

The Greatest Show on Earth: Roman Entertainments in Turn-of-the-Century New York City

Margaret Malamud

September 28 through 30, 1999, marked the centenary of a lavish public spectacle held in New York City to commemorate Admiral Dewey's victory over the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay, an event that transformed the United States into an imperial power. The three-day event featured a parade of ships, fireworks, speeches by the mayor of New York and Admiral Dewey, and a land parade with over thirty thousand members of the military escorting Dewey and his entourage through the streets of New York. Members of the National Sculpture Society designed a massive Roman triumphal arch through which Dewey was to pass in a celebration of the American victory in the Pacific and the emergence of an American overseas empire. In imitation of Roman triumphal arches, the Dewey Arch displayed naval heroes and territories acquired as a result of the Spanish-American War, and newspapers and the parade's souvenir booklet drew comparisons between Roman triumphs and Dewey's victory parade (King; Bogart 100-104, 342). The civic extravaganza was so popular that vandalism presented a threat to the Dewey Arch: many people wanted to take a piece of the Arch home with them. In turn-of-the-century New York, America's acquisition of an empire was an event to celebrate.

This essay investigates America's imagined relationship with ancient Rome and how that relationship was articulated in turn-of-the-century New York mass entertainment. America's relationship with Roman antiquity illustrates what Eric Hobsbawm has called "the invention of tradition," by which he means the ways in which groups, usually nations, establish a connection with a usable past as a means of constructing identity, validating present actions and values, and fostering group cohesion (Hobsbawm and Ranger) Since the Revolutionary era, the Roman Republic had served as the exemplary political model for the young nation, and it was invoked in art, architecture, and political oratory to help articulate and legitimate America's identity. The other Rome, the

Rome of the Caesars, has been more problematic. On the one hand, imperial Rome stood for the political and religious tyranny of British rule, from which the States had freed themselves, but on the other hand, it provided a monitory image of what the States might become. For according to the common view, Rome had destroyed itself through corruption, excess, and political and moral decline.

When America became a wealthy industrial nation and an imperial power, a new twist was given to the usual negative references to imperial Rome in American culture: favorable images of empire now begin to be produced in architecture, public spectacles, and popular entertainment. Perhaps the most noticeable evocation of the grandeur of imperial Rome was in civic architecture; the architectural legacy of Rome played a vital role in shaping New York into an imperial metropolis. Roman architectural forms seemed particularly suited to the militarism, materialism, and cosmopolitanism of the era, and turn-of-the-century New York train stations, public baths, museums, concert halls, libraries, banks, and universities utilized the architectural language of Rome filtered through the Beaux-Arts movement to signify imperial splendor and civic grandeur. But, as this essay will show, New Yorkers also enjoyed "Roman" pleasures at the circus and at stage-spectacles where entertainment entrepreneurs like Phineas T. Barnum and Bolossy and Imre Kiralfy constructed gigantic spaces for the performance of spectacular events loosely based on popular images of the imperial Roman world for the enjoyment of the masses. For a small fee, thousands of New Yorkers experienced the supposed entertainments of the ancient Romans at the circus, at elaborate stage-spectacles, and at Coney Island.

These popular entertainments provided a different image of the majesty and grandeur of imperial Rome than those suggested by the architecture of the City Beautiful movement in New York.¹ The didactic and uplifting intentions of that movement were turned inside out in the circus and stage-spectacles. At these events, patrons were offered spectacles of imperial cruelty and decadence and other forms of "Roman" entertainments with no pretensions of moral improvement. Instead of uplift, the circuses and stage-spectacles created spaces for the performance of allegories of imperial power and spectacles of colossal Roman excesses in the form of mass entertainment. Negative images of the decadence and cruelty of the Roman empire were domesticated and transformed in popular entertainments about ancient Rome into mass spectacles for the consumption and pleasure of the citizens of New York.

