4. The Designer as Entrepreneur

Boston, rather than New York, was the geographical center of the burgeoning New Stagecraft movement in 1911. That year the experimental Toy Theatre featured modern designs by Livingston Platt, recently returned from study in Europe. Across the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts, George Pierce Baker’s English 47 class at Harvard experimented with new scenic and lighting production techniques as part of their exploration of dramatic texts; the same students could attend a Harvard lecture by William Butler Yeats in which he discussed the dramaturgical influences of Craig’s design theories on his writing.¹ The Boston Opera Company hired Viennese artist Joseph Urban to direct and design their 1911 season, based on his renown as an architect and opera designer specializing in Art Nouveau styles. Each of these occurrences brought Continental influences to Boston audiences, but the last, arguably, had the most significant impact on the American theatre industry’s adoption of New Stagecraft practices and the public’s perception of modern design.

Urban, along with the Viennese craftsmen who staffed his first studio in Swampscott, Massachusetts, revolutionized practices of scenic painting and theatrical lighting, producing a style of impressionist staging that amazed Bostonians with its vibrant color, depth, and beauty. Kenneth Macgowan, Harvard student and soon-to-be New Stagecraft critic, reported that Urban’s settings were the “first expression in America of a new, but well-founded, school in stage design” that emphasized “simplicity” and “suggestion” over “crude, literal representations.”² The New Stagecraft would soon travel from Boston to New York, transported by young designers like Macgowan’s friend, Robert Edmond Jones.

Urban made this same journey, following the failure of the Boston Opera Company in 1914. His straighter path to Broadway, however, is less celebrated than the circuitous route taken by Jones who traveled...
Europe, knocked around Greenwich Village, and explored the dunes of Provincetown, Massachusetts. The year that launched Jones’s Broadway career with *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* also saw the beginning of Urban’s collaboration with impresario Florence Ziegfeld, specifically his design for the 1915 edition of the *Follies* at the New Amsterdam Theatre. Although Ziegfeld’s annual revue had run since 1907, theatre historians generally hail 1915 as the quintessential *Follies* edition, due in large part to Urban’s opulent modern designs. Occasionally referred to as the “Blue Follies,” the 1915 production incorporated Urban’s trademark vibrant Mediterranean-like blue hue as a “visual leitmotif that reappeared through the evening.”

Urban’s *Follies* designs, more than his work in opera, made him a “household name” and brought him a variety of commissions inside and outside the theatre industry. Urban’s commercial success and popular appeal, however, disappointed New Stagecraft advocates who bemoaned his abduction by commercial producers who seemingly had no interest in advancing the modern arts beyond their own profit margins. As a New Stagecraft design, the 1915 *Follies* demonstrated Urban’s dedication to bold, expressive colors and clean lines, but the production’s spectacular aesthetics were starkly dissimilar to the austere stages of New York’s art theatres. Urban’s open partnerships with business executives also aligned him with the same conservative forces that many modern artists challenged with their nonconventional viewpoints. Urban, however, was only the first of many modern designers who bolstered their careers with commercial contracts and, as a result, spurred industry development through theatrical design practices. These entrepreneurs opened up new venues for showcasing modern design, establishing it as a prevalent force in American consumer culture. Urban’s vibrant colors and seductive decors proved as fitting a location for showgirls as they did for spectators intent to emulate Ziegfeld’s alluring, sophisticated image of modern American life.

**SCENOGRAPHIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

The same economic circumstances and cultural movements that inspired the activist design activity discussed in the previous chapter also stimulated entrepreneurial artistry, albeit from dissimilar and frequently opposing