

*FEMALE AERIALISTS IN THE 1920S AND EARLY  
1930S: FEMININITY, CELEBRITY AND GLAMOUR,  
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196 PP. KATE HOLMES*

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**T**HIS new work of circus history scholarship makes the important leap away from simply describing the past to drawing out contextual relevance for today. The primary argument is that female aerialists of the interwar era were key figures in evolving previously held European and North American concepts of femininity to include attributes of strength and vigour. In making this argument, however, Holmes negotiates a broader territory than my précis might suggest, revealing a complex interweaving of phenomena that make this book a useful contribution to contemporary circus studies as well as performance history and gender studies. The five main chapters of the volume build toward the major thesis, fleshing out the vital concept of celebrity with a particular reference to the work and lives of Lillian Leitzel and Luisita Leers. The focus of chapter one, “Democratising experience: Diverse transformative performance spaces,” is on cultural and spatial performance contexts in the UK and the US. These contexts include the creation of celebrity through publicity materials, which “extend[ed] the boundaries of the circus space” (Holmes 27). The ensuing chapters focus on how certain elements of performers’ body and persona presentations were crucially balanced for the formation of celebrity: skill and risk; past and emerging femininities; and, in the production of glamour, intimacy and distance. The interconnected phenomena result in some reiterative overlap between chapters, making the volume perhaps easiest to digest as interlinking but separate essays. Chapters two to five focus, respectively, on glamour as a “kinaesthetic fantasy of weightlessness,” on “skilful vulnerability,” on the connections between aerialists’ physique and the

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emergence of the “modern girl” phenomenon of the period and on the evolution of femininity to include more active behaviours, both physical and social. The concluding chapter, “Updating aerial celebrity and re-evaluating practice,” connects the revelations of earlier chapters to the aerial performance of contemporary celebrity P!nk in her 2018/19 tour, illustrating their continued relevance and providing a rare analysis of the singer’s aerial activity. The importance of the 1920s and 1930s as a period of highly popular circus is laid out at the start of the book in its introductory chapter, “Producing allure and popularity,” which breaks apart some common myths of circus nostalgia that conventionally direct attention to alternate periods. Holmes is conscientious here in laying out the limitations of fragmentary evidence from the era and describes her own consequential approach of supplementing phenomenological input from her experience as a contemporary audience member and amateur aerialist to flesh out her descriptions of the past. Later on, however, her claims are couched more strongly, and further acknowledgment of the limited evidence would have been appreciated.

It is interesting to read about the impact circus had on variety performance (Holmes 42) and of how successful aerialists of the period were “expert gender negotiators” (110), but the work’s most valuable contribution to circus scholarship comes from Holmes’s elaboration of two key terms: skilful vulnerability and kinaesthetic fantasy. Both describe perspectives on the audience–performer interface and shed clarity on the way aerial performance is experienced by audience members. The performance of skill and the performance of strength are positioned as inextricably interwoven elements of circus performance. These performed attributes overlap—but are separate from—the real risks and strengths produced by the artists and the conditions of their acts. Here, Holmes articulates an important concept in the understanding of circus allure. Furthermore, she highlights the phenomenon of perceived weightlessness in aerial performance at the incidence between perceived skill and perceived strength. This generates the kinaesthetic fantasy, produced at a distance but felt as an intimacy, that Holmes argues is key to the glamour of her aerialist subjects and is also intertwined with conventions of gender. I am left wondering whether ballet scholarship has its own contributions regarding this phenomenon, but that is outside the scope of this already wide-ranging volume. Similarly, the heterogeneous nature of audience experiences (Freshwater 28) and consideration of possible alternate positions would merit scrutiny in future study. Nonetheless, these embodied positions are welcome additions to the circus theory canon and intriguingly so when they touch on the embodied nature of ideologies (Holmes 148).

Holmes goes a good way toward untangling some of the seeming paradoxes of circus performance, and her thorough excavations of historical evidence allow her to provide excellent reconstructions of leading aerial performances from the period. She also arranges a concerted argument from the evidence available to

her, detailing how female aerialists of the 1920s and early 1930s were instrumental in a period of shifting gender norms. These performers allowed femininity to incorporate physical strength and vigorous activity for the first time through their glamorous celebrity status.

## References

Freshwater, Helen. *Theatre & Audience*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.