into account the “strong feeling in the Canteen against the admission of Italian men.” At their next meeting, still waiting on the decision of the board and without new information on their status, the Canteen Committee gave the order that “Italian prisoners” were not to be admitted.²⁸⁷ That the Canteen Committee took two meetings to make the decision not to admit former enemy combatants because they were not positive about their status shows how seriously they took their own rule about serving all (male) members of the armed forces of the United Nations.

While enemy combatants were not admitted as guests, some enemy civilians worked there as volunteers. In early January, the American Theatre Wing executive board ruled that enemy aliens could not volunteer at the canteen. By then, the canteen had about seventeen enemy alien volunteers.²⁸⁸ In the wake of the decision, Kaye told the rest of the

²⁸⁶ “Paul Robeson Seen as Symbol,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 15, 1942, 21.

²⁸⁷ Canteen Committee minutes, July 10, 1944, and July 17, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 22.

²⁸⁸ H. Berkowitz, Internal Security Division memorandum, July 9, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.

Canteen Committee that several junior hostesses had threatened to quit in solidarity with the workers who would be dismissed under the new policy. The committee passed a motion stating the Theatre Wing Board's resolution should be rescinded, since there was no government restriction against enemy aliens participating in civilian activities or being inducted into the Armed Forces.²⁸⁹ The committee's resolution had no effect, though, and in early 1943 playwright Rachel Crothers, president of the Theatre Wing, sent letters of dismissal to enemy alien volunteers.²⁹⁰

Henry Levinger, one of the volunteers who was dismissed, had been volunteering for nine months when he received Crothers' letter. In a letter to Cowl and Royle, Levinger deployed the rhetorical arsenal of wartime ideals of democracy and unity. He wrote that the ruling was an example "of turning the power of an organization against a defenseless minority – a practice used by Fascist states." He had friends who had the same legal status as he did and were serving in the military: "How am I to explain to them, that whereas they are privileged to shed their blood for this country I am, for reasons they are sharing with me, not even allowed to wipe the coffee they spilled from their trays?" He expressed himself particularly dismayed that such a thing would occur in "an organization handled by artists and theatrical people." "Art and Theatre especially are international," he wrote. "I can see no reason why national discriminations should suddenly take place in a theatrical organization such as the Stage Door Canteen."²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ Canteen Committee minutes, January 17, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 17.

²⁹⁰ Canteen Committee minutes, March 1, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 18. The text of the letter was not included in Roche's papers, but Rutherford thought the letter was a "slap in the face" of the volunteers and Kaye called it "shocking."

²⁹¹ Levinger to Cowl and Royle, March 3, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA. A letter from Henry Miller to Antoinette Perry, objecting to his daughter's dismissal from the canteen, offers an interesting complement to Levinger's letter. Miller believed his daughter was dismissed because her captain did not like her. Like Levinger, Miller connected the dismissal to wartime values, arguing that it

At the canteen's inception, Vivian Smolen had approached German actor Ellen Schwanneke about becoming a junior hostess. According to Schwanneke, Smolen overrode her objections that she was a citizen of an enemy nation, telling her that would not be a problem. Schwanneke had emigrated from Germany in 1939 as Nazi "terrorism" increased. She was already well-known in Germany at the time and was giving up a very promising career, as she pointed out to Antoinette Perry.²⁹² Her dismissal from the canteen gained some publicity through Leonard Lyons, who wrote a short, disapproving item that mentioned that Schwanneke had refused Hitler's invitation to all German artists to "be his guest at the Munich festivals."²⁹³ A woman who had snubbed the Fuhrer could hardly be treated as an enemy.

In February 1943, twenty-one junior hostess captains sent a letter of protest to the American Theatre Wing Board. "[A]s representatives of the largest body of workers in the Canteen," they wanted to "go on record as being opposed to the policy... excluding enemy aliens from contributing service to the Stage Door Canteen."

We believe that to continue the policy as it exists now is completely contrary to the principles and ideals for which this war is being fought. To us this is the war and no more urgent issue has faced us before to test our belief in the Democracy which we see at work nightly at the Canteen.²⁹⁴

"seem[ed] to violate the principles of justice and fairness which our boys [were] gallantly fighting to preserve." Miller's letter suggests that that such arguments may have been a common recourse when objecting to a perceived injustice. (Miller to Perry, February 7, 1944, Emeline Roche Collection, box 31, folder 13.)

