

## **Review: Kirsty Sedgman, Francesca Coppa and Matt Hills, *Theatre Fandom: Engaged Audiences in the 21st Century*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2025.**

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In *Theatre Fandom: Engaged Audiences in the 21st Century*, Kirsty Sedgman, Francesca Coppa, and Matt Hills (2025) work at the intersections of fan studies and theatre/performance studies to suggest that theatre fandom, as once was believed, is not an embarrassing or ‘wrong’ supplement to theatre spectatorship, but it actually is one of the ways with which theatre has lived and understood. The volume argues that the ‘elite’ theatre culture has long treated its most dedicated audiences/lovers/fans with suspicion, precisely because of them being fans; however, it is in the fan practices that contemporary spectatorship, identity, and power can become visible in theatre. Across fourteen articles, the volume suggests that theatre is not only what happens on stage, but also what audiences do with performances across time and space, and through memory, repetition, and creative transformation. As a result, the book puts itself as both an opening and a corrective: theatre fandom exists, but scholarship has not always been willing to name or theorise it, since theatre and performance studies can complicate what fandom looks like when its object is embodied and ephemeral.

The book is organised into three sections: ‘What Makes a Theatre Fan’, ‘Liveness versus Mediatization’, and ‘Bodies and Identities’. Each section is an intervention into fans and performance studies at once. While each article questions the assumption that fandom is a noisy, immature enthusiasm, mainly organised around re-playable media, for theatre and performance studies, each chapter unsettles an ontology of liveness derived from (mostly) Peggy Phelan’s (1993: 146) theories that performance ‘cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations’. The collection traces theatre fandom as a networked set of practices: from repeated attendance and serious leisure, ‘... a concept coined by Robert Stebbins (1992) to denote hobbies that are substantial, interesting, and fulfilling’ (Sedgman et al., 2025: 47), to fan pilgrimage,<sup>1</sup> the volume offers a rich and coherent model for rethinking what theatrical spectatorship looks like in the twenty-first century.

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<sup>1</sup> As it is highlighted in the volume, ‘... a theatre visit is always an act of fan pilgrimage’ (Sedgman et al., 2025: 12).

In my opinion, the conceptual core of the collection lies in the first section, since it expands what can count as fandom in a theatrical context. Here fandom emerges as an everyday long-term dedication for theatre. In chapter one, written by Stephanie E. Pitts, Sarah M. Price, and Helen Freshwater, the concept of private fandom is introduced, which can be described as high-frequency theatre attenders whose loyalty and commitment does not necessarily translate into the usual fan practices.<sup>2</sup> This chapter's strength is in turning to an apparently simple question of 'do you call yourself a fan?' into a tool for exploring the boundaries of genuine audience behaviour. Tom Cantrell's chapter, then, develops chapter one's core concept through the case of Daniel Kitson's stand-up performances by arguing that theatrical ephemerality does not limit fandom. He explains how knowing that a show cannot be exactly repeated can increase fandom attachment rather than reducing it.

Chapter three, written by Ben Walmsley, draws on 'serious leisure' concept and proposes a typology of theatre fans: groupies, reflectors, collectors, autodidacts, art lovers, disciples, addicts, etc. This typology helps to explain how different spectators think, behave and benefit from their engagements with performances. Caroline Heim then pushes this typology further in the next chapter by discussing that performative pleasure is at core of theatre spectatorship. She asks: 'what distinguishes fan pleasure from a non-fan pleasure?' Because theatre usually cannot be replayed, fans create an 'afterlife' for the performance to extend the pleasure of theatre. They usually do that by reperforming the show. This interpretation explains how fans solve the frustration of theatre ephemerality by making the show live on, in, and through their bodies and creative practices. In the next chapter, Megan Vaughan shifts the focus from fan's embodiment to fan's discourse by exploring theatre criticism as fandom and introducing fanzines as foundations of contemporary theatre fandom. For Vaughan, fandom is not just consuming the fan object, but it is a way of producing cultural meaning and authority. Overall, this section exhibits that what makes a theatre fan is less of a matter of self-labelling than of what spectators do to make theatre matter in their lives.

In the second section, 'Liveness versus Mediatization', the collection's central paradox, which is that theatre's liveness is 'both unimportant and essential',<sup>3</sup> is being addressed. This section shows how fandom requires theatre to have afterlives through recordings, broadcasts, online clips, para-texts, and memory, while still investing in its core liveness.

Arguing that both theatre and fandom now function within a shared system of generalised transmedia in chapter six, Matt Hills acknowledges theatre studies' attachment to liveness as a defining value, however, he insists that performances progressively circulate via social media, filmed broadcasts, fan-produced content, etc. Hills argues that currently, liveness works as a connection within a wider network of representations rather than an ontological exterior to mediation.

