Dance Marathons

“For No Good Reason”

Carol Martin

In their heyday dance marathons were one of America’s most widely attended and controversial forms of live entertainment, employing an estimated 20,000 as promoters, emcees, floor judges, trainers, nurses, and contestants (Kaplan 1935:31). Spectators were many times that number, though no reliable estimates have been made. Marathons were performed in coliseums, armories, dance halls, and tents (plate 1); they ranged in size from small local shows with audiences of 200–300 to urban coliseum and armory shows seating as many as 5,000. They began brewing in the 1920’s, but took shape as Depression entertainment in the 1930’s when they sprang up virtually everywhere. After a decline during World War II, they made a brief comeback, only to die a slow death during the late 1940’s.1

Marathons were big business, and for a few years almost a legitimate business. Through the formation of the National Endurance Amusement Association (NEAA), headed by lawyer Richard Kaplan, promoters tried to set standards that would govern all endurance shows (plate 2). The idea was to protect the industry from one-shot guys who didn’t know anything about putting on a show but went into “virgin” towns, made a fast buck, and split before they paid their debts—leaving contestants strung out and stranded, with no prize money after dancing for weeks. The NEAA was never able to make marathons into a legitimate business enterprise; the crooks in the business always made headlines, giving all shows a bad name.

When marathons began, they were simply nonstop dance contests where individual contestants tried to set new hourly records by dancing longer than anyone else. Over the years this changed. Rules were developed to make the shows last longer—generally around six to twelve weeks. The contestants no longer danced nonstop; instead, they danced popular dances such as the waltz, fox trot, lindy, jitterbug, and tango at specified times. The rest of the time they had to be in continual motion for 45 minutes out of every hour, day and night.2 A band played in the evening, and a Victrola churned out the music during the day. The audience paid from around 25 to 50 cents to get in, and shows were open 24 hours a day. A show could start with as many as 100 contestants but would dwindle away to about 20 couples in the first few days.

As early as 1931 this new-style marathon was put on by legitimate promoters who advertised it as a “walkathon” (Seltzer 1934:220). Walk-
1. Marathons ranged in size from small local shows to urban coliseum and armory shows. Here the contestants are photographed after performing a comedy sketch as part of “showtime” entertainment. (Photo courtesy of Stan West)

2. Contestants sold picture postcards like this one to their fans in the audience. Some marathoners considered themselves endurance athletes. Walter Grafsky started his endurance career when he ran 2,500 miles from California to Chicago in the 1928 C. C. Pyle’s bunion derby. When he arrived in Chicago, Grafsky danced 260 hours and won second prize in a dance marathon. (Photo courtesy of Richard Elliott)
3. As early as 1931 promoters staged new-style marathons called “walkathons.” Hal J. Ross was known in the marathon world as a legitimate promoter who staged fast shows of five or six weeks. (Photo courtesy of Richard Elliott)

4. Mud wrestling was one of the many special entertainments at dance marathons. (Photo courtesy of George Eells)

Marathons (plate 3), alternately called marathons, became a genre in themselves. Arnold Gingrich characterized them as the poor man’s night club, “a place where celebrity is immediate, stardom easy, and human dignity is very low” (1933:61). Just dancing and walking wasn’t enough. Showmanship and special entertainment such as comedy sketches, weddings, mock weddings, elimination contests, and mud wrestling (plate 4)—in addition to endurance dancing and just staying awake—were what made walkathons unique. The “old style” dance marathons, where people merely danced until they dropped, were a thing of the past. As performance, marathons became a conglomeration of social dance, music, theatre, and sports: drama came from theatre; body style and movement from vernacular dance; jazz rhythms from popular music; and competition, contest, rooting, and betting from sports.
A Walkathon without special entertainment features, both in the contest and in addition to it, would be like a horse show without betting. So there are all manner of stunts worked into the contest itself, and a variety of extra divertissements thrown in (Gingrich 1933:61).

