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Puppet, Death, and the Devil: Presences of Afterlife in Puppet Theatre

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Tana Wojczuk, *Lady Romeo. The Radical and Revolutionary Life of Charlotte Cushman, America's First Celebrity*[1]

Abstract

This review of Tana Wojczuk's *Lady Romeo. The Radical and Revolutionary Life of Charlotte Cushman, America's First Celebrity* highlights how the book makes Cushman's art and work more visible and accessible to American and European audiences. Wojczuk's detailed study of Cushman's life complements her work and career as an actress, thus shedding new light on Cushman's role in shaping nineteenth-century American theatre and culture.

KEYWORDS: American theatre; Shakespeare; Charlotte Cushman

In the nineteenth century, American theatre was the primary means of entertainment. Literacy rates were not high, but working-class people understood and loved Shakespeare. The 'gallery gods' in the cheap seats near the ceiling would throw food at the actors and the wealthier people below them if they did not feel that Shakespeare's work was good enough. *Lady Romeo. The Radical and Revolutionary Life of Charlotte Cushman, America's First Celebrity* tells a story of American theatre that parallels the development of American culture in general. Cushman herself seemed to embody a kind of artistic declaration of independence at a time when the United States was anxious about its cultural standing in the world. Cushman, a massively talented and intelligent actress, changed the audience's understanding of the text through the accurate and timely delivery of her lines. Actors were not just vessels for the playwright; they were critics themselves, and Cushman helped shape Americans' understanding of female ambition with Lady Macbeth, masculinity with Romeo, and even prostitution with Nancy Sykes from Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*.

She tended to keep her work and personal life separate, but she never hesitated to speak out when she felt it was her duty to do so.

[1] New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020, ISBN 9781501199523, pp. 226

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The only work comparable to Wojczuk's book is *When Romeo Was a Woman* by Lisa Merrill,[2] a professor in the Department of Performance Studies at Hofstra University. Merrill's work was published in 1999, a little more than twenty years before this new biography. Instead of starting from Cushman's infancy, as Wojczuk does, the text begins with Cushman's first voyage to England and an unpublished diary full of private thoughts that the actress documented during her transatlantic journey. Merrill moves backward and forward through Cushman's life, focusing on the imagery of 'crossing', her cross-gender performances, the transition between private and public venues, and the thin line between convention and the social acceptance of her image. Lisa Merrill draws from the hundreds of letters written by Cushman to the women in her life, which allow her to paint a portrait of Cushman beyond the late-twentieth-century speculation about the nature of nineteenth-century lesbian desire.

Merrill's work is included in *Lady Romeo*'s bibliography, and we can most likely suppose Wojczuk[3] took inspiration from it. It is certain that Wojczuk's debut in 2020 — with this vivid and more complete biography of Charlotte Cushman — helps provide a more accurate portrait of actress Charlotte Cushman (1816–1876) and illustrate the reasons why she captivated audiences while breaking nineteenth-century America's strict gender rules. Born to a middle-class family in Boston, Charlotte dropped out of school at thirteen and worked in her mother's boarding house after her father abandoned the family. After a series of disastrous performances in her brief singing career, Cushman leapt at the opportunity to play Lady Macbeth in 1836; the role launched her to fame at a time when unescorted women were not allowed in theatre audiences. In the 1840s, Cushman earned acclaim for her performances in London as Romeo alongside her younger sister, Susan, as Juliet, and she made a successful U.S. tour in which she played both male and female characters, including Cardinal Wolsey in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* and the prostitute Nancy from Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. After falling in love with the writer Matilda Hays, Cushman moved to Rome — where

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[3] Tana Wojczuk is a senior nonfiction editor at *Guernica* and teaches writing at New York University. Previously, she has worked as an art critic for *Vice*, *Bomb Magazine*, and *Paste* and as a columnist for *Guernica*. Other essays, criticism, and poetry have appeared in many magazines and periodicals such as *The New York Times*, *The Believer*, *Lapham's Quarterly*, *Narrative*, *Opium Magazine*, and elsewhere. Wojczuk has an MFA in nonfiction from Columbia University, where she formerly taught. She was recently a finalist for the Gulf Coast Nonfiction Prize and has been a fellow at the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation residency and Tin House Summer Writers Workshop. Originally from Boulder, Colorado, she now lives in Brooklyn, New York.

the two lived openly as a couple — and established a network of female artists before succumbing to breast cancer. Wojczuk enriches her portrait with lively theatre gossip and detailed discussions of nineteenth-century class, social, and gender codes. This enthralling narrative restores Cushman to her rightful place in the spotlight.

