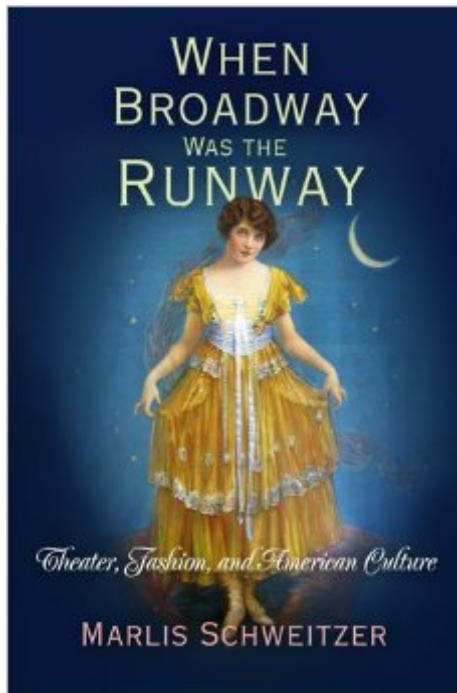


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When Broadway Was The Runway: Theater, Fashion, And American Culture



Synopsis

Selected by Choice magazine as an Outstanding Academic Title for 2009 *When Broadway Was the Runway* explores the central and largely unacknowledged role of commercial Broadway theater in the birth of modern American fashion and consumer culture. Long before Hollywood's red carpet spectacles, Broadway theater introduced American women to the latest styles. At the beginning of the twentieth century, theater impresarios captured the imagination of their largely female patrons by transforming the stage into a glorious site of consumer spectacle. Theater historian Marlis Schweitzer examines how these impresarios presented the dresses actresses wore onstage, as well as the jewelry and hairstyles they chose, as commodities that were available for purchase in nearby department stores and salons. The Merry Widow Hat, designed for the hit operetta of the same name, sparked an international craze, and the dancer Irene Castle became a fashion celebrity when she anticipated the flapper look of the 1920s by nearly a decade. Not only were the latest styles onstage, but advertisements appeared throughout theaters, in programs, and on the curtains, while magazines such as *Vogue* vied for the rights to publish theatrical costume sketches and *Harper's Bazaar* enticed readers with photo spreads of actresses in couture. This combination of spectatorship and consumption was a crucial step in the formation of a mass market for consumer goods and the rise of the cult of celebrity. Through historical analysis and dozens of early photographs and illustrations, Schweitzer aims a spotlight at the cultural and economic convergence of the theater and fashion industries in the United States.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

From the standpoint of the academic audience for which this book was written, it's an excellent overview of the economic and sociological aspects of changing American fashions at the turn of the last century, with particular reference to the influence of New York's theatrical actresses in promoting and disseminating new fashions. That, in fact, is the main problem with this book from the standpoint of the general reader/fashion enthusiast - it's basically an academic text rather than a work aimed at the person who's more interested in the fashions of the Edwardian era and how early Broadway stars such as Lillian Russell and Anna Held popularized them than at the economic and sociological details. Thus, I have to admit, neither being an economist or a sociologist, but just a fan of Edwardian fashion, I felt somewhat let down when I finally got to read this book. That having been said, there are several amusing anecdotes (such as the frenzy that gripped audiences composed mainly of women - one interesting fact related by the author is that theater audiences in New York in the 1900's were majority-female - when the famous "Merry Widow" hat style was introduced and handed out as a free giveaway at performances of the eponymous musical), the book is very well-written, and it's generously illustrated. My 3-star rating should be taken as my subjective reaction to what the book actually turned out to be rather than what I had expected it to be about; professional students of fashion history, on the other hand, will find this book of exceptional value as an analysis of the American fashion industry in the 1900's.

Comically bad with sweeping statements like "the exhibitionary tendencies of the social elite had a dramatic effect on the social and economic landscape" or "these critics were ... WASPs united by a desire to preserve cultural hierarchies and a growing aversion to the products and effects of modernity." Not only pedantic, but it reads like a college treatise written by someone desperate trying to be politically correct and connected with the current train of thought. I remember reading Victorian versions of such criticism in college and inwardly praising the Gods that we've moved beyond such narrow-minded bigotry; however, it appears we've simply played musical chairs and now a different form of biased and opinionated prejudices are au courant â " and by the very same players that were previously rejected. No doubt, a hundred years hence, some poor kid like me will pull this off the digital book shelf and roll his eyes at the tripe. A fabulous thesis hijacked by petty ideas. Very sad. Even the selection of the illustrations are tainted with the same jaundiced viewed. No doubt I 'll receive many thumbs down for this review by the liberal Mafia, but then so did the forward-thinkers of the Victorian age.

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