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BOOK REVIEW

The Story of 42nd Street

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In a word, this book is superb! Written with a passion, it is co-authored by two writer/historians who obviously love the theatre and everything about it. The result: The Story of 42nd Street will inspire instructors who teach popular theatre history. It will also provide them with fascinating information about “the world’s most famous theatrical boulevard” (p. 33), information that will assuredly enliven class lectures, class discussions, and easily make for new and exciting homework assignments spurred on by these lectures and discussions.

In sum, this volume relates how between 1893 and 1920, twelve theatres were built on 42nd Street. In The Story of 42nd Street each of these playhouses is clearly and thoroughly described. For example, as regards the American theatre, aside from learning that it was the first built, opening May, 1893, we are told that it was the dream realized by T. Henry French and his wealthy partner Count Elliott Zborowski. (If the name French sounds familiar, it’s because his father, Samuel French, was the famous publisher of plays). We learn the architect of the American, Charles Coolidge Haight, made the exterior “a light-colored brick ornamented with terra-cotta decorations” (p. 37). Interestingly, there was a terrace built atop the theatre. Here patrons could sit and enjoy a light repast while enjoying various entertainments. We learn that the interior was done in various shades of red with lots of gold accenting and while the theatre was big, it felt cozy. The other eleven theatres on the Street including: Hammerstein’s Victoria, the Theatre Republic, the Lyric, the New Amsterdam, the Liberty, the Lew Fields, the Eltinge, the Candler, the Selwyn, the Times Square, and the Apollo are just as conscientiously described.

The individuals whose names are forever linked to the heyday of these playhouses—often great names in theatre history—are vividly presented. Thus, we read about the career of Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr. Among other things we discover the origin of his ideas for the lavish productions
He mounted, how he micro-managed his shows, how successful he was when it came to the theatre, and how gambling often made him lose the enormous sums of money he made. A sampling of the other greats presented in this work include: Oscar Hammerstein I, the Shuberts, David Belasco, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Robert Edmond Jones, Eleanora Duse, Sarah Bernhardt, Minnie Maddern Fiske, John Barrymore, Fanny Brice, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, George M. Cohan, Eddie Cantor, and many, many more.

Then, of course, there are the shows, including productions of Shakespeare, dramas, melodramas, musical revues, musical extravaganzas, and comedies—shows that ultimately served as models of what the best of popular theatre should be. Here, for example, we read about the sweeping success of Anne Nichols’s *Abie’s Irish Rose*, opening at the Theatre Republic, July, 1922. Undoubtedly, this story of the marriage of an Irish girl to a Jewish boy, allowed immigrants to America and, most particularly, their children (and there were many) to see America as a real “melting pot.” For “by the end of Nichols’s play . . . the bride’s Irish father and the groom’s Jewish father forget their differences . . . reconciled over the cribs of their grandchildren . . . named Patrick and Rebecca” (p. 71). *Abie’s Irish Rose* ran for five years. Indeed, it made Nichols a wealthy lady.

Another production studied in this book is Lew Leslie’s revue entitled *Blackbirds of 1928*. It opened at the Liberty on May 9, 1928, and was the most successful production ever to grace that house. The African-American cast included, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, who wowed the audience with a stair tap routine that he created, the well known singer Aida Ward, and Tim Moore, a comedian who in succeeding years would appear on the *Amos ‘n’ Andy* television program as George “Kingfish” Stevens. All the critics loved the production and most especially Bill “Bojangles” Robinson. Some of the other shows explored in *The Story of 42nd Street* include: George M. Cohan’s *Little Johnny Jones*, David Belasco’s *The Girl of the Golden West*, Franz Lehár’s *The Merry Widow*, the Marx Brothers in the Irving Berlin/George S. Kaufman production of *The Cocoanuts*, George and Ira Gershwin and George S. Kaufman’s *Strike up the Band*, and Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur’s *The Front Page*.

The authors also take us through 42nd Street’s decline. This decline was caused by, the Stock market crash, the arrival of the movies, and simply, changing times. Sadly, many of the theatres aforementioned turned into pornography movie houses and the street generally took on a “seedy” look attracting drug peddlers and prostitutes (p. 223). Thankfully, in recent years 42nd Street has returned, even more glorious than before. Many of the theatre that once lined the street have been restored. Talented performers tread the boards once more. Marvelous shows await eager patrons.

In short, this special book includes many never before published photographs that pick up where words leave off. Highly enjoyable, it boldly reveals that while time passes, people still go to the theatre for the very same reason: entertainment. Finally, it makes a person proud to be teaching popular theatre history and most of all proud of our American popular theatre.