

BOOKFILTER'S SEPTEMBER PICK OF THE MONTH

MICHAEL GILTZ | SEPTEMBER 12, 2018

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Playing to the Gods

By Peter Rader

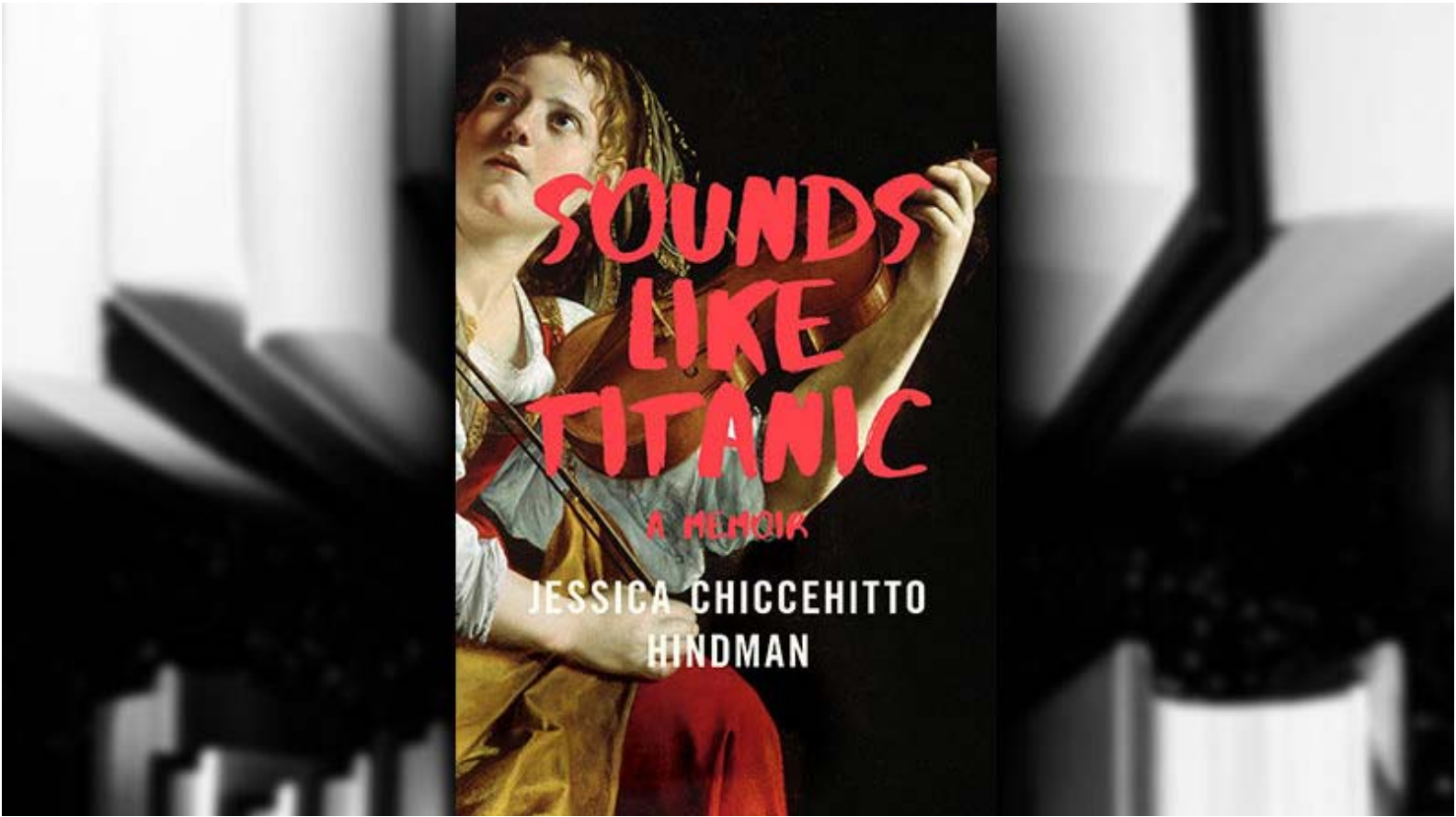
\$26, Simon & Schuster

This dual biography tells the stories of two of the greatest stage actresses in history: Sarah Bernhardt (the Divine One, as good at self-promotion as she was at acting) and Eleanora Duse (a self-effacing artist who pioneered modern acting). It's juicy and delightful. Both women came from hardscrabble backgrounds, with the French Bernhardt the daughter of a courtesan and the Italian Duse the daughter of itinerant actors. Bernhardt was a genius at marketing and merchandising — she ran her own theater company and put her face on everything from fans to face cream. Her scandalous exploits were headline news all over the world and she was delighted, for Bernhardt played the press like an impresario. Duse preferred not to speak to the press at all, saw acting as a spiritual act, and disappeared into her roles. Bernhardt was a *star*,

always the same in every play; Duse was an *artist*, devoted to the roles and the emotions of her characters. Bernhardt was the last of the great posers, the actors who took specific, detailed stances on stage to evoke emotions, all of it worked out in advance, all of it mechanical, and, in her case, always, always winking at the audience. Duse was among the first of the true actors as we understand acting today, influencing Stanislavski and his Method acting (which she embodied even before it had a name). These two women circled each other warily, competing for lovers and roles, but wisely valuing the roles over lovers every time. Their competition peaks with an insane showdown in which they both appeared in London across the street from each other ... playing the same role in the same play.

