

BOOKFILTER'S BEST OF SUMMER PICKS

MICHAEL GILTZ | JULY 21, 2015

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The savvy reader's favorite website BookFilter.com chooses the best theater books of the summer just for Broadway Direct.

Ah, summer. What will it be this year: theater camp (either attending or running!), or touring in Phantom, or building sets for your community theatre, or heading to Broadway to see the hot new musical *Hamilton*? If you're doing the last option, you'll probably want to bone up on your Founding Fathers by diving into the Ron Chernow biography that inspired Lin-Manuel Miranda to create his show.

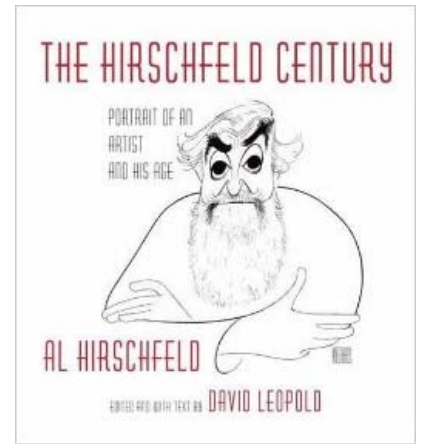
Wherever you go, whatever you do, here are some more great books by and for theater lovers to take along, all curated by BookFilter.com.

[The Hirschfeld Century](#)

Edited with text by David Leopold

(\$40, Knopf)

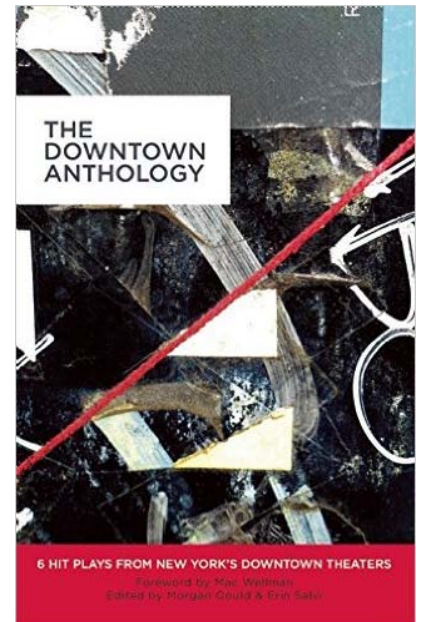
When you think about Broadway, images pop into your head: neon signs, classic shows, iconic posters, and the stars. But you don't always picture Carol Channing and Tommy Tune in the flesh, do you? Sometimes you picture the vivid caricatures that capture those personalities even better than the people themselves. And those canny, amusing, and memorable portraits were created by Al Hirschfeld. If you've already seen the documentary about his life, here's the next best thing to a Hirschfeld museum. It's a lavish art book celebrating Hirschfeld's craft that naturally bursts at the seams with examples of those works that define him — and indeed the American theater. [Learn more.](#)



The Downtown Anthology

Edited by Morgan Gould & Erin Salvi
(\$19.99, Playscripts)

Sometimes downtown is uptown. At least artistically, the real heat often comes from Off-Broadway and even Off-Off-Broadway. Those are the playwrights who will revolutionize theater, bringing their innovative work to Broadway or simply shaking it up with productions around the country. It's impossible to argue with the six hits explored in this book, drawn from the wellspring that is downtown theater. *Hits* in this case doesn't always refer to box office: It refers to hitting your mark, creating a work that will endure. Among the plays included: *Trevor* by Nick Jones, *The Lily's Revenge* by Taylor Mac, and *We Are Proud to Present . . .* by Jackie Sibblies Drury. [Learn more.](#)

