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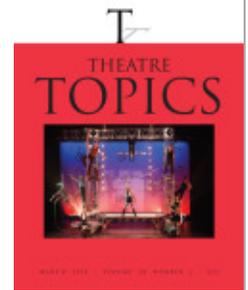
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The Many Middling Failures of Miss Virginia Calhoun

Brian Eugenio Herrera

Performance historiography is premised on success. Watershed dates, events, and figures focus our narratives, coordinate our periodizations, and anchor our claims for significance. Our traditional tales of theatre's history depend on such moments of invention and intervention, or on occasions of disruption and discovery: Thespis steps from the chorus; Okuni dances in the riverbed; Nora slams the door. Synecdochic evocations of past "success" stand as privileged cues to apprehending what matters, then and now, in performance history.

Those tales of obscurity and failure that we tell are likewise typically rendered in triumphant terms. Theatre historians routinely rediscover and retroactively celebrate the heretofore unacknowledged genius, undervalued technique, or overlooked influence of previously forgotten theatre-makers, events, or movements. Theatre history is thus comparatively bereft of non-triumphant tales. Our most favored failures are those readily rendered as episodes within triumph's long arc or as epic enough to warrant a place within theatre history lore and legend. Performance history's triumphal tendency might also be seen in how it does not narrate the undeniably unsuccessful performances of someone like Virginia Calhoun.

Calhoun—a mercurial, eccentric, mysterious woman who labored for nearly a half-century as an actress, writer, and producer as the nineteenth century became the twentieth—believed herself to always be on the verge of success. Having decided to become an actress shortly after her thirtieth birthday, the California-born and -educated Calhoun spent much of the 1890s studying in France and England. She returned to the United States as the century turned and enjoyed a brief stint as a touring trouser (mostly performing Sardou along the Southeastern coast) before resettling in Los Angeles, a newly booming city in her home state. In 1903 Calhoun secured the exclusive dramatic rights to Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1883), the hugely popular fictional narrative of life in California's southland during the Spanish colonial era. She then began what she would come to call her "lifetime's work": to bring a suitably artistic, authentic, and uplifting version of Jackson's epic treatment of California's "mission past" to respectable theatre audiences in California and beyond. As writer, star, producer, and marketer, Calhoun staged not only her own theatrical adaptation of *Ramona*, but also led two major, independent regional tours of her production throughout the Far West, Southwest, and Midwest in 1905 and 1906. Over the subsequent three decades the unmarried and unmoneyed Calhoun persisted, experimenting with form, style, and venue for her constantly revised script, all while vigilantly defending her *Ramona* from the creative predations of her usually male and always more successful rivals. Yet, despite her creativity, tenacity, and productivity, Calhoun is only remembered, if remembered at all, as a peripheral figure in accounts of more successful *Ramona*s (fig. 1).

Calhoun's most sustained accomplishment is her accumulation of nearly fifty years of near success. Yet, as if to confirm that "near success" registers archivally as failure, Calhoun—a prodigious writer of letters, scripts, and stories; an avid collector of Southern California memorabilia; a prodigious contributor to a broad range of civic performance traditions—left no "Virginia Calhoun Collection" (at least not one that an existing archive or repository considered worthy of keeping).



FIG. 1 Virginia Calhoun as *Ramona*, circa 1905. (Source: As published in *Pleasures and Palaces: The Memoirs of Princess Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich* by Eleanor Hulda Calhoun Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich [New York: Century Company, 1915].)

Still, after more than fifteen years of my own on-again/off-again research tracking brief mentions of her in the printed record and her occasional appearances in other peoples' papers, I find that the pieces of the Virginia Calhoun story have slowly come together and feel that I can now tell her story.

But what is the point of telling a story like Calhoun's? Why would, why should any reader or publisher care about the many middling failures of someone like her? My years of puzzling over the question of "what's at stake" in telling Calhoun's story has led me to appreciate that, for all her idiosyncrasy, she might just be more typical than exceptional. And "being typical" poses a peculiar problem in performance history, because performance historians have so valorized triumph that extraordinariness has come to stand as a default measure of what matters in performance history.

Being on the verge of success also placed Calhoun ever at the edge of failure. This precarity ultimately renders her nearly unintelligible to performance history. Two stories about her do earn brief notices in the historical record: the one about Calhoun's many missteps when first staging her

Ramona, and the other regarding how she almost stopped the *Ramona Pageant* from ever happening. These tales have generally been tethered together to tell a minor story of how Calhoun's failure ultimately made way for the pageant. Such mentions confirm her deserved obscurity while effacing the rest of her multi-decade quest to stage *Ramona*. Yet, when considered as signal episodes, these stories amplify Calhoun's remarkable talent for standing at the capricious pivot of success and failure.