A coterie of professional contestants (plate 5) developed in response to the demand for showmanship and special entertainments. Novices with ambitions to be celebrities—or at least professional entertainers—and a small contingent who thought of themselves as endurance athletes went from show to show. At 16, Stan West was a tap-dancing street kid who earned his living selling papers. “I’ll buy a paper from you if you do a little tap dance,” his customers used to say, and West would respond with a waltz clog. He slowly expanded his repertory by picking up steps from encouraging vaudeville performers who played the local theatre. West entered his first marathon in 1932 in Rochester, New Hampshire, hoping it would be an outlet for his talent, but he “fell out” of the show (plate 6). In 1933 he entered another show in Salisbury Beach, Massachusetts; he stayed in for 2,000 hours, but still lost. This was the beginning of his life as a professional contestant (West 1986).
Contestants gradually became professionals as they learned the ropes and developed a personal style. Promoters got to know the contestants who could entertain and often solicited them in the "Endurance Show" pages of Billboard, or wrote them directly when they were about to open a show. June Havoc, Red Skelton, Frankie Laine, and Anita O'Day all worked in marathons for varying lengths of time. Many celebrities such as Josephine Baker and Texas Guinan appeared as special attractions. Each show also had its amateur locals who joined the contest in hopes of winning the $1,000 to $1,500 prize money, or just to get food to eat and have a roof over their heads. When asked why they did it, contestants often replied, "For no good reason" (O'Day 1981:40). But whether professional or amateur, performer or spectator, marathon participants were not merely naive enthusiasts trapped by conmen in a drama beyond their control, as is often thought.

Both contestants/performers and spectators were active participants in the construction of these performance events. Spectators could interject their fantasies and desires into the performance event, and performers would willingly oblige. There was a unique opportunity for different types of contact between spectators and contestants. Betty Herndon Meyer was a vulnerable 14-year-old when she saw a 1933 walkathon in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Before the walkathon Betty's world consisted of family, church, and school. But she had a fantasy about life beyond Tulsa that included becoming a famous actress. The walkathon brought Betty closer to her fantasy. "It was as if it [Hollywood] all appeared instantly and magically with them. [...] Notes were passed back and forth between some of the high school kids and the contestants in the walkathon. One or two of the contestants were supposed to write poetry so the kids would write poems back to them" (Martin 1986:13). Betty wrote tentative notes of good luck to a handsome contestant named Jimmie Parker. He responded:

"Dearest Red [Betty has red hair] I think you are a mighty sweet girl—I hope I can see you when the walkathon's over—I would like to dance with you at the Playmore—Thanks for rooting for me—'Dancingly yours' Jimmie Parker. 4028 W. Hirsch St. Chicago, Ill.—925 hours, 11 couples and 2 girls [state of the walkathon at the time the note was written]. Tulsa Coliseum Walkathon" (Martin 1986:14).

Although the passing of notes was usually a calculated ploy on the part of contestants known as "working the rail," it was a tender and arousing contact for fans like Betty. The titillation kept her coming back, even though she never met Jimmie. For Betty, the Coliseum was full of an exciting potential not only for interaction with the object of her girlhood crush but also for the fulfillment of her desire to begin to know things beyond her everyday Tulsa experience. Betty's reaction was not unusual. Walkathons mixed theatre and real life in a way that had never been experienced before in America. Marathons are an extreme example of what can transpire between performers and spectators when there are fissures in the boundaries separating ordinary life from performance.

