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Conference Report

Fans in the Theatre? About Unbeloved Fannish Spectators and Theatre's Self-Image 1860-1920

ABSTRACT

The conference "Fans in the Theatre? About Unbeloved Fannish Spectators and Theatre's Self-Image 1860-1920," organized in the context of the DFG (German Research Foundation) research project "Fan Mail to Danish Film Stars in the 1910s: Exploring the Agency and Practices of Early Film Fans," took place from October 23-25, 2024 in the premises of the Theatre Collection at Schloss Wahn, Cologne (Germany). Although fannish behavior and fannish practices in theatre were ubiquitous and much discussed during the heyday of theatre in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, fan studies and theatre studies have rarely been brought together. Thus, the conference aimed to create a space for encounter and exchange between the two disciplines in order to gain a better understanding of both fandom and theatre history.

KEYWORDS

historical fandom, 1910 fan mail, early fans, fan studies, theatre studies, theatre fans, fannish practices, fan letters, theatre collection Wahn

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Carina Eltrich studies media culture and Scandinavian studies at the University of Cologne, Germany, where she is currently both working at the Scandinavian studies' library as well as a research assistant on the DFG project "Fan Mail to Danish Film Stars in the 1910s." Her academic interests lie in early film and the development of fan practices over time as well as in the visibility of queer fandoms and cultures.

DECLARED CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Ms. Eltrich joined the DFG project as a student assistant one month prior to the conference she now reports on. She did not present at the respective conference herself and although she was not involved in its conceptual planning, she was part of the organizing team.

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As a celebratory prelude to the start of the DFG research project "Fan Mail to Danish Film Stars in the 1910s: Exploring the Agency and Practices of Early Film Fans" in October 2024, the researchers Stephan Michael Schröder and Alice Alessandra Salamena (Department of Scandinavian and Finnish Studies at the University of Cologne) organized the conference "Fans in the Theatre? About Unbeloved Fannish Spectators and Theatre's Self-Image 1860-1920" in collaboration with Peter W. Marx (Institute of Media Culture and Theatre at the University of Cologne and Director of the Theatre Collection Cologne), which took place from October 23-25, 2024 in the premises of the Theatre Collection at Schloss Wahn, Cologne.

This thematic focus on historical fandom of the theatre includes the theatre alongside other performance art forms as possible objects of research about fans and extends not only the time period of the aforementioned research project by several decades but also questions the often tacit assumption that fan culture first emerged as a mass phenomenon in connection with early cinema. As of today, fandom and theatre studies have rarely been brought into dialogue. Therefore, the conference aimed to create a space for encounter and exchange between the two disciplines, which in turn could function as an intersecting point for the fan mail project. Although arguably the defining period for the modern concept of the 'fan,' the decades around 1900 have largely been ignored by fandom scholarship in favor of more contemporary fandoms and fan practices. Furthermore, theatre studies have long held on to theatre as the epitome of established high culture, either explicitly or implicitly, with a tendency to ignore the fans and fandom in this field. This is despite the fact that there have clearly been fans and fan practices in and around the theatre, as showcased by the many unique artefacts with fan- and fandom-related references during a guided tour of the Theatre Collection. By overcoming this misconception about the relations between fandom and theatre and by allowing the two disciplines to enter into dialogue, the conference sought to better understand the history of both fandom and theatre.

Several distinguished scholars in the field of fan and theatre research were invited to the conference as guest speakers. The participants in the audience were mainly scholars and students of theatre and media culture, however, registration for the conference was generally open to the public. Furthermore, although held on location, the entire conference was also streamed online, allowing remote participation.

The presentations and discussions

After welcoming the audience and participants at the historical location of Schloss Wahn and introducing the speakers and their academic backgrounds, Schröder and Marx opened the conference, stating the conspicuous lack of research on historic fandom as described above and emphasized how the concept of the spectator was essential to theatre, opera, and cinema: The spectator, often a fan, is the link

between the performing arts. Why then, have fandom and theatre studies hardly been brought together so far? Trying to answer this question, different perspectives on theatre, fandom, and cultural history were presented.

Kirsty Sedgman (University of Bristol, Department of Theatre): "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Fandom?"

As first guest speaker, Sedgman opened her talk with Neil Patrick Harris' performance at the 2011 Tony awards showing the magic of theatre by embracing the largeness of spectacle. She stressed the theatre's power: according to Thornton Wilder and Zelda Fichandler, it was considered to be the most 'human' art form and uniquely able to reach people and change something in the world via its audience. Sedgman then went on to introduce the paradox of value in the context of theatre and performance and linked it to money and wealth. She considered the value judgements made by fandom to be standing in stark opposition to societal or institutional value systems: without a spectator, without a fan, there would neither be a theatre nor any form of spectacle happening. Therefore, the question arises as to why the institution of theatre has mostly dismissed, even outright ignored, its fannish spectators so far?