Circuses and Stage-Spectacles

Circuses capitalized on their distant link to Roman circuses. Many boasted that they were animating the Circus Maximus of ancient Rome;

one circus poster boldly proclaimed "Ancient Roman Hippodrome. A glorious picture of the Eternal City under the Caesars, reproducing with startling realism the sports, gladiatorial displays, and thrilling races of the Circus Maximus" (qtd. in Fox and Parkinson 160). Madison Square Garden, once called the Great Roman Hippodrome, offered a variety of entertainments, including light operas, romantic comedies, and P. T. Barnum's and John Ringling's circuses.² The "Roman" entertainments performed at these circuses included acts like the Octavian Troupe, sixteen Roman soldiers and athletes who performed "the sports, games, combats and tournaments of classic days. An historically correct representation of the thrilling scenes of the Caesarian period." Chariot races, living-statues tableaux of mythological figures and events (such as Hercules, the Apollo Trio, the Seven Sapphos), gladiatorial combats, and acrobats dressed as Romans who juggled "Roman axes" were popular acts at a variety of circuses.³ Cleopatra often made an appearance in circus tableaux and in circus street parades, a spectacular form of advertising held on the morning before the grand opening of the circus and designed to entice people to come to the show. Adam Forepaugh's 1889 circus street parade, for example, displayed the Egyptian queen reclining on a colossal decorated barge, which was pulled through the street by six plumed horses. Another of Forepaugh's circuses in 1888 featured a tableau with such a lavish barge and gorgeously dressed Cleopatra that, according to its advertising poster, it presented a scene "far surpassing the poet's most fitful dream" (Fox and Kelby).

As early as 1889, the Barnum and Bailey circus referred to itself as "a stupendous mirror of departed empires" (Adams 188). Like Roman emperors, circus entrepreneurs provided spectacular entertainments; they made the "pastimes of the Caesars" available to masses of people and offered "a millionaire vision for even the poorest child."⁴ At the circus, the pleasures and excitement of Roman decadence could be enjoyed by every spectator, regardless of class or income. Barnum and Bailey were populist emperors; while America's wealthiest families endowed neo-classical temples of art and music for the improvement of the working classes, Barnum and Bailey provided a different kind of Roman pleasure in the form of lavish spectacles of imperial Roman cruelty and excess.

The stage-spectacles organized by Imre and Bolossy Kiralfy also offered mass audiences fabulous visions of ancient Rome and other historical eras. Spectacular stage productions were one of the most popular forms of entertainment in late-nineteenth-century America. Stage-spectacles took spectacle elements of Victorian theater and some of its melodramatic themes and reproduced them in gigantic spaces for thousands of people. Enormous in scale and size, these productions featured elabo-



Circus Poster, circa 1890s, advertising Roman entertainments. [Courtesy of the Library of Congress.]

rate scenery, hundreds of singers, dancers, and actors in extravagant costume who mimed the drama to orchestral accompaniment. The most successful stage-spectacles of the era were produced by Imre and Bolossy Kiralfy, who were the undisputed masters of the medium (Barker; Senelik 149-54).⁵

The two brothers along with other members of their family had emigrated from Hungary to New York in 1869. All members of the family were involved in dance, and in the 1870s Imre and Bolossy began producing shows. Both had experience in choreography, design, and production, and they had European connections to draw upon in order to get the artists and musicians necessary to put on their shows. They understood the American immigrant audience's need for affordable entertainment and its desire for visual spectacle. In the 1880s they began producing and writing their own shows, but in 1886 Imre and Bolossy split over a business disagreement, and Bolossy moved to England, where he produced spectacles for the enjoyment of the British masses. Imre remained in America, and in 1887 he built an outdoor theater on Staten Island where he staged his *Nero, or the Destruction of Rome*. *Nero* was produced on a lavish scale and was performed to great acclaim in 1888.⁶

