PROJECT MUSE®

Editorial

Marlis Schweitzer

Canadian Theatre Review, Issue 141, January 2010, pp. 3-6 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ctr.0.0013>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/372727>

Editorial

by Marlis Schweitzer

On a warm June afternoon while walking along Toronto's Queen Street West on my way to the Theatre Centre, I came across a peculiar sign pasted on a traffic light post. I was struck by the sincerity of the creator's request for a "notable NAME" actor to audition for his Fringe show, *Chooch, Bummy Bum and Inguele: From Child to Man-child*. I'm used to seeing audition notices posted in public spaces, but an audition notice specifically targeted at famous people? This was something new. As it turns out, the poster was (surprise!) part of a publicity campaign created by the Suck My Thumb Co-op, producers of this play. In addition to pasting audition notices around the city, the Co-Op also issued a press release on June 3, 2009, announcing the launch of a search " . . . to Find Guest Celebrity To Play Actor's Mother in Play at Fringe 2009" (<http://www.meandmyjewishmother.com/frames.htm>).

What impressed me about Suck My Thumb's celebrity search was the way it cleverly inverted the "let's make a star" narrative of contemporary reality television shows such as *American* (or *Canadian*) *Idol*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* These shows take young, aspiring performers and put them through months of intensive workshops, grooming sessions, and live performances before crowning a winner. The implicit assumption is that the celebrity attained by the fortunate individuals during their time on the show will last long after the final broadcast. Often, this doesn't happen and a contestant's short-lived celebrity disappears without the support of a corporate apparatus (on this subject, see Richie Wilcox's article in this issue). But in the case of Elicia Mackenzie, the winner of CBC's *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?*, success on that show translated into a starring role in the Mirvish production of *The Sound of Music* and most recently a Dora award for Outstanding Performance by a Female in a Principal Role – Musical. Indeed, the formula for *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?*, which marries reality TV with live theatre—a marriage originally devised by mega-musical composer Andrew Lloyd Webber—seems to herald the arrival of a new theatrical genre: the reality show musical.¹ Whether the arrival of this genre can be seen as a positive or negative development is the subject of a much longer conversation. But if Suck My Thumb's publicity stunt is any indication, celebrity culture is beginning to inflect the lives of Canadian theatre artists, administrators, and academics.

And this cannot be ignored.

A "Wanted" sign posted on a street light along Toronto's Queen St. W. invites "Notable NAME" performers to audition for a Fringe play.
 Photo by Marlis Schweitzer

This issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* joins a growing body of scholarship on the phenomenon now widely referred to as "celebrity culture" (Rojek, Marshall, Holmes and Redmond, Evans and Hesmondhalgh). This new work draws on previous histories of stardom and fan culture within film, media, and cultural studies but recognizes an important distinction between stars and celebrities.² As cultural theorist P. David Marshall explains, celebrity is a "phenomenon that is specifically beyond stardom" in that it considers "the interplay between the performance (the textual), [. . .] and the performance of everyday life (the extra-textual) of the public personality" (Marshall 6–7). Celebrities are not necessarily performers, but are always individuals who, in Daniel Boorstin's formulation, are "known for [their] well-knownness" (79).

Increased academic interest in celebrity culture can be seen as a response to the explosion of celebrity culture itself. Since the mid-1990s, the ubiquitous and surprisingly long-standing appeal of reality television, the proliferation of online gossip sites and photo agencies, the popularity of blogs and social networking sites from Facebook to Twitter, and the unbelievable success of YouTube have dramatically increased the number of venues through which average citizens can view and vie for fame and fortune. As a result of these developments, celebrities living their "everyday lives" are subject to constant surveillance by the paparazzi and by extension, the fans who view "candid" celebrity photos and videos online. Fans and bloggers too have become celebrities—witness the bizarre fame enjoyed by American gossip blogger Perez Hilton. Indeed, now more than ever, celebrity appears to be tantalizingly within reach of anyone with a camera, an amusing, cute, or shocking idea, and the guts to make a spectacle of themselves.

Celebrity culture is therefore an ideal subject for theatre artists and scholars to investigate, particularly those interested in the processes whereby the bodies, ideas, and images produced within a theatrical context are transmitted from stage to auditorium, and across borders of culture, ethnicity, race, class, gender, and nation. For example, in their work

on celebrity actors, Marvin Carlson and Michael Quinn have noted the tension that often arises when the extra-textual aspects of a celebrity's public persona overtake or interrupt the audience's experience of seeing the celebrity perform (Carlson, Quinn). More recently, Joseph Roach has examined the combination of vulnerability and strength that bestows certain individuals with the "It effect," such that audiences are undeniably attracted to them without always knowing why (Roach).

The authors gathered here explore a range of issues related to the acquisition, performance, and marketing of celebrity in both traditional (i.e. the Stratford Festival, Fringe Festival) and non-traditional (i.e. Fan Expo 2008, Facebook) theatrical contexts. Indeed, one of the underlying questions throughout this issue is whether the terms "celebrity" and

“celebrity culture” can be used to describe audience reactions to celebrated performers and companies. Blake Brooker, Artistic Director of Calgary’s One Yellow Rabbit, contends that celebrity culture is really an American phenomenon that has had a limited effect on Canadian theatre; Robert Ormsby argues that artists like the recently deceased William Hutt experience something akin to renown, but that full-fledged celebrity lies beyond their grasp; *One Man StarWars* performer Charlie Ross tells a very different story about his brush with fame and the experience of seeing his name and face appear on billboards and marquee in Times Square.

