



NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN THEATRE MANAGERS

Jane Kathleen Curry



Greenwood
PUBLISHING GROUP

NINETEENTH-CENTURY
AMERICAN WOMEN
THEATRE MANAGERS

**Recent Titles in
Contributions in Women's Studies**

Refusal and Transgression in Joyce Carol Oates' Fiction
Marilyn C. Wesley

Becoming, Being, Bonding: Contemporary Feminism and Popular
Fiction by American Women Writers
Katherine B. Payant

Women's Lives and Public Policy: The International Experience
Meredeth Turshen and Briavel Holcomb, editors

Sex, Abortion and Unmarried Women
Paul Sachdev

Mules and Dragons: Popular Culture Images in the Selected Writings of
African-American and Chinese-American Women Writers
Mary E. Young

Women, Community, and the Hormel Strike of 1985-86
Neala J. Schleuning

Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Consciousness: A Study of Theme
and Technique in the Tales
Evelyn E. Fracasso

Mothers and Work in Popular American Magazines
Kathryn Keller

Ideals in Feminine Beauty: Philosophical, Social, and Cultural Dimensions
Karen A. Callaghan, editor

The Stone and the Scorpion: The Female Subject of Desire in the Novels of Charlotte
Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy
Judith Mitchell

The Several Worlds of Pearl S. Buck: Essays Presented at a Centennial Symposium,
Randolph-Macon Woman's College, March 26-28, 1992
Elizabeth J. Lipscomb, Frances E. Webb, and Peter Conn, editors

Hear Me Patiently: The Reform Speeches of Amelia Jenks Bloomer
Anne C. Coon, editor

NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN THEATRE MANAGERS

Jane Kathleen Curry

Contributions in Women's Studies, Number 143



GREENWOOD PRESS
Westport, Connecticut • London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Curry, Jane Kathleen.

Nineteenth-century American women theatre managers / Jane Kathleen Curry.

p. cm.—(Contributions in women's studies, ISSN 0147-104X ; no. 143)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-313-29141-1 (alk. paper)

1. Theater management—United States—History—19th century.
2. Women in the theater—United States—History—19th century.
3. Theatrical managers—United States—Biography.
4. Women theatrical managers—United States—Biography. I. Title.

II. Series.

PN2291.C87 1994

792'.023'082—dc20 93-44133

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Copyright © 1994 by Jane Kathleen Curry

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, by any process or technique, without the express written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 93-44133

ISBN: 0-313-29141-1

ISSN: 0147-104X

First published in 1994

Greenwood Press, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

For my parents, Barbara and Richard Curry

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
1. The Pioneers—Early Nineteenth-Century Women Theatre Managers in the United States	11
2. Women Theatre Managers of the California Gold Rush	35
3. Laura Keene—First-Class Theatre Manager in New York City	53
4. Mrs. John Drew and Other Women Theatre Managers in Philadelphia	77
5. After Keene—More Women Theatre Managers in New York City and Brooklyn	93
6. Beyond the Theatrical Centers—Later Nineteenth-Century Women Theatre Managers throughout the United States	119
Conclusion	129
Bibliography	135
Index	149

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my former teachers, especially those who had a direct impact on this project: R. B. Graves, Don B. Wilmeth, Walter J. Meserve, Judith Milhous, and Marvin Carlson.

I would also like to mention just a few of the many people who deserve thanks for providing assistance and encouragement. The short list includes Kathleen Morgan, Vera Mowry Roberts, Jan Heissing, Eileen Berkon, Jack Hrkach, Paula Longo, Emily Hegarty, Danielle Mead, Edward Dee, Joel Berkowitz, Shauna Vey, David Roll, Robert Grenier, Doug Giebel, Joanna Kurtz, Joel K. Soiseth, Chris Curry, Molly Curry, and Richard Medoff.