²⁹² Ellen Schwanneke to Antoinette Perry, November 12, 1942, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA. This letter was written in response to an earlier Theatre Wing ruling against enemy alien volunteers, which, though announced, was apparently never enforced and was hastily forgotten by canteen volunteers.

²⁹³ Leonard Lyons, Loose-Leaf Notebook, *Washington Post*, March 13, 1943, B9.

²⁹⁴ Captains of the Junior Hostess Committee to Antoinette Perry and Kermit Bloomgarden, February 2, 1943 [telegram], Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.

They suggested that enemy aliens who had filed a Declaration of Intent to become citizens of the United States (also known as first papers) should be allowed to work at the canteen. The Theatre Wing Board was convinced by their argument and changed the policy.²⁹⁵

The change was short-lived. After the Board changed its ruling, Rachel Crothers consulted with other war relief agencies, including the USO, and found that they all had a policy of only allowing American citizens to volunteer. Crothers also received a letter from Lt. Commander Charles Cranford, Navy Welfare-Recreation Officer for New York. Cranford told Crothers he had been dismayed to find out that the American Theatre Wing allowed people who were not “full-fledged American citizens” to “rub elbows with Naval Personnel.” “Perhaps these people, as individuals, are as much against the Axis nations as we are,” he wrote, but nonetheless it would be “unwise” to allow them to volunteer. As a result of the advice and especially Cranford’s letter, the Theatre Wing Board reversed the decision again.²⁹⁶

This time, the Canteen Committee supported the decision. Oliver Sayler, a member of the Theater Wing Board who often attended Canteen Committee meetings, stated that he knew several enemy aliens who had their first papers who said they were “in complete sympathy with everything the Wing and this country [were] doing” but they would “reverse their position” if the war would mean the destruction of their homelands. Sayler believed the possibility that enemy aliens remained fundamentally attached to

²⁹⁵ Perry to Captains of the Junior Hostess Committee, February 7, 1943, Stage Door Canteen Investigation, RG 389, NA; Canteen Committee minutes, February 15, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 17.

²⁹⁶ H. Berkowitz, Internal Security Division memorandum, July 9, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA; Canteen Committee minutes, February 15, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 17; Charles B Cranford to Rachel Crothers, February 9, 1943, Stage Door Canteen investigation, RG 389, NA.

their countries of origin “was in back of all the extreme care being exercised by the Army and Navy with respect to enemy aliens.” In the face of evidence that the Army and Navy were opposed to enemy aliens volunteering, and Sayler’s suggestion that even aliens who seemed loyal to America might not be as loyal under certain circumstances, the Canteen Committee unanimously passed a resolution supporting the Wing’s decision.²⁹⁷ The American Theatre Wing chose to defer to military authorities and accepted an offer to have the War Department investigate enemy aliens before allowing them to volunteer. A year later, Schwanneke, as well as some other enemy aliens, were cleared to resume volunteering at the canteen.²⁹⁸

Sayler’s argument that no enemy alien could be completely loyal to the United States was a persuasive one for the Canteen Committee, but the question of whether or not individual enemy aliens were security risks was not the source of the committee and Theatre Wing board members’ disagreements. At the root of the conflict were two different understandings of civilians’ part in the war effort. In one view, civilians’ work was wholly auxiliary to the work of servicemen. The goal of the war was the defeat of the Axis powers. For a civilian service group like the American Theatre Wing to enact a policy that the American military deemed a security risk made little sense, as their role was to strengthen the war effort, not weaken it. But another point of view emphasized that the war was supposed to be a fight for values, not just the defeat of an enemy. If the war was a fight for democracy, then any fight for democracy was the war. From that perspective, civilians’ responsibilities were parallel as well as auxiliary to servicemen.

²⁹⁷ Canteen Committee minutes, February 15, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 1, folder 17.

²⁹⁸ American Theatre Wing Board minutes, February 2, 1944, John Golden Papers. Schwanneke became a citizen on December 18 of the same year. (“2 Actresses Naturalized,” *New York Times*, December 19, 1944, 27.)