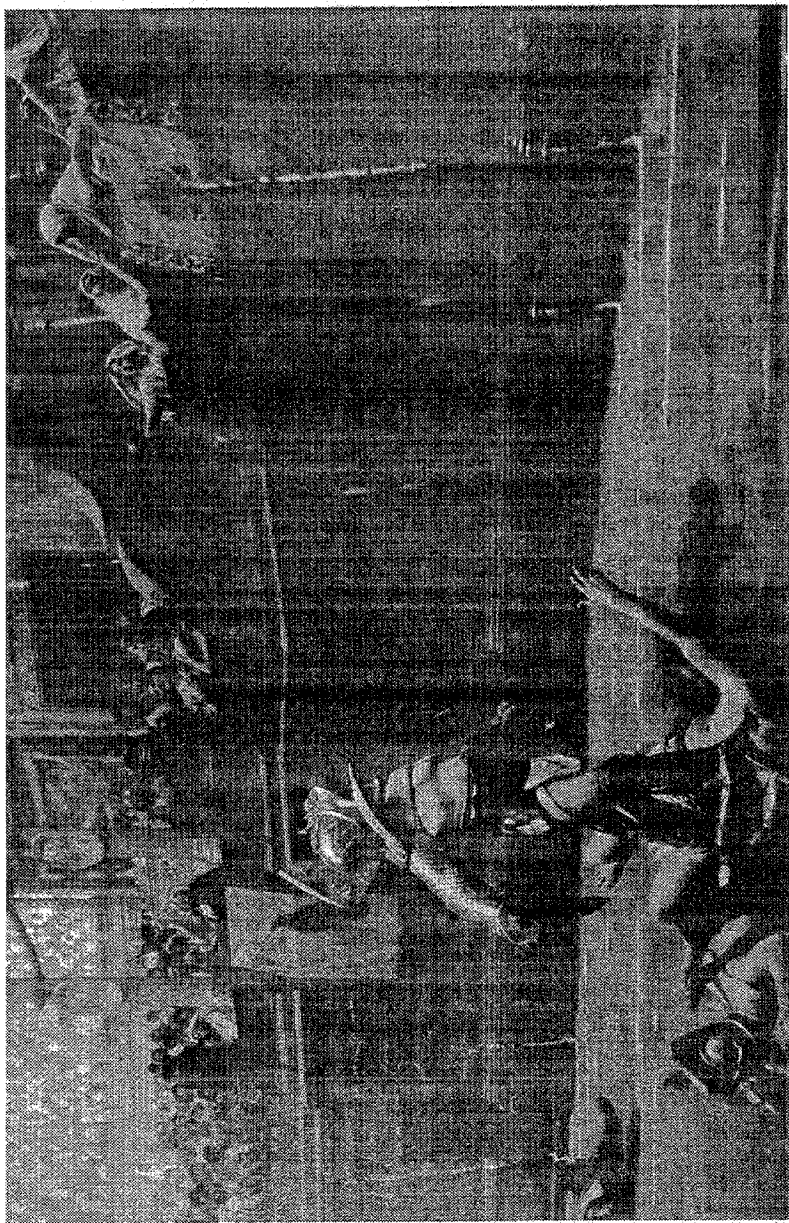
Advertising for *Nero* said it was a "gigantic, historical, biblical, dramatic and musical spectacle," and like other Kiralfy productions, *Nero* combined dance, music, visual spectacle, and mimed action. Its program claimed that the production enabled the audience to be "transported in imagination to early Rome and to read through the eyesight of a novel." The plot draws on the images of a cruel and decadent Rome prevalent in such Victorian novels as Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii* and Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur*, in "toga" plays, popular from the 1880s on, and in Jean-Leon Gerome's popular Roman arena paintings. The performance included representations of Roman arena events, such as gladiatorial combats; an imperial orgy; Nero's attempted seduction of an innocent Christian girl; Christians burned as human torches in the arena; Christians thrown to the wild beasts in the arena; and Nero's burning of Rome. The drama ends with Nero's death and the dawning of Christianity, signaled by angels appearing to transport the martyred Christians to heaven.