Sedgman connected this to the classic debate around 'high' and 'low' (or rather 'popular') culture and the interesting observation that discourse about culture resembles discourse about food, mass media representing 'junk food' in opposition to theatre as true nourishment. The necessary 'acquired taste' may be even further divided into 'good' and 'bad,' thus creating further judgement towards fandoms and pathologizing their behaviors as well as power imbalance between the institutions and fandom as well as within the respective audiences. Additionally, fandom is commonly assumed to be improper or too unregulated as a display of appreciation for live performances of the higher arts. This results in the degradation of female fans in particular as uncivilized, anarchic, and not knowing the proper theatre etiquette. What actually constitutes 'respectful' ways to show enthusiasm and engagement differs greatly from culture to culture as well as from neurodiverse to neurotypical people. The idea that

audiences must be controlled, contained, or regulated due to their alleged vulnerability to mass media may be considered an inherently western, white, classist, and ableist idea. It can easily be refuted, e.g., by referring to codeswitching K-pop fans who might scream at concerts of their favorite idol but know how to 'behave' in theatre. Some theatres may even hypocritically shame fans who attend a play only because of a certain celebrity or franchise while capitalizing on that very fandom by adapting popular books or films and casting celebrities in hopes to lure especially younger audiences into theatres by any available means. The presentation concluded circling back to Neil Patrick Harris and stated that in the end it was always the spectacle itself that drew people in and made them fans.

Clemens Räthel (University of Greifswald, Department of Scandinavian and Finnish Studies): "Take a Bow! (Royal) Copenhagen's First Female Star"

Arguing that stardom as a marketing tool existed well before the 'Age of Modernity' and continues to influence how we remember historical celebrities, Räthel presented the 'superdiva' of the 19th century at Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen: Johanne Luise Heiberg (1812-1890). Famous for her very well-versed repertoire, she became the first female managing director at The Royal Danish Theatre and was later celebrated as an author as well. Notably she is the only actress bearing the title 'fru' (Danish for 'lady') instead of 'madame' as well as the only woman represented as life size statue at The Royal Danish Theatre thanks to funding by her 'true admirers.' Even other celebrities such as the Scandinavian authors Henrik Ibsen or Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson became her fans, resulting in countless poems and plays immortalizing her—most famously Adam Oehlenschläger's *Dina* (1842).

Referring to Heiberg as a 'superdiva' with a following of 'superfans,' Räthel highlighted the inseparable connection between stardom and fandom—within the historical context of the time: as an actor in general, especially as a female actress, you needed patrons and admirers for funding and exposure. In her autobiography *A Life Relived in Memory* (published posthumously 1891-92), Heiberg described the behavior of her superfans with mixed feelings both touched and annoyed. There is also evidence of the early existence of anti-fans who were just as passionate and invested as the admirers. Furthermore, the transnationality of fan-behavior towards theatre stars was remarkable. Räthel concluded that Heiberg was one of the most visually present figures of her time and remains recognizable until today due to a number of unique portraits of her. These and other celebrity pictures were used for gender-specific merchandising and marketing purposes helping to sell consumption goods such as cigarettes or chocolate which conveyed an illusion of intimate closeness to the star.

Daniel Cavicchi (Rhode Island School of Design, Faculty of History, Philosophy and the Social Sciences): "Devotees, Fanciers, Hunters and Maniacs: The Onomastics of 19th-Century Enthusiasm"

Exploring fandom's historical side, Cavicchi presented a multitude of precursors to the term 'fan.' Coined 1883 in American sports slang, the word 'fan' spread to other environments and developed into a widely used umbrella term. Thanks to urbanization, industrialization, and secularization, a new social class of workers suddenly had leisure time and money they could spend on cultural experiences. The new field of psychology was quick to pathologize excessive fannish behavior, while at the same time acknowledging fans by describing them as an obsessive or manic group. Practices of naming, renaming,

and reclaiming, however, were also quite common among fans as there have always been insiders, slang, adaptation and adoption of terms in fan-cultural contexts—be it self-ascribed or by others. This still holds true for today's contemporary fan culture.

