

Holly George. *Show Town: Theater and Culture in the Pacific Northwest, 1890–1920*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016. Pp. x + 266. \$29.93.

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Book Review

In *Show Town*, Holly George offers a thorough insight into the role that theater played in the public life of Spokane, Washington between 1890 to 1920. The professional stage made a significant contribution to Spokane's culture and economy forming significant associations between Spokane's theatre and the national and international markets. The historical journey of Spokane's theater from 1890 to 1920 is a testimony of how performing arts helped to modify the idea of the American home in the American west, making Spokane a hub of "boosterism" (17). Nuanced and well-researched, George's account explores complex dimensions of Spokane's identity change from just a town in the "Wild West" to a burgeoning "good show town" (3). It also captures the trajectory of professional theater's transformation from being encompassed in Victorian orthodoxy to embracing modern ideologies where men and women could discuss issues of gender and sexuality in public. Such changes in the theatrical scene reflect Spokane's rapid cultural and sociopolitical modifications backed by the conflict of tastes in stage performances among the city's influential patrons and the middle-class audience.

The history of Spokane's theater culture begins with the great Auditorium theater that was created for the enthusiastic promotion of performing arts and catered specifically to the tastes of the elite and wealthy in the young Spokane city. However, the rise of the "highbrow" Victorian theatre became a failure, and eventually turned into a daily entertainment center attracting thousands of migratory workers from the neighboring forests and mines who willingly spent money on "riotous entertainments" (17, 5). In the middle of class and cultural hierarchies and negotiations between western morality and modern, indecent modes of entertainment, these workers who were primarily young, single men working for the affluent Spokaneites kept the variety theaters running.

Another important subject that the book covers comprehensively is the issue of contested urban identities during the 1800s and 1900s. Spokane's variety theater scene became a space for compromise between inappropriate sexual behavior in the name of entertainment and "good" conduct that was propitious to middle-class family life. Therefore, the basic conflict remained between Spokane's image as the "Wild West town" infested with gunfights, drinking, and gambling and its reputation as the "family friendly" town that followed civility and law (79-80). Protestant ministers or reform politicians played the role of moral police in the town eventually leading to the passing of the barmaid law in 1895, another vital historical moment in the town's theater route; this law barred women from participating in variety theaters and saloons in any capacity whatsoever. However, the expansion of the variety theater gave artists the opportunity to experiment with various genres that led to further experimentation with the interpretation of womanhood and sexuality on stage. Examples of the glamorous life of Helen Campbell, the Dansants society, bedroom farces, and girl shows prove that women were the root of all controversies in the flourishing variety theater.

Show Town touches upon many important economic and cultural historical moments between 1890-1920 such as the arrival of the Northern Pacific in 1881, discovery of minerals in

Idaho between 1882-1885, and a developing economy in the western United States built on logging, mining, agriculture. Holly George draws her research from several libraries in Washington and the city's newspaper records. She also supports her account with information from the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture and the Utah State Historical Society. She expresses her indebtedness to Washington state for fueling her interest to unravel the state's theatrical history. Overall, this book is groundbreaking in terms of portraying the multifaceted picture of sociocultural change in a small, nascent town in the Northwest, and also capturing the changing face of American theater. George points out that numerous scholarship about "American theatre, culture, and gender" in the eastern United States has been published but adequate historical information about the US west coast is still lacking (15). Thus, her meticulous use of secondary sources, especially her use of illustrations from the 1800s and 1900s opens avenues for further research on the art and culture of the Pacific Northwest.

The title of the book is deceiving. The book does not broadly talk about the performing arts in the Pacific Northwest, instead it mainly focuses on the expansive culture of entertainment in Spokane. However, *Show Town* establishes significant links between Spokane, Washington and the rest of the American Northwest as showmen from the Northwest became increasingly involved with the showmen of Spokane and kept the demand for lively theater alive.