

# H-Net Reviews

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William Faricy Condee. *Coal and Culture: Opera Houses in Appalachia*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004. 224 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1588-7.

Reviewed by Julie Yates

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## Where Is the Opera?

The Appalachian coal mining boom often brings to mind the raw effects of industrialization: the destruction of land, loss of that land by its native people, and paternalistic devices used by coal barons to wield control over the land and population. Coal mining became a force that consumed the region in a flurry of activity with the laying of railroad tracks, immigration of laborers, and building of towns to entice workers and their families to make coal mining a way of life. Along with this industrialization came the development of cultural entities that solidified the communities. William Faricy Condee, professor of theater at Ohio University, explores the vital role that opera houses played in these communities during the rapid industrialization of the Appalachian region from the 1860s through the 1930s.

This work, a unique combination of entertainment history and Appalachian history, focuses on the medium of the opera house as a “crossroads of the community” (p. 5). The expansion of the coal mining and railroad industries along with an increase in immigration converged at the same time to create the perfect environment for the growth of opera houses. In the preface, Condee states that the “goal of this book is to lay a historical foundation for the restoration of opera houses in Appalachia” (p. xi). Condee proceeds to accomplish this feat by illustrating the symbiotic relationship between the formation of industrialized Appalachian towns and the presence of opera houses. To show this linkage, the author uses a wide array of primary and secondary sources, including research on more than 125 opera houses in small to mid-

size towns across Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio.

*Coal and Culture* begins with an overview of various opera houses, which offers detailed descriptions of their basic designs and architecture and includes intriguing photographs and illustrations. The first chapter also supplies background information about the inner working and key design elements essential to the operation of opera houses. The design was important not only for the individual opera house but also for the entire town. The author employs cultural landscape studies as a methodology to analyze the significance of these opera houses. This interesting approach focuses on studying the opera house not individually but as part of the entire landscape. In numerous examples, the centrality of the opera houses within the overall organization of towns verifies their importance within these communities.

Ironically, opera was rarely performed in the “opera houses.” The name “opera house” was purposefully deceptive because of the desire to distance it from the scandalous reputation of the “theater.” In turn, this distinction granted opera houses respect and legitimacy within towns. Opera houses thrived because they were deemed an acceptable part of society through their promotion of a larger nineteenth-century movement referred to by Lawrence Levine as “the cult of etiquette,” which changed the nature of performances and audience behavior. According to Condee, this “feminization” of opera houses made it acceptable for women to attend opera house per-

formances along with their families (p. 33). In Harlan, Kentucky, for example, the goal of the opera house was to “not only be entertaining but [also] instructional and educational” (pp. 25-26). Additionally, the legitimacy supplied by opera houses helped attract and maintain a solid labor source. For the most part, opera houses promoted morality and provided an air of civility within Appalachian towns. However, not all opera houses in smaller coal camps were focused on morality; some promoted entertainment, such as scantily clad dancing girls, that would draw the largest crowd.

Condee’s detailed description about the various types of events that occurred in opera houses is informative. The author chronologically traces the progression of entertainment from the inception of opera houses until their demise, while exploring the distinctions between high and low culture and how these became more important as the population became more class conscious. This book highlights the different types of entertainment available at opera houses, including blackface minstrelsy, variety acts, comedy acts, Shakespearean plays, and such popular dramas as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Most consistently, however, the book emphasizes the importance of the opera house to the community; it was used for various events, such as graduations, political debates, and religious functions.

One of the most significant contributions of this work is Condee’s emphasis on the exposure that opera houses brought to the communities. The Appalachian region has often been unfairly noted for its isolation in comparison to the rest of the United States. In 1899, for instance, Berea College president, William Goodell Frost, described Appalachian people as “our contemporary ancestors” (p. 57). However, Condee demonstrates that the region was not as isolated as often thought and that opera houses increased the region’s exposure to various cultural aspects. For example, the Croatian Club in Lynch, a

coal camp in Harlan County, Kentucky, arranged a performance by an internationally known opera singer with the only other performance in the United States being held in Louisville. Overall, Condee illustrates how opera houses positively affected the inhabitants of Appalachia by expanding their experiences and increasing their quality of life.

The debate over the boundaries of Appalachia continues in this analysis with the addition of Ohio. To clarify his decision to include Ohio, perhaps Condee should have examined the controversy surrounding the definition of Appalachia and offered an overview of the region in the beginning chapter to help lay the foundation for his work. At certain points, the book reads as if the focus is on opera houses in larger industrial towns rather than in coal camps, which may be a result of more readily available sources. However, more information gleaned from coal company records might have been a nice addition to this work that would further have helped in defining the scope of the region.

Overall, Condee effectively illustrates the cultural value of opera houses by demonstrating how one type of building in industrialized Appalachian towns provided so many invaluable functions as the “nexus of the community” (p. xi). The final chapter summarizes the fates suffered by many opera houses, which ended up as ashes or were flattened. The purpose of the book is realized in the final pages with accounts of the restoration and revitalization of numerous opera houses that currently host community theater productions, movies, and dance recitals. Condee advocates that the “role the opera house can play in the future is found in the past,” which inspires communities to preserve their own historic treasures (p. 173). The interesting angle of this work, provided in part by Condee’s unique perspective as a theater professor, is undoubtedly an important contribution to the cultural history of the Appalachian region.

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