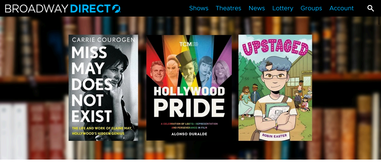

THE BEST NEW THEATER BOOKS OF SUMMER 2024

MICHAEL GILTZ | JULY 2, 2024

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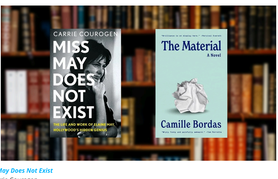
Broadway Direct spotlights the best theater books of the summer, just for you.

Whew! It's hot out there! Thank goodness for Broadway and theater all over the country: They're a cool oasis, but also a hotbed of creativity and excitement. Heck, we'll even do outdoor theater (though, hopefully it starts at dusk! While you're getting ready for your next Broadway show or touring production or local community production or even theater camp (we wish we were), here are some of the best books by and about theater to read and enjoy before the curtain rises on your next great performance.

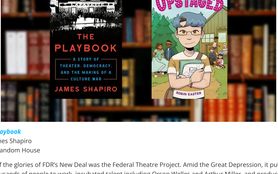


Miss May Does Not Exist
By Carrie Couragen
$30, St. Martin's Press

Elaine May revolutionized theater thanks to her improvisational work with Mike Nichols as a comedy duo. They stormed into the New York scene and conquered Broadway with their show *An Evening With Mike Nichols and Elaine May* in 1960. It won a Grammy Award for their lightning-in-a-bottle work that both celebrated and mocked the sophisticated audiences who flocked to their performances. But it was almost 60 years later before May won a Tony, for her performance in a revival of *The Waverly Gallery*. In between? She revolutionized film comedy as a performer, writer, and director on works like *A New Leaf*, *Heaven Can Wait*, *The Heartbreak Kid*, and, yes, *Ishtar*. (It made money, you know!) One of the smartest performers in theatrical history, the very private May receives her due in this new biography by Carrie Couragen.

The Material
By Camille Bordas
$28, Random House

Elaine May knows the perils and promise of stand-up. She'd probably love this new novel by Camille Bordas. It follows students who attend a Chicago MFA program in stand-up even though everyone wrestles with the idea of "teaching" comedy — just as generations argue over whether writing programs can really teach writing (or, rather, writing anyone wants to read). *The Material* tosses a grenade-launching visiting artist to roil things up for students who are insecure, needy, and hilarious *off* stage, but are wildly overconfident and too good-looking to be funny, and so on. One thing the critics agree on: A book about stand-up comedy better be funny. And it is.

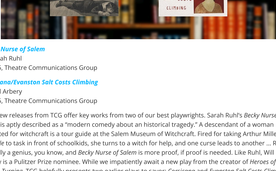


The Playbook
By James Shapiro
$30, Random House

One of the glories of FDR's New Deal was the Federal Theatre Project. Amid the Great Depression, it put tens of thousands of people to work, incubated talent including Orson Welles and Arthur Miller, and produced shows all over the country. Its shows — like the legendary all-Black Othello staged by Welles — were seen by more than 30 million people (about one in four of all Americans), most of whom had never seen a professional production. Naturally, this couldn't continue. The far right attacked it, and their playbook in taking down a wildly successful program has been studied and repurposed ever since. James Shapiro tells the story with its highs and lows and warnings for today.

Upstaged
By Robin Easter
$12.99, Little Brown Ink

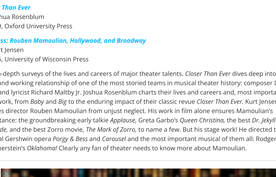
Robin Easter's delightful graphic novel captures the drama of summer theater camp with a light, comforting touch. Ash is the stage manager for the big production, and their best friend, Ivy, is the star. Ash wants to be more than a best friend, and maybe this summer, this final hurrah before high school is the right time? But maybe not? But maybe? The show may include a clever carriage for Cinderella, but *Upstaged* is no fairy tale. (Well ...) It succeeds by being real about the challenges of putting on a show and the challenges of friends who are growing up and maybe growing a little apart.



