

MARLIS SCHWEITZER

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

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. 310 pp.

AOIFE MONKS

On January 8 2013, the UK's *Grazia* magazine ran a story entitled "[...] The Dos and Don'ts of Stage Door Chic." Referring to the post-show appearances of actors like Katie Holmes and Jessica Chastain, the magazine offered its readers "a list of easy-to-follow rules for successful stage door dressing." With advice like "DO get noticed in bright red" and "DON'T wear sunglasses at night," the magazine failed to notice that what they termed the "the vintage hipster look" of the British actor Anna Friel, was in fact a clear reference to her leading role in a West End (London) production of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. Friel, wearing heavily embroidered dresses, fake fur wraps, and Cossack-style boots, matched her backstage appearances with her onstage persona while ensuring that, according to the *Daily Mail* newspaper, she looked, "every inch the star."

Marlis Schweitzer's excellent monograph, *When Broadway Was The Runway*, makes clear that these stage door appearances, and their breathless reporting in the fashion press, are nothing new. Schweitzer suggests that the emergence of the modern American fashion system was heavily dependent on the infrastructures of theatrical production at the end of the nineteenth century. Her book draws on a remarkable range of archival sources in order to sketch the complex web of relations between critics, consumers, spectators, stars, chorus girls, department stores, producers, and designers that underpinned the role that the theatre played in the making of the fashion system at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Schweitzer, actors and their audiences found complex ways to engage with the surfaces of fashion in order to produce a conversation between actor and role, between character and the modern ideas of 'self,' between consumption and self-fashioning, while being embroiled within the power dynamics of racial, gendered and class hierarchies that structured and produced the idea of the 'fashionable' in this period.

The book is divided into five chapters that examine the contexts in which fashion emerged as a driving logic of the stage, and the theatre emerged as a staging-ground for new modes of consumption and dress. Schweitzer offers a detailed and convincing account of the heavily gendered dynamics of theatrical production, in which young female audience members (and consumers) were active and prominent figures, much to the disgust of male critics. She examines the ways in which the theatre's economies were heavily intertwined with the new structures of department store consumerism and the mass-produced clothing trade. She interrogates the ways in which the star-system was structured by the performance of class and race, which emerged through the choices of fashion worn by actresses onstage. She opens out the tensions within the modern conceptualization of subjectivity, with the model of the essential fixed self (that is to be expressed outwardly and authentically), competing with the idea of the modern malleable self (that can be produced and 'fashioned' through clothes). This discussion is mapped against the broader set of social changes taking place in the period, examining the theatre's

relationship to the suffragette movement, for example, and the ways in which star actresses were capable of ‘speaking’ to their female audience members through their choice of clothes and roles. Schweitzer also acknowledges how young working women and society ladies took up this conversation through their emulation and adaptation of the actresses’ clothes offstage. Finally, Schweitzer examines the newly invented fashion show and its theatrical structures, interrogating how it began to model feminine identity as the ‘mannequin’.

This is a hugely valuable work for the field of theatre and performance studies, not least because the masculine disgust at the consumerist frivolities of the young matinee girls that Schweitzer invokes at the beginning of this book, has been so influential on how theatre scholarship has often approached the question of costume and fashion. To presume that consumer practices are merely “false consciousness,” or a form of feminine frippery, is to entirely overlook the ways in which costume might operate as the broker within a set of complex gendered relationships and performances. Indeed, Schweitzer makes an important claim: that clothes and the stage were the means through which modern ideas of the female self could be articulated. As she argues, “female audiences drew upon the cultural meanings associated with admired actresses to fantasize about alternative lives and make personal statements about themselves as modern women” (163). In a post-twentieth century theatre, where the high-minded (usually male) artists of the avant-garde and modernism so roundly rejected the consumerist cultures of the popular nineteenth century stage, it’s easy to overlook the role of fashion in making selves, particularly female selves. These are modes of subjectivity that, as Schweitzer argues, are capable of subversive and profoundly resistant statements of self that don’t simply situate the female body as a passive site of consumption. Schweitzer shows that female spectators were capable of figuring themselves as agents within the webs of consumerism that were so closely aligned to the self-fashioning of actresses.

Of course, finally, what Schweitzer does so well, is to offer a proleptic sense of our contemporary star system now saturated with ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’, with the figuring of the female star’s body as a passive mannequin, devoid of subjectivity, offered up for judgment and derision (often by young female consumers). Schweitzer’s book enables us to see how in the early twentieth century, fashion was a place in which feminine agency could develop and emerge. Stage door chic turns out to be a profoundly complex business that is worthy of further attention.

ROBERTA BARKER and KIM SOLGA, eds.
New Canadian Realisms.

New Essays on Canadian Theatre, vol. 2. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2012.
280 pp.

JERRY WASSERMAN

Realism has been the bread-and-butter of Canadian theatre for a long time. Merrill Denison’s 1921 comedy, *Brothers in Arms*, the most popular of his “realistic treatments of ordinary Canadian life” (Grace 53), was the most produced Canadian play for nearly half a century. The stark prairie naturalism of Gwen Pharis Ringwood’s Depression-era *Still Stands the House* helped make it, for decades, Canada’s most anthologized drama. The culturally marked domestic real-