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978-0-521-60854-1 - The Cambridge Companion to the Actress

Edited by Maggie B. Gale and John Stokes

Excerpt

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Introduction

Historically, the figure of the actress has often been marked by absence and by exclusion. The theatre of the English Renaissance, like that of the Greeks, was famously without women, although it is true that in both cases scholars continue to debate why this might have been and how absolute the prohibition actually was. In Catholic Europe performers, both male and female, while sometimes much admired, were denied full religious burial rites. There was clearly an entrenched unease about their power. By the eighteenth century many European actresses were celebrated not only for their physical presence but for their special capacity for feeling, their unique insights into human behaviour. At the same time their public ‘femininity’ – culturally created and projected – may even have exceeded that of the female roles they played. Even so, their success depended upon the art of dramatists who were frequently, if not exclusively, male. Despite the more recent rise of feminist historiography, the ways in which modern actresses have confronted these situations, and their dealings with playwrights, image-makers, managers and entrepreneurs, are only now beginning to be being fully explored.

The first ‘actresses’, in anything like the modern sense of the word, were Italian and, according to the most recent scholarship, they were, at least until the fifteenth century, mainly courtesans. The most celebrated, however, was a learned and respectable woman, wife of an actor, who lived in both Italy and France: Isabella Andreini.¹ The early French actresses aspired to her example: Molière’s partner and the driving force behind much of his work, Madeleine Béjart, is perhaps the most famous example of this independent spirit. In England, with its transvestite theatre, the situation was very different. The current edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* says that the word ‘actress’ was ‘at first used only in the general sense, not in the dramatic; now only in the dramatic, not in the general’. The ‘general’ sense here means ‘a female actor or doer’; the ‘dramatic’ sense means ‘a female player on the stage’, and the first example of the latter in the dictionary is from Dryden in 1700. (‘Actor’, says the *OED*, was ‘at first used for both sexes’.) However, earlier

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instances have since been discovered of what looks like the ‘dramatic’ sense of ‘actress’, referring to female participation in masques.² These semantic shifts are important in two respects: they remind us that the very word ‘actor’ may imply not simply to play on stage but to take action, to ‘do’; they suggest that we still need to make a distinction between the kind of performance required in musical and dance entertainments and ‘acting’ since, as Clare McManus has put it, the ‘concept of masquing differed radically from that of acting, demanding neither the effacement of self nor the adoption of an alternative identity’.³ Our concern throughout this *Companion* is as much to do with the construction, the loss and the disguise of the self in dramatic performance as it is with the ideological and practical relations between ‘acting’ and ‘action’.

The special skills of the ‘actress’ are mimetic, to do with characterization, as well as interpretative: she gives voice to texts. While these abilities can sometimes mesh with prevailing sexual ideologies to make her seem dangerous, a seductive dissembler, they can also signify a truth-teller whose art powerfully and accurately expresses the reality of the surrounding world. As a contemporary theorist such as Judith Butler would argue, performance in daily life plays an essential part in the creation of our sense of self.⁴ To ‘act’ theatrically, to become another, even ‘the Other’, is to engage in a reflexive activity through which socially constructed individuals, either on stage or in an audience, encounter the conditions of their own survival. In an essay cited more than once in this collection, Ellen Donkin asserts that ‘the history of women’s performance is the history of a struggle for a subject, rather than an object, position in representation’.⁵ Here, at least, is one dominant element in the actress’s insistent but precarious status, her occasional invisibility coupled with her all-pervasive significance.

It is precisely because of these ambiguities that we have restricted the field to the areas where they are historically most apparent, deliberately concentrating upon performers from Europe or North America, and confining ourselves to those women whose talents are unquestionably mimetic, where imitation controls expressive potential, and whose skills are predominantly, though not exclusively, verbal.

We have also, perhaps more contentiously, confined ourselves to professionals, to women who get paid for acting. The very word ‘professional’ hovers between public and private: the ‘professional actress’ is defined by what she does, and yet what she does is imitate other people, which means that her work may have a problematic relation with the rest of her life. Nevertheless, we begin with the paid female performers of the English Restoration – allowing for, but not exploring, the precedents among amateur ladies at the English court and parallel careers in continental Europe. The English

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Restoration marks a moment when, as professionalism takes over in the theatre, the division in women's lives between public and private is simultaneously reconceived.

