

The Making Of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990. By Richard Butsch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; pp. 438. \$69.95 cloth.

Although we have long understood that audiences are co-makers of meaning in the playhouse, most theatre histories pay scant attention to the role of spectators in constituting periods of theatrical history and motivating historical change. In part, our ignorance of audience dynamics has been due to the difficulty of researching the topic; reliable information on the social profile, expectations, behavior, and response of historical audiences is not easy to acquire. Before Butsch's survey, historians of American acting, playwriting, theatre architecture—of the entire range of theatrical phenomena that had to accommodate itself to the habits, mollify the concerns, and inflame the desires of past audiences—might have been excused for their inattention to and/or misleading generalizations about American spectators before 1920. No more. *The Making of American Audiences* provides a firm foundation on which a new generation of performance historians might build more socially engaged and responsible histories.

As Butsch's subtitle suggests, however, his book spans the entire range of spectating in the United States; it includes film viewing, radio listening, and television watching as well as audience behavior in past playhouses. While this inclusiveness has its uses, especially for historians of the twentieth-century American theatre, most performance scholars will be drawn to the first half of the book, where Butsch surveys major changes in theatrical audiences from colonial times to around 1920, with a focus on spectators for dramatic and variety entertainments.

In a cogent introduction, Butsch sets out the terms of his analysis and summarizes the major findings of his history. Interested in the power of past audiences and attempts to control or "incorporate" that power, Butsch notes that groups of spectators have shifted from relatively "active" to predominately "passive" participation over the course of two hundred and fifty years. Various entertainments in different media have also been more or

less “embedded” for audiences; like inattentive family members chatting in the midst of a television sit-com today, the B’hoys in the 1840s ignored much of the on-stage action at the Bowery Theatre to attend to their own concerns. Butsch also signals his interest in spectating as a mode of “collective identity” and “collective political action,” which leads to the pessimistic thesis which drives the narrative of his book: from active, group participants in the “public sphere” of the nation, audiences became passive individuals, attuned to private consumption rather than civic responsibility. The theatre of the mid-nineteenth century privatized the spectating experience, and radio and television broadcasting completed the process, making the home the primary center of entertainment and raising enormous barriers to political participation through spectatorship.

Butsch discusses the concept of the audience as a part of a public sphere in significant detail in his chapter on the theatre of the early republic, covering roughly 1790 to 1812. Certainly the discourses of the time gave authority to “the public” in the playhouse, as opposed to managers or actors or to the mostly elite, coterie audiences of colonial times. And there is no doubt that Federalist and Republican politics animated spectators to cheer certain plays, demand specific tunes, and occasionally to destroy the interiors of playhouses through riots when managers balked at audience sovereignty. But whether these modes of political participation were legitimate expressions of a Habermasian public sphere is open to interpretation. Although Butsch stretches Jurgen Habermas’s definition to accommodate such rowdy behavior, he recognizes that it was a long way from the rational debate favored by the political theorist. Other historians, too, would question whether a Habermasian public sphere ever existed in the United States, within playhouses or anywhere else. Nonetheless, Butsch insists that significant aspects of a bourgeois public sphere were a part of audience dynamics in the early republic and this does provide his narrative with a high point from which he can tell the story of spectatorial pacification and decline.

Butsch's history gains credibility and complexity when he details the gradual shift toward privatization. According to Butsch, three discourses drove this process from the 1840s through the 1870s: respectability, cultivation, and fashion. The pressures of respectability and female fashion were probably the most significant, driving managers eager to attract matinee ladies to domesticate their playhouses through the exclusion of liquor and prostitutes and finally to feminize the theatregoing experience through choice of repertoire and closer attention to the costumes of actresses. Even the B'hoys, alleges Butsch, were trapped by their cultivation of cultural capital in the theatre; their knowledge of actors like Forrest and Chanfrau tied them to the charismatic power of these stars, pulling the teeth of their opposition to the dominant culture. Butsch is especially attentive to matters of class and gender in these chapters, noting ironically that the apparent triumph of middle-class women in Victorian audiences came at the expense of spectator power. Women filled the playhouses by the 1880s, but decorum and habits of viewing shaped by consumption kept them silent and submissive before the stars and the stage illusion. Contrary to historical consensus, this transformation had largely occurred before the complete dimming of the house lights and the rise of fourth-wall naturalism.

Later chapters on theatre audiences provide similar gems of insight. Butsch's extensive research into audiences for minstrel shows qualifies what has been the assumption of nearly all scholarship on pre-1860 minstrelsy that spectators were predominately working class. Careful attention to the economics and performance conditions of vaudeville leads Butsch to posit a dialectic between the performers' desire to activate the audience and the managers' eagerness to pacify it. Butsch recognizes that active audience involvement led to social solidarity in Italian and Yiddish immigrant theatres from the turn of the century into the 1920s.

This latter insight qualifies the pessimism of Butsch's narrative. While audiences have rarely participated in direct political action in the theatre since 1850, they have used spectating as a means of building solidarity that could—and sometimes did—have indirect

political consequences outside of the playhouse. The workers' theatre of the early 1930s, some community-based performances of today, and even temperance theatre for matinee ladies in the nineteenth century are relevant examples. Butsch recognizes that the theatre can still play this indirect role, but such considerations, necessarily involving close ties between specific audience groups and certain kinds of entertainments, lie beyond the more general scope of his book.

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