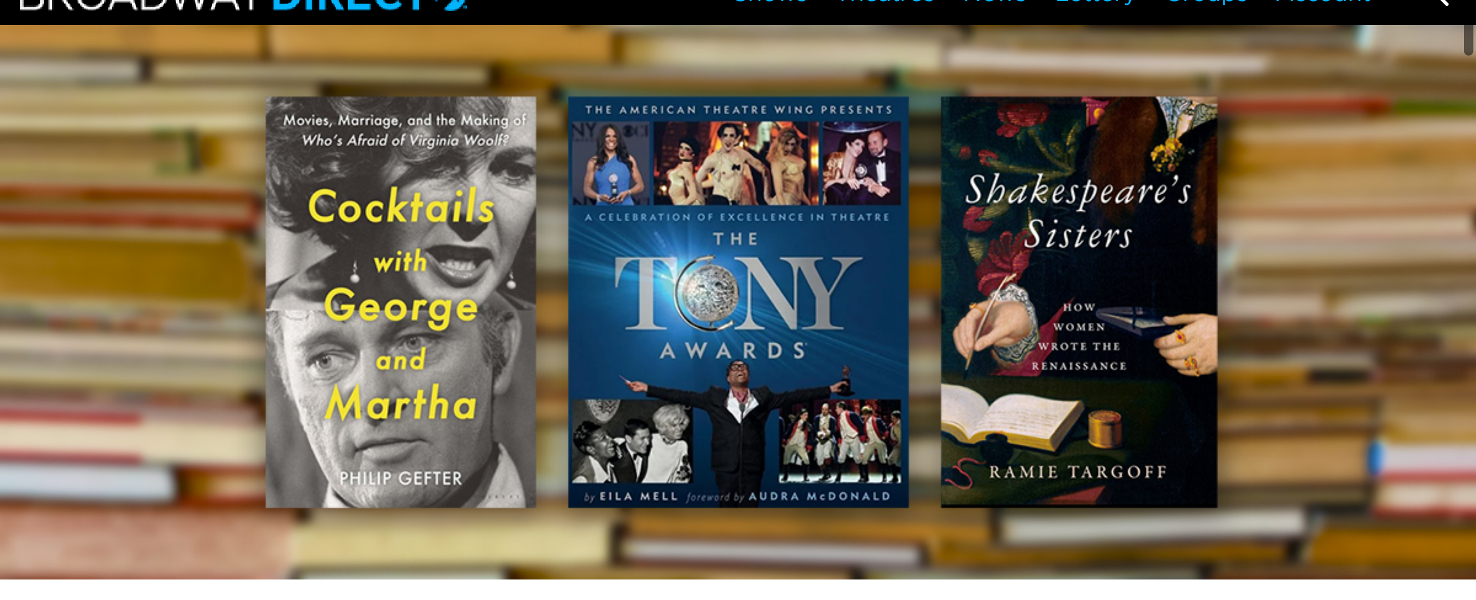

THE BEST NEW THEATER BOOKS OF SPRING 2024

MICHAEL GILTZ | APRIL 2, 2024

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Broadway Direct spotlights the best theater books of the season, just for you.

***Cocktails With George and Martha: Movies, Marriage, and the Making of* Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?**
By Philip Gefter
$32, Bloomsbury Publishing

Edward Albee's deliciously entertaining play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* proved a resounding success on Broadway. But everyone agreed on one thing: This sexually frank drama would *never* be made into a movie. Philip Gefter's look at the show's tumultuous journey from controversial hit play to a remarkably successful critical and commercial hit film captures it all: fighting with Jack Valenti over dialogue like "screw" and "hump the hostess," casting changes from the proposed Bette Davis and James Mason to Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, and of course, theatrical genius Mike Nichols making one of the great cinematic debuts as director. Not to be missed.

What Have We Here?: Portraits of a Life
By Billy Dee Williams
$32, Knopf Publishing Group

He's famous the world over for playing Lando Calrissian in the *Star Wars* franchise, and for other hit films ranging from *Lady Sings the Blues* to the 1989 *Batman.* Billy Dee Williams is also a mainstay on the small screen, from the smash hit TV movie *Brian's Song* to recurring roles on everything from *Dynasty* and *General Hospital* to *The Hughleys.* His credits go on and on. But theater buffs know Williams as a Broadway baby — literally! He made his Broadway debut at the age of 7, returning again and again, including his break in *A Taste of Honey* in the 1960s, playing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in *I Have a Dream* in the 1970s, and taking over for James Earl Jones in the first Broadway production of *Fences* in the 1980s. We haven't even mentioned his lifelong passion for painting, how LSD saved his life, and much more in this engaging memoir.