The Cambridge Companion to the Actress pursues the professional actress across the centuries and across two continents. But, rather than present its findings in a simply chronological fashion, which might suggest an untrammelled progression from apparent absence to full presence, the essays are grouped into three parts. While the story of the actress obviously cannot be separated from shifting concepts of gender, contributors also account for the particular manifestations of her art by referring to cultural determinants – political, economic, and technological – as well as to modifications in dramatic form and modes of theatrical representation.

In Part I: 'Turning points', the essays concentrate upon key historical moments, all of them driven by widespread uncertainties about what the actress might now represent. Gilli Bush-Bailey establishes many important themes: the equation between actress and 'whore', between theatrical performance and sexual availability. This, as she shows, is very much of an historical phenomenon, yet something similar will be found to recur at later periods. In addition, she stresses social configurations that have 'gossip' as their product, and these too will continue to operate long after, although in new ways. Bush-Bailey's technique is to concentrate on a small group of representative figures: Mary Saunderson, Elizabeth Barry, Anne Bracegirdle. Elizabeth Eger continues with this approach when, in her survey of eighteenth-century actresses, she focuses upon Elizabeth Griffiths, Mary Robinson and Sarah Siddons. But Eger's special interest is in the ways in which experience in the theatre conditioned personal expression away from it. The actress as writer and critic was a powerful and lasting phenomenon who not only brought out the distinctive significance of literary texts for a female readership but who understood the risks and rewards involved in any act of self-presentation.

In France actresses such as Hippolyte Clairon (1723–1803) and Marie-Françoise Dumesnil (1713–1803) had become acknowledged objects of intellectual fascination for *philosophes* of the order of Voltaire and Diderot, a theoretical interest that also captured the attention of the English actor David Garrick. But in the nineteenth-century the actress becomes fully international. For the legendary artists who feature in Gail Marshall's essay on global touring, opportunities for universal exposure (brought about by the combination of immensely improved facilities for long-distance travel and patterns of emigration that had created huge potential audiences in the New World) turned them from local or national heroines into modern phenomena. Harriet Smithson, Rachel Félix, Adelaide Ristori, Charlotte Cushman,

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Helena Modjeska and Eleonora Duse are the key names here, all of them, in a term that will become increasingly relevant, ‘celebrities’.

David Mayer remarks in his detailed study of the actress and the photograph that ‘Fame, publicity, adulation, collecting, fan-dom, and the full apparatus of fan-worship – even celebrity stalking – would be impossible without the attendant development in photo-engraving and print technologies and national rail and transport systems which could move the actress and her various images in various formats to all parts of the country and, beyond, to the Empire.’ This is undoubtedly true. Some familiar names reappear in Mayer’s census but other, rather less well-known women also claim his attention: Isabella Glyn, Kate Saville, Annabelle Moore.

By the end of the nineteenth century the successful actress has become, in another word that is overused but hard to avoid, an ‘icon’. She may be internationally known, her image may be widely disseminated, she may be famous even to those who haven’t witnessed her in a theatre and, of course, she may be an inspiration to ambitious young women who see in her a role model of seeming independence. Yet that freedom may, in some respects, be illusory or precarious. Chance may play as large a part as talent, and the actual business of theatre is, as Tracy C. Davis has shown in early research that has done more than any other to determine this whole field, a guarded male preserve.⁶ Although opportunities for administrative and financial power could sometimes be found, the dominant mode of production revolved around the figure of the male actor-manager who relied upon a steady supply of attractive young female performers for his popular commercial repertoire. It was one of the ironies of the new drama schools that developed in the early years of the twentieth century, whose impact is described by Lucie Sutherland, that although women dominated the student intake, the schools should have been largely founded and directed by men. Sutherland connects the schools with unionisation, linked as symptoms of a ‘professionalisation’ that would, eventually, lead the way forward.

