



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Beyond Broadway: The Pleasure and Promise of Musical Theatre  
Across America* by Stacy Wolf (review)

Laura MacDonald

Theatre Topics, Volume 30, Number 3, November 2020, pp. 222-223 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.2020.0045>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/772478>

The second part of *After August* looks to reinterpret American drama in light of Wilson's blues dramaturgy. In stark and revealing contrast to the preceding discussion of Wilson's blues aesthetic, chapter 4 explores the writings of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams as works bound up in whiteness and thus centered on protagonists' quests for isolation and self-sufficiency. Maley highlights O'Neill's tragic heroes (Yank from *The Hairy Ape*, Ephraim Cabot from *Desire Under the Elms*, and Mary Tyrone from *Long Day's Journey into Night*) as figures who shun all bonds of family and community. The same quest ensnares the titular *Emperor Jones*: a black protagonist undone by the white worldview of his creator. Chapter 5 reexamines *The Glass Menagerie*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Orpheus Descending*, charting intersections of whiteness and normative male sexuality as forces that splinter and silence Williams's characters, in contrast to the solidifying and harmonizing nature of Wilsonian communities.

The book's final section considers American drama post-Wilson: focusing on Katori Hall and Tarell Alvin McCraney as contemporary playwrights who adopt a blues aesthetic and "take Wilson's techniques in important new directions" (170). Maley investigates Hall's dramatizations of black women's experiences in *The Mountaintop*, *Hoodoo Love*, and *Hurt Village*, and McCraney's explorations of black queer identities in *Choir Boy*, *Wig Out!* and *The Brother/Sister Plays* as "a necessary evolution of Wilson's blues dramaturgy . . . that can more capaciously serve the contemporary project of black identity crafting" (201). Within that analysis, there is a curious framing of Hall's drama as grounded in "an aesthetics of failure" (186). Such a phrasing risks sounding judgmental in foregrounding (at least rhetorically) Hall's protagonists' "failure" to achieve certain goals, rather than the playwright's project of revealing how forces of patriarchal and racial hegemony oppress, but never obliterate, the strivings of courageous black women.

The second half of *After August* charts new vectors of Wilson's influence in several directions and points toward other possible lines of inquiry. There are limits to the book's methodology of focusing only on white male playwrights who preceded Wilson and African American writers who followed him. What new contours might reveal themselves in the dramas of Susan Glaspell, Lorraine Hansberry, or María Irene Fornés when revisited "after August"? Which nonblack contemporary playwrights converse meaningfully with Wilson's blues dramaturgy? *After August's* original and revelatory approach that centers Wilson as a key interlocutor for all of American drama opens up enticing new pathways for scholars of the American stage to explore.

JONATHAN SHANDELL  
Arcadia University

1. August Wilson, qtd. in *Conversations with August Wilson*, ed. Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2006), 78.

**Beyond Broadway: The Pleasure and Promise of Musical Theatre Across America.** By Stacy Wolf. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020; pp. 392.

Stacy Wolf concludes *Beyond Broadway: The Pleasures and Promise of Musical Theatre Across America* by admitting that prior to her research, she was biased against local, amateur musical theatre performance. She cites upcoming amateur performances in her community that she would previously overlook, but that she is now excited to attend. The revelation that her enthusiasm for amateur musical theatre persists beyond the preparation of this book is a final call to the reader to see, support, and value local musical theatre practice, because "[t]he pervasive and the commonplace deserve our attention" (17). Wolf points out that local musicals are central to American cultural life and to the Broadway theatre industry. Local musical theatre practice is thus worthy of scholarly consideration and must be acknowledged for its promotion of the repertoire and preparation of theatregoers, who will continue consuming Broadway musicals.

The journey beyond Broadway begins in chapter 1 at the Junior Theatre Festival (JTF) in Atlanta, where since 2003 hundreds of children have performed excerpts from school productions of "junior" adaptations of Broadway shows. "JTF, as a microcosm of tween musical theatre across the United States, is a place of political, economic, artistic, and affectual contradictions," Wolf explains (39). She unpacks the investment and long-term strategy of major Broadway players who collaborate on the profitable event, and problematizes trends such as girl after girl singing "usually with great charisma and forcefulness—about wanting to sacrifice herself for a boy" in excerpts from *The Little Mermaid JR.* (64). But Wolf also introduces compelling amateur performers like Vanessa, who experiences positive feelings when she takes up space on a public stage, performing a song from *The Music Man*: "for a moment she became someone else, she became Marian. Everyone was looking at her. She felt different, and she knew it was good" (52).

