

BOOKFILTER'S FEBRUARY 2021 PICKS OF THE MONTH

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MICHAEL GILTZ | FEBRUARY 2, 2021

BookFilter picks the best new theater book, exclusively for Broadway Direct readers.

Mike Nichols: A Life

By Mark Harris

\$35, Penguin Press

Available on February 2, 2021

A Bright Ray of Darkness

By Ethan Hawke

Available on February 2, 2021

Two major talents hit the books this month. A great director gets the biography he deserves and a great actor writes the novel his precocity promised.

Mike Nichols is one of the major talents of the 20th century, especially in the theater. How can you miss telling the story of his life? An odd duck childhood, not helped by a disease that left him entirely hairless, Nichols partnered with Elaine May and they took Broadway by storm as a sketch comedy duo of rare smarts. Then he turned to directing. Imagine this: in 1965 he directed Neil Simon's play *The Odd Couple*, in 1966 he directed the film *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf* with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, in 1967 he directed the film *The Graduate* and in 1968 he went back to Broadway with Simon's *Plaza Suite*. And that just scratches the surface. Writer Mark Harris is the husband of playwright Tony Kushner, so he had a front-row seat to Nichols tackling the HBO miniseries of *Angels In America*. He's also the author of acclaimed looks at Hollywood, so this bio has been acclaimed as especially good on Nichols and film. But theater lovers will find plenty to feast on here.

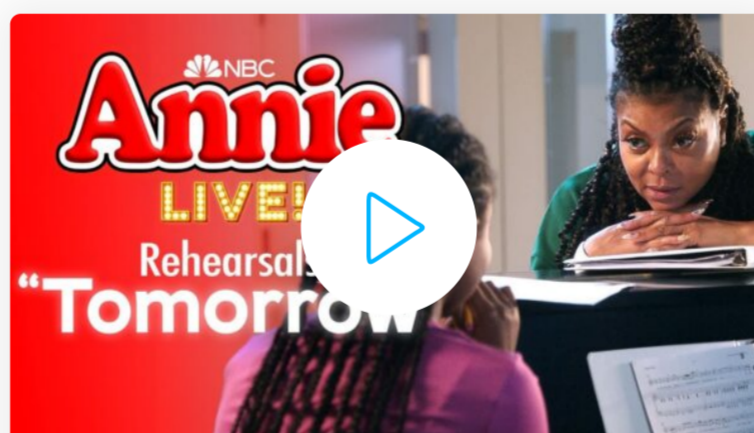
Fans of Ethan Hawke know that just when you've got him figured, this artist reveals some new side to himself, such as the journalist he proved himself with an excellent profile of Kris Kristofferson for *Rolling Stone*, a second life as a horror flick protagonist, or a third life as an Oscar-nominated screenwriter. Hawke's first novel in almost two decades isn't the first of his three works of fiction to feature an actor. But it is the first to put acting — and especially the theater — front and center. The story follows a mess of a young man playing Hotspur on Broadway opposite a Falstaff embodied by an actor as grandiose a train wreck as Shakespeare's creation. Backstage rivalries, a brilliant director, unflattering boozing, and debauchery are all on full display. Of course, Hawke himself played Hotspur at Lincoln Center opposite Kevin Kline's Falstaff. Enjoy that titillating thought but remember this: Hawke's reviews improve noticeably every time out. And that 2004 production remains the best I've seen yet.

Michael Giltz is the co-host of the weekly entertainment podcast Showbiz Sandbox. He's covered all areas of entertainment as a journalist, critic, feature writer, and analyst, contributing to numerous outlets including the New York Daily News, the Los Angeles Times, Huffington Post, Entertainment Weekly, The Advocate, and many others. Michael reviews shows in New York City and London, as well as profiling the artists that create it. When he's not attending the theater, he's reading about it.

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