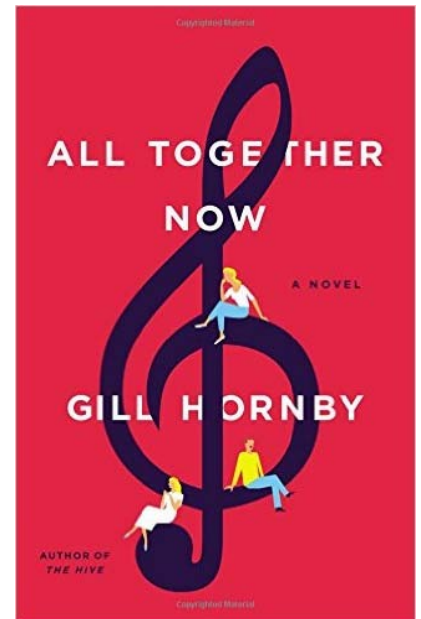


All Together Now

By Gill Hornby
(\$26, Little, Brown And Company)

Go to see a Broadway show and you can't help but fantasize about treading the boards yourself. That might mean acting in a local production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Or maybe just singing in a choir. Creating art together is what it's all about. In this charming novel, Hornby captures the magic of people coming together in song. When your town is on the ropes, the first thought that springs to mind probably isn't "show choir." But a shot at a major competition is about all the citizens can look forward to — assuming the stalwart choir members can get along with much-needed new recruits brought in to beef up their sound. Buzzed about with early strong reviews, it's a crowd-pleaser that someone like producer Scott Rudin has probably already optioned for the movies *and* for Broadway.

[Learn more.](#)

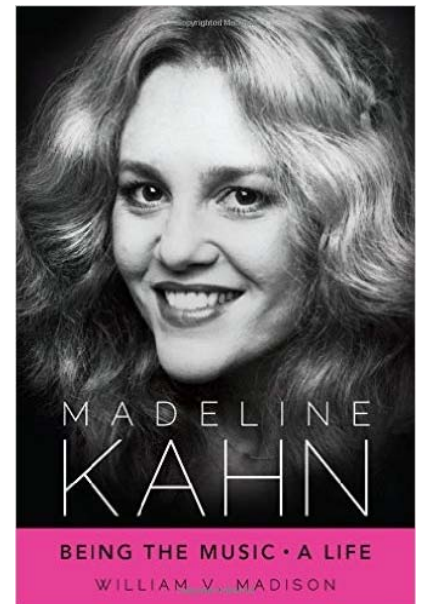


Madeline Kahn: Being the Music, a Life

By William V. Madison

(\$35, University Press of Mississippi)

What a unique talent Madeline Kahn was. The current revival of *On the Twentieth Century* reminds us that Kahn was once a theatrical force to be reckoned with. But even those unlucky enough to miss her on stage know Kahn was a marvel on film, a fact captured in classics including *Paper Moon* and *Blazing Saddles*. Madison gives us more than Kahn the kooky public persona: He gives us Kahn the artist and Kahn the woman in all her complicated glory. It's to his credit that so many stars who knew her offered reviews saying how he did right by this once-in-a-lifetime performer. [Learn more.](#)

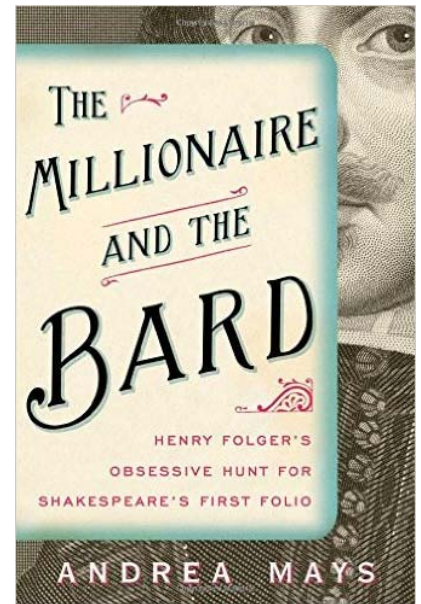


The Millionaire and the Bard

By Andrea Mays

(\$27, Simon & Schuster)