Cirque Du Slay
By Rob Osler
$29.99, Crooked Lane Books

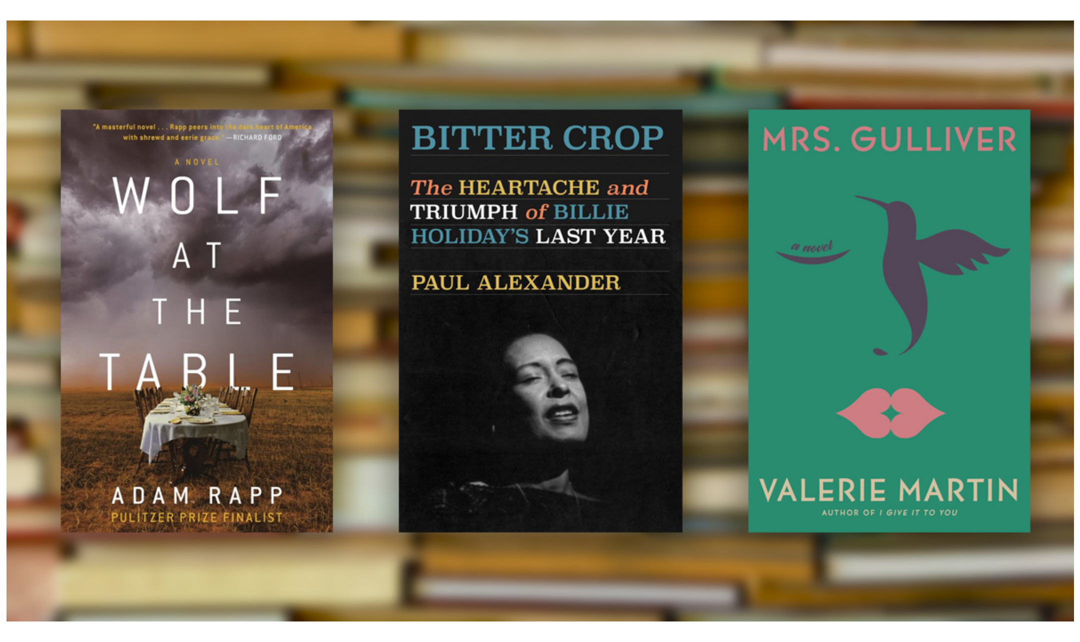
Author Rob Osler follows his lighthearted and award-winning debut, *Devil's Chew Toy,* with another mystery, this time with a circus setting. Middle school teacher, gay relationship blogger, and amateur sleuth Hayden McCall partners with his lesbian best pal, Hollister, to solve a crime. Now, they don't *like* their frenemy Sarah Lee, but they also don't think she killed the impresario behind Mysterium, a Cirque du Soleil–like troupe. The cast of suspects is as intriguing and unreliable as you'd expect from any traveling circus: a Russian trapeze artist, indecently fit Romanian male acrobats, a cowgirl sharpshooter, plus behind-the-scenes figures no less exotic and all with a reason to see their boss dead. It's silly, serious, sexy, and great fun for fans of mysteries and the greatest show on earth.

The Tony Awards
By Eila Mell
Foreword by Audra McDonald
$55, Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers

What's it like to win a Tony? More than 100 artists share their story with author Eila Mell in this coffee-table-worthy tome endorsed by the American Theatre Wing. With a foreword by Audra McDonald — the most Tony'd actor ever — the book is bursting with anecdotes from behind-the-scenes talent and a host of stars, including Chita Rivera, Hugh Jackman, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Carol Burnett, Matthew Broderick, Angela Lansbury, Martin Short, Patti LuPone, Mel Brooks, and on and on. Catnip.

Piper Chen Sings
By Phillipa Soo and Maris Pasquale Doran
Illustrated by Qin Leng
$19.99, Random House Studio

You'd be surprised at how many theater actors get nervous before a performance. Tony-nominated and Grammy-winning star Phillipa Soo draws on her own memories of childhood stage fright to create her first picture book. Cowritten by Maris Pasquale Doran and illustrated by Qin Leng of *A Family Is a Family Is a Family* fame, *Piper Chen Sings* is about a little girl who jumps at the chance to solo at a school concert… and then gets jittery. Luckily, Piper's grandmother is ready with some helpful advice. Casually weaving in the Chinese word for *grandma* (Nai Nai) and other cultural details, Soo's story about Piper offers a universal story of how anyone can find the strength to pipe up and turn those *húdié*, or butterflies, into wings to help them soar.



Wolf at the Table
By Adam Rapp
$30, Little Brown and Company

When does writer Adam Rapp sleep? Rapp is known by theater lovers for his many terrific plays, including the Tony-nominated *The Sound Inside* and the Pulitzer Prize finalist *Red Light Winter.* Now Rapp is definitely having a moment. He's the showrunner on the acclaimed drama *American Rust* starring Jeff Daniels and Maura Tierney, which just debuted its second season on Prime Video. On Broadway, he's the cowriter of the book for the new musical ***The Outsiders***. And amid all that, he has a new novel out. Titled *Wolf at the Table,* it's about a family harboring a serial killer, the violence that haunts America literally at home. No less than novelist Richard Ford calls it "masterful," an adjective people will be saying again and again this year about Rapp.