Cavicchi's approach is a linguistic one, working with Richard Coates' chapter "Names and Historical Linguistics" from the *Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming* (Hough, Carole [ed.]. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016, pp.525-539) in order to identify the variety of terms for pre-1880 enthusiasm and to demonstrate the wide scope of pre-fan terms and cultures. Collecting, dating, and sorting terms, he presented graphs showing when the use for certain terms was peaking or whether there was a specific trend towards a certain fandom at a certain time. Names for early fans and fandoms imply different meanings and can be grouped in order to suggest wider meanings—such as partisanship (esp. in a context of sports or celebrity), accumulation (of knowledge, objects or experience), and attention (toward a person, object, or activity). However, it remains difficult to say why some terms for fans settled in some fields but not in others (e.g. music-*lovers* vs. theatre-*maniacs*).

Agata Łuksza (University of Warsaw, Institute of Polish Culture): "Pirate Theatre History / History of Theatre Piracy: Reflecting on 'Theatremania' in the Nineteenth Century"

Łuksza criticizes that the history of theatre often focuses on high culture, side-lining the passionate fandoms that have always existed on the fringes. In 19th century Warsaw and primarily among young middle-class women, a distinct form of theatre fandom emerged that challenged societal norms and re-defined audience engagement. This fandom, rooted in rebellion, can be understood through the lens of 'pirate theatre history,' a term inspired by Jack Halberstam's 'pirate cultures' (cf. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011). In this sense, Łuksza shows how these fans disrupted conventional narratives of theatre and may be linked to several non-conforming and freedom-seeking aspects. These fans of the theatre, rejecting the formal norms of high culture, were particularly focused on stars like Polish actress Helena Modrzejewska. They followed her schedule, mapped out her favorite spots in the city, and rejected the idealized image of theatre in favor of intimate, real experiences, thus blurring the line between spectator and participant.

Łuksza discussed how this fandom was not only about admiration for performers but also about creating safe spaces for women to express emotions and desires (embracing their 'fangirling,' so to speak). The female fans felt empowered by going out into the city together for 'celebrity spotting,' by travelling together to watch other plays in different cities, and by sharing knowledge and skills. Female fan circles held a huge queer potential and sisterhood flourished within them, providing support, protection, and encouragement. They also stimulated intimate, lifelong relationships and sometimes even love affairs. Through shared passion, fandom, and close friendships, these young working- and middle-class women rejected societal expectations, reclaimed their emotional lives and their space in urban environments. Since Poland at the time was partitioned, the fan cultures of Kraków and Warsaw were not only non-territorial but anti-establishment: theatres, often seen as sites of elite culture, were reimagined as spaces for rebellion, where young women could test social boundaries. Their fandom was a feminist gesture, a rejection of both domesticity and patriarchal authority.

Peter W. Marx (University of Cologne, Institute of Media Culture and Theatre): "The Deep-Time Perspective of Fandom: Spectators, Audience, and Performance Artifacts"

The notion of fandom, often viewed through a contemporary lens, has deep historical roots that stretch back for centuries and across borders. In his presentation, Marx stated that understanding fandom from a 'deep-time' (in reference to Siegfried Zielinski) perspective is key to grasp its complexity. Such a perspective involves examining the evolution of spectatorship, audience engagement, and the material culture associated with performance. Material objects such as busts, cups, porcelain figurines, or postcards remind us of past performances and have long played a significant role in how audiences engage with theatre and the opera. These artifacts often bring a piece of the theatre into one's home, blurring the lines between public performance and private consumption, furthermore creating a commemorative commodity culture.

Marx went on to explain the various historical and cultural key factors that have shaped the deep-time perspective of fandom, focusing on the 19th century as a pivotal period. The reform of the theatre, influenced by the Enlightenment and secularization, altered the function of (semi-)religious practices, paving the way for new forms of public engagement. Another factor was the enhancement of image production and reproduction. Thirdly, the rise of consumer culture led to the commodification of theatre and opera. Performers became objects of public interest and adoration, their artifacts gained spiritual value—using Walter Benjamin's terminology, they became 'auratic,' quite like religious relics. Moreover, the elevation of theatre and opera artists to the status of royalty or important political figures reflected broader societal changes. But in addition, one of the most significant challenges in studying the history of fandom is the relative silence of fans themselves. Their presence is often inferred from the material remains they leave behind, casting long shadows over historical records.

Lastly, the 19th century also saw a fascination with death leading to a shift in funeral culture: death masks and other mortuary artefacts became popular, reflecting a morbid curiosity and a desire to preserve and immortalize the likeness of beloved performers even after their death. Schiller's famous lament about the amnesia that threatens actors' afterlives ("Posteriority does not braid laurel wreaths") is countered by the numerous practices of veneration found in the late 19th century. The material objects associated with these practices constitute a repertoire of gestures of adoration, bridging the gap between the ephemeral nature of performance and the enduring love of fans.