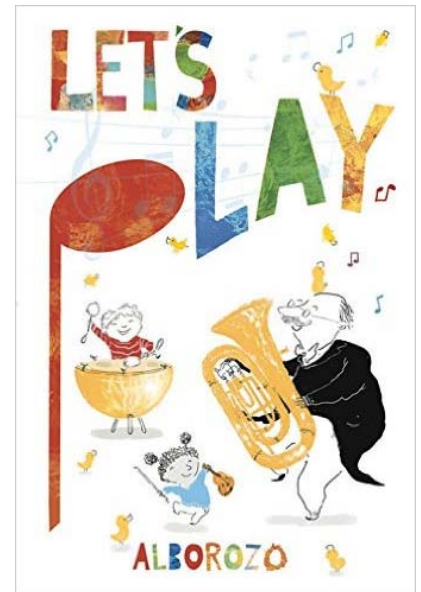
William Shakespeare will live forever — but he almost didn't make it to the 18th century. Luckily, determined friends risked considerable funds to create the First Folio, a collection of his plays designed to celebrate his genius. That rescued many works that might have been lost forever and proved essential in launching Shakespeare's enduring fame. Author Andrea Mays tells the fascinating tale of how that First Folio came to be, and the remarkable saga of Henry Folger, who became obsessed with Shakespeare and devoted his considerable fortune to collecting enormous quantities of theatrical material from Shakespeare's time, including every First Folio he could lay his hands on. Auctions, unexpected deaths, grudges, and more all come into play as Mays charts the siphoning-off of Shakespeare's work from the U.K. to the U.S. and later Japan. Since you won't get to buy a Folio yourself, buy this and live vicariously. [Learn more.](#)



Let's Play

By Gabriel Alborozo
(\$16.99, Allen & Unwin)

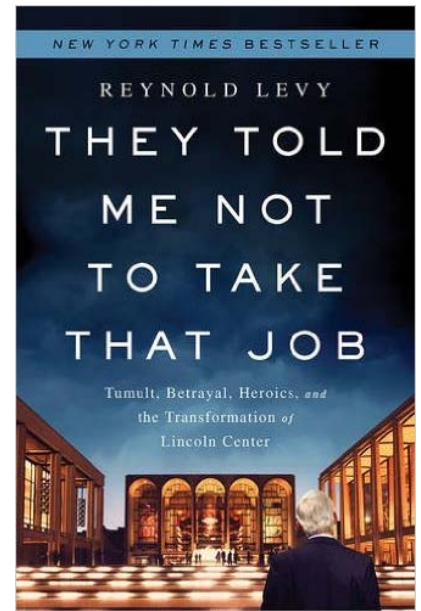
When you take a child to their first Broadway musical, always be sure to arrive early so you can let them peek into the orchestra pit. And before that happens, you can introduce tykes to the magic of dozens of artists uniting in music by reading them *Let's Play*. Alborozo's charming picture book romps through the many sections and instruments with a verve that Leonard Bernstein would heartily approve of. [Learn more.](#)



They Told Me Not to Take That Job

By Reynold Levy
(\$28.99, PublicAffairs)

Levy oversaw Lincoln Center for more than a decade, taking it from the depths of despair to its newly triumphant position as a jewel of New York City. Does he deserve all the credit? None of it? Some of it? Judge for yourself as Levy tells all about tackling the arts institution despite the warnings of friends that it was a fool's errand. He tells some tales, dishes some dirt, gives credit where credit is due, and makes the turning-around of a cultural institution as gripping as a thriller. It certainly looks like a happy ending from the outside and Levy explains how and why it happened. [Learn more.](#)

