

When Broadway Was the Runway: Theater, Fashion, and American Culture.

By Marlis Schweitzer. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009; pp. 320, 47 illustrations. \$39.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

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This excellent and engaging study examines how the commercial Broadway theatre, partnering with department stores, manufacturers, and mass publications, variously collaborated and competed with the fashion industry in wooing the mainly white, middle-class, female patrons who increasingly dominated its audiences in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. Through extensive archival research and an impressive synthesis of scholarship in multiple disciplines, Schweitzer illuminates the complex interworkings of business, cultural production, and commodification of goods and bodies. Her richly contextualized, beautifully written and illustrated historical analysis is well attuned to issues of class and race as well as gender as she argues for the ways theatrical spectatorship produced modern consumers and fueled mass markets in advance of electronic media.

In the first two of the book's five chapters, "The Octopus and the Matinee Girl" and "The 'Department Store Theater' and the Gendering of Consumption," Schweitzer maps relationships among key cultural forces that shaped fashion's theatrical operations. She begins by analyzing the triangulated power struggle among the Theatrical Syndicate, comprised of business-minded theatre managers, most of whom were Jewish; the "matinee girls" who desired to see the latest products in clothing and decor showcased on stage; and the WASP theatre critics who railed against Broadway becoming "a feminized commercial paradise dominated by foreign commodities" (22). Her analysis clearly shows that the anti-Syndicate campaign cannot be understood chiefly as an anti-Semitic struggle between men; gender was a crucial factor in this competition, as both managers and critics targeted women, for better or worse, as their most influential audience. Chapter 2 tracks the symbiosis of theatres, department stores, and advertising as stage realism fostered commodity tie-ins and product placements, and publications such as *Theatre Magazine* naturalized the connection between theatregoing and shopping by producing special sections devoted to the fashions of the stage. Schweitzer smartly highlights a pivotal irony of this strategy: "Rather than draw audiences further into the fictional stage world, realistic stage sets, furniture, and designer gowns called attention to their status as real, undermining the theatrical illusion by encouraging fantasies of consumption" (91). In addition to highlighting this dynamic, Schweitzer also illuminates the maneuverings of theatre and department store managers to keep patrons insulated from the ugly realities of labor exploitation and strife involved in the production of these commodities. Schweitzer brings another level of irony to the fore as she describes the Syndicate and rival Shuberts, seeking to bolster their reputations and curry favor with women, trying to best each other with monetary donations to

on-strike garment workers while simultaneously ignoring the declining working conditions of their own employees.

Equally complex in conceit and rich with insight, the next three chapters look at the manifold performances of fashion in which the theatre was implicated. Chapter 3, “‘The Cult of Clothes’ and the Performance of Class,” focuses on the fraught rapport between female performers and female fans whose objectifying scrutiny and ardor for the stage became sources of threat as well as support. Schweitzer argues that it was partly to combat the flood of stagestruck girls seeking acting careers, including many immigrants and African Americans, that “female performers sought to protect the whiteness of the Great White Way by making fashionable dress and a stylish [i.e., tall, slender] body a prerequisite of stage success” (99). This emerging body ideal prompted the nonconforming Sophie Tucker to resort to blackface, which meant that she later had to reinvent herself to succeed as a white comedienne. Chapter 4, “Fashioning the Modern Woman,” analyzes the introduction of the revolutionary sheath gown to America via Lillian Russell in *Wildfire* (1908) and its cross-racial appropriation by Aida Overton Walker in vaudeville. Schweitzer also intriguingly considers the cross-class implications of other “copy acts,” for example, how emulating actresses who played prostitutes proved empowering to some working-class women. While abetting conformity, actresses were also used, she argues, to promote fashion as self-expression and to counter anxieties about overconsumption. Chapter 5, “The Theatrical Fashion Show on Broadway and Sixth Avenue,” tracks the theatrical fashion show as it moved from fashion salon to department store to theatre, emphasizing how it privileged the work of the designer over that of the individual performer. While many women lost agency as performers, some gained other professional opportunities, most notably Lucile (Lady Duff Gordon), who became principal designer of the Ziegfeld Follies and director of the million-dollar fashion show *Fleurette’s Dream at Peronne* (1917–18), a war charity event on the Keith vaudeville circuit. Schweitzer shows how Lucile advanced an influential philosophy of the patriotic “citizen consumer” bound to spend as much money as possible on dress to please the soldiers.

Although concerns about fashion are often dismissed by cultural guardians as frivolous, their historical impact resounds throughout this book. As Schweitzer reminds readers in her powerful epilogue, the burden on actresses to furnish their own up-to-date costumes occasioned the Actors’ Equity Association’s first arbitration settlement in 1913 and figured centrally in the historic strike of 1919. But, ultimately—and of far wider cultural and political consequence, Schweitzer convincingly contends—the theatre’s strategic proffering of fashionable commodities in conjunction with other capitalist industries helped redefine democracy as the practice of choosing among consumer goods, which privileged consumer satisfaction over collective social action. Those values, she notes, are well at work in the corporate Broadway of today, even as the latter-day matinee girl fans of *Wicked* continue to assert their influence in the marketplace and blogosphere.