Endurance dance promoters and contestants sought to inflame spectators and align their emotional reactions for or against individual performers. Promoter and publicist Richard Elliott maintains that the progression
of any show was dependent on the audience becoming sympathetic to at least some of the dancers (Martin 1986b:11). This sympathy wasn’t generated haphazardly. Sympathy in endurance shows was deliberately cultivated in devious and sophisticated ways that always depended on performers playing villains who would prey on “innocent” victims. Contestant Chad Alviso, perhaps the most famous villain in endurance shows, was so hated by marathon fans that she had to steer clear of the perimeter of the ring for fear of being smashed over the head with chairs. The never-smiling Alviso worked in cahoots with the floor judge to rile the spectators to indignation. Her victim was more often than not the stereotypically feminine “fairhair”—the vulnerable ingenue—who was always about to drop from exhaustion. In a typical scenario, Alviso elbowed blond Norma Jasper (plate 7) in the ribs at a moment when the floor judge just happened to look the other way. Jasper, who was already dragging, pulled the audience’s heart strings by feigning collapse. Spectators tried to intervene by frantically yelling to the judge to disqualify Alviso for foul play. The closer Jasper’s knees came to the floor the more enraged the audience became at Alviso’s attack on the seemingly innocent Jasper (Jasper 1986).

The energy and information flowed not only from the stage to the house but also from the house to the stage. Marathon spectators actively participated—physically, mentally, emotionally, vocally, and materially—in the whole performance/contest event. At one show a man was screaming and waving his fist so hard at Alviso that he lost control and fell right

6. Stan West and Margie Bright on the brink of being eliminated. If a contestant’s knees touched the floor, they were out. For this elimination feature the contestants’ hands were bandaged together. (Photo courtesy of Stan West)

7. Norma Jasper is called to the microphone after a sprint. Note the hours elapsed above “boys” quarters and the hospital. (Photo courtesy of George Eells)
out of the balcony (Jasper 1986). The contestants kept watch on the brightly lit audience, reading their reactions and changing their behavior to attract interest. Jasper and fellow contestants just kept right on going when the man fell out of the balcony. "We wanted to get the attention off of that," Jasper recalls. Professional contestants were confident performers who knew how to bend the spectators' emotions and interests in extraordinary and mundane ways. Contestants worked the rail to solicit the "ringside ladies" who lavished special gifts, affection, and attention on their favorites. It was common for a popular contestant to return from the rest period before "showtime," from 8 p.m. to midnight, to a cache of presents piled up on the corner of the stage. Attention also meant cash. In a 1939 Chicago show, Al Capone's sister handed Jasper $25 to get into a fight with another contestant (Jasper 1986).

One thing about this kind of show business, the audience came and went without offence to the actors. People yelled to friends, or to the dancers; wept and screamed when a favorite dropped out; fought among themselves. Audience participation indeed (Havoc 1959:80).

It wasn't only participation that brought audiences to marathons but a voracity and an agenda of expectations that were exacerbated by the Depression.

It cannot be denied that the urge that packs arenas for the knock-out punch or the race track for the harrowing spill resulting in death is the motivating force behind this thing called walkathon. The contestant is exalted to the position of combination gladiator and night-club entertainer (Selter 1934:220).

Throughout a contest promoters and performers collaborated to snare the spectators in an ever-tightening web of interactions. By the end of each night the performers had accumulated debts of revenge toward one another. Would Jasper get back at Alviso? Or would revenge come from an unexpected source? Would the other performers protect Jasper or would they align themselves with Alviso? The spectators were very involved in the moment-to-moment playing out of these possibilities. As the hours of the contest wore on, some scenarios were resolved while others became increasingly complicated. As in soap operas, the complex narrative structure of dance marathons presented daily episodes in the lives of the contestants. The audience was mainly made up of people who attended again and again (Kaplan 1935:31).

