

comes from the playwright himself, from his unpublished papers and conversations with those closest to him, the sheer accumulation of useful detail is remarkable. While readers will, no doubt, miss a unified and compelling portrait of the complicated personality behind great canonical works like *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons*, *The Crucible*, and *A View from the Bridge*, they will be forever indebted to this scrupulous and sympathetic critic for providing us with a sound basis for understanding the ins-and-outs of Miller's material world. And in that respect the book is, simply put, indispensable.

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MICHAEL M. CHEMERS. *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008. Pp. 168, illustrated. \$80.00 (Hb).

Reviewed by Rachel Adams, Columbia University

Staging Stigma is the first book-length study of the freak show as a theatrical form. Despite the popularity of freak shows in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historians of theatre have declined to consider them as a mode of dramatic art. So, too, scholars of disability studies have often denounced the freak show's capacity for abuse and exploitation, while under-emphasizing its theatrical dimensions. By drawing on life histories and, when available, the voices of the performers themselves, Chemers seeks to insert freak shows into the history of theatre in America. He claims that theatre studies provides an ideal vantage point for understanding the staging of stigma that takes place at the freak show because it is a field attuned to the performative dimensions of identity. As his title suggests, the concept of stigma figures centrally in Chemers's account. Building on the foundational work of Erving Goffman, Chemers argues that the freak show makes the production of stigma visible as it constructs the participants' identities through performance, gesture, and costuming. Exposing the theatricality of stigma, he hopes to reveal the mechanisms by which it can be manipulated to serve the interests of stigmatized groups.

Each of the four central chapters in Chemers's study pivots around an event or figure that opens up a discussion of how the freak show engaged with the pressing cultural and political debates of its time. The

first chapter is about how freak shows managed allegations of indecency. It focuses on the actor Charles Stratton, best known by his stage name Tom Thumb. Chemers discusses how Stratton's skilful acting, exceptional physical beauty, and intelligence enabled him to become one of the most celebrated performers of his time. The fact that his career included appearances at Barnum's museum as well as at what would today be considered more legitimate theatre attests to the slippage between dramatic modes. It is theatre historians' own preconceptions about what constitutes legitimate dramatic art, Chemers argues, that has led them to overlook an actor of Stratton's talents and popularity. A second chapter describes how popular "missing link" exhibits negotiated between older conceptions of monstrosity, such as those articulated by the influential Ambrose Pare, and the emergence of Darwinian evolutionary theory. The embodiment of the freak show's affirmation of "peculiarity as eminence," the missing link helped to popularize Darwinian evolution and legitimate the project of American imperialism.

A third chapter centres on the Revolt of the Freaks, a protest staged by some of Barnum's most famous performers in 1898. Threatening to strike, the performers banded together to protest being labelled with the "opprobrious" term "freak" (98). After receiving over one hundred letters of support, they finally returned to work under a new name, "prodigies." Chemers situates these struggles as the outgrowth of cultural shifts caused by the medicalization of disability, which threatened to render the concept of "peculiarity as eminence" obsolete. At the same time, he acknowledges the freaks' remarkable accomplishment: it would not be until the formation of Actors Equity that a group of American performers would again so successfully challenge their working conditions. The final chapter looks at contemporary freak shows as a radical form of avant-garde theatre, concentrating on the performance art of Jennifer Miller, Otis Jordan, and Tony Torres. Contrary to those who claim that the freak show waned because of changing attitudes towards disability, Chemers argues that its decline was due to its being expensive in comparison with the mechanized rides that became increasingly popular at carnivals and boardwalks. Although it became less common, the freak show persisted as a radical theatrical medium. Like their counterparts from the past, the living performers Chemers discusses have been able to use their unusual bodies to make a profit and carve out a social role.

Each of the chapters in Chemers's study tells a good story. However, *Staging Stigma* also seeks to demonstrate why the freak show matters to the history of disability in America. Given the constraints faced by people with disabilities, the performers Chemers discusses had considerably more resources and agency than did many of their peers. Freak shows provided them with economic opportunities as well as a community where

their differences were tolerated and even celebrated. As a result, Chemers finds in the stigma of freakery, “an intense subversive power to revise oppressive disability narratives in favor of transgressive and liberating ones” (25). At his most optimistic, Chemers is prone to making such bold statements about the subversive potential of freak shows, past and present. By his account, all disability is socially produced, and therefore, he looks forward to changes in cultural attitudes and the built environment that will make it obsolete. The four examples he offers do not provide much evidence for this argument. Even if they did, Chemers mentions only a few of the more capable individuals who participated in an institution that was demeaning and brutally exploitative far more often than it was a gleeful collaboration between actors and managers. Moreover, these four chapters, with a gap of a century between the third and fourth example, are a slim frame for more sweeping claims about the freak show’s meaning and historical trajectory.

The real accomplishment of *Staging Stigma* is that it presents the freak show as a kind of theatre that can be analysed in the same terms as other dramatic forms, thus demonstrating the claim that freak shows deserve a place within the annals of American theatre history. The excellent chapter on Charles Stratton best exemplifies this aspect of Chemers’s scholarship because it takes Stratton’s career as an actor seriously and, in doing so, shows how it can enable a better understanding of freak shows within the spectrum of performative arts at the time. This is an important point, and one that, we may hope, will influence further work on the intersection between theatre studies and popular culture.



L.W. CONOLLY. *Bernard Shaw and the BBC*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. Pp. 292, illustrated. \$45.00 (Hb).

Reviewed by David Hendy, University of Westminster

During a broadcast in 1932, Shaw told his listeners he had been asked “to say some nice things to you.” “But,” he added, “saying nice things is not my business” (qtd. in 69). This was putting it mildly. Almost nothing in Shaw’s dealings with radio or television – and particularly in those dealings with his most consistent patron, the British Broadcasting Corporation – was straightforward.

We might have expected an altogether smoother relationship to have bloomed. Broadcasting’s formative years coincided neatly with Shaw’s period as an international superstar. Here was an accomplished playwright, critic, social campaigner, controversialist, Nobel Laureate, Oscar winner.