Bitter Crop: The Heartache and Triumph of Billie Holiday's Last Year
By Paul Alexander
$32, Knopf Publishing Group

Audra McDonald has six Tony Awards on her shelf, more than any other actor in history. She's also the only person to win a Tony in all four acting categories: lead and supporting for both musicals and plays. The final piece of the puzzle came when McDonald won best actress in a play for her performance as Billie Holiday in *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill.* It captures Holiday performing in the final year of her life. (And that Tony may have been for a play, but McDonald delivered a jaw-dropping interpretation of Holiday's singing that we would have laid money was simply *not* in McDonald's wheelhouse. But apparently, anything is.) Now writer Paul Alexander takes a look at the final year of Holiday's life. Though it's called *Bitter Crop,* there is also artistic triumph in what Holiday accomplishes. And this riveting story about one of the great artists of the 20th century is already one of the most highly acclaimed books of the year. Like McDonald, it will be remembered come awards season.

Mrs. Gulliver
By Valerie Martin
$28, Doubleday Books

Take a little *Romeo & Juliet,* add a dash of *The Tempest,* and you've got *Mrs. Gulliver.* It's 1954, and on Verona Island, sex work is legal. So brothel owner Lila Gulliver is happy to take in the blind – but beautiful! – young Carità and put the girl to work. When the feckless – but handsome! – son of the wealthiest family on the island pays a call, he falls hard for Carità. Mrs. Gulliver rolls her eyes because she's seen it all before. But Carità has her own ideas. Best-selling author Valerie Martin knows how to bring a fresh perspective to classic tales – her breakout novel, *Mary Reilly,* was inspired by Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* Here, she takes on the tropes of Shakespeare. Fans of her earlier work like *Property, The Ghost of the Mary Celeste,* and *Italian Lover* will be eager to discover if this is a tale full of woe – like that of Juliet and Romeo – or a tempestuous but happier romance.

Shakespeare's Sisters: How Women Wrote the Renaissance
By Ramie Targoff
$33, Knopf Publishing Group

Virginia Woolf once famously said in her essay *A Room of One's Own* that women as talented as William Shakespeare simply weren't allowed to make use of their talents in his time. What treasures have we lost because they never had the chance to shine? Pish, says Ramie Targoff. In her new history, this Brandeis professor uncovers the buried treasure of four women who *did* manage to craft a life as writers, against all odds. You'll learn about the first woman in the 1600s to publish a book of poetry, another who published the first original play by a woman, and a third who fought in the courts for her inheritance and privately kept a diary worthy of Pepys. They rank alongside the one well-known figure here – Mary Sidney, who did it all (poetry, plays, even a translation of the Psalms) and was accounted alongside her brother Philip, Edmund Spenser, and, yes, Shakespeare as one of the notable writers of the day. Buried treasure, perhaps, but no longer.

Bury the Lead
By Kate Hilton and Elizabeth Renzetti
$17.99, Spiderline

In this launch of a new cozy mystery series, a big-city journalist heads to a small town with her dreams of ink-stained glory all but shattered. Cat Conway is reduced to working at the tiny *Quill & Packet,* a local paper whose idea of a big story is for Cat to profile the hammy but famous actor starring in a local production of *Inherit the Wind.* When that actor is murdered, Cat might feel guilty that it took his death for her to get a shot at big-time glory again. But, no, she is after all a journalist. Now she just needs to figure out whodunit. The star's ex-wife? The snubbed actor who felt the man ruined his career? The (many) women he treated poorly and even abused? Heck, even the local baker has a grudge. Cat better find out, because the murderer wants to kill the story — and her in the bargain.

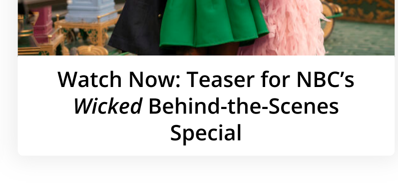
Great Expectations
By Vinson Cunningham
$28, Hogarth Press

Author Vinson Cunningham is a staff writer and theater critic at *The New Yorker*… but perhaps not for long. Drawing on his time as a staffer on Barack Obama's first presidential campaign, Cunningham delivers a debut novel that encompasses politics, family, American culture, religion, fatherhood, and our hero's place in it. To call it acclaimed would be to slight the praise he's getting. Maybe Cunningham will turn it into a play? Otherwise, the theater world might have already lost him for good. A bold title – taking on the name of a masterpiece by Charles Dickens isn't for the faint of heart – but Cunningham lives up to it. Now, if only he'd had the nerve to call the protagonist Pip…

Michael Giltz is cohost of the weekly entertainment podcast Showbiz Sandbox *and oversees book coverage at* Parade.com. *He covers all areas of entertainment as a journalist, critic, feature writer, and analyst. Giltz has written for numerous outlets, including the* New York Daily News, New York Post, New York Magazine, the Los Angeles Times, Huffington Post, Entertainment Weekly, *and* The Advocate. *When Michael's not attending theater, he's reading about it.*

NEWS:

Auli'i Cravalho on *Moana 2* and Being the First Disney Princess to Age



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