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

“I know of no other vocation except literature in which a woman stands on a footing of absolute equality with a man. If an actress is capable of doing as good work as an actor she receives the same remuneration that he does,” observed stage star Kate Claxton in 1894.¹ Seeing their opportunity, thousands of women throughout the nineteenth century turned to the theatre in the United States for a basic living and with a hope of gaining the reputation necessary for demanding a large weekly salary. More remarkably, a few determined women took full advantage of the unique career path available in the theatre to assume the important position of theatre manager. The various responsibilities of a theatre manager were likely to include managing a stock company, owning or leasing a theatre, hiring actors and other personnel, selecting plays for production, directing rehearsals, supervising all production details, and promoting the pieces offered to the public. Having included women at every level of skill and responsibility from its first appearance in America, the professional English-language theatre provided an unusual occupational field. The managerial roles held by women in the theatre are especially significant in their frequent contrast to evolving standards of proper and acceptable work for women.

Since the earliest colonial days white women have worked in America. The difficulty of life in the New World meant that the labor of all hands was necessary for family and community survival. At first, most basic needs, such as food, clothing, and furniture, were met by home production, and when specialization of labor did occur it was not unusual for all members of a family to participate in the enterprise. In the colonial period widows, especially those who did not hastily remarry, frequently assumed the trade of their deceased husbands, working, for example, as printers or merchants. This was possible because the women had been involved in the day-to-day operations of their husbands’ trade and possessed the required knowledge and skill. Other widows used their inherited property, typically the family home, to launch an enterprise

such as an inn or school. Local communities usually encouraged the industrious widows, who often provided some needed service while relieving the community of the potential burden of supporting them and their families.²

Increased urbanization and industrialization at the end of the eighteenth century and especially at the beginning of the nineteenth century led to a decline in family production and moved much work out of the home, taking with it most men. Division of labor along gender lines became more formalized, with women's work increasingly devalued and women isolated in their homes. After a husband's death, for example, a woman could no longer be expected to continue his business, as she was usually not well acquainted with his work. Instead of working alongside their husbands, married women were encouraged to concentrate on child rearing and creating comfortable, well-regulated homes. Some women, of course, remained in the work force, but most of these were found in lower-class jobs, performing either low-status women's work, such as domestic service, or unskilled factory labor, where they received lower wages than men even for identical work, along with constant resentment for the threat they posed to men's employment. Called working girls, the women employed in these ill-paid, monotonous jobs with little chance for advancement were usually young, single, and expecting to remain in the work force for only a few years before marriage. Great pressure was placed on married women to remain at home, using their superior moral sense to influence their husbands and to guide the formation of their children's characters, rather than risking their virtue in a harsh workplace. Further, with widespread accumulation of wealth in the new country, the presence of a wife in the home took on an element of conspicuous display, demonstrating the wage-earning ability of the male breadwinner. Rather than break the social prohibition against married women's employment, poor families often sent children to work and encouraged the wife to supplement the family income at home by taking in boarders or sewing piecework. A widow with small children who wished to remain at home might barely survive by doing the same poorly paid piecework. Even a single woman working outside the home to support other family members had difficulty earning an adequate income under a system which assumed that only men might have dependents.³

Women from more prosperous families created the domestic ideal which defined women's sphere of activity throughout the nineteenth century. Neither wealthy women, whose only responsibility was to oversee the household servants, nor middle-class women, who did not work outside the home but often had to perform all the strenuous though little appreciated housework themselves, contributed directly to their families' financial well-being. Instead, they developed a role for themselves as the emotional center of the family, providing comfort and a proper moral influence. Higher status women's jobs, positions that usually required some education and would not prevent a young woman so employed from eventually making a good marriage, included social work, nursing, and teaching, all occupations that could be seen as an extension

of women's "natural" role in the home.⁴ Of course, not all women performing privileged domestic roles were content. Women in teaching and other good women's jobs had few career options and were not paid well in comparison to men of similar family background and educational level. Also many bored and isolated, wealthy women with extra time on their hands, joined by middle-class women as technology relieved much of the burden of housework, began to look for fulfillment beyond their own parlors.

Because of many women's dissatisfaction in work or domestic roles, the struggle to define the proper role for women in society was a concern throughout the nineteenth century. Many women worked to expand the traditional definitions of womanhood, encouraging women to take part in philanthropic or reform activities. They also urged higher education for women, usually on the grounds that this would make them better mothers and wives, with the result that the number of women teachers increased dramatically. More radical feminists supported the efforts of women to hold traditionally male, high-status jobs—for example, as doctors, lawyers, or ministers—and helped other groups of women, such as garment workers and shop girls, organize for better working conditions and wages. Besides the issues of fair compensation and fewer restrictions on career opportunities, feminists in the second half of the nineteenth century were concerned with issues such as full suffrage for women and reform in married women's property laws.⁵ Often collectively referred to as the "woman question," these controversial ideas were continually debated as many women sought to expand their participation in the public realm.

