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Strange Duets: Impressarios and Actresses in the American Theatre, 1865-1914 (review)

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informs her study. It is too bad, for some of those scholars have probed the relationship between print and national identity for its culturally hegemonic implications, despite representational diversity. Print culture specialists would be more attentive to how socio-economic power shapes media production and access, as well as to how ideologies, like pluck-and-luck and rags-to-riches, expressed in print, distorted social expectations. A more comprehensive survey of the cultural field of print would reveal countless publications, say, by the Wobbly Knights of Labor, challenging the beneficence of what Mizruchi calls “full-scale consumer capitalism.” Finally, book historians might delve more deeply into the publishing histories of the texts she treats to consider them as efforts in their own right to constitute publics and counterpublics. In contrast to Mizruchi’s somewhat static multiculturalism, such work envisions the representation of difference in print culture as continually contested, frequently negotiated, and often resolutely polysemic.

University of Pittsburgh

Ronald J. Zboray

STRANGE DUETS: Impressarios and Actresses in the American Theatre, 1865-1914.

In Strange Duets: Impressarios and Actresses in the American Theatre, 1865-1914, Kim Marra invites readers into the tumultuous world of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century theatre through an examination of the on-and-off stage relationships between leading ladies and the men who claimed to have fashioned their success. The text is a pièce de résistance of intersectional historical scholarship, analyzing the ways race, class, gender, and sexuality both influenced and were influenced by the relationships forged between men and women of the theatre during the wax and wane of Victorian sentiment, the emergence of Darwinian theories on evolution, and the rise of the New Woman. The book treats three iconic and enduring impresario-actress relationships that reflect the social tensions and changes in theatre of the period.

Augustin Daly and Ada Rehan, Charles Frohman and Maude Adams, and David Belasco and Mrs. Leslie Carter are three of the dynamic duos that dominate the “legitimate” American theatre during this period. Marra organizes her study into seven chapters, dedicating one chapter to each impresario’s early career development and dealings with women and a second chapter to their relationship with their primary leading lady. Due to the enormous success of their theatrical collaboration, David Belasco and Mrs. Leslie Carter warrant a third chapter. The case studies are fronted by an introduction in which Marra explains how these impresarios and actresses, “[r]ising up together from lowly ‘racial’ and class origins, . . . compelled intense fascination because of how, as highly visible celebrities, they played out these cultural tensions, both onstage in performance and, often most intensively and intriguingly, behind the scenes in the process of training and rehearsal” (xviii). The study concludes with an Epilogue which reads the legacy of such actress-impressario dealings through the late twentieth century musical hit The Phantom of the Opera, demonstrating how such “personal biography merges with wider social history” (259).

Through exhaustingly extensive archival research into primary sources including letters, journals, photographs, reviews, memoirs, and production ephemera, Marra painstakingly constructs a representation of these working and personal relationships that not only provides insight into the business of the professional theatre of the time, but also into the personal lives and loves of the individuals whose lives were inextricably caught up in the public performance of personal identity. Forty archival images reproduced within the text illustrate the fantastic lengths to which these artists spared nothing to create socially
acceptable representations of gender, sexuality, and race while creating opportunities for private lives and identities that often deviated from such norms a great deal. Marra skillfully weaves diverse interests in science, performance, religion, culture, and personal politics into a theatrical history that, like all great works of art, holds a mirror up to the nature of the society it represents while at the same time reflecting the broad interests and concerns of its contemporary audience.

University of Kansas

Jocelyn L. Buckner


Scrapbooks are the bane of archival processes, conservation practices, and of librarians in general, as the books bulge grossly with acidic tape, material objects, and loose pages. For the cultural historian, scrapbooks represent, in their unregulated messiness, a mountain of interpretative challenges. The creators of scrapbooks disordered the world around them and reordered it on the pages of their own book; relied upon commercial sources for books and scraps while assembling what look to be monuments of folk expression; hint at artistic creativity while insisting upon amateur status. These polarities are, of course, suspect as theoretical frameworks unless used as continuums of valuation, rather than oppositional categories.

Helfand’s volume on scrapbooks struggles mightily with these challenges of interpretation, and while at times Helfand succeeds at illuminating the social and historical contexts for scrapbooks, it will take a more traditional scholar to provide us with a full-length study of the phenomenon. The organization of the book is roughly thematic but themes such as “Time,” “Space,” and “Nostalgia” are under-developed and inconsistently applied. Change over time as an analytical approach is dispensed with overtly, since, the author argues, scrapbooks themselves resist chronological arrangement. However, more historically-grounded scholarship of recent years has demonstrated that scrapbooks have a distinct and traceable history framed in other literary practices and influenced directly by technological changes. There is a casual slippage of terminology (and hence, categories), such as the equation of collecting (an activity) with scrapbooks (specifically referred to as a category of objects) in the preface, and later in the same section, biography and autobiography are both used to describe scrapbooks as statements of self.

These criticisms reflect scholarly, historical issues that I have with the book. The volume is a gorgeous monument to the idiosyncratic beauty of scrapbooks dating from the mid-1800s to late 1990s. Helfand, partner in a prominent graphic design firm Winterhouse and co-editor of the influential blog Design Observer, has produced an extremely beautiful book. The extended horizontal format of the volume reflects the commitment to reproducing layouts of the scrapbooks. The full-color images are of very high quality, photographed and cropped with attention to detail, and reproduced with a uniformly lush texture so that the pages appear remarkably as if the actual scrapbook pages. This focus on the aesthetic qualities of the volume reflects Helfand’s own self-professed subjective approach, and is a cue for readers interested in a careful weighing of historical evidence that they may not be on the same page as the author. Don’t hate this book because it is beautiful; accept it for what it is. Helfand presents readers with an object of beauty that describes the beauty of those overlooked scrapbooks that only appear homely. Readers may not be persuaded by any historical or cultural arguments that Helfand presents; that work is better accomplished by recent or forthcoming scholarly works on scrapbooks.

Miami University of Ohio

Helen Sheumaker