If the contestants didn't generate enough excitement at the end of the evening's main events to guarantee a big house for the next night's show, the floor judge, always a man, could up the stakes. Officially on the side of management, floor judges saw to it that contestants kept moving, following the rules of the contest to the letter. They also provided part of the entertainment by harassing the contestants. Blowing a shrill whistle in a contestant's ears, flicking wet towels at tired and swollen legs, and making the "weak ones" work harder were some stock ways they manipulated spectators' emotions. Floor judges were experts at wielding power—unfairly. Burly Jim "King Kong" Coffee, one of the best floor judges in the business, got the spectators at one show so riled he had to be escorted out of one show by eight cops (Eells 1986b).
At the Tulsa show Betty was attending on 10 December 1933, her “crush” Jimmie Parker and Helen Leonard, along with three other couples, had to run a 60-minute, 105-lap race in a figure-eight floor pattern around two pylons set at either end of the performance area. This race, called a “grind,” was just one of the many kinds of “exotic” nightly elimination features: zombie treadmills, back-to-back struggles, hurdles, circle hotshots, dynamite sprints, horseraces, heel and toe races, duck waddles, and bombshells (plate 8). Each elimination contest had different rules that put the contestants through their paces in unique ways. For example, the couples could be blindfolded, and/or taped or chained together to make everything more difficult. These “tortures” were the icing on the cake for spectators who really wanted to “watch the weak ones fall by the wayside,” as a popular advertisement slogan promised.

In the Tulsa show the “kids,” as the emcee called them, had been dancing and walking 45 minutes out of every hour, 24 hours a day, since 3 October—more than two months. The daily accounts, called “dope sheets,” for this show were printed up newspaper-style complete with headlines, feature stories, and general news. The 11 December installment reported that practically all of the contestants had to briefly step out of the race for medical attention. According to the dope sheet, “plucky little walker” Hazel Maves’s right knee was swollen to three times its size. Jimmie and Helen, one of the crowd’s favorite couples, were really having a tough time. Jimmie’s feet were solid masses of blisters, and Helen’s ankles were on the verge of collapsing. But the grueling grind failed to eliminate anyone. Floor judge Allan “Frankenstein” Franklin turned up the heat. After the grind he made a special announcement: The following night both “boys” and “girls” would have to run a 55-lap race and, in addition, there would be a special “surprise” for the girl contestants that would eliminate one and perhaps more of them from the contest. The spectators became riled and excited at the thought of the poor boys and girls having to surmount yet another obstacle. According to publicist and promoter Richard Elliott:

Now, people came to see ‘em die. That’s an overstatement. But they came to see ‘em suffer, and to see when they were going to fall down. They wanted to see if their favorites were going to make it. That was all part of it. It was Depression entertainment (Martin 1986b:7).

Spectators kept coming back or tuning in on the radio to follow their team through their hour of glory or demise. They ate up the emcees’ promises for “special surprises” like the one Frankenstein announced for the “girls” in Tulsa. Dope sheets and broadcasts gave spectators the opportunity to keep up with what was going on even if they couldn’t attend every day. This reportage also gave management the opportunity to build up and exaggerate the previous night’s events. In Winslow, Illinois, where they didn’t have radio, the local telephone operator called 20 miles to the Freeport Walkathon management each morning and then rang her customers with the news about how Winslow’s favorite couple was doing.

But the outcome of the contest was usually planned by promoters; seasoned spectators assumed marathons were fixed. In this way the contests were similar to today’s professional wrestling. Despite the fact that wrestlers are physically trained to take on opponents, the matches are more a
display of rehearsed, besotted heroics than they are a sport. What mara-
thon spectators enjoyed was a theatrical spectacle in the guise of a contest. Enthusiasts both on the scene and listening over the radio became deeply involved, as sports fans do. In a personal conversation, marathon enthusiast George Eells (1986) recounted, “I knew from the first time I saw them they had to be phony, but being part of the crowd stimulated me to the point of pulling for the contestants even when I knew the whole thing wasn’t really legitimate.” And Betty Freund remembers her mother’s involvement this way:

My mother was obsessed with them [marathons]. They were broadcast from over the floor at least two times daily on the local radio station (KHQ). One was early in the morning and one was at noon. My mother always listened and had her favorite couples. I went one time and just remember it being sleazy and depressing. But my mother would take her lunch and stay all day (Freund 1985).