It is useful to consider women theatre managers in light of both the jobs typically performed by working women and the more rewarding careers that a small number of women were struggling to achieve later in the nineteenth century. Women found unique career opportunities in the theatre, but at times, like women in other male-dominated fields, women theatre managers faced difficulties due to gender. Challenging the pressure to conform to ideals of womanly behavior operating in the larger society, women assumed positions of leadership within the theatre. By observing the ambitions, obstacles, and successes of the highly visible women theatre managers, it is possible to learn more not only about the theatre, but also about the expectations, restrictions, and possibilities for women, both as a group and as exceptional individuals, throughout the nineteenth century.

Unlike many other occupations, the theatre attracted women from every type of background. That the field provided strong employment prospects for women, most commonly as actresses, means the theatre should not be overlooked in studying women's employment throughout the nineteenth century. Of course, many women, especially early in the century, entered the theatrical profession by being born into it. Mrs. John Drew is the classic example of this type, as her career of nearly eighty years, including thirty years as a manager, began when her mother carried her onstage as an infant.

For many working-class women entering the theatre, even as a “ballet girl,” meant relatively good wages and working conditions compared to other options, such as domestic service. There was also the possibility to work up in the profession or, once on the stage, to attract the attention of a wealthy man and marry into a higher social class. Of course, women usually left the theatre if they married outside the profession. Middle-class women, widows and especially daughters, facing difficult times sometimes turned to the stage, where education, refined speech, and graceful manners could help some of them succeed. Even the wealthiest and most socially prominent women in this country were sometimes attracted to the stage. Beautiful society women who could pay for their own stage debuts usually started in leading roles, rarely training in lesser parts and rarely earning much acclaim or staying long in the theatre. However, there were exceptions, such as Lily Langtry, who had a highly successful career.

Early in the nineteenth century several women assumed theatre management positions, usually more through necessity than ambition. Some women inherited a theatre following the death of a husband and continued to manage because of a sense of familial obligation or responsibility for an already established company. Mrs. Anne Brunton Merry Wignell Warren, for example, took on a managerial role following the death of her husband, Thomas Wignell, in February 1803. Other women turned to management in order to provide themselves with a performance venue when their other options were limited. Elizabeth Hamblin, for example, opened her own theatre in New York City in 1836 following her divorce from theatre manager Thomas S. Hamblin, and Charlotte Baldwin, not satisfied with her compensation at the Park Theatre, opened the City Theatre under her own management in 1822.⁶

As all theatre practitioners in the early nineteenth century lived and worked somewhat outside of the boundaries of respectable society, they tended to allow a greater flexibility in defining women’s work, with less concern for socially enforced restrictions on behavior. In the theatre women were not denied training and entry-level employment as they were in many other fields. Working as an actress, a woman had plenty of opportunity to observe theatre managers at work and to prepare for a management career essentially the same way a man would. Some women, including Mrs. John Drew, Frances Anne Denny Drake, and Miss A. G. Trimble, also had the advantage of observing at close range the management of husbands or fathers before becoming managers themselves. This relative ease of entry to the profession was in sharp contrast to the experience of the would-be woman doctor, for example, to whom many medical schools were closed until well into the twentieth century. The first woman to earn a regular medical degree in the United States, Elizabeth Blackwell, only gained admission to Geneva College, a less-than-prestigious medical school, after the student body voted her in as a joke. Completing her degree along with postgraduate training in Europe, Dr. Blackwell was forced to buy a building in order to start her practice because

she was unable to convince anyone in New York City to rent rooms to her.⁷

Besides having adequate training, a woman who worked in the theatre was not as likely as her nontheatrical counterpart to have qualms about the business aspect of theatre management. Commerce was clearly defined as a male enterprise in nineteenth-century America and considered dangerous to a woman's character and respectability. Since women in theatre had already challenged notions of respectability when they entered the profession, they were probably less likely to have their managerial ambitions checked by social pressure.

