

Showtime in Cleveland: The Rise of a Regional Theater Center. By John Vacha. (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2001. 264 pp. Paper. \$29.95, ISBN 0-87338-697-3.)

John Vacha has written about fine and performing arts for a variety of scholarly and popular history publications and was an associate editor of the *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History/Dictionary of Cleveland Biography*.

Vacha's *Showtime in Cleveland* traces the evolution of "legitimate" theater (live spoken drama) as part of the city's cultural history. The work is a chronological narrative with chapters representing distinct eras in the development of Cleveland theater history. It is not a scholarly history, but a rich narrative account interspersed with photographs and illustrations.

Citing scant surviving evidence, Vacha's story begins with local amateur dramatic productions and visits by a few traveling professional actors in Cleveland's pre-canal early 1820s. Linkage with the Ohio canal system and increased Lake Erie travel late in the 1820s led to the town's first significant population growth and an audience base stable enough for the first ventures into the theater business. Cleveland's earliest theaters were simple frame structures built or adapted to be home bases for stock companies touring a circuit made possible by the expansion of lake traffic. Entrepreneurs like John Ellsler came to the city with touring companies during this period, decided there was sufficient audience support for dramatic troupes to stage productions in their own home buildings, and spent one or more seasons attempting to succeed in the theater business without touring. However, those few stock companies that lasted beyond their first seasons found that economic survival depended on a mix of touring and stock productions.

Vacha relates facets of Cleveland's nineteenth century evolution as a city -- surges in population and infusions of ethnic cultures, economic successes and failures, the growing popularity of public entertainment genres (including theater), and sometimes resistance to such entertainment by churches, newspapers, and prominent civic leaders -- to the proliferation of theaters and shifting of "entertainment" districts geographically within the city. Between the 1830s and 1890s stock companies came and went, depending upon the vagaries of the local and national economy, competition from other entertainment venues, and varying support from local groups and individuals. Cleveland's stock companies also produced nationally notable actors such as Ellsler's daughter, Effie Ellsler, and Clara Morris, whose career stretched into the silent film era. Theater history in the latter part of the century was dominated by the economic and social involvement of prominent local citizens like Mark Hanna and Henry Wick. Meanwhile, resident stock companies declined, giving way to more lavish productions by professional touring (or "combination") companies featuring more polished performances and spectacular sets.

Cleveland's middle class grew tremendously in the late nineteenth century, and the rise of vaudeville as the dominant entertainment genre influenced both the content of theatrical productions as well as the nature of audiences. Grand theaters originally built exclusively for dramatic productions became venues for mixed programs, including legitimate theater, variety shows, and movies.

Vacha's twentieth century history of theater in Cleveland heralds the rise of a national "Little Theater" movement, including organizations like Cleveland Playhouse and Karamu. During World War I local emphasis on drama studies and locally produced plays recalled the stock company era of the previous century. Vacha describes the emergence of Playhouse Square as the geographic center of theater in Cleveland during the time when ornate theaters such as the Hanna, Ohio, and Hippodrome were built. However, the Great Depression soon followed, leading to the creation of the Federal Theater Project during a trying time of economic calamity across the nation. World War II briefly revived some of the grand theaters, ushering in a new era of patriotic themes and a brief respite from the declining period of the 1930s on the local theater scene.

In "New Directions," Vacha recalls the challenges posed by the decline of Cleveland's post-World War II downtown. Some venerable downtown theaters were lost, torn down in the era of urban renewal, but others were restored in the recent renaissance of downtown Cleveland. Vacha views the theater district not only as a product of renewed economic investment in the downtown, but also as a stimulus to further economic and cultural reawakening. The recent return of touring Broadway shows to the city brings the story of theater in Cleveland full circle. Playhouse Square is considered to be an important part of a rejuvenated downtown cultural and entertainment district.

Showtime successfully sets Cleveland's theater history against the backdrop of the city's development geographically, socially, economically, and culturally, as well as placing the story in context with national history. Vacha provides vivid descriptions of the theaters themselves, the individuals who influenced the genre, and the shifting of entertainment districts within the city's boundaries. Intriguing and fascinating connections are drawn between Cleveland's history and the lives of prominent national and international figures like John Wilkes Booth, Sara Bernhardt, P.T. Barnum, and John Houseman. Colorful stories about these and many other memorable individuals provide revealing glimpses of those individuals who shaped Cleveland's theatrical history.

Although not footnoted, the bibliographical essay at the end of the book provides directions for researchers wishing to delve into the subject. Vacha draws upon local and national primary sources, studies, dissertations, and a variety of secondary sources to interpret the story. Two appendices provide lists of Cleveland's biggest hits and a selection of prominent theatrical openings in the city. The book, however, lacks maps depicting theater and district locations over time for those readers interested in the geographic implications of the theaters.

Vacha's writing is readable and entertaining for general audiences, and illustrations are integrated within the layout of the text, contributing to the effectiveness of the narrative. The

book is a significant contribution to the history of legitimate theater and a valuable addition to local and regional history libraries.

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