Most marathons were held in dance halls, coliseums, armories, and tents. Management often decorated the space with patriotic bunting, built a low oblong thrust stage, and surrounded it on three sides with reserved seating. The stage had a certain give to it so contestants wouldn’t have to cut the toes out of their shoes because of swollen feet. Bright lights were lowered from the ceiling so both the spectators and the contestants were theatrically lit. At the far end of the stage was the bandstand, and on either side were exits marked “girls” and “boys” that led to respective rest quarters for the contestants (plate 12). On one side of the bandstand there was a “hospital,” usually with an open side or glass wall giving the audience a partial view of the contestants being treated for injuries (plate 9). If a case was extreme or required discretion, the nurse pulled the curtains. This, of course, made everyone even more curious and concerned.

Promoters had to generate enough interest and enthusiasm during a marathon’s first days to establish its economic success. They tried to satisfy the spectators at the most visceral levels. One way was to have “country store night” (plate 10) when there was a special drawing rewarding

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9. Contestants were treated for injuries in the “hospital” with an open side or glass wall giving the audience a partial view. (Photo courtesy of the Dance Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center)

10. “Country store night” at a marathon in Freeport, Illinois, in the early 1930’s. Some marathons had raffles to give away free bags of groceries during the Depression. (Photo courtesy of George Eells)
some of the spectators with bags of groceries. Free food was a valued boon at a time when many had to wait in bread lines for their one meal a day. By Winter 1931 unemployment in the U.S. reached nearly ½ of the labor force (Glassman 1986:30). For those who could afford it, every marathon had a refreshment stand that sold snacks such as hot dogs and popcorn. Sometimes spectators brought their own food—in the afternoons the “ladies crowd” arrived with picnic baskets. The night crowd was fond of hip flasks.

The contestants also ate—in front of the crowd—an average of three meals and four snacks a day. For each feeding a table top was set on saw horses in the center of the performance space. Contestants were required to keep moving, shifting their weight from foot to foot (plate 11). A favorite trick while wavering around the table was to apparently fall asleep while eating. A contestant’s face would plunk down into a bowl of oatmeal, making the audience roar with laughter. However, the meals

11. Contestants had to keep shifting their weight while eating. For each feeding a table was set up on saw horses. (Photo courtesy of the Dance Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center)

12. A contestant gets a leg massage in the “boys” quarters. (Photo from the collection of Fay De Marco and Lefty Lehman; courtesy of George Eells)
were for real and very carefully considered. In 1929 Dr. Everett Perlman and G. W. Nelson, who thought endurance dance was destined to become a new type of athletic event, wrote a small booklet on the medical and health aspects of marathons. Their sample menu was:

7:00 a.m.—Breakfast
One-half grapefruit
Boiled oatmeal (sweetened with syrup)
One soft-boiled egg
2 slices of whole wheat toast (buttered)

10:00 a.m.
Cookies
Glass of milk

12:00 Noon—Lunch
One cup of soup (puree or thickened soups)
Vegetable salad (oil dressing)
Cottage cheese
Two slices whole wheat bread (buttered)

3:00 p.m.
Apples
Oranges
Celery

6:00 p.m.—Dinner
Soup
One slice of meatloaf
Small baked potato
Cabbage salad (oil dressing)
Two slices whole wheat bread (buttered)
Milk

9:00 p.m.
Apples
Oranges
Celery
Cookies

12:00 Midnight
Whole wheat sandwich of jelly or relish
Black coffee

3:00 a.m.
Celery
Apples
Cookies
Black coffee

The performers’ and spectators’ hunger, both real and symbolic, was a motivating force in marathons. Spectators and performers alike were seeking to satisfy physical, psychological, and social hunger in a time of unparalleled social and economic turbulence in the U.S.

For forty cents, on any evening, you will see more knock-downs than a fight fan will ever see for forty dollars. For that
same forty cents, you will hear as much poor singing and as much low humor, as the frequenter of cabarets will get for a separate investment of dollars ten to forty. For forty cents, if you are cold and lonely and out of a job on a raw winter's night, you join an audience composed of people who appear to have every right to feel as wretched as yourself, and with them you get the thrill of being able to feel sorry for someone (Gingrich 1933:61).