By all accounts, the opening-night performance of Calhoun's first version of *Ramona*, presented on February 27, 1905 at Los Angeles' grandest venue, the Mason Opera House, was a disaster. After weeks of enthusiastic advance publicity, the Monday night debut of *Ramona* attracted "an appreciative audience that extended from orchestra chairs to the highest of gallery seats" and filled "every row . . . from floor to roof." When the cast of her *Ramona* took its final bows nearly five hours later, only a polite smattering of that audience remained. ("[M]any of the audience left before the last act," when it became "necessary to think of getting home before the [street]cars stopped.") "It must be cut . . . for the benefit of the actors as well as the audience," insisted the *Los Angeles Times*; "the strain is too continuous." Strong central performances by Calhoun and Lawrence Griffith could not balance an accumulation of "crudities which mar a first-night performance," including a malfunctioning curtain that forced one actor to stand and walk from the stage "after dying with tragic effect," and when the galloping hooves of another actor's horse could be heard sounding even as he "was still hurrying to mount his steed." The lone reviewer ruefully noted that "the audience laughed—it would have been hard to help it" (*Los Angeles Times*).

The opening-night stumbles of Calhoun's *Ramona* did not dissuade the actress/author from taking her script, her troupe, and her whole production on the road a month later. In the spring of 1905 her *Ramona* toured north from Los Angeles, making a dozen or so stops along the Camino Real before reaching San Francisco, then the undisputed center of California's entertainment culture. San Francisco proved somewhat more hospitable to Calhoun's *Ramona* than Los Angeles. Noting how her production was "the first to put in stage form the widely read story of early California life," one reviewer expressed the consensus among most Bay Area reviewers by observing that the play was "more a narrative in dialogue . . . than a drama," but "[held] the poetry and ideality of the characters very effectively" (*San Francisco Chronicle*). Only the reviewer for the *San Francisco Argonaut* disagreed: "No one in the company knows how to act and Miss Calhoun does not know how to write a play" (qtd. in Schickel 67).

But the modest houses and mixed reviews greeting Calhoun's Camino Real tour did nothing to dissuade her from taking the show on the road again the following year for a far more ambitious eastward jaunt. Setting out in late August 1906, Calhoun's "second season" tour—in which she served not only as author and leading lady, but also producer and marketer—followed the "Silver Circuit" through mining towns in Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. By the time her company offered a long-anticipated performance in Colorado Springs (Jackson's final home and resting place), however, Calhoun had failed to secure the Denver booking so necessary to fortifying advance sales for the company as it trouped further eastward to its biggest scheduled bookings in Kansas City and New Orleans. She was increasingly distraught. On October 16, 1906 she wrote in a letter to Jackson's widower, William Sharpless Jackson: "I have become convinced that this present way of undertaking to exploit *Ramona* can only mean disaster. How much of it is deliberate aim to rob me of my beautiful and valuable property? I cannot know." Nevertheless, the company persisted through Kansas. But when the manager of Kansas City's largest venue canceled Calhoun's booking (a casualty, it seems, of the Syndicate's collapse), Calhoun's tour "fell down" before reaching any of its scheduled Gulf Coast bookings.

For decades Calhoun's disastrous opening-night presentation of *Ramona* would be remembered as an "unfortunate and inexplicable failure" from which "the people went to their homes grieving as one might over the fall and breakage of a beautiful vase" (Davis and Alderson 258–59). Such remembrances of Calhoun's earliest and most epic failure overshadow all that happened next.

She did not stop after her disastrous Los Angeles opening, but instead mounted two independent tours. And even when both of those tours fell short of success, she persevered in her quest to stage her *Ramona*. On November 28, 1911 Calhoun assured William Jackson that she was “put[ting] all my time, my labor, my money, my hopes of my whole career on the stage into this one thing . . . which I have hopes to believe is not distant for New York.” Then in a letter dated April 15, 1915, penned shortly after the death of her mother, Calhoun promised one of Jackson’s associates, George Barrow, that “the stern sense of obligation and duty” compelled her “to go on with plans already almost completed regarding a *Ramona* production.” Indeed, over the next twenty years, in letters both to the Jackson estate and Little, Brown and Company (the publisher of the novel), she persisted: exploring new production ideas and casting concepts, experimenting with different venues and producing partners, assuring anyone who might have a stake in the property that her great success was drawing nigh.