Through the framework of fan tourism and pilgrimage, Ruth Foulis's chapter on *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* complicates the idea of the theatre ticket as a discrete transaction; the live performance becomes one moment in a chain of mediated and embodied engagements, from reading the script to watching YouTube clips to posting reviews and

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<sup>2</sup> Pitts, Price and Freshwater explain that as 'audience membership that has the compulsion and intensity of fan behaviour, but little of its public display and a low regard for explicit connections with fan communities' (Sedgman et al., 2025: 24).

<sup>3</sup> It is stressed in the volume that 'when it comes to theatre fandom, then, the liveness of a live performance is both unimportant and essential; it is simultaneously weakened and strengthened by acts of transformative mediatization' (Sedgman et al., 2025: 12).

photos online. Chapter eight and nine draw on fan studies understandings of spectators as meaning-making collaborators to suggest that mediated theatre objects, such as unofficial recordings, etc. can become hubs of lively networked contemporary theatre culture. As a result, the chapter removes the hierarchy and invites theatre scholars to see mediated afterlives as part of a performance as well. The second section of the volume neither denies the importance of liveness nor accepts the claim that performance must disappear to count as 'real' theatre. For a reader that is interested in how contemporary theatre spectatorship is re-imagined and re-configured, this section provides a model that moves beyond simple binaries of live versus mediated.<sup>4</sup>

'Bodies and Identities' section questions the narrative of theatre's historical spectatorship movement from participatory audiences to silent spectatorship. Here, Sedgman in conversation with Dominique Morisseau asks why quietness came to be associated with reasonableness and investigates inequality within audiences' bodies and whether we should comply with these norms or not.

*Hamilton* and 'Hamifans' are case studies in Sarah K. Whitfield's chapter. Through that, she critically questions the LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream theatre and the industry power. Whitfield shows how producers can tolerate or even encourage fans' LGBTQ+ interpretations in para-texts.<sup>5</sup> In this context, fandom becomes both creative and critical: fans create inclusive meanings and imaginaries, yet their work reveals the limits of what institutions are willing to risk, since fandom is not just about pleasure but about challenging who is visible and valued on and off stage. Next chapter by Owen G. Parry follows Francesca Coppa's work on fanfiction as performative spectatorship to suggest the notion of fanformance, which describes how fans inhabit fictional worlds through live art practices. This chapter explains fandom as an ongoing performative practice in which the line between spectator and maker blurs.

Emily Garside in chapter twelve asks how we can measure a lifetime as a musical fan and uses *Rent* the musical traces of fan practices from analogue to online phenomenon and argues how fandom changes as both audiences and texts age. This perspective matches the book's emphasis on theatre afterlives by suggesting that fandom itself transforms generationally. The next chapter by Beth Emily Richards brings the whole connection back to fandom, archiving and cultural memory. She focuses on her practice-based verbatim project on Michael Jackson's visit to Exeter City Football Club to show how verbatim theatre becomes as a fan-studies methodology by breaking the consistency of fandom narratives into multiple discursive strands and shows how fandom contributes to the making and re-making of cultural memory. The next chapter as the closing chapter of the volume reflects on musical fans as 'global citizens' (Sedgman et al., 2025: 214) by studying the touring of well-known musicals around the world and their fans' pilgrimages to watch these shows in different points of the world.

*Theatre Fandom: Engaged Audiences in the 21st Century* offers a new coherent argument that reframes core questions about ephemerality and afterlife in theatre, and new forms of theatre spectatorship and fandom. If there is a limitation to this book, it is one the editors themselves acknowledge and that is the need for more scholarship that looks beyond

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<sup>4</sup> As the contributors mention as well, 'Philip Auslander (2008) and others have already pointed out that the binary between the live and the mediated is in many ways false' (Sedgman et al., 2025: 129).

<sup>5</sup> Such as interviews, social media, ancillary materials, etc.

the Global North and builds comparative perspectives.<sup>6</sup> Even so, for readers thinking about archives, testimony, and cultural memory, the book's insistence on afterlives is particularly resonant. Also, for theatre fans themselves, the book acts as an acknowledgement on their affective labour and their identity building through repetition that crystallised into a sense of theatre not as a one-off event but as a practice of becoming, remembering, and belonging.

## Biographical Note

Mahsa Sheydani is a Doctoral Researcher in creative arts (performance studies and drama) at Loughborough university. With a background in Theatre, Dramatic Literature, and Media Arts, her research explores the relationship between performance, memory, and archives, with a particular focus on how performance can become a site of cultural memory and political resonance. She engages with documentary theatre, counter-archives, and the poetics of absence to explore this dynamic.

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## References

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<sup>6</sup> The editors acknowledge that 'a serious limitation is the relative lack of contributors from the global majority and the total lack of scholarship on fan practices outside the global north. This book is therefore just a prolegomena—a concerted foray into an emerging field, but one with the potential to expand to encompass fandoms of performance forms that are less dominant or mainstream, or that otherwise sit outside the white Western canon' (Sedgman et al., 2025: 9-10).