On September 7, 1902, the New York Times pronounced the musical comedy dead on arrival. According to the article, “the general opinion was that in the not far distant future the musical comedy and its kin will be found among the ‘have beens’ so far as concerns New York. Nearly all agree that the cycle is dead” (“Musical Comedies’ Vogue Said to be On the Wane” 10).\(^1\) If the reports of the musical’s death were greatly exaggerated, the identity of musical comedy was rather up in the air. In the twentieth century’s first decade, the musical comedy was beset by, in Gerald Bordman’s words, “a blurring of definitions” (Bordman, American Musical Comedy 79). Audiences seeking musical entertainment on Broadway found themselves choosing between operettas, comic operas, musical comedies, musical plays, revues, and “French vaudevilles,” nomenclature employed by producers more for the sake of novelty than accurate description (Bordman, American Musical Comedy 78–80). Roughly speaking, Cohan and Victor Herbert set the tone of the early years of the century, Viennese operetta (and many imitations thereof) ruled Broadway from 1907 to 1914,\(^2\) and around 1915, the American musical would reach something close to maturity, at least temporarily, with the shows that would come to be named for the theatre where they were produced—“Princess” musicals.

Relating PMC class consciousness to watching the American musical of this period means, in general, looking past center stage and the spotlight.
Gentlemen, along with outlandish and exotic kings, princes, and sultans, were the men who carried the day. As in the college plays, PMC types were lurking around the edges while critics championed the occasional show fit for the elusive “intelligent playgoer.” Most particularly, however, the Girls were the main focus, especially in the Ziegfeld shows. What sort of PMC cultural work was the musical doing during this period with regard to stirring class consciousness? Part of the answer lies in an acknowledgment of “summer widowers” in the audience. Still another aspect of the answer lies in a playful and jaundiced view of a new American “-ism”—imperialism. The musical version of imperialism would also give onstage PMC characters some employment. And, in the second decade of the twentieth century, a seemingly modest series of musicals would start to put PMC people in the spotlight as regular people (who happened to burst into song periodically). In the meantime, no discussion of musicals would be complete without dealing with Ziegfeld and his “girls.”

Experts and historians have identified the appeal in a number of ways. Robert C. Allen, in his book Horrible Prettiness, referred to “male scopic pleasure.” For Laura Mulvey, the appropriate term was “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Perhaps Ziegfeld himself summed it up best: “Bring on the girls.” Treating the Girls as objects of desire is perhaps a tired (and certainly narrow) way to look at the Ziegfeld phenomenon. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Follies and the emerging PMC was, in many ways, mutually nurturing. Not the least important element of this nurturing atmosphere was a direct acknowledgment and definition of the Follies audience. For Follies shows, in New York at least, from 1907 until 1931, were summer shows—not for the “tired businessman and his family,” but rather for the businessman who had to stay in the City while the family summered on Long Island and elsewhere. Ziegfeld recognized the emerging phenomenon of the “summer widower” and found a way to entertain him. The summer widowers, largely PMC-types, came through with enough positive response to spawn a new generation of young managers who welcomed the opportunity to help glorify the American Girl.

Perhaps more pertinently, the “Ziegfeld Girl,” positioned in contrast to “low” chorus girls and threatening “New Women,” was something of a PMC creation—a recognizable and reliable brand name created not