Performers and spectators interacted in response to both the fictional events and the conditions of real life that were inextricably woven together in the performance. "Real life" was always poking its head through the performative conventions. "Real life" in dance marathons was the complete inversion of deus ex machina. The dramatic entanglements of the contest, instead of being resolved by divine, human, or other interventions common to theatre, were propelled by the chance conditions of real life, continually writing and rewriting the powerful text of the marathon. Despite the phoniness of some aspects of marathons, the dancers were really walking, dancing, eating, sleeping, getting injured, and receiving medical care—all in full view of the audience. There was even a special event called "cot night" in which the cots from the rest quarters were brought out and placed along the perimeter of the dance floor. For several periods contestants no longer had 15 minutes of privacy every hour. They were "on" all the time—except for going to the toilet or emergency medical treatments. Their personal rest rituals were exposed to the voyeuristic delight of the spectators. However, "cot night" was nestled in the performative conventions of dance marathons and under the control of promoters and contestants. There were other unplanned and unforeseeable events. In 1948 the armed bank robber Dale Cross decided to make the walkathon at the Pla-mor in Kansas City his hide-out. Suddenly the place was swarming with plainclothesmen who whisked Cross away during a rest period. Marathons were the place where things really did happen. An audience was never assured that what was happening in the theatre was not for real, and therefore could not indulge in the conventional suspension of disbelief.

A girl was dancing with a young man. The doctors discovered that she was crying, and investigation revealed that great areas on the upper part of the body were black and blue from his pinching, particularly around the chest. This couple was disqualified immediately and the girl placed under a physician's care. We mention this because the reader may have a daughter or sister under the same circumstances, and it may be said that dancers must be watched very closely (Perlman and Nelson 1929:29).

This cruel eruption of real life pain in the midst of the performance/contest created disjunctions in the spectators' frames of reference—night after night, contest after contest. In extreme and sublime ways, theatrical illusion was always being muddied with real life. It was like knowing that at any moment a staged fight could erupt into a real fight. This is what people today remember most about marathons. The "real life" of marathons has been mythologized, fictionalized, and bemoaned to such an extreme degree that most other salient characteristics of the performance event have been blurred or lost. In the popular imagination, marathons
exist as a cruel exploitation racket. There is little consciousness, except of
course among the surviving participants, that they were complicated per-
formative events with professional performers playing the roles of conten-
tants alongside amateurs who were responsible for most of the incidents
like the one described by Perlman and Nelson.

Marathon spectators could choose their degree of participation, but the
performers had no choice. If a performer stopped moving s/he was dis-
qualified while the event went on. Cardboard timecards marked the
hours the marathon had been in progress. Hours passed into days, weeks,
and months, indifferent to the comings and goings of spectators and the
decreasing number of performers. For the spectators the focus of mara-
thons alternated between individual heroes, comics, and villains, and the
overall experience of being part of an implacable, unstoppable event—an
event that continued until all but one person or one couple had been
exhausted, used up, consumed. This couple alone—and the audience—
survived.

The timecards marking the hours danced functioned like a scoreboard.
Attending a contest that had been in motion for five days was different
from attending one that had been in motion for two months. There were
three different temporal rhythms operating: the short, sporadic, and in-
tense periods of contest, crisis, and combat; the longer rhythm of the
"marathon" extending into weeks and months; and the finale when rest
periods were cut and elimination features were held one right after an-
other to insure a swift and climactic conclusion.