The hostess captains represented their role at the canteen as their part in the war not just because they were serving the morale of the armed forces, but because they believed themselves to be struggling for the same ideals that servicemen were struggling for – democracy, equality, unalienable individual rights. As they wrote in their letter to the Theatre Wing Board, for them their work at the canteen *was* the war. Though it was not the Double V cause and did not have the same social implications as the struggle for black equality, the hostesses' letter of protest to the Theatre Wing Board reflected a Double V mentality – working for democracy abroad was meaningless unless Americans were working for, and practicing, democracy at home.

During World War II, the United States government promoted cooperation and unity based on shared ideals and a common cause, rather than on national or ethnic identity. The ideals and cause were defined in opposition to a racist, fascist enemy. “Democracy” came to signify whatever was the opposite of fascism and militarism, and words and phrases like equality, freedom of expression, and “regardless of race, color, or creed,” became staples of wartime discourse. These ideals also combined harmoniously with the self-proclaimed liberalness of the theater. The democratic ideals that were woven into rhetorical justifications of the war gave Theatre Wing members and canteen workers reason to view the struggle against racism and prejudice as part of their war work.

Canteen volunteers and guests frequently became more aware of the discrepancies between the ideals for which the United States was purportedly fighting, and the way the war was being fought. The hostess captains found that their ideas of fairness and pluralistic democracy clashed with wartime security requirements. Seeing black and

white servicemen socialize side by side, and sometimes with each other, was a visible argument against the necessity of a segregated military. Even for those volunteers and visitors for whom the Stage Door Canteen was not a battlefield in a home front war for democracy, being at the canteen could suggest new ways of understanding the war effort and the people engaged in it. The Stage Door Canteen was not a flawless realization of “democracy” – of equality, fairness, and religious, ethnic, and racial inclusivity – but it did present volunteers and guests with evidence that democracy might be a practicable and achievable goal.

Conclusion

The Stage Door Canteen was an exceptional service center in many ways, but it was also a product of its time. It was popular with the media and resonated with the American public because it echoed widely accepted sentiments about the war effort. The ubiquitous influence of government propaganda and media representations of the war effort affected every policy and practice of the Stage Door Canteen. Canteen volunteers, at least in print, embraced government prescriptions about the proper attitude towards the war: optimism, energetic support, unwavering faith in the war's *rightness*, and gratitude for the sacrifice of servicemen accompanied by actions that expressed that gratitude. Canteen officials also embraced government proscriptions: avoiding the waste of food and materials and discouraging talk about war matters at the canteen. Where mainstream American propaganda did not directly shape policy, it shaped how canteen volunteers expressed the importance of the canteen's policies. It was reflected in volunteers' embrace of commonplace rhetoric about the war – that the Allies were “fighting for democracy,” that all Americans “were in it together,” and that the war was being fought for the victory of democratic ideas as well as the defeat of the Axis.

While the operation of the Stage Door Canteen reflected a faith in government and in the inherent rightness of the war effort, the work of canteen officials and other volunteers was not characterized by passive acceptance of propaganda. Of course, not all volunteers thought critically about the meaning of the war, or their place in the war effort. But many volunteers engaged thoughtfully and actively with propagandist ideas about the purpose of the war, sometimes implementing these ideas in ways that made military

officials, servicemen, and civilian observers uncomfortable. Many canteen volunteers, including those who sat on the Canteen Committee, were inclined to prioritize democratic ideals over security and wartime expediency, and individual justice over the good of the war effort.

The canteen was an imperfect expression of racial, ethnic, and class equality. However, canteen policies gave individuals the chance to challenge social inequities in meaningful ways. Racial inequities were tackled the most consciously, and occasionally the canteen changed volunteers' and servicemen's thinking about African Americans' role in society. The most radical aspect of the canteen's non-discrimination policy was its implicit message that racial tensions were best addressed by changing white thought and behavior, rather than by altering black behavior and circumstances. Officials in the USO, which did not mandate integration in its service centers, and in the US military, which mandated segregation, justified their respective policies by arguing that their organizations were not vehicles of social experiment. But American Theatre Wing and Stage Door Canteen officials announced their policy as an immutable fact, rather than as an "experiment." For many canteen officials, the outcome of the policy was not in question, and could not be considered experimental.