Fans play an integral role in the development and expression of celebrity culture, as the articles by Scott Duschene and Stephen Johnson illustrate. In his analysis of two very different “Fan Tribute Performances” staged at Fan Expo 2008 in Toronto, Duschene argues that fans who dress up as their favourite science fiction characters are essential for sustaining the popularity and economic viability of science fiction commodities—from films and television shows to the actors themselves. Johnson focuses on fan portrayals of a single pop culture icon, Elvis Presley, and ponders the King’s enduring appeal with the Collingwood audience.

Richie Wilcox and Michael Greyeyes examine celebrity from the performer’s point-of-view. As a finalist in Season 1 of *Canadian Idol*, Wilcox was made over by producers to represent an idealized version of himself, a process that carefully omitted certain details of his life while elevating others. In recounting his experience, Wilcox exposes the mechanics of making celebrities—or, in the case of *Idol*, “celetoids.” Greyeyes

relates his online exchanges with fans, many of whom are female and enjoy going on fan sites to share their views of both his performances and his physical attributes. But where should actors draw the line when it comes to Facebook and similar social networking sites? Is it possible to maintain a filter?

The final articles describe two recent autobiographical solo shows, both of which represent the playwright/performers’ encounters with celebrity, but from very unique perspectives. Lydia Wilksinson interviews Brooke Johnson about the process of writing and performing *Trudeau Stories*, a play that chronicles Johnson’s real-life friendship with the former Prime Minister, whom she met at a National Theatre School event. Jenn Stephenson offers an insightful analysis of the autobiographical solo show as a dramatic genre and uses TJ Dawe’s *Totem Figures* as a case study. One of the most striking characteristics of *Totem Figures*, she suggests, is the way Dawe weaves the narrative of his own career as a Fringe performer with narratives about the fictional characters and real-life performers who have inspired him. Stephenson’s analysis provides an ideal introduction to the play itself, the featured script in this issue, for which Dawe has provided a number of illustrations.

There is much to say about celebrity culture in Canada, especially as it continues to influence everything from casting practices and season planning, to marketing and funding decisions. One question that remains unanswered for me is how or whether the experience of celebrity differs for female versus male performers, especially considering that so many of the artists profiled here are male. Another, perhaps

Marquee for *The Sound of Music* outside the Princess of Wales Theatre along King St. in downtown Toronto. Elicia Mackenzie, winner of the CBC reality series *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* appears nightly in the acclaimed Mirvish production. Series runner-up Janna Polzin also performs as Maria twice a week.

Photo by Marlis Schweitzer

Celebrity culture is an ideal subject for theatre artists and scholars to investigate, particularly those interested in the processes whereby the bodies, ideas, and images produced within a theatrical context are transmitted from stage to auditorium, and across borders of culture, ethnicity, race, class, gender, and nation.

---

inevitable, question is the extent to which Canadian celebrity culture differs from celebrity culture elsewhere. Vancouver-based gossip blogger Lainey (Elaine) Lui argues that *unlike* the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Japan, China, and India, Canada does *not* have its own home-grown star system. “What is it about Canada that we are so unwilling to support a star system?” she asked when I interviewed her. “[We really] need to examine this question. Why don’t we respect our stars?” (Lainey interview). If Lainey is right, then perhaps this issue of *CTR* is a start.

Marlis Schweitzer is Assistant Professor of Theatre Studies at York University where she teaches courses on the Broadway musical and popular entertainment genres including vaudeville and burlesque. She is the author of When Broadway Was the Runway: Theater, Fashion, and American Culture.

Notes

- 1 Also premiering in the summer of 2008: *Legally Blonde the Musical: The Search for Elle Woods* (MTV) and *High School Musical: Get in the Picture* (ABC). See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High_School_Musical:_Get_in_the_Picture> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legally_Blonde_-_The_Musical:_The_Search_for_Elle_Woods>. Both viewed August 23, 2009.
- 2 Previous studies include: Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown; Fame and Its History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Richard de Cordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994); Richard Dyer, *Stars*, 2nd ed. (London: BFI, 1998).

Works Cited

- Boorstin, Daniel J. “From Hero to Celebrity: The Human Pseudo-Event.” in *The Celebrity Culture Reader*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006. 72–90.
- Carlson, Marvin. *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Evans, Jessica and David Hesmondhalgh. *Inside Media: Understanding Celebrity*. Berkshire: Open University Press, 2005.
- Holmes, Su and Sean Redmond. *Framing Celebrity: New directions in celebrity culture* London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Marshall, P. David, ed. *The Celebrity Culture Reader*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006.
- . *Celebrity and Power*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Me and My Jewish Mother.com. “About Page.” 30 Aug. 2009. <<http://www.meandmyjewishmother.com/frames.htm>>.
- Roach, Joseph. *It*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Rojek, Chris. *Celebrity*. London, Reaktion, 2001.
- Lui, Lainey (Elaine). Telephone interview. 6 Aug. 2009.