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Book Review

Dudden, Faye E. (1994). **WOMEN IN THE AMERICAN THEATRE: ACTRESSES & AUDIENCES 1790-1870**. New Haven, CT. Yale University Press.

The theatrical enterprise... contains two divergent possibilities for women: transformation and objectification. Theatre may enable women to rehearse the most radical projects of self-creation or may reduce them to bodies and present them as objects. Theatre may do either of these, or both, or neither: it depends on the conditions under which theatre is conceived, produced, and received. It depends, that is, on history. (p. 2-3)

Thus, in a most entertaining and thought-provoking volume "provid[ing] a critical case study in the relationship of gender, popular culture, and American capitalism" (p. 4), Faye E. Dudden, author of the work, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses & Audiences 1790-1870*, interestingly chronicles and accounts for the changing role played by women on the stage then. Moreover, her penetrating investigation of that pivotal growth period in American theatre sheds a fascinating light on the "Why?" and "How come?" the role of women on our stage today. It is the story of *male* power and money increasingly industrializing, commercializing, and controlling the theatre. Concomitantly, it is the story of ever-increasing *female* objectification, and finally, profitable commodification as "body" product to be sold to the audience that buys the tickets. It is the story of why our theatre is the way it is—and why, in fact, a woman's pretty face and sexy figure have often become more than enough "talent" for a career on the stage.

And yet, as Dudden tells it, things didn't start out that way at all! In the early republic, c. 1790-1830, when the theatre too, was in its formative years—"provincial" (p. 4) and cooperatively organized—having enough "talent" for a career on the stage meant having a "thrillingly expressive" or "soul-subduing" voice (p. 14). It meant having studied and cultivated "the art of elocution" (p. 14). It meant having the ability to captivate the audience *without* the aid of elaborate costumes, sets, or props. Indeed, in this theatre that celebrated the "aural" (p. 15), male and female performers alike were held to this standard. Hence, they were both heartily cheered or mercilessly booed for their efforts by a "spirited" (p. 24) audience enamored of polished orators in *or* outside the playhouse. True, women on stage still labored under the libelous burden of being considered morally questionable—as were all "public women" (p. 21). But, then again, acting was one of the few jobs open to them. It

provided a good living. It allowed for marriage and family. And, in the 1830s, with the exceptional success of Fanny Kemble, it even seemed for a moment that the stigma attached to being an actress might become something of the past.

What changed everything? According to Dudden, it was that theatre became a business, driven by the growth of cities, a burgeoning public eager for entertainment, and, most especially, *businessmen*—specifically theatre managers—even *more* eager for profits, big profits! Thus, for example, there was Thomas Hamblin at the Bowery Theatre. Omnipotent in his position as boss and “relentless” (p. 62) in his pursuit of the “low-[cost] high volume” (p. 5) production, he determinedly turned to the wholesale presentation of crowd-pleasing melodrama, hence his theatre nicknamed the “Bowery Slaughter House” (p. 61). He turned to stressing what had become the less costly and more popular visual rather than the aural, hence the endless simulated fires and floods that filled his proscenium and wowed his audiences (p. 62). And finally, he turned to hiring actresses whose only real claim to fame was their looks, ““manufacturing”” (p. 61) theatrical pedigree. Hence Hamblin avoided fulfilling salary demands made by those women in possession of *real* theatrical experience and studied talents. Indeed, with this last of his money saving ideas, Hamblin, as well other theatre managers, bet that their audiences of predominantly male wage earners—*those having money to buy a ticket*—would be very happy with little more than a young and pretty face. Sadly, they were right.

Of course, the more optimistic could point to Charlotte Cushman who appeared about mid-nineteenth century. “She was ‘without one personal charm of face or figure’” (p. 77-78). She was “tall,” “plain” with an “owl-like face” (p. 75). Nonetheless, her skill at self-transformation was unequaled. She performed male *and* female roles to audience acclaim. “Her Lady Macbeth was strong and muscular, ‘a pantheress let loose’” (p. 90). Her portrayal of “Romeo,” opposite her sister as “Juliet,” was considered one of the greatest nineteenth century performances of that role by “male or female” (p. 92). Moreover, her audience was made up of men *and* a considerable number of women who somehow convinced their male escorts to take them to see her. A powerful woman both on and off the stage, Cushman never allowed anyone “to use her” (p. 83). But then, there were very, very few like her.

Instead, the problems most women on stage would face were just beginning. The success of the ““model artist”” shows (p. 116) and the ““concert saloons”” (p. 143) brought the “leg craze” (p. 164) to the theatre. Thus the main requirements for women on the boards became a pretty face *and* attractive legs. Soon a curvaceous figure was added to the list of prerequisites as theatre managers took note of the powerful success of shows like *Mazeppa* and *The Black Crook*. The visit of Lydia Thompson and her troupe of ““British Blondes”” only underlined profits to be made.

And so, little by little, as Dudden tells it, women became a commodity, their bodies the products to be sold—by males to males. Indeed, it is a fascinating story, and one still very much with us.

Women in the American Theatre: Actresses & Audiences 1790-1870: it's a book well worth the reading.

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