



Ziegfeld: The Man Who Invented Show Business

Ethan Mordden

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Any girl who twists her hat will be fired! – Florenz Ziegfeld

And no Ziegfeld girl ever did as she made her way down the gala stairways of the *Ziegfeld Follies* in some of the most astonishing spectacles the American theatergoing public ever witnessed. When Florenz Ziegfeld started in theater, it was flea circus, operetta and sideshow all rolled into one. When he left it, the glamorous world of "show-biz" had been created. Though many know him as the man who "glorified the American girl," his first real star attraction was the bodybuilder Eugen Sandow, who flexed his muscles and thrilled the society matrons who came backstage to squeeze his biceps. His lesson learned with Sandow, Ziegfeld went on to present Anna Held, the naughty French sensation, who became the first Mrs. Ziegfeld. He was one of the first impresarios to mix headliners of different ethnic backgrounds, and literally the earliest proponent of mixed-race casting. The stars he showcased and, in some cases, created have become legends: Billie Burke (who also became his wife), elfin Marilyn Miller, cowboy Will Rogers, Bert Williams, W. C. Fields, Eddie Cantor and, last but not least, neighborhood diva Fanny Brice. A man of voracious sexual appetites when it came to beautiful women, Ziegfeld knew what he wanted and what others would want as well. From that passion, the Ziegfeld Girl was born. Elaborately bejeweled, they wore little more than a smile as they glided through eye-popping tableaux that were the highlight of the *Follies*, presented almost every year from 1907 to 1931. Ziegfeld's reputation and power, however, went beyond the stage of the *Follies* as he produced a number of other musicals, among them the ground-breaking *Show Boat*. In *Ziegfeld: The Man Who Created Show Business*, Ethan Mordden recreates the lost world of the *Follies*, a place of long-vanished beauty masterminded by one of the most inventive, ruthless, street-smart and exacting men ever to fill a theatre on the Great White Way : Florenz Ziegfeld.

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