P. T. Barnum saw *Nero* and was so impressed that he immediately contacted Imre and asked him if he would be interested in shortening *Nero* into a "circus spec" and joining him with it on tour in London. Imre agreed, and the collaboration of the two popular entertainers marked a breakthrough in circus entertainment. Whereas circuses earlier offered multiple separate entertainments, now they began to offer narrative spectacles on popular topics. Kiralfy's *Nero* became a part of Barnum and

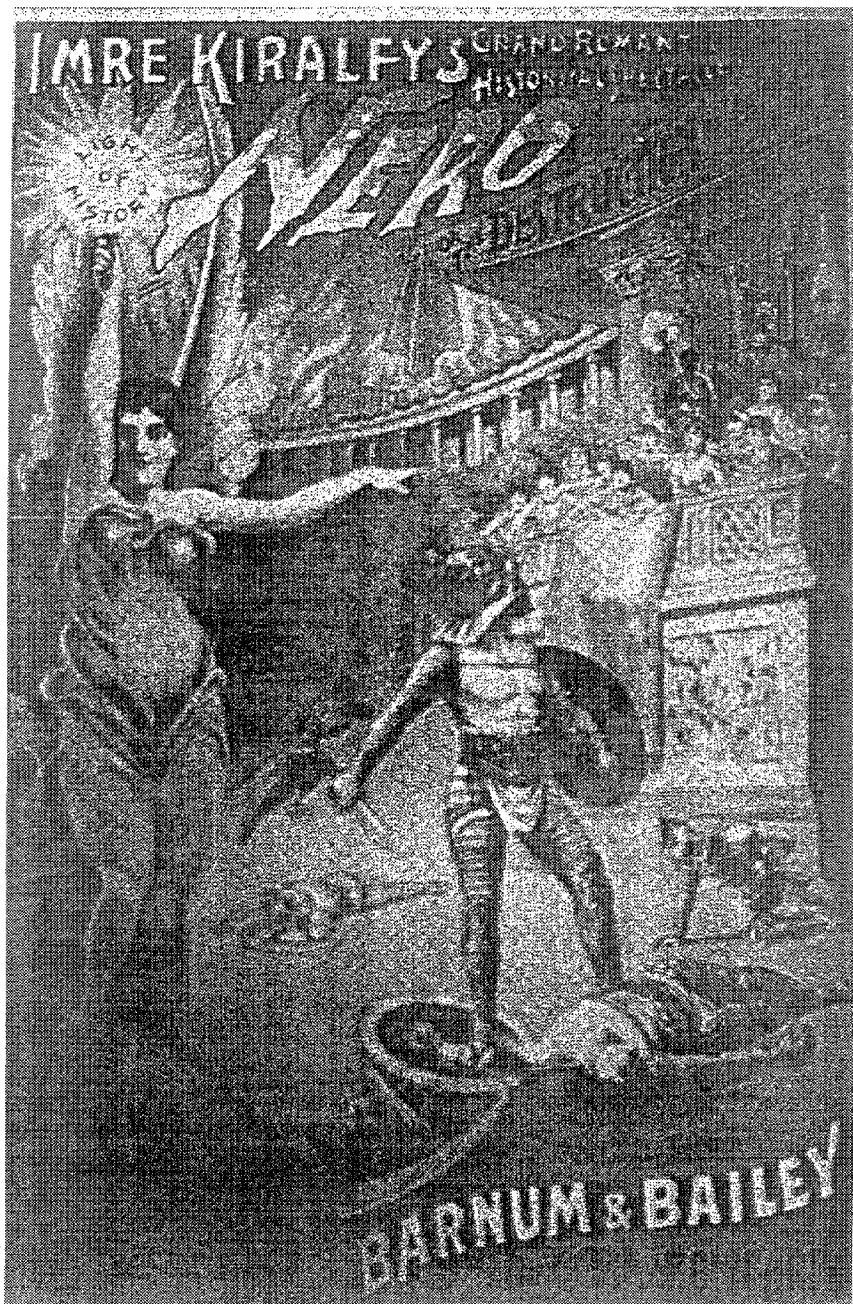
Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth; it reached thousands of people, first on tour in London and then in the United States. The joining of the two forms of performances was so successful that Barnum later commissioned Imre to create "circus specs" of some of his other productions for the Greatest Show on Earth, including Kiralfy's *The Fall of Babylon* in 1890 and *Columbus, and the Discovery of America* in 1892. In 1912, Barnum and Bailey's offered its New York audiences a *Superb Spectacle Cleopatra*, loosely based on Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and other theater productions about the famous Egyptian queen.⁷