Calhoun’s next close encounter with actual success came in 1923, nearly two decades after the opening-night disaster of her *Ramona*. As 1923 began, Hemet Valley Chamber of Commerce was working in earnest on a grand scheme designed to bring attention (and visitors) to its burgeoning hamlet in the southeastern corner of California. Hoping to capitalize on the booming popularity of outdoor theatrical presentations in the region and because the novel was set in and near the Hemet Valley, the chamber envisioned a small ravine in the San Jacinto Hills as an ideal, natural amphitheater for a pageant drama version of *Ramona*. Preparations were well underway when the chamber received notice that Little, Brown would not grant performance rights to the chamber unless and until Calhoun, the longtime holder of “exclusive dramatic rights” to *Ramona*, gave her blessings.

Burdette Raynor, the head of Hemet Valley Chamber of Commerce, was charged with the task of securing the necessary permissions from Calhoun, who lived in nearby Los Angeles. The young entrepreneur entered the meeting with high hopes, buoyed by his confidence that Hemet’s *Ramona Pageant* promised great benefit for all involved. “About two hours later,” Raynor later recalled, “I left that lady with much of my enthusiasm gone and my disposition considerably ruffled and upset. I do not recall how many times I went to see this lady and each time I went away baffled and disappointed” (210). With the outdoor drama’s scheduled opening dates rapidly approaching and Little, Brown refusing to budge from its original position (“we see no possibility of your arranging for performances of *Ramona* except on [Calhoun’s] conditions”), the chamber had few options (Little, Brown). “I set out for what I fully expected to be my last and unsuccessful visit,” Raynor remembered. “To my everlasting surprise and gratification, Miss Calhoun signed the contract without question or argument” (211).

With Calhoun’s endorsement (which appeared on the title page of the pageant’s program), Hemet Valley Chamber of Commerce staged its *Ramona Pageant* during the spring of 1923, commencing what would be a nearly uninterrupted annual tradition that continues to this day. Although the chamber had high hopes for its endeavor, it could not have anticipated that the *Ramona Pageant*, nearly a century later, would stand not only as the longest-running outdoor theatrical event in the United States, but also among the most enduring theatrical events of its kind anywhere in the world. Hemet Valley Chamber of Commerce did, however, quickly discover that its troubles with Calhoun had only just begun. “[W]e have had to handle her as carefully as a young blood would handle an elderly aunt from who he hoped to receive a substantial inheritance,” Raynor reported to Little, Brown on behalf of the chamber shortly after the closing of the pageant’s first performances in April 1923. “Our relations with Miss Calhoun have been satisfactory,” Raynor concluded in an aside that would prove prophetic. “[But we have no] assurance that this relationship will continue as pleasant as it has been.”

Had she said “No,” Calhoun might have thwarted the plans of the men of Hemet Valley Chamber of Commerce. (When I described her as “the woman who almost stopped the *Ramona Pageant* from ever happening” to a group of the pageant’s boosters in 2015, her name inspired a

resounding “Boo!”) Instead, with her assent Calhoun perhaps inadvertently confirmed what has become her own most enduring legacy: as a minor footnote in the history of the *Ramona Pageant*.

Some of the most important work that a performance historian can do is that of recuperation, rehabilitation, and retrieval. These historians can and should illuminate and elevate the work of heretofore unacknowledged geniuses (or unheard critiques, undervalued techniques, or unrecognized influences). Indeed, recuperative narratives wherein a previously (and often unjustly) ignored or forgotten theatre-maker, ensemble, event, or mode is returned to the historical record are among the most thrilling and important work we do.