Alice A. Salamena (University of Cologne, Department of Scandinavian Studies): "On the Continuity of Fannish Practices: Fan Letter Writing to Theatre Stars and Film Stars"

In her talk, Salamena explored the transformation of fandom during the early 20th century from private adoration to public spectacle, identifying a significant shift in the public visibility and practices of fandom. According to Salamena, this was facilitated by the open discussion of fan mail by stars, newspaper articles, and the public as well as newly established fan magazines. These platforms reported on fan activities but also encouraged them, providing instructions as well as addresses, publishing pictures that fueled fan interest. They also served as a forum for exchange between fans. Even though the practice of fan letter writing itself was not new at that time, the stereotype of the fan as an overly emotional young girl was new to the discourse on film culture, reflecting broader societal perceptions of the time.

The connection between fans and media coverage intensified during this period. Stars and the press actively encouraged fan practices, seeing fan mail as a legitimation of stardom. This new quality of fan-

dom and stardom was exemplified by figures like Betty Nansen, a Danish actress (and theatre director later in her life), who became an international sensation in the 1900s and 1910s. Nansen knew how to manipulate press coverage and her public image and she actively encouraged gossip around her public persona to solidify her stardom. Her reputation grew throughout the early 20th century, making her a celebrity in both Europe and the USA. Betty Nansen presents an interesting case study in the continuity of fannish practices. Her fan letter collection offers a unique insight into the adoring audience of the early 1900s, especially as it includes fan letters addressed to Nansen both as a stage actress and as a screen actress, providing a rare opportunity to compare fan practices across different media. They reveal that fans were conscious of writing to a star and aware that others were doing the same. This self-reflection and awareness are evident in the letters by cinephiles who often felt the need to apologize for writing to celebrities. Fans either leaned into stereotypes or distanced themselves from them, reflecting a nuanced understanding of their role in the fan-star dynamic. Notably, the fans' apologies for writing to the celebrity became more important over time. According to Salamena, the fan letters sent to Nansen serve as important testimonies that can help reconstruct the genesis of the 'fan' in the early 20th century and may offer insights into their identity and motivations.

Stephan Michael Schröder (University of Cologne, Department of Scandinavian Studies): "Acquiring Actors: Theatre Stars and Film Stars on Postcards"

Schröder concluded the conference by elaborating on how the 1860s saw the rise of portrait cards featuring theatre stars. This led to the creation of the 'picture personality' of a stage actor as an early form of stardom. Portrait cards became a pivotal medium for both the promotion of stage actors and the collection habits of fans since 'possessing a piece of' the favorite actors suddenly became possible. In the 1910s, star photography became an integral part of film marketing. The postcards depicting film stars served a dual purpose: they medialized the actors, making them more accessible to the public, and became cherished collector's items for enthusiasts—a practice that had already been established for opera and theatre stars. The visual strategies employed in these portraits, whether depicting the stars in private settings or in their stage roles, fostered a sense of intimacy and proximity between fans and their idols.

The portrait cards of theatre stars created the 'role portrait' as a novel form of visual representation since they managed to capture the star's on-stage persona in their theatrical costume and characteristic poses from specific scenes. This new type of image satisfied the fans' desire to see their favorite stars as they appeared on stage, enhancing the emotional bond between the viewer and the actor.

These images allowed fans to bridge the gap between the stage and their personal spaces. Fans engaged in various practices to bring these stars into their homes: they created collections in albums, inserted the portraits into scrapbooks, or displayed them in frames. In many cases, the fans made no distinctions between opera, theatre and film stars. Using postcards of Danish actor Olaf Fønss as a case study, Schröder demonstrated that theatre stars were rather portrayed in character on postcards whereas film stars often wore civilian clothes. The relationship between fans and celebrities, facilitated by these portrait cards, can be understood through the concept of para-social interaction. Although the lack of reciprocity may not have diminished the enthusiasm of fans, as it allowed them to project their own desires and fantasies onto the celebrities, it is still worth noting that the fans in turn sometimes sent photographs and postcards of themselves to the stars in an attempt to establish a mutual interaction.

Conclusion and further notes

Overall, the conference was a remarkable success as the first of its kind to bring fan studies and theatre studies together in Germany. It created a productive interdisciplinary atmosphere for discussion and exploration of the 'unbeloved fannish spectator' in theatre and beyond. Despite their different disciplines and perspectives, the group of researchers found many overlaps in their academic fields, with the phenomenon of transnationalism in fandom at its center: people knew how to be fans across borders.

The conference showed many opportunities for future collaboration, it also led to the initiation of a "Fan History Initiative" and to plans for a joint publication. The anthology *Admirers, Fanciers and Devotees: The Early History of Fandom*, edited by Daniel Cavicchi and Stephan Michael Schröder, is scheduled for publication in 2026.