In 1890, Barnum and Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth returned to America "crowned with triumphant laurels won abroad" after repeatedly selling out its shows in London. On April 12, 1890, *Nero, or the Destruction of Rome* opened in New York. Even the program was oversized, and was packed with press excerpts from England extolling the show, illustrations, self-promotion, descriptions of all of the performances in the show, and personal statements to the public from Barnum, Bailey, and Kiralfy.⁸ The program promised "dazzling views of imperial orgies," "grand gladiatorial combats," and "the holidays of Nero come again" all put on in a reconstruction of the great Circus Maximus in Rome. Advertising for *Nero* claimed that it was a "splendid mirror of the classic age" and a "reflex of the regal Rome that was." One testimonial said, "It is no mere artificial show, but a vivid and vast realization of life in the great seat of Roman imperialism. The senses are beguiled by its reality as well as its surpassing beauty and the perfection of its details." And the effect was such that "we seem to be living in the Rome of ancient days."

The Roman pastimes the entertainment entrepreneurs created for the pleasures of their audiences were based on those depicted in popular novels and paintings, especially the paintings of the Neo-Grec school. There was a fascination with blood in the arena, the titillating and decadent pastimes of the Roman elites, and the colossal material splendor of the era. Gerome's well-known Roman paintings dwelt in detail on spectacles in the Roman arena, and the covers for many circus souvenir booklets and the advertising posters for Kiralfy's *Nero* reproduced his famous paintings of gladiatorial combats, wild beast hunts, and the martyrdom of Christians. Circus attendees were not at all disturbed by any moral consideration of the events in the arena. As the souvenir program put it: "Whatever may be thought of Nero, he deserves the best thanks of everyone for the races and the gladiatorial contests which are brought off for his amusement." One might condemn Nero and still enjoy the spectacle.



Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Pollice Verso*, 1872



Cover for Barnum and Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth souvenir booklet, 1890, reproducing Gerome's *Pollice Verso*, 1872.

In creating a miniature imperial Rome, some of the glory of that era devolved onto the circus itself and its modern re-creators; as Bailey said about his Greatest Show on Earth in the souvenir program:

It is one of the nineteenth century's most colossal and magnificent achievements...to exhibit Rome, as she appeared in the zenith of her architectural, imperial, warlike, coliseum, civic and festal splendors two thousand years ago. We do this, and with a majesty, perfection and superbness that would have amazed and captivated Nero himself.

Barnum and Bailey's lavish entertainments thus rivaled and even superseded the imperial spectacles once provided by Roman emperors. Similarly, a language of imperial power was employed to describe the success of the circus's "victory" and "triumph" in London: "Nero the new, transcendent dramatic spectacle which reigned triumphant and resplendent in London for over two hundred performances." One poster for a circus held shortly after the parade in honor of Admiral Dewey has circus performers proceeding in triumph through the Dewey Arch. Barnum boasted in a letter to his circus audiences that his show was so popular in London that he could "truthfully exclaim '*Veni, vidi, vici.*'" Like Caesar (and later Cecil B. DeMille), Barnum had the skills necessary to organize, supervise, and direct masses of men and animals. After all, it was no easy task to re-create imperial Rome under a circus tent! One admirer quoted in the souvenir program said: "One is lost in admiration of the masterful generalship, the enormous labor, and the infinite care bestowed upon details...all going forward with the regularity and apparent ease of clockwork." At a banquet given in Barnum's honor at the Hotel Victoria in London, the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* suggested that Barnum ranked with Caesar himself or even Alexander the Great.

After all, are not the great men of all ages showmen? Was not Julius Caesar, when he crossed the Rubicon...was not he a showman? Was not Alexander the Great a showman when he burned Persepolis with a magnificent display of ten thousand additional lamps?

