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0521855055 - Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900-1920

Katie N. Johnson

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Sisters in Sin

The prostitute and her sister in sin – the so-called “fallen” woman – were veritable obsessions of American Progressive Era culture. Their cumulative presence, in scores of controversial theatrical productions, demonstrates the repeated obsession with the prostitute figure in both highbrow and lowbrow entertainments. As the first extended examination of such dramas during the Progressive Era, *Sisters in Sin* recovers a slice of theatre history in demonstrating that the prostitute was central to the development of American realist theatre. Plays about prostitutes were so popular that they constituted a forgotten genre – the brothel drama. The brothel drama’s stunning success reveals much about early twentieth-century American anxieties about sexuality, eugenics, contagion, women’s rights, and urbanization. Introducing previously unexamined archival documents and unpublished play scripts, this original study argues that the body of the prostitute was a corporeal site upon which modernist desires and cultural imperatives were mapped.

KATIE N. JOHNSON specializes in theatre, film, and gender studies in the English Department at Miami University of Ohio where she is Associate Professor. In 2003, she was awarded the Gerald Kahan Award for best essay in the field of theatre studies by a younger scholar. Her work has appeared in *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Survey*, the *Journal of American Drama and Research*, *American Drama*, the *Eugene O’Neill Review*, the *American Transcendental Quarterly*, and the *Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*.

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The American theatre and its literature are attracting, after long neglect, the crucial attention of historians, theoreticians, and critics of the arts. Long a field for isolated research yet too frequently marginalized in the academy, the American theatre has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues. Investigations into its myriad of shapes and manifestations are relevant to students of drama, theatre, literature, cultural experience, and political development.

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*For Timothy and Liam
And for Ruby Gabler Fick*

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Through the countless ages, and on down into our own times, the scarlet woman has been looked upon as one who in sheer wantonness had chosen her evil mode of life. "Very well," said society, "she has made her bed, now let her lie in it."

Madeleine, a turn-of-the-century prostitute

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