



Stephan Michael Schröder

Book Review

Kirsty Sedgman, Francesca Coppa, Matt Hills (eds.): Theatre Fandom: Engaged Audiences in the Twenty-First Century

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AUTHOR

*Stephan Michael Schröder is a Professor of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Cologne. One of his main research topics is cinema in the silent era, on which he has written numerous articles and a book: *Ideale Kommunikation, reale Filmproduktion: Zur Interaktion von Kino und dänischer Literatur in den Erfolgsjahren des dänischen Stummfilms 1909–1918* (2 vol., Berlin: Nordeuropa-Institut, 2011). Currently, he is PI in the research project “Fan Mail to Danish Film Stars in the 1910s. Exploring the Agency and Practices of Early Film Fans,” funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).*

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For several years, scholars have explored the intersections between fandom studies and traditional, time-honored academic disciplines, such as art history, literary studies, musicology, and theater studies, with increasing intensity. While the death of the author/composer/painter/creator has long been part of the body of knowledge in these disciplines, the birth of the reader/listener/viewer/recipient has more often than not produced an idealized recipient who is male, white, heterosexual, and from the Global North, committed to bourgeois, ‘non-fannish’ reception practices. It is telling that the widely known editors of this commendable interdisciplinary anthology, which aims to bring the essential frameworks of performance studies and fandom studies into dialogue with one another, still use the term “prolegomena” (10) for their endeavor in 2025. However, one should interpret this topos of modesty as a rhetorical device rather than as a reflection of an actual serious limitation of the anthology.

The volume, which originated from a symposium organized by Kirsty Sedgman at the University of Bristol in 2017, is divided into 14 chapters organized into three sections: “What Makes a Theater Fan,” “Liveness Versus Mediatization,” and “Bodies and Identities.” The field of inquiry is broad. It encompasses not only theater in the narrower sense—which, as the editors point out in the introduction, is faced with the task of attracting a new, younger, more diverse, ‘fannish’ audience with different audience practices—but also theater performances in a broader sense, including musicals and forms such as verbatim theater, live art, and the like. Additionally, it addresses the reception of mediatized theater performances, that is how to deal with the omnipresent technical recordings of the ephemeral theater experiences. At the same time, the volume thrives on the productive crossing of boundaries between academia and theater practice: directors, playwrights, and theater zine contributors share their perspectives alongside scholars. The contributions are closely interwoven: numerous cross-references between the essays ensure that the polyphony of perspectives, methodological approaches, and fields of inquiry does not devolve into the cacophony often found in anthologies. A comprehensive index allows readers to track people, terms, and titles throughout the essays.

A few contributions will be briefly touched on here (though I won’t hide the fact that the following selection reflects my personal preferences). Stephanie E. Pitts, Sarah M. Price, and Helen Freshwater, in “‘I’d See Anything’: Exploring Private Fandom in Highly Engaged Theater Audiences,” based on an interview study, focus on fans of theater in general—not of specific stars or performances. Their “private fandom,” defined as “the pursuit of fanlike engagement without reference to a fan community” (35), renders them invisible in studies of fandom. Caroline Heim examines how pleasure can extend beyond ephemeral performances through reperformances (“when fans act out moments from productions, mimic a character’s gestures or voice, recite dialogue, or sing lines” [69]). She illustrates this concept with two examples from the 19th century: the B’Hoys and the Matinee Girls, thus supplementing the other

contributions, which focus on contemporary topics, with a historical dimension. In Matt Hills' contribution, "Theatre Studies/Fan Studies: Toward a Shared Regime of Theater and Fandom's Transmediatization," the author argues that the task does not only consist of promoting a more intensive dialogue between fan studies and theater studies but also of analyzing both sub-species' transmediatization, since the phenomenon of transmediality "now frames contemporary fan experiences as well as theatrical enterprises" (95). In "Theater Fandom and the Media: Three Case Studies," Francesca Coppa challenges the notion that only live performances allow for an adequate form of theater reception, as this insistence is actually a 'proxy' for the claim that audience engagement plays a role, which is, however, a basic truism in fandom studies. Coppa goes on to demonstrate how experiences of purely mediated theater performances also give rise to participatory fan cultures. In "Coming Back Another Day: Rent Fans Across the Decades," Emily Garside traces the fandom of the so-called 'Rentheads,' fans of the musical *Rent* (1990). She considers this a "fascinating case study for investigating the evolution of theater fandom over decades" (175), as the internet has offered new forms of participatory culture during this time and the musical has been staged in very different venues, locations, and circumstances before new generations of audiences. Finally, in the volume's last contribution, "The Border and Boundary Crossings of Musical Theater Fans in Europe and East Asia," Laura MacDonald broadens the geographical and cultural perspective by examining musical theater fandom practices primarily in Germany, Austria, Japan, South Korea, and China, focusing particularly on the interplay of globalizing and localizing tendencies.

As a German scholar of Scandinavian studies without in-depth knowledge of the Anglophone theater and musical scene, I must admit that I sometimes felt left behind when reading the case studies, since the focus of this volume is explicitly on the extremely vibrant and often groundbreaking Anglophone theater world, centered in London and New York. However, I readily acknowledge that my lack of familiarity with the Anglophone theater world is my own problem. With regard to the overall concept of the volume, most articles succeed in demonstrating the benefits of the intended interdisciplinary convergence between fandom studies and performance studies, although the tendency of fandom studies toward autopoietic closure (mirroring the fan communities—hardly any semantic field has produced so many of its own terms in such a comparatively short time) does not always make this easy. Finally, one cannot help but notice that, despite the significant presence of musicals and their fandom in this volume, the fandoms of opera and ballet are scarcely mentioned, although opera and ballet as performing arts share many characteristics and challenges with theater and musical performances (such as ephemerality, changes in audience composition, star culture, etc.). One wonders about the reason for this omission: is it an (understandable) wish not to broaden the scope too much or are there other reasons for drawing a line, such as between opera and rock opera?

Theater Fandom: Engaged Audiences in the Twenty-First Century will surely and deservedly become a standard work on contemporary theater fandom. The anthology's "hybridized space" (9) offers, for the most part, an inspiring read for scholars of both fandom and performance studies. In particular, Heim's and MacDonald's contributions seem to me to point in promising directions for future research, namely, expanding research interests both in historical and geographical-cultural directions to better understand the historical as well as the culture-transcending but also culture-specific dimensions of fan practices in relation to theater.