The book is rich in sensory detail, with Wojczuk's evocative and impressive narrative fluency. The author keeps track of her subject's networks and scoured her journals and letters for mentions of the people, places, and events she was writing about. The travelogues of Dickens and many others offered a wealth of information, but Wojczuk tried not to rely too much on secondary sources.

Tana Wojczuk has always been passionate about Shakespeare, as she reveals in a long and interesting interview with the *North American Review*, and her 'obsession' with Shakespeare led to her discovery of Charlotte Cushman. It can be considered a 'discovery' because even though the actress was America's first celebrity, her impact on the craft has gone uncredited since her death. Wojczuk first encountered Cushman while researching another book about American Shakespeare. She was captivated by her success while playing men's roles and by the fact that she lived openly with female partners. Her fame forces us to reconsider nineteenth-century America and its culture. Like Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Cushman was a woman who transformed herself into a man (onstage at least) and was able to live courageously and fearlessly in public at a time when women could not even go to college.

When Cushman was born in Boston in 1816, America had no artistic culture to speak of. In Europe, it was thought of as a backwater, "it was still seen as a land without culture, or as one European traveler put it, a 'nation of campers'" (10). A series of events cleared the way for her life on the stage — a path she eagerly took — by rejecting marriage, creating a life of adventure, and playing the role of the hero, in and out of the theatre, as she traveled to New Orleans, New York City, London, and eventually back in order to build a successful career.

Just as Cushman was making her stage debut, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, and others in the Transcendental Club were meeting to discuss why there were so few American geniuses.

Along with many others, including Walt Whitman and Alcott's daughter Louisa May, they saw this genius in Cushman. She wasn't appreciated in America until she got the European stamp of approval when she played Romeo with her sister as Juliet in England. Her story demonstrates that Americans and Europeans recognized gender in performances during the nineteenth century even though the Civil War and the rise of Victorian morality tightened gender norms. Audiences loved Shakespeare as they loved this powerful, ambitious woman. It is worth remembering that American culture

was shaped not by educated elites but by the working classes, who made up a large part of the audiences; they loved Shakespeare, and in this powerful, ambitious woman they had a figure they could identify with and look up to.

Reading *Lady Romeo* feels more novelistic than we are used to in historical biographies, thanks to its artful nonfiction prose, and the book seems perfect for the stage or the screen. The book is shaped into a cinematic structure to convey Cushman's life in terms of an exciting adventure story.

Wojczuk reveals moments that felt made for Hollywood, like her unlikely triumph in London and Henry James narrowly missing Cushman perform as a child (166-7).

The *Prologue* of the book begins at the end, describing a night in New York City in November 1874 when thousands of fans crowded excitedly into every available space in Booth's Theatre to see Charlotte Cushman's farewell performance. She decided to bookend her career by performing the same role she had made her debut forty years earlier, Lady Macbeth. It was the first acting role offered to her, which was surprising because it was a major role. It was intimidating, too, as we read in chapter three, "in part because it was so closely associated with the legendary British actress Sarah Siddons . . . first cast in the role in 1785, a little more than fifty years earlier" (36).