We meet many more performers like Vanessa throughout the book. Chapters 2 through 6 take the reader around the United States to examine amateur musical theatre performance sites where the Broadway repertoire circulates: a pay-to-play afterschool program in California run by a charismatic backstage diva, Midwestern high schools that stage annual musicals (illustrated by three productions of *Into the Woods*), community theatres in New Jersey that produce busy seasons with multiple musicals, outdoor summer musical theatres that facilitate important civic engagement (illustrated by three productions of *The Sound of Music*), and summer camps in Maine where Jewish girls build community and confidence through weekly bunk shows.

Ethnography has been a less common approach to musical theatre research, but it makes sense for Wolf's project. All of the chapters are highly descriptive, and Wolf offers thorough contextualization as well as detailed examples from the rehearsals and performances she witnessed. Perhaps because local amateur performances of musicals are, like the musicals themselves, filled with heightened emotion

and positive feelings, Wolf sometimes writes in a similarly heightened tone, enthusing about the individuals she has met in her travels and warmly receiving their work.

If Wolf writes with critical generosity toward her amateur subjects in these chapters, it is merited; her monograph persuasively establishes the significance and value of student and community musical theatre productions. While she acknowledges examples of theatres toning down adult material and refusing to produce musicals like *Rent* or *Spring Awakening* due to their content, the book is focused on “the pleasures and promise” of musical theatre. Even so, Wolf might have contrasted the valiant work she chronicles with the problems of producing musical theatre beyond Broadway, whether that be pirated productions disregarding licensing, the circulation of racist and sexist stereotypes by dated musicals, or economic disparities limiting participation.

Chapter 7, “Disney Goes to School,” is much more critical, given its focus on a corporation’s participation in amateur musical theatre. Wolf examines the success of Disney’s sixty- and thirty-minute adaptations of its popular musicals, licensed annually by thousands of schools. She pays particular attention to the Disney Musicals in Schools (DMIS) program, designed to support underserved public schools in building their capacity to stage musicals. Wolf argues that performing in a Disney musical empowers children in different ways than devising original autobiographical work, and that the high-quality materials that Disney provides guarantee success. Often troubling representations of race and gender change “in actual elementary school productions in which virtually every character is played by a child of color, cast based on their energy and expressiveness and not their appearance or type. . . . For a spectator accustomed to a depressingly white Broadway, seeing so many children of color in a musical is nothing short of revolutionary” (274).

Along with chapter 1, chapter 7 is one of the strongest because, in it, Wolf moves beyond documenting and celebrating fun amateur practice and attempts to reconcile the Broadway musical’s inherent commerciality with the vastly different goals of facilitating children’s musical theatre practice. She scrutinizes JTF and Disney, and this critical lens would have deepened the more celebratory chapters where predominantly white middle-class labor and pleasure are amplified with less complex analysis. Adult amateurs and children in pay-to-play programs have time and funding to facilitate their efforts, just as the licensor Music Theatre International and Disney have resources to develop kid-friendly events and materials, but the former seem elevated here above the latter because they profit in pleasure rather than dollars. The only discussion of professional performers, chapter 8 surveys several mostly thriving dinner theatres in Colorado, which Wolf argues offer good entertainment value for audiences and where “the actors can make a living and a life” (288). This chapter fills a gap in scholarship and is a strong illustration of Wolf’s larger point, “that musical theatre lives locally and intimately, building community in its place of performance” (4).

Because Wolf chronicles amateur musical theatre practices seldom if ever documented elsewhere, her book will be a valuable resource in courses on applied theatre and theatre in education. It will also be of interest to scholars charting other widely circulating theatre, whether Shakespeare, hit plays produced regionally, or local performances such as pageants and reenactments. Countless theatre majors who will become the community theatre producers, school teachers, and teaching artists that Wolf celebrates will benefit from this detailed introduction to the spread and impact of local musical theatre performance.

LAURA MACDONALD  
*Michigan State University*