Becky Nurse of Salem
By Sarah Ruhl
$17.95, Theatre Communications Group

Corsicana/Evanston Salt Costs Climbing
By Will Arbery
$18.95, Theatre Communications Group

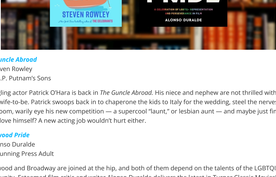
Two new releases from TCG offer key works from two of our best playwrights. Sarah Ruhl's *Becky Nurse of Salem* is aptly described as a "modern comedy about an historical tragedy." A descendant of a woman executed for witchcraft is a tour guide at the Salem Museum of Witchcraft. Fresh off taking Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* to task in front of schoolkids, she turns to a witch for help, and one curse leads to another ... Ruhl is officially a genius, you know, and *Becky Nurse of Salem* is more proof, if proof is needed. Like Ruhl, Will Arbery is a Pulitzer Prize nominee. While we impatiently await a new play from the creator of *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, TCG helpfully presents two earlier plays to savor: *Corsicana* and *Evanston Salt Costs Climbing*.



Closer Than Ever
By Joshua Rosenblum
$40.19, Oxford University Press

Peerless: Rouben Mamoulian, Hollywood, and Broadway
By Kurt Jensen
$34.95, University of Wisconsin Press

Two in-depth surveys of the lives and careers of major theater talents. *Closer Than Ever* dives deep into the work and working relationship of one of the most storied teams in musical theater history: composer David Shire and lyricist Richard Maltby Jr. Joshua Rosenblum charts their lives and careers and, most importantly, their work, from *Baby* and *Big* to the enduring impact of their classic revue *Closer Than Ever*. Kurt Jensen rescues director Rouben Mamoulian from unjust neglect. His work in film alone ensures Mamoulian's importance: the groundbreaking early talkie *Applause*, Greta Garbo's *Queen Christina*, the best *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and the best Zorro movie, *The Mark of Zorro*, to name a few. But his stage work! He directed the original Gershwin opera *Porgy & Bess* and *Carousel* and the most important musical of them all: Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* Clearly any fan of theater needs to know more about Mamoulian.



The Guncle Abroad
By Steven Rowley
$29, G.P. Putnam's Sons

Struggling actor Patrick O'Hara is back in *The Guncle Abroad*. His niece and nephew are not thrilled with their dad's wife-to-be. Patrick swoops back in to chaperone the kids to Italy for the wedding, steel the nerves of the groom, warily eye his new competition — a supercool "taunt," or lesbian aunt — and maybe just find some love himself? A new acting job wouldn't hurt either.

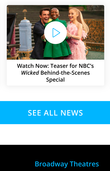
Hollywood Pride
By Alonso Duralde
$40, Running Press Adult

Hollywood and Broadway are joined at the hip, and both of them depend on the talents of the LGBTQIA+ community. Esteemed film critic and writer Alonso Duralde delivers the latest in Turner Classic Movies' coffee-table-worthy books about cinema. But here you don't just get a fun overview of queer movies and lots of stills; you also get an in-depth history of the talent that made movies, the films that were out and proud in the silent and early talkie eras, closeted for decades and then spoke truth to power again with films like *Desert Hearts* and *Brokeback Mountain* and so many others. Even ardent fans of cinema will discover movies they've never heard of, not to mention movies they hadn't thought about as queer but most definitely are. And time and again you'll see the connection between stage plays turned into films like *The Children's Hour* or *Advise and Consent*, the different challenges stage plays faced versus movies, and the creative interplay between Broadway and L.A. It's an engaging read that could easily become a textbook for college film classes. Most of all, it will have you streaming movies for months to come.

Michael Giltz is Parade.com's bookologist, in charge of overseeing the iconic website's books coverage and writing its major stories. He also covers all areas of entertainment as a journalist, critic, feature writer, podcaster and analyst. Giltz has written for many outlets, including the New York Daily News, New York Post, New York Magazine, the Los Angeles Times, Huffington Post, Entertainment Weekly, *and* The Advocate, *among others. When Michael's not attending theater, he's reading about it.*

NEWS:

Aug01 Cravalho on Moana 2 and Being the First Disney Princess to Age



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