Just when you're ready to start casting the next season of TV's *Feud*, author Peter Rader digs further. He shows how Bernhardt rose to the challenge of Duse and deepened her craft. He also gives her credit for brave public stances, such as when the Jewish Bernhardt stood tall during the Dreyfus Affair. That's all to the good for Bernhardt, since she may have won the battle (we still know her name), while Duse so clearly won the war when it came to acting. Rader is strongest on the specifics of their lives, a little weaker when he steps outside the facts of the story at hand (such as erroneously saying Marlon Brando's appearance in *A Streetcar Named Desire* was his Broadway debut; it was *I Remember Mama* some three years earlier, followed by four more shows before *Streetcar*). Anyone who loves theater, acting in general, and strong women from history in particular will enjoy *Playing to the Gods* very much.

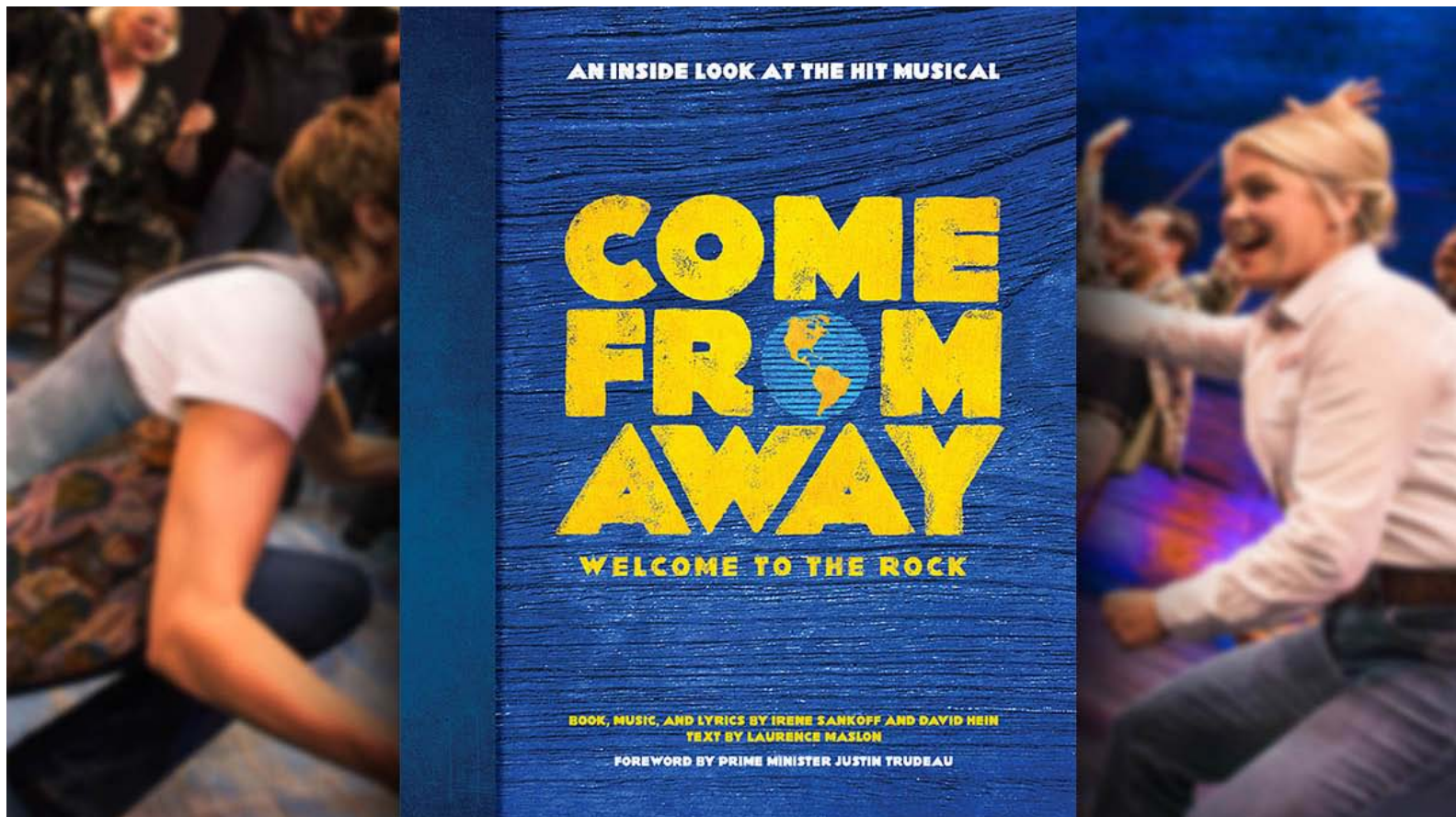
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