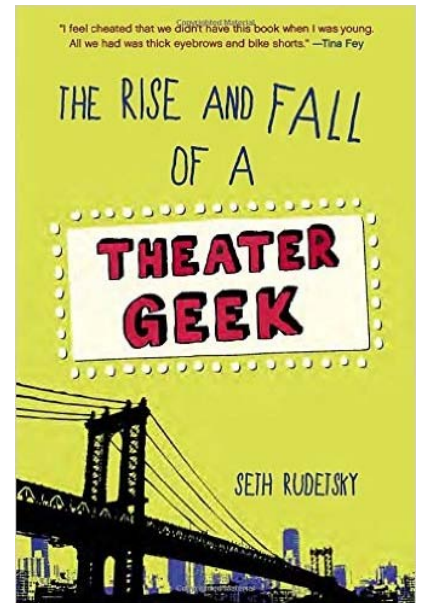


The Rise and Fall of a Theater Geek

By Seth Rudetsky

(\$9.99, Random House Books for Young Readers)

Teens who love theater will revel in this chatty, silly, romantic tale of theater geek Justin who is positively besotted with Broadway, stumbles into a great internship, makes friends with an honest-to-goodness star, and learns a few not-too-painful lessons about responsibility along the way. Adults will enjoy this rose-tinted but (somewhat) realistic glimpse behind the scenes of the business while marveling that books like this with unapologetically gay protagonists can be taken for granted. [Learn more.](#)



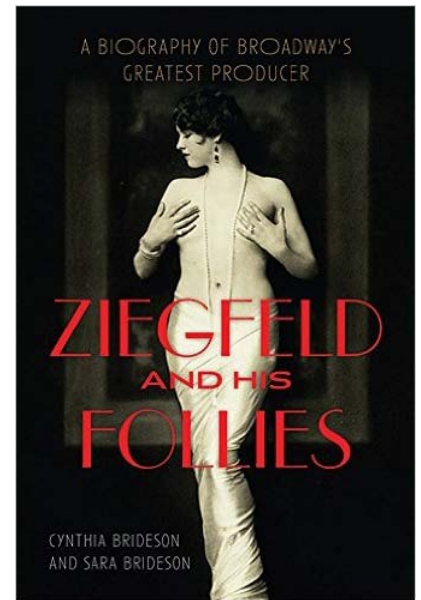
Ziegfeld and His Follies

By Cynthia Brideson and Sara Brideson

(\$40, University Press of Kentucky)

Even now, Florenz Ziegfeld captures the popular imagination as the Broadway producer who broke the mold. He personified the

glamorous 1920s and created a revue whose name still plucks at our heartstrings. Oh, to have seen a Ziegfeld Folly back in the day! Cynthia Brideson and Sara Brideson tell Ziegfeld's story, placing him in the context of his times as well as showing the impact he's had on theater ever since. Seemingly the only folly was betting against Ziegfeld, and the authors demonstrate the savvy businessman who stayed on top for so long. [Learn more.](#)

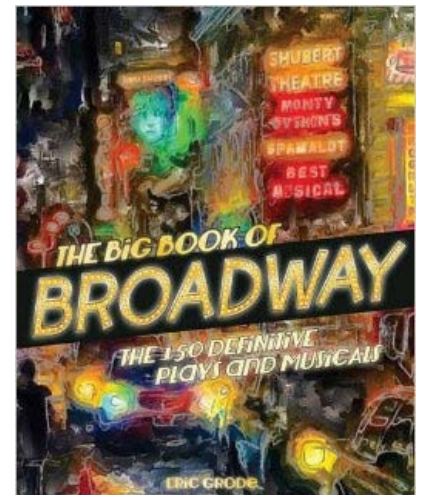


[The Big Book of Broadway: The 150 Definitive Plays and Musicals](#)

By Eric Grode

(\$50, Voyageur Press)

Let the arguments begin! Heck, you can even have passionate arguments about the shows you haven't seen! Yes, Grode's coffee table book is filled with images and bits of trivia that casual fans will enjoy. It has short, sharp takes on dozens of plays and musicals (from the 1860s smash *The Black Crook* to *The Book of Mormon*) that are unquestionably landmark works, whether commercially or artistically or (best of all) both. But is his list your list? It's certainly not my list and half the fun is tearing down the ones you think don't belong and wondering how the heck he left such-and-such off!! Such-and-such is a masterpiece! [Learn more.](#)

