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978-0-521-66483-7 - The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990

Richard Butsch

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The Making of American Audiences

In *The Making of American Audiences*, Richard Butsch provides a comprehensive study of American entertainment audiences from the colonial period to the present. Covering theater, minstrelsy, vaudeville, movies, radio, and television, he examines the evolution of audiences as each genre supplanted another as the primary popular entertainment. Based on original historical research, this volume exposes how audiences made themselves through their practices, and how they were made by contemporary discourses. During the nineteenth century, active audiences were represented as unruly and a threat to civic order, while in the twentieth century, audiences have been portrayed as passive and controlled by media messages. At the same time, dispersal of audiences from theaters to their homes by radio and television has made entertainment a private experience rather than a public occasion, and has severed the connection between audience practices and collective action. This timely study serves as an important contribution to communication research, as well as to American cultural history and cultural studies.

Richard Butsch is a professor of sociology at Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. A recipient of funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation, he is the editor of *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption* as well as author of a variety of scholarly articles in the area of communications.

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Acknowledgments

About 15 years ago, I began to investigate the change from music making to music listening associated with the dispersion of phonograph and radio. I had been intrigued with historic examples of the change in western culture from production for use to production for exchange in the realm of play and leisure and the consequent division between producers/performers and consumers/audiences. After some preliminary explorations of dusty archives and old books, I concluded it would be difficult to document such private practices as the personal making and consuming of music. But in the process I stumbled across accounts of the lively theater audiences of the nineteenth century. I was struck by the comparisons to my earlier research interest in working-class consumption of television programs. I saw here a more public manifestation of what I had been looking for, the changes in audiences' participation in their own entertainment.

From the beginning I was excited about the value of this project and found it intrinsically enjoyable to do the research. It had the potential to shed light on issues of the public sphere, collective action, mass culture, and effects of television. But the work was exceedingly slow. References to audiences in the usual primary source documents were so scattered that I felt I was searching for tiny fragments of history blown across a great territory by the winds of time. Primary and secondary sources about the stage scarcely mention audiences, and typically only in passing, with little elaboration. Rarely was the term "audience" indexed in theater histories. While there is an enormous literature on audiences in mass media research from movies to television, there is very little about audiences in natural settings, and even less giving extended eyewitness descriptions. Only by persistent searching for eight years was I able to amass enough documentation to

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compose a series of pictures of what we have done *as* audiences and what we have said *about* audiences, so that we can imagine how we have arrived where we are.

Writing this book has been a great education. In the process I have benefited from the generosity of many scholars who shared with me their knowledge and guided me in my quests. Since I traversed such broad territory, across disciplines and eras, I seemed always the novice and in their debt as guides, now exploring colonial theater, then turn-of-the-century Italian puppets, and still later current research on the uses of VCRs. With their help, I learned the literature of each field and have arrived at the understandings of audiences that I have laid out here in this book. Equally important was their enthusiasm about my project, confirming my own sense of its value. Without this encouragement I could not have persisted.

Several colleagues stand out for special thanks for having been there with encouragement and ideas for me from the beginning through the end. Ava Baron provided insightful advice and careful, detailed criticism on every stage of this project. Bruce McConachie took me seriously while I was still a novice in theater history, and shared with me his own hard-won knowledge of theater audiences. Doug Gomery provided the same valuable service as my guide in film history; and Alison Kibler helped me learn about vaudeville. Roland Marchand shared his enthusiasm and his knowledge of the cultural history of the 1920s and 1930s. John Clarke and John Kasson each, in ways small and large, sustained my efforts.

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