Yet, even in failure Calhoun fails to meet the criteria for recuperation that scholars of subsequent eras might use when scanning the early twentieth-century landscape for the overlooked triumphs of understudied theatrical innovators. She cultivated no sphere of influence that would survive her, despite her Zelig-like encounters with an array of notable figures of her day. Her capacity to cross paths (and swords) with culturally significant figures is remarkable, including theatre impresario David Belasco, to whom she pitched *Ramona* and who politely declined, possibly because he had already successfully staged his own riff on *Ramona* in *Rose of the Rancho* (1906) (Belasco). Calhoun both collaborated and battled with pioneering filmmaker D. W. Griffith, whom she knew as Lawrence Griffith, the actor who played opposite her as *Ramona*'s lover Alessandro in both the Los Angeles premiere and subsequent Camino Real tour. When Griffith later cribbed Calhoun's script outline for his own two-reel silent film adaptation of the story *Ramona* (1910), she launched a precedent-setting though ultimately unsuccessful lawsuit against both Griffith's Biograph Company and Little, Brown. Calhoun's failed legal challenge had enduring impact, both in helping to codify the legal terms distinguishing *cinematic* from *dramatic* licensing and buttressing her lifelong loathing of the cinema, even as she continued her work in Hollywood's backyard and within the shadow of three subsequent film productions of *Ramona*.

Nor did Calhoun maintain any long-term relationships or sustaining community among women, despite her fiercely feminist independence, passionate advocacy of women's rights, and constant presence on the scene of the burgeoning women's club circuit in Los Angeles. Although she maintained longstanding professional acquaintances with several notable women, some—such as feminist and Southwest cultural advocate Mary Austin, who once described Calhoun as “the actress whose sole mentality is imbalanced”—held her at arm's reach. Others indulged Calhoun's acolytic nature without seeming to actually notice her, like legendary stage actress Tania Modjeska, whose salon Calhoun attended devotedly and whose example seems to have somehow prompted the latter's confidence that taking her *Ramona* on an off-market tour of mining towns was a good idea (*Los Angeles Herald*).

Despite independently producing three separate stagings of her *Ramona* in less than two years, Calhoun left no playscript that could be staged by others; and despite having generated and revised at least a half-dozen different scripts (not to mention the half-dozen *Ramona*-related performance installations she staged at community festivals, expositions, and amusement parks between 1907 and 1935), she innovated neither distinctive techniques of performance nor noteworthy interventions into the depictions of women, indigenous peoples, or California history. Calhoun's *Ramona* had no notable popular impact or artistically or politically prescient accomplishments. Her *Ramona* remained slightly retrograde, emphatically middlebrow, and basically banal throughout its thirty-plus years of intensive development. It left barely a trace in either the archive or the repertoire, in no small part because Calhoun failed in her “lifetime's work” to bring it to success.

Her many middling failures evoke the precarity faced by most theatre-makers at any given historical moment, most of whom are not extraordinary. Most theatre-makers labor in historically modest ways without fame or fortune; most produce negligible successes and minor failures and operate far from the cultural vanguard, remaining unnoticed by scholars. In a way, most theatre-makers

are a lot like Calhoun. And even though the mundanity of failure has not, as of yet, registered as historically significant, her story suggests that we might do well to seek measures beyond theatrical triumph when arguing for the significance of past performances.

Calhoun's failures were not big—they were banal. Even so, her many middling failures have prompted me to see a differently complex history of US popular performance as it transformed in the first decades of the twentieth century. With Calhoun standing as but one example, I have thus become increasingly convinced that performance historians would do well to plumb the archive of middling failures as we continue to examine what the *making of performance* actually means at a given historical moment.

Calhoun sustained a perilous balance familiar to most performance-makers, being always on the verge of success and thus also always at the edge of failure—and she did so for nearly fifty years. My travels with her through archives, libraries, and databases over the last decade or so have compelled me to ask with ever greater urgency: might Calhoun's be just one of many such stories ready to be evinced from the archival traces left by the scores of artists occupying that vast middle tier of performance-makers? What might we learn from the telling of such perhaps all-too-typical tales? Who and what else are we failing to see in the archive because of performance history's taste for triumph? And what is at stake for our field when a performance-maker as independent, tenacious, creative, and persistent as Virginia Calhoun finally fails to matter?

Brian Eugenio Herrera is an assistant professor of theatre at Princeton University, where his work, both academic and artistic, examines the history of gender, sexuality, and race within and through US popular performance. He is the author of *The Latino Theatre Commons 2013 National Convening: A Narrative Report* (2015), and his book *Latin Numbers: Playing Latino in Twentieth-Century U.S. Popular Performance* (2015) was awarded the George Jean Nathan Prize for Dramatic Criticism and received Honorable Mention for the John W. Frick Book Award from the American Theatre and Drama Society. He is presently at work on two new book projects: *Starring Miss Virginia Calhoun*, a narrative portrait of a deservedly obscure early twentieth-century actress/writer/producer; and *Casting: A History*—a historical study of the material practices of casting in US popular performance.

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