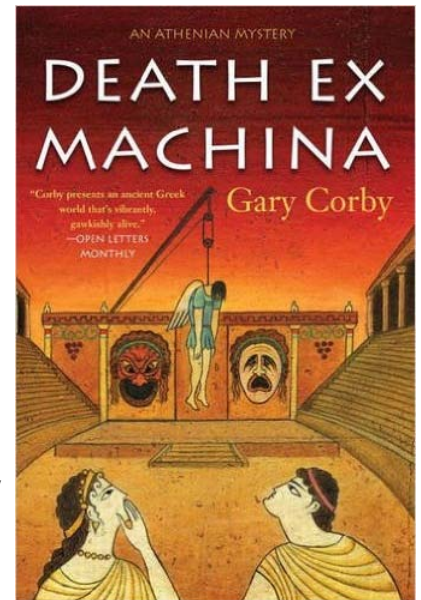


[Death Ex Machina](#)

By Gary Corby

(\$26.95, Soho Crime)

Is there anything worse than dying on stage? While actually *dying* on stage, for starters. Gary Corby's popular and acclaimed series of mysteries set in ancient Greece serves a dual purpose. It offers pretty



accurate glimpses of day-to-day life both in Athens in general and in the world of the theater in particular. (Machines were an increasingly central fact of life, even back then, for example.) And it provides wittily dangerous mysteries. This time, a major festival is nearly disrupted by the death of an actor, a murder immediately “illustrated” by a backdrop displayed on stage. Our heroes have to pretend to battle spirits while tracking down the very human mastermind they believe is responsible. It’s silly fun, especially for those who savor mysteries set in worlds far removed from their own. [Learn more.](#)

The Best American Short Plays 2013–2014

Edited by William W. Demastes
(\$19.99, Applause Theatre & Cinema Books)

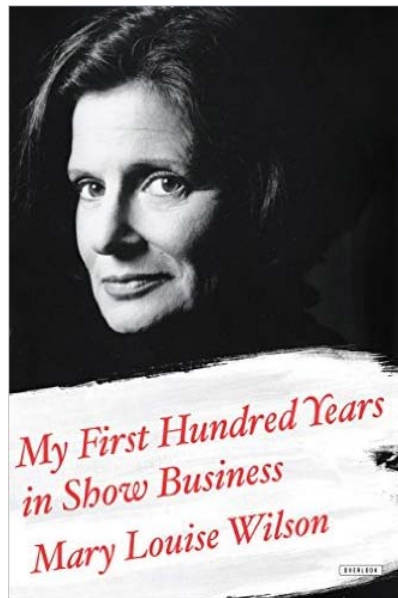
Whether you are looking for a play to perform, want to spot rising talent, or just enjoy reading well-done pieces, *The Best American Short Plays* series is a dependable offering. The theatrical equivalent of a short story is awfully appealing after tackling another “classic” five-act work that you can’t help thinking might have been just as good (or better) at three acts. Or two. [Learn more.](#)



My First Hundred Years in Show Business

By Mary Louise Wilson
(\$28.95, Overlook Press)

Here it is, the dishiest, funniest, chattiest, and most soul-baring theater book of the year. Tony winner Mary Louise Wilson —



forever dubbed “the best thing in it” in review after review — captures her life and career in this delightful memoir. Pick it up and its slim nature (less than 200 pages)

