

Kim Marra. *Strange Duets: Impresarios and Actresses in the American Theater, 1865-1914.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006. xxii + 352 pp. \$47.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87745-993-4.



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Early in *Strange Duets*, Kim Marra provides a scene from the back row of a theater that says much about her subject. Augustin Daly, drama critic, playwright, and consummate theater manager has hidden himself from his performers' view and watches them with opera glasses from the deep recesses of the gallery. He is not there to judge the merits of the acting but to see if the actresses, in particular, break his rules prohibiting smiling at, nodding to, or otherwise interacting with male audience members. The surveillance, every bit as theatrical as what took place on the stage, epitomizes Marra's world of profits, celebrity, and control in American theater in the five decades after the Civil War. Daly's effort to see if the women in his hire recognized his authority over their emotional expression, even when he was ostensibly absent, was but one device with which he and other theater managers asserted a new organizational and artistic regime. *Strange Duets* examines three relationships between male impresarios and female actors in order to illuminate a type of professionalization that, because it

affected a popular and lucrative form of entertainment, had significant cultural resonance.

Marra divides her study into three parts, organized around the professional relationships between impresarios Daly, Charles Frohman, and David Belasco and their respective stars, Ada Rehan, Maude Adams, and Leslie Carter. Each pair worked closely together for decades, manipulating passions on the stage to further their career goals. The "strangeness" of the three duets stemmed less from their age gaps or their decidedly public nature than from their challenge to racial and sexual proprieties. Daly, Frohman, and Belasco shared "marginalized 'racial' and religious roots," making their control of women on and off the stage potentially troubling for moralistic observers (p. xx). But that marginality also became key, in Marra's analysis, to the popularity of the duets' productions. In such spectacular pieces as *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Chantecler*, and *The Heart of Maryland*, managers and their actresses thrilled audiences by portraying transgressive emotions and physical actions with a stylized, respectable veneer.

Of the three impresarios, Augustin Daly comes across as the cruelest. Rehan, an Irish immigrant with meager career prospects before taking up with Daly, became the target of her manager's intense power plays. Whether by demanding monogamy of Rehan and then parading his mistresses before her or forcing her to rehearse until she fell ill, Daly stressed (on stage and off) male triumph over savage female passions. While chronicling Daly's project of both taming Rehan and presenting the taming process as drama, Marra provides close readings of group photographs that display Daly's construction of power over Rehan through hierarchy, dress, and proximity. Photographic analysis works well with Marra's method of examining reviews, memoirs, scripts, and press coverage to tease out the nature of the relationship. As with the other two couples, Marra argues that the success of the Daly/Rehan public image was due to the partial revelation of the seemingly private.

For Charles Frohman and Maude Adams, private life included long term same-sex relationships that would have repelled mainstream audiences. Unlike Daly, Frohman was not interested in sexual domination as a career-building strategy. Instead, he used emotional containment. Marra presents Frohman as a gay man who battled the implications of sexual inversion theory by using Adams's "transcendently chaste Gentile stardom" to secure theatrical triumphs (p. 77). Together they were able to clothe Adams in potentially scandalous breeches for five performances from 1900 to 1911, yet keep her above suspicion by rendering her naive and sexless instead of disconcerting and androgynous. Marra reveals the balancing act well with detailed examinations of the "queer cultural work" of *Aiglon* and *Chantecler* (p. 134).

David Belasco emerges as the most interesting figure in the book, due to Marra's wonderfully detailed description of his rise to fame and idiosyncratic methods. Moreover, Belasco's career

with Leslie Carter seems to fit the *Strange Duets* model best, given his attempt to harness Carter's physical passions for art and profit while dressing himself as a Catholic priest. This was, Marra argues, Belasco's way of achieving professional recognition in the face of rampant anti-Semitism. Belasco's attention to the physical was equal parts pornographic and physiological. He compared his craft in startling fashion to that of another type of trained expert: "I feel as if I were using a surgeon's knife. I probe and probe and probe, and finally I find what I was looking for, what the person herself may have had no knowledge of" (p. 193). Carter was the recipient of these probings, driven to reveal emotional climaxes that won over audiences as the embodiment of sincerity.

Readers may wish that Marra pursued some connections further. For example, her comparison of the discipline imposed by theater managers and militaristic models developed by industrial capitalists would benefit from more elaboration. The parallels are clear, but did they actually mean anything to the six people followed here? Likewise, Marra attributes fascinating interpretations of scripts and acting methods to such disembodied entities as the era's "cultural framework," as if the framework sat in the audience like any other paying customer (p. 51). At times, it does not seem enough to relate details of these relationships to coincident scientific or political paradigms. If, for instance, the tenets of recapitulation theory come to some readers' minds when they encounter impresarios' efforts to infantilize female stars, that does not mean that it informed approaches, practices, or responses in the 1880s.

On the other hand, one might argue that this instability of interpretation indicates the power of cultural products that were open to multiple readings, and thus wider audiences. Marra's book succeeds in showing just how productive volatility could be. Rehan became so popular that she gained leverage with Daly, who desperately needed her to keep playing the role of the untamed

wilderness that would be conquered by manly heroes. Adams and Frohman intentionally undercut their challenge to propriety by alternating between performances in breeches and traditional female roles. Belasco and Carter blurred lines between authenticity and artifice to such an extent that well-trained emotional exercises emerged as evidence of essential sensuality. Through Marra's lively and perceptive analysis, the ambiguity of the material becomes an asset. *Strange Duets* will not disappoint readers interested in the history of popular cultural forms in the United States, and the theoretical and practical intersections of race, class, and sexuality.

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