So far the ‘turning points’ have been largely to do with the profession as it grew and developed in relation to technology and social organisation. But the arts of performance also reflect and contribute to great political events. In his essay on the English actress in the post-war years John Stokes shows how a world-wide catastrophe, which had imposed new responsibilities upon women in the domestic and the industrial spheres, resulted in what looks at first like a contradiction: a renewed stress upon the ‘ordinary’. Matters were not, of course, quite what they seemed. In the tense, unstable performances of actresses such as Celia Johnson, Peggy Ashcroft, Yvonne Mitchell and even Vivien Leigh, internal struggles – with class, with sexuality, with intellectual expectations, and with professional status – are made apparent in subtly

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visible discontent. In Mitchell's partly autobiographical book published in 1957, simply entitled *Actress*, the stress is mainly upon the technicalities and, indeed, the ethics of performance. Popular success is incidental to self-discovery.

All this at a period when the cult of the fabulous movie star is reaching its peak with the careers of Marilyn Monroe, of Jane Russell, of Doris Day and of Jayne Mansfield in the USA and, in the UK, of Diana Dors and Shirley Eaton. Yet, in publicity ploys even the 'sex symbol' is the girl – or wife – or mother – next door. This provides a kind of reverse glamour in which the very 'normality' of the actress's personality is said to enable her exceptional performances. It's the time, too, when sophisticated theories of acting, often Stanislavski-based, begin to take a hold, especially in America. And it's a time when a new medium, television, will bring high drama into the home on a daily basis.

It was probably no accident, then, that even those women who were mainly renowned for their portrayal of the quotidian should have displayed on many occasions a highly developed social conscience. Even this was nothing new. By rehearsing her potential in plays an activist prepared for her political life. The 'political' actress has her origins in the role of national figurehead adopted on occasion by Rachel Félix (who chanted the 'Marseillaise' in 1848), in Bernhardt's response to the crises of 1871 and of 1914–18, in Modjeska's fierce Polish patriotism. Feminist historians such as Julie Holledge, Sheila Stowell, Viv Gardner, Carole Hayman, Sally Ledger and Barbara Green have stressed the wider cultural importance of the New Woman and unearthed the continuities between the literary, political and theatrical activities that lay behind the broad banners of the suffrage movement. The Actresses' Franchise League (AFL), founded in 1908, and the Pioneer Players, founded in 1911, were in many ways the culmination of the actress-led Ibsen campaign of the 1880s and 1890s. The AFL provided an organisation which questioned the interface between professional theatre women and the politics of gender in their industry, campaigning on behalf of actresses, playwrights and managers (fig. 1). It gave a focus for politicized actresses who understood the relationship between the gender inequalities in the theatre and those which existed in society at large. The AFL also created opportunities for training in political oratory and campaigned for suffrage outside the context of the theatre itself, recognizing the usefulness of actresses' skills as public speakers and public women who could galvanize attention and direct it towards a particular political topic.

Tony Howard takes the historical existence of political actresses one step further and in his chapter focuses on those who used their celebrity and enhanced access to public forums to campaign about all varieties of political

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Fig. 1. The Actresses' Franchise League, assembled for the Women's Coronation Procession, 17 June 1911 (Museum of London).

issues. Here the actresses, many of them taking a radical as opposed to a liberal stance, assume extraordinary levels of responsibility as citizens who can use their professional status, and their theatre or film and TV personalities, as a means to inspire and create political change, often at the 'cost' of their own careers. Howard picks up the story with Maud Gonne, the Irish revolutionary, orator and sometime actress, and continues with a broad survey, again based on selective examples, in which he draws attention to the roles of actresses in the American witch-hunts of the 1940s, in the Civil Rights struggles in the USA and South Africa, in the campaigns against the Vietnam war and in the subsequent activities of such powerful spokeswomen as Vanessa Redgrave (fig. 2), Jane Fonda and Glenda Jackson. It seems fitting that this section on 'turning points' should conclude with women who have contributed so powerfully to the history of today.

