

## Book Reviews

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Theatre Research International 49:1 doi:10.1017/S0307883323000445

***Gender, Sex, and Sexuality in Musical Theatre: He/She/They Could Have Danced All Night.*** Edited by Kelly Kessler. Bristol: Intellect, 2023. Pp. xxvii + 323. £99.95/\$134.95 Hb.

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As the field of musical theatre studies has flourished over the past two decades, scholars have consistently taken an interest in identity. Whether expert in theatre, music or dance, specialists have interrogated whose stories are told in musicals, what communities have been represented or excluded, and why musical theatre might be such an appealing forum for exploring identity. It makes sense, then, that the first essay collection to be assembled from articles published in the journal *Studies in Musical Theatre* (supplemented by five newly commissioned essays) would concentrate on identity. Curated by media studies scholar Kelly Kessler, *Gender, Sex, and Sexuality in Musical Theatre: He/She/They Could Have Danced All Night* gathers mostly US- and UK-based scholars, from a range of disciplines. The seventeen essays are divided into four sections focused on the gender binary; sex and sexuality; divas; and practice. As Kessler explains, the contributors ‘take on gendered icons...while teasing apart various ways industrial practices, narrative stylings and political movements construct and disrupt notions of musicalized gender and sexuality to form variant and nuanced lenses through which to consider the genre’s foundational romantic framework’ (p. xxvi).

Janet Werther’s fascinating examination of ‘(Mis) Representations of Trans Experience in Contemporary Musicals’ follows chapters focused on performers’ and characters’ experiences of gender in the context of a male–female binary. Werther’s lucid writing guides the reader through case studies that ‘wrestle with what it means to project virtuosity and authenticity in the contemporary trans musical’ (p. 74). They elegantly articulate what is at stake, from composition to casting, in new musicals’ representation of trans experience: ‘Reaching a large audience has power, particularly when minoritized representation is on the line’ (p. 89).

The heart of the essay collection may be the chapters probing divas, launched by Michelle Dvoskin’s examination of diva roles, the ‘larger-than-life female characters who drive a musical’s action and encourage a virtuosic, outsized performance style’, in contrast to diva *characters*, who may be performers but may not embrace the excess of a diva role (p. 177). Dvoskin’s essay is subsequently cited in Dustyn Martincich’s persuasive call to acknowledge the virtuosic dancing diva, ‘as a collaborator, translator and independent artist’ (p. 191); in Deborah Paradez’s appreciation of Black divas in *The Color Purple* (2005), a musical that ‘offers new possibilities of

diva collectivity or relationality that re-imagines traditional Broadway musical constructions of its solitary, predominantly white divas' (p. 212); and in Kessler's consideration of Broadway divas on television. Dvoskin's presence in these essays illustrates the strength and depth of musical theatre studies, and this dialogue between diva scholars is a highlight of the volume.

Practice is broadly understood in the final section, with essays on performance, training, casting and musical fans. Sherrill Gow shares her pedagogical practice with a student production of *Pippin* (1972), a musical she mined for its feminist potential, 'to create a play world where women would take up space and not revert to playing 'sexy', a behaviour often coached and reinforced in performer training' (p. 273). Stephanie Lim considers how gender play in casting provides 'new perspectives on well-known narratives, giving audiences and performers increased chances to see themselves on stage in unique ways' (p. 295). Jiyoung Jung rounds out the collection with her consideration of South Korean musical theatre fans' feminist activism.

Musical theatre scholars John M. Clum and Stacy Wolf are cited throughout the collection, and their investment in the gender and sexuality of characters, performers and audiences is clearly shaping what the wider field centres in ongoing studies of gender, sex and sexuality in musical theatre. This means that the anthology does not evaluate how experiences of identity may have shaped the work and careers of writers, composers, directors, choreographers or designers. The omission of women and queer men such as Jeanine Tesori and George C. Wolfe is surprising. The collection may therefore become a touchstone for scholars wishing to amplify the contributions of such practitioners in the context of gender and sexuality. Still, the close readings of characters and performers will be useful for students working on gender and sexuality. In highlighting musical theatre's power of transformation, the assembled scholars consolidate trends in the field while revealing new pathways for further study.

Theatre Research International 49:1 doi:10.1017/S0307883323000457

***Performing the Ramayana Tradition: Enactments, Interpretations, and***

***Arguments.*** Edited by Paula Richman and Rustom Bharucha. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xviii + 357 + 16 illus. £74/\$110 Hb; £34.49/\$48.99 Pb.

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The space of (and in) performance to engender possibility, multiplicity and adaptation of one of Hinduism's defining epic is the recurring emphasis of Richman and Bharucha's book. The opening line of the first introduction aptly sets the tone for the rest of the volume: 'Where does the Ramayana narrative begin and end?' (p. 4).

Addressing that question definitively is impossible but this enlightening volume makes a strong attempt by examining the ways past and present performances of the Ramayana story have in turn contributed to and re-written this *kāvya* (elaborate narrative poem). To reflect the diverse traditions that engage with the Ramayana, the editors have chosen to discard the verbs 'act' or 'perform' in favour of 'enact' (as is reflected in the book's subtitle). This choice is deliberate, as Bharucha explains in his introductory chapter, for performance traditions in India do not have an encompassing term called 'performance'. Specific vocabularies that describe performing in these traditions are inflected by regional and local concerns *vis-à-vis* social prestige, class and even caste. Any discussion of performances of the Ramayana must be rooted in contextual specificity.

Like the many versions of the Ramayana which exist, the volume adopts several concerns and even modes of writing; it is composed of critical essays, annotated scripts, practitioner interviews