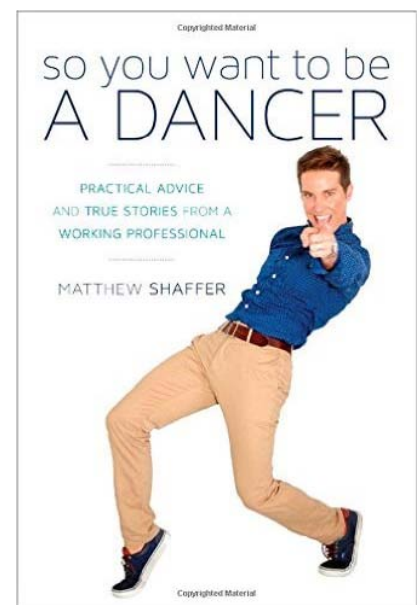
might disappoint. But then you start to read it and soon realize, Oh, she only put in the good stuff! Wilson tells her story in a charmingly scattershot style, but the through line is the eight-year journey of turning a memoir of *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland into the career-peak triumph *Full Gallop*. Otherwise, she jumps from her crazy family to sharing horror stories about auditions and life on the set of the hit sitcom *One Day at a Time*, enduring the glassy stare of Bonnie Franklin, to winning the Tony for *Grey Gardens*. It’s impressionistic, flits all around, has no discernible structure, and pretty much charms the hell out of you. [Learn more.](#)

[So You Want to Be a Dancer](#)

By Matthew Shaffer

(\$19.95, Taylor Trade Publishing)

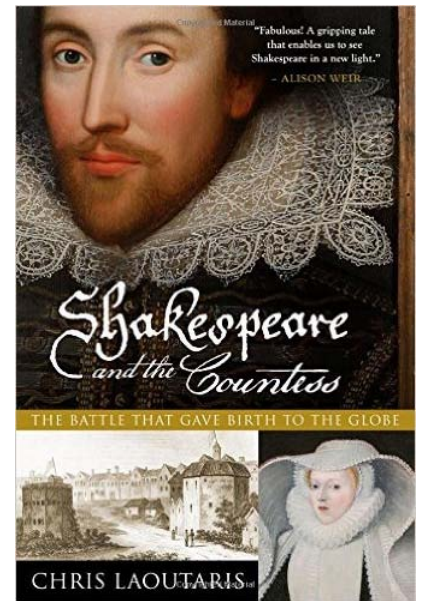
Is Matthew Shaffer plugged in? He’s gotten blurbs from choreographer Mandy Moore of *So You Think You Can Dance* and Emmy-winning director Kenny Ortega, for starters. And while highly successful, the fact that he’s not a superstar legend everyone has heard of perhaps means that Shaffer is able to keep his feet on the ground (insert dance joke here) while offering up actual practical advice about everything from auditioning to how to behave on film sets around the stars. This book is for those who yearn to break in and those who just want to fantasize about what it’s like to try. [Learn more.](#)



Shakespeare and the Countess

By Chris Laoutaris
(\$29.95, Pegasus)

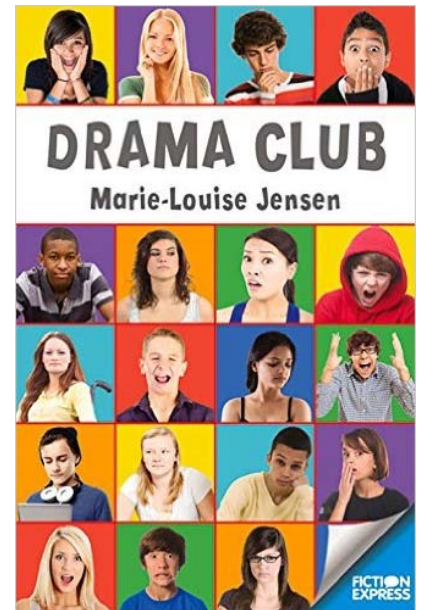
No, we have no idea why the formidable historical figure Lady Elizabeth Russell hasn't been the star of a play or movie yet, or a novel — until now. She's a compelling villain/heroine. Infuriated that a new theatre was opening right next to her home, Lady Elizabeth (who styled herself the Dowager Countess) mounted a furious assault against Shakespeare's new home, driven by religious passion (she hated Roman Catholics *and* the Church of England), her puritan streak of propriety, and, let's face it, good old not-in-my-backyard-ism. The result? Shakespeare's troupe had to abandon the indoor theatre and build another one, dubbing it The Globe. This showdown is presented with verve by historian Chris Laoutaris and virtually every critic has commented that it's a tale worthy of Shakespeare's gifts. [Learn more.](#)



