

*THEATRE ACROSS OCEANS: MEDIATORS OF
TRANSATLANTIC EXCHANGE, 1890–1925,*
CHAM: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN,
2021. 352 PP. NIC LEONHARDT

NELE WYNANTS, UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP

NIC LEONHARDT's *Theatre Across Oceans: Mediators of Transatlantic Exchange, 1890–1925* is a meticulously researched exploration into the dynamic world of transatlantic performing arts during a pivotal era marked by significant technological and social transformations. The central thesis of the book is that theatre, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was a highly mobile and interconnected art form that traversed national boundaries through the efforts of key mediators such as agents, brokers and impresarios. Leonhardt demonstrates how advancements in transportation and communication facilitated these exchanges, creating a vital transatlantic theatre trade. Through detailed case studies of mediators such as Elisabeth Marbury, Alice Kauser, Richard Pitrot and H. B. Marinelli, Leonhardt challenges traditional distinctions within theatre history and underscores the interconnectedness of various performance genres such as vaudeville and circus. This book stands out not only for its academic rigor, but also for its engaging narrative that brings to life the bustling exchanges between Europe and America.

However, it takes a while before the reader gets to the heart of the book. The first chapter sketches the theoretical backdrop of Leonhardt's endeavor by examining how nineteenth century printed culture fostered distinct national identities and a shared global awareness. Theatre became a platform for negotiating ideas on nation, politics, ethnicity and gender, while also promoting cultural mobility and diversity.

Contact: Nele Wynants <nele.wynants@uantwerpen.be>

The second chapter details the physical and communication networks that facilitated cross-border trade. These are illustrated by the impact of the Titanic's sinking during these exchanges, which is described as one of the first "transnational media events" (39). Similar to Marlis Schweitzer's *Transatlantic Broadway: The Infrastructural Politics of Global Performance*, Leonhardt's book aligns with mobility studies by highlighting how transportation and communication networks revolutionized the theatre industry. The author details how these technologies enabled faster communication and transportation, which were essential for the expansion and operation of the transnational theatre network. Railroads facilitated theatrical circuits and faster transatlantic steamship travel opened markets for performers and talent scouts. Communication technologies such as telegrams allowed for faster interactions over broader distances through which "negotiations were conducted, agreements were reached, offers made, schedules fixed and contracts agreed" (51). This contextualization is crucial, because it demonstrates how these advancements were instrumental in the mobility and exchange that characterized the transatlantic theatre networks.

In chapter three, the focus finally shifts to the often "invisible" work of theatre brokers and agents. The history highlights the transition from the nineteenth century actor-manager, who handled both performance and business, to the bureaucratic theatrical agencies of the twentieth century. It details how theatrical agencies systematized their practices with standardized offices in various theatrical capitals. These offices managed production rights, contracts, international tours and media coverage, which demonstrates their crucial role in the commercial theatre business.

The book's strongest aspect is its focus on the often-overlooked figures who facilitated these cultural exchanges. In the fourth and central chapter, Leonhardt provides detailed profiles of four notable mediators. New York-born businesswoman Elisabeth Marbury (1855–1933) was a pioneering theatrical agent who played a crucial role in professionalizing the early twentieth century theatre landscape by establishing systematic practices for managing contracts, royalties and international tours. Known for her extensive network, Marbury managed an impressive list of playwrights, including George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde, that eventually extended beyond theatre to include screenwriters in the burgeoning film industry. Her Hungarian-born apprentice, Alice Kauser (1871–1945), leveraged her multicultural background to foster successful transatlantic collaborations and to manage significant talents. Born to a diplomat and a singer, Kauser was well-versed in multiple languages and cultures. These skills enabled her to develop international partnerships.

The book contains significant references to circus acts and performers, making it a useful resource for circus studies scholars too. Austrian-born Richard Pitrot (1852–1929) transitioned from performer to a prominent manager of his

own circus known as *The American Globetrotting Company*. Pitrot's circus toured internationally, including performances in South Africa in 1900. He also specialized in bringing European circus acts to America and vice versa, highlighting the transnational nature of circus entertainment during this period. The author discusses how Pitrot helped to book acts for Antonio V. Pubillones' *Gran Circo Pubillones*, which toured Cuba, the Caribbean and South America, as well as *Frank Brown's Circus*, known as the "Barnum of South America."

H. B. Marinelli, an Italian contortionist turned influential agent, is the final case discussed. Known as the "Greatest Exporter of European Talent," Marinelli brought a wide array of European acts to American audiences. He operated within multiple performance genres such as vaudeville and circus to ensure the flow of diverse European talent into the American entertainment market. Marinelli's success lay in his innovative organizational strategies and the establishment of a multi-local business with branches in major cities. The final chapter examines the impact of World War I on transatlantic theatre activities. Leonhardt discusses how the war led to a stagnation of cultural mobility and a rise in nationalist sentiments, which disrupted the previously active exchanges.

Through these case studies, Leonhardt sheds light on the professionalization of theatrical mediation. This approach underscores the pivotal roles of these mediators in shaping the transatlantic theatre and circus businesses by highlighting their significant contributions, skills and strategies. Drawing on a combination of archival research, historiographical analysis and case studies, she constructs a rich and multi-faceted narrative. The use of a diverse range of sources from multiple archives and digital repositories, including business correspondence, playbills, contracts and photographs, provides a vivid picture of the era. She acknowledges the dispersed and informal nature of this source material, which often renders these mediators invisible in traditional theatre histories. By bringing these figures to the forefront, she not only fills a significant gap in theatre and circus scholarship but also challenges the conventional national and sometimes local focus of theatre historiography. However, while the book does draw from sources in multiple languages, the focus is predominantly on English-language sources. A more balanced inclusion of non-English sources could have provided a more comprehensive view of the transatlantic theatre networks and highlighted the contributions of mediators from non-English-speaking countries.

Overall, Nic Leonhardt's *Theatre Across Oceans* offers an illuminating exploration of the key figures who facilitated the dynamic exchange of theatrical performances between Europe and America during a crucial period of modernization and globalization. By studying the role of agents in bridging the gaps between legitimate theatre, popular entertainment and circus performances, this book provides invaluable insights for circus studies scholars. The author's

analysis reveals the intricate networks and logistical frameworks that enabled the global circulation of diverse performance forms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Theatre Across Oceans* is an essential read for scholars and enthusiasts interested in understanding the complexities and dynamics of transnational cultural exchanges during a transformative period in history.

Author Biography

Nele Wynants is a research assistant professor at the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts (ARIA), University of Antwerp. She leads the EU-funded project 'Science at the Fair' and is series editor of the Media Performance Histories series. Her work focuses on the circulation of science, technology and visual media in nineteenth century theatre and popular culture. Wynants extends this line of research into Arts & Media Archaeology through various projects, a blog and a Summer School.