



THE SUMMER 2014 BROADWAY READING LIST

MICHAEL GILTZ | AUGUST 5, 2014

SHARE 

Get your theater fix right in your home (or on vacation!) with these great picks.

It would be wonderful to go to the theatre every night of the week, but that's rarely possible. If nothing else, your town or city probably has one night (usually Mondays in the U.S.) when theatres are dark and there are no performances at all. Frustrating! Not to worry: We've pulled together a roundup of some of the best books by and about or simply set in the world of the arts for your perusal. They make great gifts for friends, for kids whose imaginations you want to spark, and, most of all, for yourself on the nights when you want a theater fix right in your home. All titles have come out in the last few weeks and we include a link for each book where you can find further information. So check them out and make a list of books to get from your favorite independent bookstore, library, or online outlet. The next time the theatre is dark, you can brighten up your night with these titles.

Let's start with arguably the greatest actor of all time, Laurence Olivier. Certainly he's the most versatile — no one else succeeded so completely on both stage and screen as both an actor and director as Larry did. In *Olivier* by Philip Ziegler (MacLeHose Press), you experience again

the highs and lows of his tumultuous life (including the tabloid catnip of his romance with Vivien Leigh); the actors he worked with and measured himself against (including Richard Burton and John Gielgud); and his crowning achievement off the boards — heading the National Theatre in the U.K. and turning it into the cherished institution it remains today, 51 years after it was founded. This bio has been acclaimed as probably the best for the general public, and if you're not already a fan of Olivier, you soon will be.

Olivier was of course a masterful interpreter of Shakespeare. As lovers of theater, we know how many movies, TV shows, and books are spun off from and inspired by the classics penned by the Bard of Avon. But passing that love on to children can be tricky. Enter ***How To Teach Your Children Shakespeare*** by Ken Ludwig (Broadway Books). Just out in paperback, this gives enthusiastic adults clever and effective ways to bring plays like *Romeo & Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth* alive for kids, with fun exercises and approaches you do together. And here's a secret: It's also fun for adults on their own who just want to play with those words and gain a better appreciation for the genius behind them.

If you want to spark kids' interest in theater, there's more to share than just Shakespeare and the delightful Nate series by Tim Federle (who released ***Five, Six, Seven, Nate!*** back in January from Simon & Schuster). Kids discover live theater and performance in countless ways, and books can help them realize that. Magic shows are often an early step toward performing, and writer Jacqueline Davies explores that in ***The Magic Trap*** (HMH Books for Young Readers), in which two siblings, Jessie and Evan, work together to create a magic show they'll stage in their backyard. It's the fifth book in the best-selling Lemonade War series and is ideal for middle school readers. Teenagers might enjoy the setting of ***My Faire Lady*** by Laura Wettersten (Simon & Schuster). No, the heroine Rowena Duncan isn't starring in a local production of that classic musical. See the *e* in *Faire*? In fact, this teen is getting over heartbreak by spending her summer working as a face painter and "serving wench" at a Renaissance Faire. She's soon immersed in a world of artists and performers . . . and romance.

Smart, empowered kids become smart, empowered adults, and few were as accomplished and memorable as politician and playwright Clare Booth Luce. Her story is told in the two-part autobiography by Sylvia Jukes Morris. ***Rage for Fame*** is out in paperback from Random House and the final volume, ***Price of Fame***, just came out in hardcover. It's a remarkable life devoted to politics, causes, and, of course, her initial fame as a humorist, short-story writer, and the playwright behind the smash hit Broadway show *The Women*, later turned into the classic film. Fans of theater will be most intrigued by volume one, though the reviews make clear it'll be hard

to stop reading there.

Those looking for lighter fare should sample ***Dark Aemilia*** by Sally O'Reilly (Picador). This engaging novel imagines a duel of wits between Shakespeare and his Dark Lady, the inspiration behind those sonnets. Here, she's the mistress of a powerful man and an intellect who challenges the playwright over his depiction of women. Naturally, her scathing response to *The Taming of the Shrew* has him fall madly in love with her. Just out in paperback is ***The Bookman's Tale*** by Charlie Lovett (Penguin). Lovett, a playwright himself, delivered this hugely acclaimed, best-selling work about an antiquarian who becomes obsessed with an 18th century watercolor. That leads him on a chase that may reveal the true identity of William Shakespeare. It's already a book club favorite.

Love, Nina by Nina Stibbe is a charming memoir presented as a series of letters between Stibbe and her sister. Stibbe worked as a nanny for the female head of the *London Review of Books* in the 1980s, allowing her to weigh in on everyone from her boss's ex-husband, film director Stephen Frears, to various and sundry figures, from a decidedly humorous and domestic perspective. It's a delight, mostly centered on family. But the real catnip for theater lovers is next-door neighbor Alan Bennett, who Stibbe first thinks might be an actor on the telly but finally susses out is a playwright. Bennett encourages her to go back to school when not obliquely criticizing her cooking (he's often over for dinner), and it's a most unexpected glimpse at this legendary figure — very amusing, very sweet, and very fun.

If you really want to sink into the past, ***The O'Neill: The Transformation of the American Theater*** by Jeffrey Sweet (Yale University Press) charts how this Connecticut landmark had a huge impact on theater and artists like Meryl Streep and August Wilson, while incubating talent and inspiring Robert Redford to launch the Sundance Institute so he could do the same for movies.

The O'Neill's impact became clear slowly over decades. But Marlon Brando's impact was an atomic blast from the start. He was lost to the movies, but early on with the landmark stage production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Brando transformed acting forever. ***Brando's Smile: His Life, Thought and Work*** by Susan L. Mizruchi (W.W. Norton) focuses on his work, rather than his gossipy travails as revealed in the extensive annotations Brando left on the books in his library, working scripts, and other resources. It's an intellectual biography and a well-reviewed one, so for those interested in Brando the artist, this is the biography to tackle. He didn't do it alone, however, and ***The Selected Letters of Elia Kazan*** (Knopf) illuminate the career of the director who worked with Brando on *Streetcar* and, of course, classic movies such as *On the*

Waterfront. You can still start a fight discussing Kazan and the McCarthy-era witch hunts, but there's no denying his signal importance in theater and film.

Let's end with two great women who have made a huge impact on the arts. Swoozie Kurtz has won multiple Tonys, Obies, and Emmys, and her new memoir, [Part Swan, Part Goose](#) (Perigee), shows Kurtz balancing her career in the theater while caring for her mother, who has moved in with Kurtz and is fast approaching her 100th birthday. The feisty, smart, talented, and often underrated Lee Grant looks back on her entire career with [I Said Yes to Everything](#) (Blue Rider Press). She's best remembered now for her Emmy-winning turn on *Peyton Place* and her Oscar-winning role in *Shampoo*. But Grant was a formidable stage actress and an accomplished theater director as well. She tells it all, from her early success to her derailment during the McCarthy era (wonder what she thinks of Elia Kazan?) and her reinvention and multiple comebacks after years in the wilderness. It will raise Grant's estimation for many by reminding us of exactly how much she achieved against tremendous obstacles. Someone oughta make a play about it! Then we can head back to the theatre.

Michael Giltz is a freelance journalist who has written thousands of features, reviews and cover stories about theater and the arts for numerous national publications including Huffington Post, New York Daily News, New York Post, Los Angeles Times, Entertainment Weekly, The Advocate, Encore, and many others. He's the founder of [BookFilter.com](#), a site where you can discover new releases every week in every category, along with top picks on the books worthy of your time, just like the ones he recommended above.

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