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Amateur Biographies

Attempting to Fill Archival Gaps

Abstract

The biography of nineteenth-century amateur performers defies typical biographical formulae due to the paucity of information available about these performers and their productions. The story of the Lawrence sisters added another layer of challenge: determining how to contextualize an ephemeral art form within the biographical history of two women when one of them left an autobiography that, interestingly, attempts to follow typical biographical structure and yet, upon deeper analysis, only introduces yet more unverifiable knowledge gaps. By acknowledging and analyzing those gaps and the challenges they present, an organic narrative can develop—a narrative which speaks to the complexities of this work and the challenges of telling the lives of those whom history might otherwise neglect. The biography becomes, thus, the story of women whose history is imperfectly recorded and a vehicle for a discussion of a popular art form which does not readily lend

itself to being archived, while also providing a narrative of the historiographical and historical possibilities that the past presents through its gaps.

Keywords

amateur theatricals, amateur theater, Rita and Alice Lawrence, biography

Abstrakt

Biografie amatorów: Wokół prób wypełniania luk archiwalnych

Biografie dziewiętnastowiecznych artystów-amatorów trudno wpisać w typowy dla gatunku format ze względu na niedostatek informacji o tego rodzaju wykonawcach i ich występach. Z historią sióstr Lawrence wiąże się dodatkowe wyzwanie: jak kontekstualizować efemeryczną sztukę amatorów w ramach biograficznej historii dwóch kobiet, gdy jedna z nich pozostawiła autobiografię, która wprawdzie stanowi próbę realizacji wzorca tradycyjnej biografii, ale – poddana głębszej analizie – jedynie powiększa liczbę niemożliwych do zweryfikowania luk. Dzięki rozpoznaniu i analizie tych luk oraz problemów, jakie z nich wynikają, można wypracować organiczną narrację odzwierciedlającą złożony charakter pracy badawczej i trudności związane z opowiadaniem o życiu osób, które historia mogłaby pominąć. Biografia staje się więc opowieścią o kobietach, których historia została utrwalona w sposób ułomny, platformą do dyskusji o sztuce popularnej, która niełatwo poddaje się archiwizacji, a zarazem narracją na temat historiograficznych i historycznych możliwości, jakie przeszłość uobecnia za sprawą swoich luk.

Słowa kluczowe

występy amatorskie, teatr amatorski, Rita i Alice Lawrence, biografia

The biography of nineteenth-century amateur performers defies typical biographical formulae due to the paucity of information available about these performers and their productions. Archival production materials, if surviving, often were created by the amateurs themselves, rarely providing a reliable narrative upon which the biographer can base the work. Newspaper mentions, while more common toward the end of the nineteenth century for certain performers, are equally fraught as their unattributed content often seems to have been sourced from a combination of submitted show notices and society column updates. Rather than following a structure of early history, noteworthy productions, and scandals, the biographer of the amateur performer is most often left grasping for limited details or trying to determine provenance. This article traces the challenges of structuring a book-length research project based on Rita and Alice Lawrence, two amateur theatrical performers working in late nineteenth-century New York City, but with application to any biographer working with limited source materials. When details are scarce and gaps numerous, organic structural development and cultural contexts become critical for telling the story, and yet those contexts can also remain elusive or, when known, threaten to overwhelm the biographical narrative. The biographer is left, then, perpetually balancing the narrative needs of the reader with the responsibilities of historical representation, weighing the pull of the few documented moments which may well not be representative of the whole, and grappling with the numerous gaps which prevent the development of a clear linear narrative. By acknowledging and analyzing those gaps and the historiographical challenges they present, an organic narrative can develop in lieu of a linear one—a narrative which speaks to the complexities of this work and the challenges of telling the lives of those whom history might otherwise neglect.

While all biographers face gaps, amateur practitioners in this period present specific challenges as people who may not have had archives, may not have

I am particularly indebted to the undergraduate research assistants who have worked on various research tasks related to this project: Cricket Carletta, Amy Jacaruso, Thomas Lotito, and Ashleigh Whitfield. Without their willingness to assist me in tracking down and organizing nearly 2000 data points and documents, the through-lines of the project and intersections between item types would be impossible to connect. I am also grateful to the staff at the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library for all of their assistance with the Lawrence materials and the image archive. Likewise, I wish to thank the staffs at the Sheffield Archives, The Liverpool Record Office, and the LSE Library Archives and Special Collections for their assistance accessing collections on Juliana Horatia Ewing and Beatrice Potter Webb early in my quest for evidence of theatrical practice. Finally, this article benefited from grants from Dean Martin Shaffer and Vice President Thomas Wermuth at Marist College, and I wish to thank them for their support.