The author starts to tell Cushman's biography in the first chapter, offering a well-defined view of America as a relatively young country that could not compete artistically with the likes of England and France. However, it was starting to find its voice through writers like Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. The 'first disaster', which is also the title of the first chapter, was the sudden disappearance of her father, who left his family with no visible means of support. Charlotte thus had to leave school and work full time for her mother, who used the little money she had left to open a boarding house. The chapter ends with one of the most significant events in Cushman's youth: the announcement that William Charles Macready would be performing Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* at the Tremont Theatre in Boston. In Chapter Two, Wojczuk describes the birth of Cushman's passion for theatre, the initial phase of her career as a professional opera singer, and her first travels outside of New England together with the singing coach James Maeder and his wife. Chapter Three opens with the description of Cushman's arrival in the port of New Orleans and her debut in *The Marriage of Figaro*, soon followed by the sad failure of her voice. She had worked for three years with Maeder to achieve the clear, elastic tone of an opera singer, and it was suddenly gone. A few months later in 1836, the theatre owner Charles Caldwell unexpectedly lost his wife, who was a talented actress, and asked if Charlotte would act in her role. She agreed, even though it was the role of Lady Macbeth. It was the first act of Cushman's career as an actress, and she was greeted enthusiastically by the press: "She

made the people understand the character that Shakespeare drew. She was never stilted, nor mock-heroic, nor monotonous, but so fiercely, so vividly natural that the spectators were afraid of her as they would have been of a pantheress let loose. It was impossible New Orleans should long retain such a woman" (41). In Chapter Four, Wojczuk presents Cushman's arrival in New York and the beginning of her experience at Park Theatre, often compared to London's Royal Theatre on Drury Lane. Her New York debut as Lady Macbeth to Thomas Hamblin's Macbeth drew spontaneous applause, and soon after, she was declared "the star of the Bowery". A few days later, by a stroke of bad luck, the Bowery Theatre caught fire and burned to the ground, and at the age of twenty, Cushman had to prepare to start over for the third time in her young life.

Chapter Five opens with a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson about "Genius". It is worth remembering that Emerson was Cushman's pastor in Boston. This chapter focuses on Cushman's stay in Albany, where the theatres drew large crowds of many races, made up of the merchants who brought goods to and from the largest port on the Eastern Seaboard, and Charlotte performed almost nightly in starring roles at the Pearl Street Theatre, including Lady Macbeth alongside the legendary Junius Brutus Booth. The tragic occurrence of Cushman's little brother's death in April 1837 gives Wojczuk the opportunity to describe how concerned Charlotte was with matters involving her own family and the wrong decisions made for her sister Susan by their mother.

Chapter Six follows Cushman's return to New York and her contract at the National Theatre, where she performed her popular Meg Merrilies, disappearing into her character and gaining an overwhelmingly positive critical response: "The Meg Merrilies of Miss Cushman seems to abstract and embody in itself — in a perfect individual reality — all we have seen or known or had presented to us in the stage or closet — of wild women — crazed prophetess — strange in attire — sore distraught in spirit — and borne above the common flight of her sex by something demoniac and supernatural" (64). In Chapter Seven, there is a description of Cushman's study of the seemingly degrading role of Nancy in Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, which involved reading and rereading the play and even venturing into the New York inner-city slum known as Five Points. "Once again, Charlotte had taken a supporting role and made it into theatrical gold. Tickets sold out and critics raved" (77). Chapter Eight is set in 1844, when, on William Macready's advice, Cushman was preparing to go to London but then decided to postpone her departure after meeting Rosalie Sully, with whom she fell in love. Rosalie was the daughter of a painter from whom Cushman had commissioned her own portrait and an aspiring painter herself. Rose's love gave Charlotte confidence, encouraging her to attempt the most difficult role in Shakespeare's canon:

Hamlet. The only woman to have played the role was Sarah Siddons in 1776, but no American actress had done it successfully before Cushman's debut on May 13, 1844: "Hamlet is a young man, and Charlotte's smooth woman's face made her a better fit for the role than a male actor of similar experience" (82). At the end of 1844, she finally made her way to England, where she performed in London and Liverpool, as described in Chapter Nine. While Cushman was in England, she did not receive any correspondence from Rose, as the latter's father had forbidden her from having any further relationship with Charlotte. Cushman received criticism from her mother, too, and a final goodbye letter from Rose. Still torn by the loss, she decided to throw herself into her work and prepare for her next big role: Romeo. She wrote a letter to invite her sister Susan to join her in London to play Juliet on her side.