The greater the number of hours the contest had been in motion, the
higher the stakes. Bets between spectators changed hands more rapidly
when the contestants “worked heat”—made trouble. The contestants
worked heat more often when the spectators had more at stake. In addition
to betting, at any given moment a spectator could publicly send a $5
or even a $10 bill up to the emcee with a specific request attached to it.
Although the emcee directed and indirectly solicited these requests, he
didn’t have control over them. The request revealed the sender’s sensibil-
ity as much as it displayed the contestants’ talent or lack thereof. You
could request the clumsiest team on the floor to perform a waltz or the
most artistic girl with the squeakiest voice to sing a sexy song. No performer
ever declined an invitation of this kind. To do so would cause great dis-
pleasure in the management. Most marathoners knew if there was a joke
behind the request and played it out accordingly. As seasoned contes-
tants, the performers had learned how to titillate the fantasies of the spec-
tators. In Jasper’s words, “We were professionals, we knew exactly what
we were doing” (Jasper 1986).

There were others who weren’t so sure. Hazel Dietrich, “a fat girl with
a pretty face who couldn’t run or entertain,” was authentically shy about
getting up to the microphone. The emcee would call her up to the band-
stand and explain that the management advertised the show as athletic
entertainment. “So Hazel, you have to contribute by doing a dance or sing-
ing a song.” Hazel genuinely refused until the emcee coerced her into it.
During the whole exchange the emcee was consciously but tacitly organi-
zizing the audience’s emotions in favor of Hazel. When set up by an
adept emcee, the audience responded to entertainments like Hazel’s song
with generous “silver showers,” a barrage of coins tossed to the mara-
thon floor. Even though the emcee essentially forced Hazel to sing, he
also forced her, against her own wits, to win a lot of money (Eells
1986b).
Gifted performers occasionally turned requests into creative ventures of their own. In 1928 the Manhattan Casino was the site of one of the few nonsegregated marathons in endurance dance history. The spectators had identified who the real dancers were in the crowd and baited on-the-spot competitions by sending up five or ten dollars. George “Shorty” Snowden “decided to do a breakaway, that is, fling his partner out and do a few solo steps of his own.” The audience roared with approval. Later, when asked what he was doing, Snowden replied, “The Lindy” (Stearns 1968:316).

The power of purchase gave the audience a feeling of superiority. They got what they requested and were better off than the contestants, who had to comply with the ubiquitous emotions of an overly passionate crowd. Havoc remembers:

They [the audience] stayed for hours, days. They neglected home, children, work. Breeding, religion, culture—or lack of it—could not explain the avid interest of the spectators. Their behavior becomes significant only as a sign of the times. They were drawn to us by the climate of cruelty in the world. Our degradation was entertainment; sadism was sexy; masochism was talent. The passion they spilled over us lit up an entire city (Havoc 1959:42).

George Eells has more pointed memories of the endurance shows he saw from 1932 to 1952. Eells attended his first marathon in his hometown of Freeport, Illinois, when he was eight years old. The array of competing personality types on the marathon floor was a show in itself. “It was a heightening of what you find in ordinary society because it was all enclosed in one room” (Martin 1986d:17). There were always colorful individuals on display. Eells is fond of remembering Al, who had been institutionalized several times. When Al’s behavior got out of hand he pulled out his commitment papers and shouted, “Don’t bug me! I’m crazy and I’ve got the papers to prove it” (Eells 1970a:154). Eells knew the contest was as much showmanship as anything else. “I got interested in the people and some of them were very talented” (Martin 1986d:17).

Eells was drawn in, as were many people. The ideology that held dance marathons together was “get the audience involved.” The ongoing, actual relationship between audience and performers, exacerbated by and entwined with the desperate economic conditions of the Depression, was the nexus of the event. This nexus worked around a slippage among the categories of sport, dance, theatre and the blurring of boundaries between illusion and real life. This slippage was a powerful implement in portraying and parodying the shaken forces and assumptions of American life. It was not the aesthetic or athletic aspects of marathons which led to their disappearance but rather the rude intrusion of the unexpected and unconditional guest, real life, in the midst of the performance. Marathons defied not only categorization but codification and regulation.