In Part II: 'Professional opportunities', the essays are more concerned with matters of status, with the strategies through which women have created or seized a chance to advance their influence over the theatre of their time. These range from developing managerial power to creating or recreating their own histories in the burgeoning market for autobiographies, to establishing their position within the new industry of cinema, to the overcoming of race prejudice and, following on from that, challenging the 'victim status' that, paradoxically but no less oppressively, can accompany public acceptance.

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Fig. 2. Vanessa Redgrave as Mrs Pankhurst in the film of *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969). (Corbis)

As Jo Robinson explains, actresses were motivated to become managers by a number of ambitions: ‘financial ambition or security; control over artistic repertoire and staging; and control over reputation and representation’. Some of the names of the actress-managers she discusses are familiar: Bernhardt, again, and, a little later, Elizabeth Robins and Lena Ashwell – but

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not all. Marianne Saville worked in the provinces, yet her achievements were none the less solid for that, since she commanded an influential position in the cultural history of a whole city. She was, to a large extent, mistress of her own fate. Similarly, Viv Gardner's introduction to the phenomenon of the theatrical autobiography stresses the fact that, whatever the 'truth' of autobiographical writing, it allows the actress a heightened level of agency in terms of the way she 'presents' herself to the world. Taking a broad range of examples, Gardner looks at the ways in which actresses' autobiographies often acknowledge the participation of others in the construction of a persona – from family to editors to secretaries. Autobiographies enable the manipulation of such creations; a parallel reconfiguration of the individual career is very much the focus of Christine Gledhill's chapter on the actress in early film.

Gledhill examines the early film industry in Britain and the United States in terms of the possibilities that allowed actresses to cross from theatre to silent film and then to the 'talkies'. Notions of beauty and femininity, rooted in emerging national cultural identities as well as in tradition, were key to the success (or otherwise) of actresses when they undertook the professional journey between continents. Equally important in determining the position of actresses in early film were the different acting techniques favoured by competing sections of the industry. The careers of Florence Turner, Mary Pickford and Betty Balfour are as varied as those of later screen actresses such as Madeleine Carroll who was more able, in some respects, to command the directions taken by her career. Ideas of agency and self-determination link actresses in early film with actresses and autobiography and the work of the political actress. At the close of the previous section, Tony Howard ended by proclaiming that in today's culture of 'manipulated images, perhaps the actress might protect the word'. Yet, images, not always 'manipulated', have played their part in her history too. The actress is always a physical presence in autobiography and a visual sign whether on the stage, on film or in the street as a public protester.

Gardner points to the fact that we should be particularly cautious with autobiographical accounts which set out to please their readership or to confirm current views, rather than to record the actuality: we have to read such narratives with great care. Lynette Goddard makes the same point when she challenges the myth of obstacles finally and triumphantly overcome that tends to characterise the 'life-writing' of black performers. The objection is not to the representation of the obstacles, which are always real enough, but to the simplification of the success. As Goddard explains, despite the international prominence of Oscar winner Halle Berry and a handful of other black stars, the position of the black actress is still disadvantaged, still

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complicated and unresolved. Taking the British actress Josette Simon as one of her main examples, Goddard explores the doubleness of a situation in which the usually welcome principle of ‘colour-blind’ casting (in, for example, Shakespeare) coexists uneasily with the urgent need for major roles for black women in new plays.

In Part III: ‘Genre, form and tradition’, the essays are more specifically concerned with practices and conventions within the theatre itself. ‘Cross-dressing’, ‘solo performance’, ‘the function of the erotic’, ‘collaboration’, ‘the Shakespearean heroine’: these are all topics with which recent feminist theatre history has been much concerned. By putting the actress, rather than the writer or the text, at the very centre of enquiry, it becomes possible to see how matters of gender can be primary rather than secondary, how they can determine a generic tradition, how an actress can initiate as well as respond.

