

was successfully reshaped by Sinn Féin (aided, ironically, by the contemporary British press) as its own rebellion, refocused as a protest against conscription, and transformed into an effective campaign tool against its political rivals in the IPP. Destenay does his finest work laying out the various Irish by-elections in the aftermath of the Rising. And while he demonstrates that Sinn Féin candidates utilized the language of U.S.-inspired self-determination and internationalism as a means to garner votes, it is not entirely clear how much this influenced voters or whether this had much resonance beyond election campaigns. The French diplomatic representatives provide additional gloss that fleshes out the narrative a bit more. For U.S. historians, this work might be of tangential interest to Wilson's vision of the war and the postwar international order.

## A Fictionalized History of Popular Theater

**Hajdu, David and John Carey. *A Revolution in Three Acts: The Radical Vaudeville of Bert Williams, Eva Tanguay, and Julian Eltinge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. 176 pp. \$19.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0231191821.**

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*A Revolution in Three Acts* is an entertaining graphic novel about three prominent performers who appeared in vaudeville in the early twentieth century. The three characters it presents, Eva Tanguay, Bert Williams and Julian Eltinge, are seen as confronting, in performance, normative constructions of race, sex, or gender. Tanguay's high-spirited sexuality is presented as overt and powerful at a time when such expressions were shocking; Eltinge's cross-dressing act is interpreted as gender fluid and a precursor to today's burlesque drag performance; and Bert Williams is depicted as struggling to subvert the minstrel tradition with dignified, understated and sympathetic comedy. The authors' intent seems to be to excite interest in the past by highlighting its contemporary connections. I can imagine the book stimulating lively classroom conversations about race and gender and sexuality, and how the past anticipates the present.

The book serves up a fun mix of historical fact, art, and fiction. The comics are drawn with delicate, wiggling lines by John Carey in a way that captures the flickering, scratchy feel of early silent films. This isn't how artists depicted vaudeville at the time—they tended to render the dim theater lighting, the luminance of the costumes, and the garish solidity of the performers with heavy globs of paint—but the drawings are evocative of a generic "earlier time."

David Hajdu's text compliments Carey's unstable images with an episodic text. The narrative weaves in and out of the lives of three performers who rarely intersected. It

intersperses news clippings with spoken dialogue (the longer passages being drawn from contemporary interviews) and Hajdu's commentary. What I liked best was that Hajdu recognizes that his three characters habitually invented and reinvented their own stories. He does not try to locate the truth, as a conventional biographer might do, and instead builds on the fiction created by press agents and reporters. It was common at the time for popular theater performers to maintain that they weren't "acting" on stage; they were doing something real. Hajdu extrapolates from this and presents the acts of these three players as windows into their "real lives." This is a presumption, of course, and one that wouldn't be made about actors in the regular theater, but it is in keeping with the culture of vaudeville. Another thing the book captures well is the inability of all three performers to adjust to changing times and tastes. Walker's woe begotten clowning was ill-suited to the Jazz Age; Eltinge's heavily-corseted, long-gowned figure appeared fusty by World War I; and Tanguay kept presenting the same hyperactive character on stage until the public got bored.

There is much to enjoy in this graphic novel but, and I know this will sound curmudgeonly, it does have major limitations as a historical study. It is a creative work which imagines the feelings, movements, and conversations of people we know little about. Moreover, although it purports to be a study of three careers in vaudeville, neither Eltinge nor Williams spent much time in that theater. Early in his career, Williams mostly performed in musical comedies accompanied by George Walker and their touring company. After Walker's death in 1911, Williams largely performed in revues, most notably in Ziegfeld's Follies. Once his career got started, Williams was an infrequent feature in vaudeville. Eltinge, similarly, began in vaudeville, and returned to it occasionally, but he was mainly an actor in musical comedies. The Eltinge Theater in New York was not a vaudeville theater; it was a conventional Broadway house. Tanguay was the most consistent vaudevillian, largely because her talents were difficult to contain elsewhere.

There are several other errors. Tanguay did not invent the "Salome" dance; she spoofed it. Her penny costume was a dress, not a body-suit. Williams did perform in blackface throughout his career, maintaining it even when Walker gave it up. In fact, he was still appearing in blackface during trials for his last musical comedy, *Under the Bamboo Tree*, in 1921. One of the difficulties we face in understanding Williams is that he wrote matter-of-factly about the racism he experienced, but never publicly disowned the minstrel mask. Although the authors want to imagine them differently, it was Walker, not Williams, who was the more outspoken on racial discrimination. Regarding Eltinge, there is no actual evidence that he was gay, other than snide remarks from a few jealous actors and innuendos in a Progressive Era press increasingly hostile to female impersonation. Implying that performers who did cross-dressing acts were queer or bi-gender is misrepresenting the rich history of female impersonation. Eltinge stood at the end of a long tradition, the last and most successful of the nineteenth-century female impersonators. Although he broke new ground in providing products and advice to women on fashion and deportment, in some ways, he was doing what men habitually did in telling women how they should look and behave.

One of the most peculiar errors in the book is the way Carey has made the characters so much thinner than they were. Tanguay is even shown naked, as if to show that her figure on stage wasn't created by heavy corseting, which in fact it was. Neither Eltinge nor Walker are depicted without clothes, even though Eltinge also wore a corset. One could argue, I suppose, that because Tanguay moved and displayed her body in ways audiences found shocking and funny, Carey is trying to represent her sexuality for a modern audience. Unfortunately, by drawing her body for twenty-first rather than early

twentieth-century spectators, Carey does misrepresent Tanguay's vaudeville performance. Her "I Don't Care" wasn't anything like the Sex Pistols'.

None of this really matters, given what the book sets out to accomplish. It is a work of historical fiction, or fictionalized history, and, taken on its own terms, it is enjoyable, easy on the eye, and timely. One hopes that readers unfamiliar with the early twentieth-century popular theater will read it, become interested in it, and decide to study its actual history.