Drama Club

By Marie-Louise Jensen
(\$9.99, ReadZone Books)

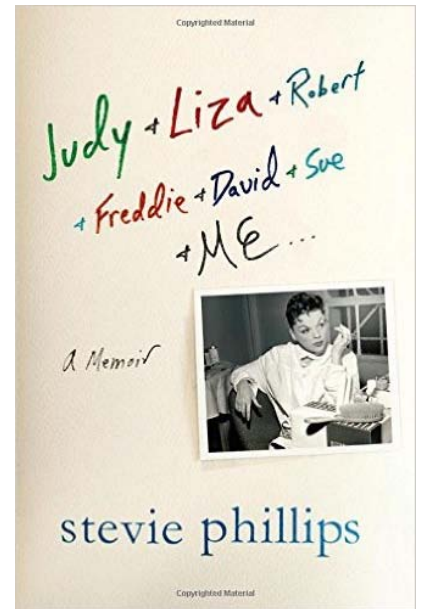
Hey, not everything can be life-and-death. So why not savor this teen romp, a story of kids involved in summer theater where, of course, who likes who and which actors are getting the lead roles in the big show really *are* matters of life and death for the young protagonists. It's a good reminder that theater is a showcase for artists and budding talent and a creative outlet and all that. But when you're young, it's also a family. And families fight and make up and fight again, but they're family and that's what matters, especially if kids don't always feel like they belong anywhere else. [Learn more.](#)



Judy + Liza + Robert + Freddie + David + Sue + Me . . .

By Stevie Phillips
(\$25.99, St. Martin's Press)

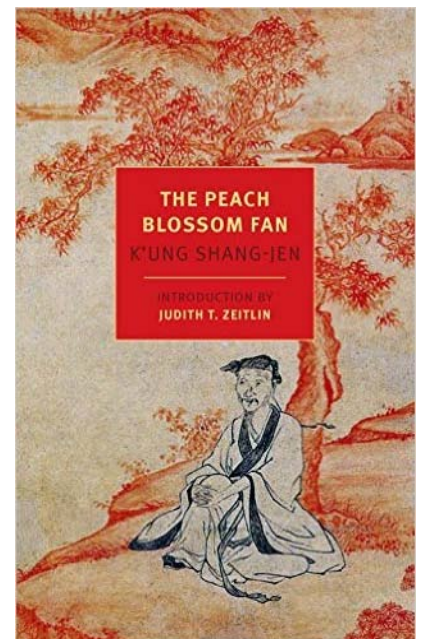
Sometimes you get the feeling that talent agents are some of the most vivid characters in the business. Sue Mengers got her due with Bette Midler's acclaimed one-woman show. Now a compatriot of Mengers takes the spotlight by telling her own tale. Stevie Phillips got her start catering to the whims of Judy Garland at the tail end of the legend's career. Surviving that was triumph enough, but Phillips insists she also learned from Garland and shares an intimate side rarely glimpsed of the performer's performer. Phillips went on to represent Liza Minnelli and Robert Redford, among many other stars, while working on acclaimed theater pieces including *Doonesbury* and *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. Chatty and informal, this is a memoir that insists it ain't like it used to be. And it ain't. [Learn more.](#)



[The Peach Blossom Fan](#)

By K'Ung Shang-Jen
(\$17.95, NYRB Classics)

A cornerstone of Chinese theater, *The Peach Blossom Fan* is a historical epic chronicling the downfall of the Ming Dynasty. Written shortly after that event occurred, it tells a tale of corruption and greed and lost glory by focusing on, naturally, a love story. A young scholar falls for a courtesan and gives her the gift of a peach blossom fan, launching a tangled personal drama against the backdrop of the end of an era. Virtually unknown in the West, it's a staple in China that was an immediate hit and has been performed ever since. While every new well-reviewed show is dubbed an instant classic, this is a work that has endured for almost as long as Shakespeare has. What better way to cap off the summer than finally devouring a genuine masterpiece? [Learn more.](#)



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