Not only did Barnum appropriate the language of imperial victory for himself and his circus, he also conflated his achievements with those of the American nation. He referred to himself both as a conqueror and a diplomatic envoy from America: he went to England, he said, "representing the Republic in amusement," and returned "triumphant to his native land," wearing "the brightest laurels the old world could bestow."



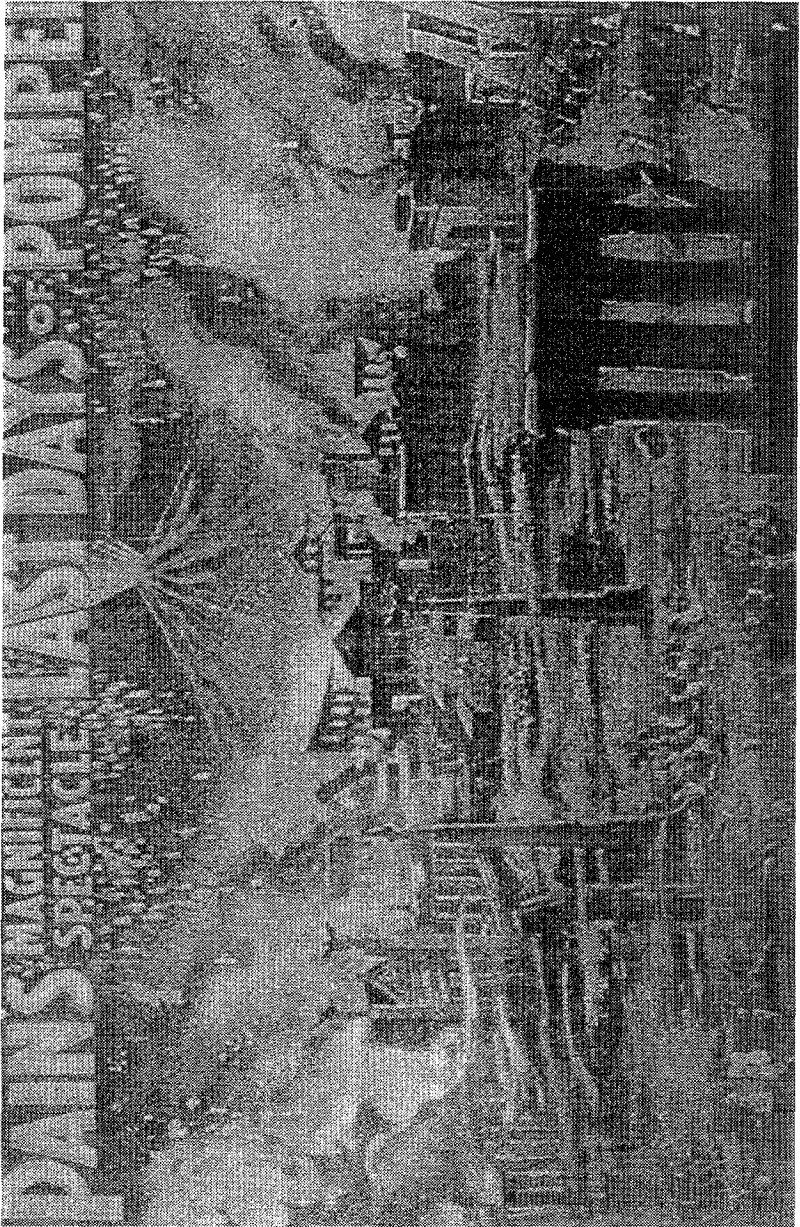
Circus Poster, circa 1899-1900, circus performers pass under the Dewey Arch. [Courtesy of the Library of Congress.]

In Barnum's bombastic rhetoric, nationalism, patriotism, and the circus are conflated: "We went as Americans; we respectfully asked for recognition as Americans; and we won squarely on American merit." The victory obtained was the recognition and admiration of the British public for the unsurpassable entertainments he and America provided the citizens of the Old World. In the entertainment arena, Americans have once again defeated the British, and proved American superiority. Barnum's triumph in London demonstrated, he claimed, "a pretty fair sample of American progress, for it proves itself at least one hundred years ahead of the kind Europe can produce."