Chapter Ten provides the book with its title and describes all the controversy around Cushman's choice to play that role before the British audience appreciated her clear enunciation of Shakespeare's lines, lack of a strong American accent, and ability to handle a sword on the stage. This chapter details her performance of Romeo through her walking and speaking like a man, the sense of freedom she instilled in the character, the choice of making her chivalric Romeo collapse weeping in the final scene, and even the way she once stopped her performance when a joker in the audience faked a sneeze during a love scene. Her Romeo proved famous, in Wojczuk's view, because the character was Italian, passionate, and young, running counter to the tight-laced American and British cultures of the nineteenth century.

Romeo offered Cushman the opportunity to portray different versions of masculinity. For example, during a fight with Tybalt, she knocks the sword, and it flies toward the audience, scaring everybody. Then at the end, on seeing that Juliet, played by her sister, is dead, she cradles her and weeps over her. This expression of emotion was moving to both men and women; many audiences admire a man able to express such deep, passionate feelings.

Chapter Eleven is set in 1848 when Cushman celebrated her fourth year away from America, succeeding where Forrest and many others had failed: She had become the first American celebrity. She then planned her return to America: "Charlotte understood her value as an American star—and she made sure others knew it" (117) when she returned in 1849. In fact, she was recognized everywhere she went, her name and reputation travelling ahead of her, thanks to the way railways and newspapers were expanding far across the country, from New York to Chicago to St. Louis. It is worth mentioning, from the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, that Walt Whitman reprinted in Brooklyn about Charlotte leaving her hotel in men's clothes (125-6). Whitman was delighted: Her cross-dressing was not a stunt but an expression of her true self, an extension of her habit of surrounding herself with a rich "entourage of female friends: ambitious, unorthodox artists like herself who longed for

more freedom than they could find in America or in England" (126).

Chapter Twelve is devoted to Cushman's new dream: living in Rome with Matilda Hays — a writer and English translator for George Sand — and supporting more women artists by offering them a place to stay in Rome, giving gifts, and writing letters on their behalf to her powerful connections. Wojczuk here describes how her house was full of artists of all kinds and how Cushman met Emma Stebbins, the last love of her life. Chapter Thirteen then shifts to the stormy affairs Cushman lived as a mature adult.

Chapter Fourteen describes the interconnections between Cushman's later years and the preparation for the Civil Wars. Cushman stayed in Washington and met President Lincoln before the tragic occurrence of his murder by John Wilkes Booth on April 25, 1865. Chapter Fifteen portrays Cushman in her sixties, and Chapter Sixteen describes the end of Cushman's life and career. Wojczuk concludes thus: "In mourning Charlotte Cushman, America also mourned its youth, forever obscured behind the fog of war . . . Since she was a girl, she had been confident of her larger purpose, and when she failed, she drove herself forward anyway, creating a life of daring adventure" (174).

While the whole book is a brilliant transcription of Cushman's biography, the epilogue renders more explicitly the bitter note perceptible throughout the narration. The epilogue begins with "But even as…", the adversative conjunction immediately suggesting the silence and the oblivion into which Cushman's name and career had fallen soon after her death. The book shows us why Charlotte Cushman deserves to appear in the American spotlight once again. However, it could have explored more thoroughly why Cushman was consigned to obscurity. Wojczuk explains that the American people started to look for pastimes away from the theatre; Shakespeare fell out of fashion, and Cushman's incredible talent as an influential performer was left out. As a result, her legacy was erased by the same inspiration that kickstarted her success and fame: her queerness.

Given Wojczuk's interest in the interconnections between theatre and culture, many readers, especially those interested in American theatre and female performances, will find *Lady Romeo* rewarding. Although it is largely discursive, the book offers pleasing insights to the public and is a useful point of departure for academic readers seeking to develop more profound research interests. Wojczuk successfully reinvigorates this significant nineteenth-century artist and provides a lively biography of a woman who made the stage her home.

Works Cited

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