World War II made social experimentation unavoidable, even for those organizations that resisted it. The war brought people into contact who had never met before, altered gender roles, removed men and women from their homes and families, and changed Americans' view of the rest of the world. The Stage Door Canteen was a microcosm of a changing society, but it also illustrated the limits of those changes. Even while offering thousands of hostesses new experiences and putting women, black and

white, in positions of authority, the canteen remained patterned on traditional heterosexual gender roles. The canteen barred servicewomen, who were representative of the new gender roles introduced by the war, and exalted the idea of the heroic fighting man.

While many volunteers would have viewed their morale-boosting service as a way of easing servicemen's burden, it constituted a tacit endorsement of the war whether or not volunteers realized it. Morale service was a means of encouraging people to persevere in their contributions to the war effort. But even while being an endorsement of the war, the Stage Door Canteen's policies constituted a critique of certain aspects of the war effort. Policies that allowed enemy aliens to volunteer and encouraged interracial socializing and dancing contradicted military policies that had been built on racial and ethnic segregation. Rules that discouraged hostesses from extending one-on-one morale services beyond their canteen shift contradicted societal pressures for young women to do anything they could to make servicemen happy.

Both the ways in which the canteen was typical of servicemen's canteens (its food and entertainment, its encouragement of traditional gender roles), and the ways in which it was unusual (its theater and celebrity connections, its non-discrimination policy, its location near Times Square) made it an interesting topic for media and for conversation, and an exciting place for volunteers to work and for servicemen to visit. By the end of October 1945, an estimated 3 million visits had been paid to the canteen by servicemen, and over 6,000 volunteers had passed through the canteen. But the canteen's effect on people who passed through its doors was more complex than can be measured by miles danced, sandwiches eaten, or stage shows watched, and the canteen's benefits to morale

extended beyond those who worked at or visited the canteen. In the media, the canteen became propaganda – it was an advertisement for civilian obligations, the importance of the entertainment industry in the war, the generosity of Americans, and the unity of all American citizens and allies. Sometimes it was also a symbol of social equality for all Americans and Allies.

Just the fact of the canteen's existence became an important element in bolstering morale. The canteen, experienced second hand through popular media and through word-of-mouth, affected people who had never visited. Through its reputation for excellent entertainment and hospitality and its apparent democratic egalitarianism, the canteen became an important symbol for civilians and servicemen. Margaret Halsey received mail from a black corporal who had never been to the canteen but said he had heard many other African American servicemen “speak so *beautifully* of their humane reception and subsequent treatment at [the] canteen.” He told Halsey, “Its fame has traveled into many lands and been heard about upon more battlefronts than you would ever imagine.”

It has done much to warm the hearts of these men who – if, as and when they die – give up their lives for the Klan, the Gerald L.K. Smiths, the Rankins, the Bilbos and the rest of the intolerant, blind, Fascist, undemocratic America, as well as for the finer element.

We can take it. But we are so glad to know that at home there are a few brave souls that want to put into practice those four freedoms of the Atlantic Charter which we are writing down with our life's blood.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁹ Halsey, *Color Blind*, 64-65.

Civilians and servicemen invested their own meanings into the canteen's work.

The ideas the canteen seemed to represent offered people tools for coping with the emotional complexities of wartime – excitement, guilt, pain, fear, and loss. Upon hearing that the canteen was closing, a woman wrote to Jane Cowl to thank her for her work. The woman's three brothers had visited the canteen. One of her brothers had died at Iwo Jima. She wrote to Cowl, "You must know what it means to those of us who are left behind to know that this war was not all blood, sweat and tears – that those boys we loved had some opportunities to laugh and be merry."³⁰⁰ In the emotionally and ideologically charged environment of the American home front, the Stage Door Canteen accrued significance that transcended its straightforward mission of feeding and entertaining servicemen.

³⁰⁰ Elizabeth Burroughs to Jane Cowl, October 29, 1943, Emeline Roche Collection, box 31, folder 13.

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