Coney Island

Coney Island opened in 1895 and its amusement parks flourished in the years before World War I. Like the Midways of the World's Fairs (which had been the inspiration for Coney's designers), Coney Island offered an array of fantasy environments and entertainments, including pyrodramas and reenactments of the destruction of Pompeii and Roman chariot races. The architecture of its three amusement parks was wildly eclectic: minarets, towers, domes, stucco, gilding, paint, over-decoration, jumble and garishness; and at night, Coney Island was dazzling: a fairyland of electric lights. At the 1893 Columbian Exposition at Chicago, the Midway amusement section offered an invigorating contrast to the monumental, neoclassical, dignified and correct White City at the center of the Exposition. Similarly, Coney Island offered an exhilarating antidote to nearby New York City. During the summer months, millions of urban workers went to Coney Island, where a carnival atmosphere prevailed, and the normal structures and rules governing social behavior were temporarily suspended (Kasson, *Amusing*).

As Michele Bogart has pointed out, Coney Island was most popular with immigrants, out-of-towners, and New York's middle and working classes, "the very groups that artists and City Beautifiers targeted for socialization and edification through public art" (243). Like the circus, Coney Island functioned as an antidote and even a protest to the moralism and ideology of the Progressive Era. Coney Island had no didactic pretensions, indeed its architecture and sculpture provided a "parodic commentary" on the aims and ideals of proponents of the City Beautiful movement. One contemporary called it "a mimic White City," and Coney Island's design and decorative elements poked fun at "highbrow" architecture. At the heart of Dreamland, one of the amusement parks, stood a Beaux-Arts shaped horseshoe organized around a lagoon, and its composition deliberately recalled but playfully subverted the majestic vision of the Court of Honor at the Chicago Exposition and the Electric



Poster advertising the pyro-drama *The Last Days of Pompeii*, circa 1890. [Courtesy of the Pain Archive.]

Tower at the 1901 Pan American Exposition in Buffalo. Chariot races were staged around the sunken plaza ringing the horseshoe, and its mock triumphal arches were adorned with clowns, pierrots, and masks.⁹

In Manhattan a restaurant called Murray's Roman Gardens re-created the ritzy Pompeii of Roman patricians for the enjoyment of New York elites. Murray's publicity material billed the Roman Gardens as a reproduction of a luxurious Pompeiian villa (Pompeii was considered "the Newport of Rome") during the rule of the emperor Nero. The Roman-themed restaurant anticipated Caesars Palace in Las Vegas in the lavish and meticulous attention it devoted to creating a sumptuous pleasure palace for imperial entertainments and ostentatious consumption. Nearby at Manhattan Beach at Coney Island that same Pompeii was destroyed by a fiery cataclysm in nightly performances of James Pain's pyrodrama *The Last Days of Pompeii*. By the late 1880s Edward Bulwer-Lytton's enormously popular 1834 novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* had been adopted for performance as a pyrodrama in England, and it enjoyed considerable success there and later in America until well into the twentieth century (Wyke 157; Mayer 41-50). Pain's pyrodrama was a very abbreviated rendition of the novel, and performances were held nightly in July and August at Coney Island, where as many as 10,000 spectators gathered to watch. Bonfires and firework displays created the effect of an eruption, the flow of lava, and the burning of the city. There is an apocalyptic flavor to the pyrodrama; those who escape Pompeii are Christians, and molten lava purges and punishes the corrupt Roman city.