Without regulation marathons were vulnerable to a number of different groups that sought to ban them for various reasons. Women’s clubs with a history of concern about health and morality in leisure activities saw marathons as a subversive force. In 1934 Mrs. Ruth Robert Mix, chairperson of the Girls Protective Council, sent a transcript of a conversation between a protective worker and a marathoner to the Journal of Social Hygiene. A young girl named Jenny explained to the protective worker
that she danced 112 days and in one evening earned $29 for a song she sang. Mrs. Mix was aware that endurance shows were a form of recreation that brought large amounts of money into the town in which they were held and employed a number of local people. “But,” she asked, “is it not decidedly dangerous to the girls who participate? It is so emotionally stimulating that it takes away a desire for any honest work” (Mix 1934:369).

Kaplan, general counsel-secretary to the National Endurance Amusement Association, felt that objections like Mrs. Mix’s were being instigated by the motion picture industry. Theatre managers realized marathons were major competition. Kaplan contended that these managers gave marathons a bad name by spreading the word that they were unlawful, unsafe, immoral, and unhealthy (Kaplan 1935:31). These objections caused alarm and were taken up by women’s groups and ministerial associations. But even these groups were not solely responsible for the complete demise of marathons. In their heyday marathons were Depression entertainment. Eells recalls that “as a kid, even though I didn’t know rationally what was going on, I knew intuitively that these [the contestants] were lives in turmoil” (Martin 1986d:17). Marathons could never shake this association with the Depression. It was built into the very performance. At marathons, performance was confounded with what was during the Depression a rude interloper, real life.

Notes

1. Marathons occurred across the United States. Some of the towns and cities listed as marathon sites in the endurance shows column of *Billboard* between 1934 and 1938 include: Asbury Park, New Jersey; Spokane, Washington; Somers Point, New Jersey; Lynchburg, Virginia; Battle Creek, Michigan; Detroit, Michigan; New York, New York; Chicago, Illinois; East Dubuque, Illinois; Danville, Virginia; Ocean City, Maryland; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Flint, Michigan; Long Beach, California; Miami, Florida; Cleveland, Ohio; Shawnee, Oklahoma; Knoxville, Tennessee; Manitou, Colorado; Macon, Georgia; Union City, Tennessee; Fort Smith, Arkansas; Marion, Indiana; Waterbury, Connecticut; North Platte, Nebraska; Tampa, Florida; Green Bay, Wisconsin; High Point, North Carolina; Frankfort, Kentucky; Wichita, Kansas; Birmingham, Alabama; Great Falls, Montana; Enid, Oklahoma; Williamsport, Pennsylvania; Charleston, South Carolina; Yankton, South Dakota; Washington, D.C.; Huntington, West Virginia; Portsmouth, Rhode Island; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Avon, Massachusetts; Shreveport, Louisiana; Freeport, Illinois; and Corpus Christi, Texas. In 1934 the promoters and producers of *Golden Slipper* marathons, one of the many enterprises that produced marathons, claimed to have produced successful shows in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Brooklyn, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Baltimore, Toledo, Washington, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Dallas, Columbus, Memphis, Miami, Dayton, Phoenix, Worcester, Newark, Providence, Portland, Peoria, Springfield, and Sioux City.

2. Forty-five minutes alternated with 15 minutes of rest. Approximately four of those minutes were spent going to and from the rest quarters. Then contestants would have to take off their shoes, or wash their faces, or go to the toilet, or do whatever needed to be done. Provided that the show wasn’t a “kip show,” a show where contestants were allowed to sleep in the morning hours when the audience had gone home, four hours was the most amount of sleep any contestant could get. Contestants learned how to sleep standing up while their partners supported them and dragged them around the floor.

3. Contestants were *always* referred to as girls and boys. My informants have objected to my referring to them as men and women. They insist that “boys” and “girls” is the correct depiction of their experience. Promoters often had affectionate surnames of patriarchal power such as Daddy Fox, King Brady, General Hugh Talbott, and Pop Dunlap.
4. I would like to thank George Eells for being an invaluable and generous source of knowledge and for his careful reading of this manuscript as well as for his continuing interest and support for this project.

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