Allowing for the rule that operates throughout all these essays, that ‘the material culture goes its own way’, Jacky Bratton nevertheless announces that ‘the enactment of the male by women seems to me to be always specific to the immediate, historical negotiations of interpersonal power through gender’. She goes on to concentrate upon the phenomenon of the cross-dressed woman as ‘boy’. If it is true that the crossed-dressed figure of woman as ‘man’ deconstructs a basic patriarchal assumption about ‘nature’ and the normative, the image of the ‘boy’ stands for something deeper, more primordial. The popular drag artist who plays at being a boy constructs a ‘male/female reality’ that challenges ‘the gender divisions itself, and so the pre-existence of man’. Bratton’s survey ranges from Margaret Woffington to Vesta Tilley, proving her underlying assumption that as sexual ideologies change so do genres and conventions. Even in the case of ‘drag’ with its legendary stars (Bratton brings fascinating new research to bear on the figure of Tilley), we should still look for discontinuity within a celebrated ‘tradition’.

As with ‘drag’ so with ‘stand-up’ and ‘monologist’: popular generic names change according to content and structure. Maggie B. Gale’s emphasis is on the women who had careers as ‘solo performers’, many of whom wrote their own work, their own one-woman dramas. This is as different from the one-woman ‘show’ in which a single performer does a series of turns – recitations, songs, anecdotes – as it is from the *comédienne* (Lily Tomlin, Jo Brand or Helen Lederer, say) who recounts anecdotes supposedly from her own life in so condensed and exaggerated a form that they serve as ‘gags’. Gale points to the fact that performers like Beatrice Herford and Ruth Draper capitalised on a growing interest in ‘identity’ and ‘character’ to make careers out of creating and performing social types. Following on from Charlotte Cushman and Fanny Kelly, for whom the solo form had enabled a reinvention of their

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careers, Draper developed the art of the monologue into a form in which a whole personal career history could be contained.

Modes of erotic attraction are as vulnerable to change as anything else. Elaine Aston concentrates upon a crucial phase in the history of sexuality in an essay on the ‘hysteric’ who is aptly described as inspiring both ‘fascination and terror’. Aston’s key figures are Bernhardt and Mrs Patrick Campbell; her main texts *La Dame aux camélias* and *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, plays that feature ‘fallen women’. The advantages and disadvantages of personal identification with the scandalous are, of course, relevant to ‘celebrity’, as is the strangely mixed morality that allowed an actress to flaunt her sexual power and then, symbolically, to pay the ultimate price for having done so.

Were the actresses who specialised in fallen women roles complicit or conflicted? There is a good deal of evidence that both Bernhardt and Campbell had very firm ideas about what they wanted to bring to these men’s stories about women’s lives. This made them, in a sense, ‘collaborators’ in the final theatrical outcome. But ‘collaboration’ is always a vexed, unequal business and, as Maria Delgado insists, we should not accept the habitual assumption that the only role for the actress who ‘collaborates’ with a male writer is that of muse to artist. Delgado opens with a list of those partnerships in which the woman has played a far more active and exploratory role than the stereotype allows. And, to further prove her point, she turns to two women who worked in a theatre – the Hispanic – which is often overlooked or misunderstood by anglocentric histories. Detailed accounts of the extraordinary careers of Maria Guerrero and Margarita Xirgu reveal them to have been leaders not followers, figures whose significance, political in the widest sense, is only now being fully realised and commemorated.

We conclude, as we did not begin, with Shakespeare. The very fact that the most celebrated repertoire in the western tradition, that of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, was generated by a transvestite theatre has, ironically enough, meant that decisions about the role of gender in casting have, in more recent years, become excitingly volatile. Penny Gay’s tough-minded estimation of the opportunities currently available for women who wish to work with Shakespeare, whether as actresses or directors, is optimistic only in the longer term. The present she sees as merely a transitional or stalled phase in the continuing history of Shakespearean production – and that despite the magnificent achievements of Judi Dench, of Vanessa Redgrave, of Harriet Walter, of Janet McTeer, of Fiona Shaw, of Kathryn Hunter and of Frances de la Tour, all of whose performances Gay warmly and appreciatively evokes.

It would, of course, be possible to trace other patterns in these essays by noting elements that feature in more than one part. Lucie Sutherland’s