A juxtaposition of the Roman Pompeiis in Manhattan and at Coney Island is telling: at Murray's Roman Gardens Restaurant wealthy elites indulged in the supposed prodigious pleasures of imperial Rome while at Coney Island that same Pompeii is destroyed in a spectacular conflagration. In the novel and in the pyrodrama, the Roman city and its luxury-loving citizens represent the dark side of empire, its corrupt, decadent, and oppressive face. In New York, the contrast between the poverty of the immigrant working-class populations in their tenements and the imperial splendor of the civic architecture and private mansions and retreats of the wealthy elites was enormous, and anxiety and tensions caused by the cleavage between the rich and the poor simmered and occasionally exploded into civic unrest. Nightmarish visions of an urban Armageddon were popular in the literature of the 1880s and 1890s: Joaquin Miller's *The Destruction of Gotham*, for example, features Bowery mobs sacking and burning the mansions of the wealthy and pillaging and gorging themselves at fashionable restaurants. The fires become an inferno that consumes corporate office buildings and carries

rivers of molten lead through the city, purging and purifying it (Burrows and Wallace 1155-56). Novels like these express middle-class angst about the conditions of metropolitan life and the threats to civic life posed by the enormously wealthy and the immigrant aliens in their midst. They form the sensationalist counterpart to the unease experienced and expressed by Henry James, Edith Wharton, and other novelists who found themselves in a New York they no longer recognized.

Coney Island's spectacularly staged apocalyptic pyrodrama provided its working-class audiences a spectacle and a moral: after the eruption of Vesuvius, it is the Christians of Pompeii who escape and are triumphant, the wealthy and decadent Romans who perish. So this vision of an urban Armageddon offered spectators a double pleasure: a voyeuristic enjoyment of lavish displays of luxury and extravagance set in doomed Pompeii and the moral pleasure of witnessing the ultimate triumph of justice. In *The Last Days of Pompeii*, the unbearable conditions of metropolitan life were transformed into melodramatic and fiery entertainment.

Notes

¹The key characteristics of City Beautiful design plans included neoclassical architecture, grand avenues, green spaces, massive buildings and civic centers, and a unity of design and scale.

²In 1873 P. T. Barnum leased from the Vanderbilts the New York and Harlem Rail Road shed, which took up an entire square block bounded by Madison and Fourth Avenues and on Twenty-sixth and Twenty-seventh streets. Barnum remodeled it as the Great Roman Hippodrome and put on performances of the world's first three-ring circus. After Barnum gave up the lease in 1879, Vanderbilt renamed it Madison Square Garden. In 1885, Vanderbilt razed the building and sold the site to a group of millionaires, including Andrew Carnegie and J. P. Morgan, who hired architect Stanford White to design the new Madison Square Garden (Culhane 104-5).

³I have used the circus poster collections at the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, and at the New-York Historical Society's Prints and Photographs Division, which contain fabulously illustrated posters advertising these and other non-Roman acts.

⁴A claim asserted in a poster for the Great Barnum and Forepaugh Combination, located in the Circus File at the Museum of the City of New York.

⁵The Billy Rose Theater Collection at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts at the New York Public Library has the souvenir program for the Staten

Island *Nero*, which includes a synopsis of the events of the spectacle, and the Library of Congress has Imre Kiralfy's copyrighted 1888 manuscript.

⁶The circus performance included her seduction of Antony and their double suicide, enlivened with many dancing girls, animals, and elaborate sets and costumes. The souvenir program book for the *Superb Spectacle Cleopatra* can be found at the Billy Rose Theater Collection at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts at the New York Public Library.

⁷A copy of this important and lavish program can be found in the Circus File at the City Museum of New York. All of the quotations below, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from this document, which is not paginated.

⁸Amusement park entrepreneur Frederick Thompson, who designed Luna Park, one of Coney Island's parks, brought his skills into Manhattan. His New York Hippodrome (1905), located on Sixth Avenue between Forty-third and Forty-fourth streets, contained an enormous theatrical space for the performance of extravagant events. Its design also playfully subverted neoclassical architecture: the Hippodrome's column capitals had elephant heads, there were horses on the spandrels, and passersby could see live animals in cages through the glass on the street level (Stern, Gilmartin and Massengale 208-9).

⁹Visitors to Coney Island could also experience the destruction of Pompeii at Dreamland. One of its buildings took the form of a classical temple, and its front was decorated with Charles Shean's fresco of the Bay of Naples with the dormant volcano in the background. Inside, patrons could witness the eruption of Vesuvius, which was realized with scenic and mechanical equipment and an extraordinary electric display.

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