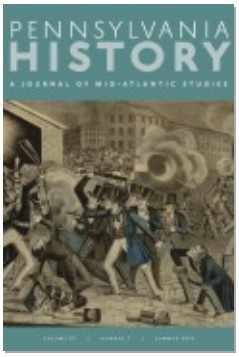
Blue Collar Broadway: The Craft and Industry of American Theater by Timothy R. White (review)



Jeanine Mazak-Kahne

Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies, Volume 83, Number 3, Summer 2016, pp. 425-428 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press

BOOK REVIEWS

Timothy R. White. *Blue Collar Broadway: The Craft and Industry of American Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). Pp. 275. Maps, illustrations, notes, tables, index. Paper, $24.95.

Timothy R. White's exploration of Broadway from the bottom up does much to underscore the importance of theater's craft workers, whom were affected (for better and worse) by a constantly evolving industry dramatically affected by social, economic, and cultural change. White's craft workers—in scenery construction, costume design, lighting, and other related industries—adapted and changed over most of the twentieth century in ways that paralleled as well as diverged from other industrial craft workers. They too were affected by changes in production, anti-unionism, capital flight, urban redevelopment, and globalization.

This emphasis on craft workers, White claims, makes his work unique. Where the majority of scholarship on theater history concerns itself with matters of design and execution, White asks the reader to examine the "history of the Great White Way as an industry, in the full blue-collar sense of the word" (8). This is sound logic. After all, it takes many behind-the-scenes workers to pull a production together—from carpenters to seamstresses to stagehands.

White begins with a discussion of nationwide theatrical productions in the late nineteenth century—before the creation of the "Broadway brand." Here he synthesizes well scholarship on the early theater in a discussion of the transition from stock to combination companies, and how changes in both technology (gas light to stage light) as well as theatrical writing (as explored through the use of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*) demanded

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY: A JOURNAL OF MID-ATLANTIC STUDIES, VOL. 83, NO. 3, 2016.

different forms of craft production causing the shift from well-worn (and hardly seen under gas light) scenery and costumes to well-constructed scenery and costumes originating out of New York City's Broadway craft district. (chapter 1)

As a result, by 1900 Broadway was a "factory for making plays." White explains that the industrialization of the theater began with scenery, once again fueled by technological advancements in lighting, and it proceeded to costume construction (38–45, 51–54). Coinciding with this type of industrialization was the development and growth of labor unions such as the International Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers (IBPAP), the International Alliance of Stage Employees (IATSE), and the United Scenic Artists (USA). Introducing these unions in chapter 2 and carrying the shifts in their circumstance through the rest of the text, White lays solid ground upon which historians may make comparisons with other craft and industrial workers over the course of the century. For example, White's theater craft workers seem to thrive in the 1920s, working well with management, while laborers in other industries faced anti-union hostilities. However, like other unionists, theater craft workers found themselves battered by the storm of globalization in the postwar period. This union thread is one of the most engaging aspects of White's work.

Another engaging conversation is the transformation of Broadway as affected by the popularity of radio, the Great Depression, the film industry, and the advent of television, which White weaves together well in chapter 3. He argues that these events and institutions brought change and stability to the district, whether in the form of employment through the Federal Writers' Project, or the propping up of aging theater infrastructure through radio, film, and television production. But, as White shows, with the end of the Depression and the transfer of film and broadcast television to the West Coast (newer facilities, compliant labor), Broadway's fate was uncertain in the face of a shift to a more "consumption oriented city center" (71). Most notably found in his discussion of the city's comprehensive Regional Plan, White asserts that redevelopment campaigns supported by city and state leadership set in motion part of the area's decline (71–80). This ultimately resulted in Times Square's transformation from theater to vice to multipurpose white-collar/tourist/theater district from the postwar period to the close of the twentieth century.

While White engages various productions in his analysis, he takes an interesting turn midway through the book. He engages two musicals—*Oklahoma!*

(chapter 4) and *Evita* (chapter 7) to illustrate changes, respectively, in the industry at mid- and late twentieth century. This allows the reader to trace transformations not only in craft work, but the position of Broadway on a global scale. White illuminates the shift from Broadway as the geographical center of the industry (*Oklahoma!*) to its "brand" in a global context (*Evita*). Against the backdrop of these performances, White engages other scholars' work analyzing geographical dispersement of theater as an industry as seen in the rise of well-funded regional theaters across the nation. As a result of these shifts the nature of work changes, once again spurred on by more technological change demanding fewer workers and therefore undermining unions. It comes full circle to the "Broadway brand"—a show must be "Broadway quality" during a period in which Broadway as a locale becomes less relevant.

In developing and supporting his thesis, White marks off a good pace through a variety of subfields. His work is an engaging mix of cultural history (theater), social history, labor history, and urban history. Each field surfaces at different points—some to which chapters are wholly devoted, while others blend a combination. White's frequent use of secondary sources both situates himself securely within the text as well as sets the text apart from scholarship on theater history. White relies heavily on secondary works to draw a clear narrative of theater in late nineteenth-century America, while he uses primary sources to anchor his narrative of stage craft in the twentieth century.

His primary source use is wide in scope. Heavy reliance on periodicals such as the *New York Times*' coverage of theatrical reviews, to union unrest, to capital investment illustrate how Broadway was very much central to Manhattan's, and perhaps most of New York City's identity. Telephone and theatrical directories as well as business listings are used to document patterns of the craft industry's geographical mobility. Accompanying maps and tables documenting these transitions provide for supportive visuals to a detailed analysis of Manhattan's cultural geography.

Manuscript collections from New York University, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, and the New York Municipal Archives provide for a detailed survey and ground thoughtful analysis of specific businesses and their owners, the impact of the Federal Theater Project, and urban redevelopment. Of note is White's comprehensive personal collection of playbills, cleverly utilized as evidence to track globalization trends in theatrical production in the late twentieth century.

White's work lends itself to an innovative use of Internet-based resources; while none are of questionable quality, the transitory nature of the cyber-sphere makes for a moving target when a researcher hopes to drink from the same well. The Internet Broadway Database (http://www.ibdb.com/) provides for interesting searches on theater locations and their productions from their origins until their demise—a valuable tool and well used. Other sources include specific theater sites and the Theater Communications Group (www.tcg.org)—most notably for a discussion of modern regional theaters. All of this supports a rich narrative (sometimes with language that appropriately has a flair for the dramatic) of theater's laboring class.

Broadway, the reader understands, is a brand built on the labor of many a skilled craftsperson. It has weathered many storms, been brought back from the brink of death, and has found its place not only in Manhattan (not necessarily in its past glory) but in theaters across the globe.

JEANINE MAZAK-KAHNE
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Kenneth J. Kobus. *City of Steel: How Pittsburgh Became the World's Steelmaking Capital during the Carnegie Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015). Pp. xv, 299. Illustrations, tables, schematics, notes, index. Hardback, $39.95.

Kenneth J. Kobus's *City of Steel* is a straightforward, chronological examination of how the ferrous metals industry in Pittsburgh came to dominate not only the regional economy of western Pennsylvania, but also the national and international iron and steel market. An essential premise of the work is that Pittsburgh appears only in hindsight to be the natural capital of steelmaking in America. Kobus reminds us that many other steel centers, including those in Chicago and throughout Ohio, had ready access to coal, as did Pittsburgh firms, and were even closer to the major iron ore-producing region of the Upper Midwest. If Pittsburgh enjoyed no special geographic advantage, asks Kobus, why did it dominate the field? The author highlights two factors in the story of Pittsburgh steel: technology and the man who most effectively employed that technology, Andrew Carnegie.