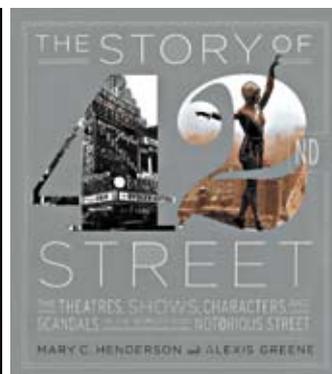
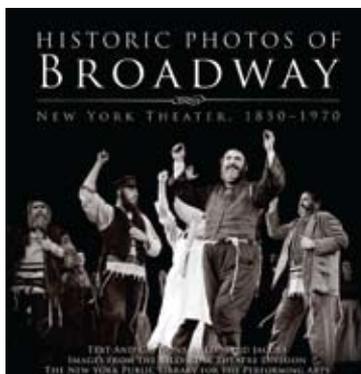


Those Were the Days

2 history-rich photo books intersect at Broadway and 42nd



BY HOWARD KISSEL

THE STORY OF 42ND STREET: THE THEATRES, SHOWS, CHARACTERS, AND SCANDALS OF THE WORLD'S MOST NOTORIOUS STREET

By Mary C. Henderson and Alexis Greene,
Back Stage Books, New York City.
240 pp, \$40 cloth.

HISTORIC PHOTOS OF BROADWAY: NEW YORK THEATER, 1850-1970

By Leonard Jacobs, Turner Publishing Company, Nashville, Tenn.
254 pp, \$39.95 cloth.

THE DECENTRALIZATION OF THE AMERICAN theatre over the past half-century can be quantified in any number of ways. One measure is that most of the plays that have won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in recent years began their life far from the city where the awards are judged and given. Had there been a Pulitzer a century ago (the drama prize was inaugurated in 1917), that could not have been the case: The capital of theatre in America at that entertainment-hungry time was unquestionably New York.

Two new books provide a fascinating picture of the city during the many decades in which it dominated, one might even say dictated, the content of American theatre. *The Story of 42nd Street*, by Mary C. Henderson and Alexis Greene, focuses on a particular piece of Manhattan real estate running east to west that had a lasting impact on the theatre. *Historic Photos of Broadway: New York Theater, 1850-1970* has as its perspective an artery running north and south that had an even greater impact.

Although 42nd Street was given its designation in 1811, when the grid plan for the development of Manhattan Island was created, it remained a remote outpost until the late 1800s. Henderson and Greene are able to trace the history of the street all the way back to land bequests in the 17th century, but they point out that as late as 1893—when its first theatre, the American Theatre, was built close to Eighth Avenue—it “might as well have been the antipodes.”

Today, when most theatres being built in New York are applauded for seating no more than about 200 with comfort and intimacy, it seems interesting that the American (which, they note, was also the first of the street’s venues to be torn down) seated 2,064 people and had room for 200 standees,

suggesting how immensely popular an art theatre was.

Henderson and Greene have organized their book according to the chronology of the theatres themselves—buildings that appeared, disappeared, or, in cases such as the Selwyn and the New Victory, reappeared, mainly on the stretch of 42nd Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. The history of each theatre lets them examine the lives of the businessmen who built them as well as the actors and writers whose work filled them.

There are, for example, a fascinating few pages on Florenz Ziegfeld. Among the tidbits Henderson and Greene present is the fact that it was Ziegfeld who recognized the comic talents of a juggler named W.C. Fields. By showcasing those talents in the *Ziegfeld Follies* of 1915, Ziegfeld moved Fields from behind the objects he tossed into the air into the spotlight—and ultimately to the movie career by which we know him.

The book is handsomely illustrated with portraits of its many characters, the interiors and exteriors of theatres, and the productions that appeared in them. One particularly interesting photo shows the Lew Fields Theatre, an ornate, imposing structure named for half of the beloved vaudeville team of Weber and Fields, with enough foliage in the foreground to suggest that at an early stage 42nd Street had quite a measure of grace and elegance.

The text is detailed in its analyses of the many facets that made 42nd Street the vital thoroughfare it was—and, after an unfortunate hiatus, once again is. I was delighted to discover several references to Edith Wharton—I had not known that she called Anita Loos’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* “the great American novel (at last!).” (Loos’s iconic work was

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