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America's Longest Run: A History of the Walnut Street Theatre (review)

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Overall, however, the collection is very tightly focused, the essays are well written, and the information is useful to anyone interested in abolition, not only in Philadelphia but in the United States in general. Regardless of the intended audience, the best home for the collection would be an undergraduate class on reform or antislavery. It is broad-ranging and would give students much to discuss.

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Andrew Davis. *America's Longest Run: A History of the Walnut Street Theatre*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010) Pp. 424. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$44.95.

On February 2, 1909, Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theatre was midway through a run of a farcical play called *Brewster's Millions*. Despite being the centennial of the nation's oldest continuously running theatre, the milestone went unacknowledged (198). In many ways, Andrew Davis's *America's Longest Run: A History of the Walnut Street Theatre* is a repudiation of such neglect, and an effort to show that "the Walnut has been at or near the center of American theatrical activity since Thomas Jefferson was president of the United States" (1). In this ambitious work, Davis chronicles the history of the titular institution, a history that he asserts "is also the history of the American stage" (5). Ultimately, it is this expansiveness, as well as the nature and handling of his source material, that somewhat limits the appeal of Davis's impressive undertaking.

Over the course of sixteen chapters, *America's Longest Run* moves chronologically from William Penn's prohibition of theatrical productions in 1682 to the present. With the exception of the first (covering 1682–1809), each chapter focuses on between eight and twenty years. These divisions are determined by significant moments in the Walnut's development, major renovations of the building, the appearance of new technologies, or momentous historical events. First conceived and constructed as an equestrian arena for touring circus performances, the building did not host a "legitimate" theatrical production until the beginning of 1812, inaugurating the era of the actor managers, who handled both the creative

and business sides of running a company of actors (32). Their preeminence was short-lived, however, giving way over the next several decades to star performers, who exerted significant control over the theatre's repertory and financial organization. The spread of the railroad facilitated this shift, allowing stars to travel between theatres playing their favorite roles while local resident companies supplied the rest of the cast. In the 1870s the creative and commercial aspects of theatrical management became increasingly separated, and "theatre managers outside [of New York or Chicago] essentially functioned as landlords, booking touring shows into their houses" (160). Briefly taken over by the Federal Theatre Project in 1938, the Walnut was purchased in 1941 by the Shubert Organization, which used it as a venue for trying out shows bound for Broadway (235). Its most recent incarnation began in 1969, when the Walnut Street Theatre Corporation purchased the theatre and converted it into a continually evolving "community-oriented performing arts center," one that would ultimately encompass multiple performance venues and support a theatre education program for children (279).

Davis's narrative is largely structured around a chronology of the stars and productions that appeared at the Walnut, and his index is a veritable "Who's Who" of important American actors (stage, film, and television), playwrights, composers, and producers. Stars such as Edwin Forrest, Mrs. John Drew, and the Marx Brothers all had stage debuts at the Walnut, and important American plays such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) saw their first productions at the theatre. Davis's kaleidoscopic study speeds through a dizzying array of personalities, productions, and historical events that all intersect in the property at the corner of Walnut and Ninth Streets. While he vividly describes changes to its architecture, Davis's focus is not the building itself, but rather "the events and productions that have taken place within its walls," which he believes serve an almost sacred function: "Like the Civil War battlefields that are hallowed by the lives of soldiers that were lost there, the Walnut is hallowed by the men and women who have given their lives to the theatre" (4). This emphasis rarely permits Davis to venture outside the Walnut's artistic context; its role in the changing landscape and demographics of the city, its interaction with the social and political upheavals that it witnessed, and its role as a community institution are rarely touched on in any detail until the book's final chapters.

It is in those chapters, however, that *America's Longest Run* comes into its own, as Davis describes the remarkable growth and development of the Walnut over the past several decades. This narrative is among the book's most useful contributions to the institution's history. Another important feature of Davis's chronicle may be found in the way that it documents the central role of the nondramatic in the various activities that took place in and around nineteenth-century American playhouses. While theatre historians have been moving toward more expansive definitions of theatrical performance in early America, there is still a tendency to fall back on a traditional binary that distinguishes between "legitimate" theatre (text-based and generally narrative in form) and other types of "amusements" (e.g., circus and animal acts, magicians, musical concerts, scientific lectures). While Davis still employs such terminology, his work demonstrates that "there was no sharp distinction between circus and theatre. . . . Both forms of entertainment competed for the same audience and borrowed freely from each other" (20).

The breadth of Davis's study, as well as the nature and treatment of his source materials, targets a more general audience. He deftly mines numerous (and lively) memoirs of actors and managers, and the text is peppered with fascinating anecdotes, such as the story of stagehand "Pop" Reed, who bequeathed his skull to the Walnut for use in future productions of *Hamlet* (176). Davis's reliance on dissertations and early theatre histories, none of which receive adequate interrogation, limit the book's usefulness for scholars, however, as does his neglect of much of the important work that historians of the theatre have produced over the past several decades. His treatment of the colonial and antebellum theatre, for example, overlooks the scholarship of Jeffrey Richards, Heather Nathans, and Odai Johnson (among others), whose work has enriched (and corrected) many claims of earlier theatre scholars.

Despite these shortcomings, *America's Longest Run* provides a rare opportunity to survey the development of an important American institution that has borne witness to much of the nation's history. Filled with more than forty illustrations and images, and exquisitely bound in red velvet reminiscent of theatre curtains, Davis's work will be a welcome addition to the library of anyone interested in the history of Philadelphia or the American theatre.

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