One major problem facing women in theatre management that did not deter pioneer career women in other fields was the theatre managers' dependence on pleasing a large public. Women doctors and lawyers could survive with the support of ardent feminists and practice on charity cases even if the rest of the world laughed. Women in theatre needed widespread approval for their endeavors. As most women managers were also actresses whose popularity and income depended on their presentation of idealized feminine qualities through various characters, a woman had to take care that her assumption of the powerful, male-identified position of manager did not undermine her public persona. The paradoxical position of the nineteenth-century actress in light of dominant social behavior has been examined by Tracy Davis in a study of English actresses, which points out that while the actress was admired for portraying a womanly ideal, the actual behavior of the actress—pursuing a career, displaying her personal beauty for a profit—was in opposition to social norms.⁸ Women theatre managers further challenged social norms by operating businesses and employing and supervising other women and men. Yet, while their mere existence could be read as a threat to the social order, most women managers were careful not to disturb the status quo more than necessary. They presented themselves not as part of a large-scale movement to change socially controlled gender roles, but as individual women who, through personal industry and artistic ability, were qualified to manage the public's entertainment.⁹ While women theatre managers were highly visible examples of women holding responsible, powerful positions, providing a sign of hope for other ambitious women, they did not, for the most part, encourage other women to follow their example, and they could not afford to be outspoken advocates of feminist issues. Not until early in the twentieth century did equal suffrage for women, the most promoted feminist issue of the day, gather sufficient public interest for several prominent theatre women, for example Mary Shaw, to risk becoming active supporters of the cause.¹⁰

Beyond subtle, psychological pressure on actresses not to disturb the status quo in assuming managerial duties, women managers sometimes encountered direct opposition. Occasionally, men in the theatre, certainly aware of the wider culture's tendency to restrict women's employment opportunities, resented working for a woman or feared the additional competition provided by women as managerial rivals. Newspaper critics, who influenced the way

in which the efforts of all managers were received by the public, also could present difficulties for women managers, though most often their negative commentary did not extend beyond condescension dressed up as praise for the “fair manageress” and her “pretty little theatre.”¹¹ It is also necessary to remember that restrictions on married women’s right to control their own property had the potential to make almost any business transaction legally impossible for a married woman manager. While exceptions to restrictive legislation seem to have been made for most women working as managers, it is possible that some women managers had to rely at times on the legal capacities of their business managers or other male employees. Many adjustments in married women’s property laws were made over the years, complicating the situation for women and not always improving it. The confused situation made it hazardous for anyone to enter into a contract with a married woman, for often the courts found women not liable for their debts if their contracts were not made with a husband’s knowledge and approval. Citing such precedents one theatre manager, Sarah Conway, during a period of financial difficulty, attempted to avoid paying her printer. However, the court found that as the recognized proprietor of a business, clearly named Mrs. Conway’s Theatre, her signature was good, and she was liable for her own debts.¹² While Mrs. Conway presumably was disappointed to lose her case, the long-term effect for women was positive, for married women would succeed in business only if, like men and like single women, they could be expected to honor their contracts. In another case, though a judge eventually dismissed the objection, Laura Keene’s right to bring suit in her effort to protect her rights to Tom Taylor’s *Our American Cousin* was challenged by William Wheatley and John Sleeper Clarke on the grounds that she was married.¹³

This study finds that, by and large, absolute barriers to women’s participation in the profession of theatrical management did not exist. Still, examination of individual cases reveals women maneuvering to balance the demands of management with an awareness of suitable gendered behavior. The patriarchal organization of nineteenth-century American society supported a pervasive ideology of restricted roles for women in the public sphere. Even as the definition of acceptable work roles for women advanced and shifted, the dominant ideology affected both the public postures assumed by women managers and the critical response to their efforts.

This account of women theatre managers in the United States during the nineteenth century includes a discussion of the managerial activities of more than fifty managers. Many of these women, among the most outstanding managers of their day, had productive careers that should be recorded, if only to negate the easy assumption that theatre managers were always men. Others were not especially successful, but are included here simply because they attempted to establish themselves as managers. This, in itself, is significant. Theatre management was a risky and difficult business even under the best of