saved or even communicated about their work in letters, rarely made news outside of society columns, did not have celebrity, were rarely included in others' correspondence, and generally remain known only through decontextualized snippets. Additionally, theater's ephemeral nature presents perpetual challenges for historians, and the work of many amateurs in the nineteenth century, while perhaps recorded for personal posterity through handwritten programs or scripts, has largely been lost to the historian as few lived lives were deemed worthy of archiving. While archive space limits are a factor in the creation of these caesurae, the complex interplay between amateur and professional work and the presumptive value of amateur performance, historically, also impacts what materials are archived.¹ Even when institutional accession policies did archive the work of an amateur theatrical performer, their identity as such is rarely the reason their materials are preserved; instead, historians are presented with remnants of a life which included a brief foray into theater.² The majority of practitioners of this popular fad have been lost to history, appearing but occasionally in undated and unlabeled photographs or in playbills with limited clues about provenance (FIGS. 1 and 2).

While all biographers must be open to the story that rises from their sources, the biographer of amateurs would be well served by expanding beyond typical biographical frameworks and engaging deeply in the gaps in the archive. As Mary Isbell notes, "the value of the material traces" in extant documents "lies in the questions they prompt."³ Embracing those questions and their potential unanswerability, while exploring the knowledge gaps which remain, is the key to conducting research into amateur theatricals and other work with limited

¹ For a consideration of theatrical ephemera collections by private individuals and public institutions, see Eve Margitta Smith, "Private Passions, Public Archives: Approaches to the Private Collector and Collection of Theatrical Ephemera in the Context of the Public Theatre Archive" (PhD diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2016), https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/files/26997120/Eve_Smith_Thesis_Post_Viva_Corrections_signed.pdf. For a discussion of the shifting scholarly approaches to amateur research and key theoretical concerns, see, for example, Nadine Holdsworth, Jane Milling, and Helen Nicholson, "Theatre, Performance, and the Amateur Turn," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 27, no. 1 (2017): 4–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10.486801.2017.1266229>. Holdsworth, Milling, and Nicholson argue for "the amateur turn" in research and practice in the early twenty-first century while tracing the sources of the "neglect of amateur creativity" (8) in the twentieth; the emergence of this broad body of work and its active discussion of the worth and ways of considering amateur theater, amateurishness, and the ever-complex relationship between amateur and professional theater, may well reduce some of the challenges detailed herein for future historians of some contemporary forms of amateur theater.

² Consider, as two examples, the letters of economist Beatrice Potter Webb, held at the London School of Economics and Liverpool Record Office Archive, and the diaries and handwritten family newspapers of author Juliana Horatia Ewing, held at the Sheffield City Archives. Both are culturally significant and have had materials archived for reasons unrelated to their theatrical endeavors, which makes those brief mentions of theater accessible to researchers.

³ Mary Isbell, "Amateurs: Home, Shipboard, and Public Theatricals in the Nineteenth Century" (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 2013), 66.

FROM THE AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

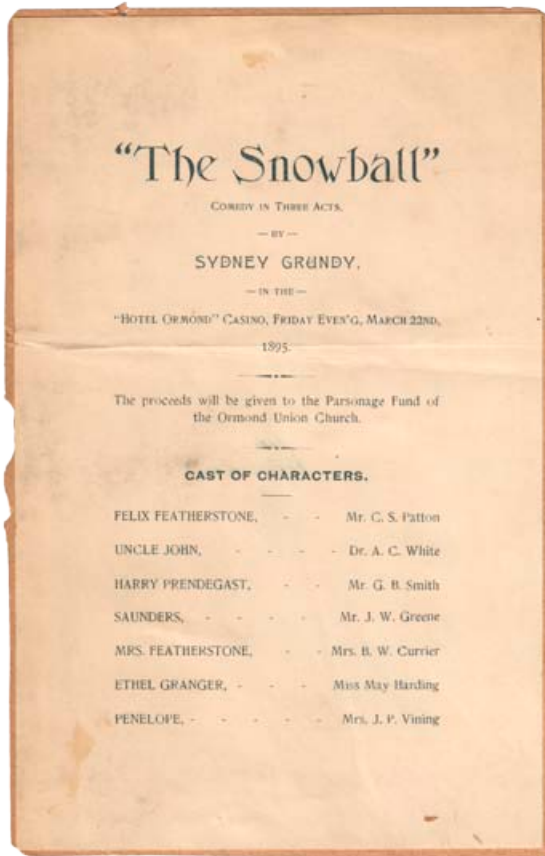


FIG. 1 A typical amateur theatrical document: a program from 1895 for a charitable performance of Sydney Grundy's comedy *The Snowball*. Purchased online, and removed from its scrapbook, the program lacks provenance beyond what can be surmised from the text. Assuming this community is in Ormond Beach, Florida, there is a chance that a local investigation might uncover more about the participants, the hall, or the fund.

source material. For each historian, a biography's content balance becomes a central question to answer; for instance, is this a biography about a person, the contexts (e.g. production, class, societal) in which they lived, or is this a biography about historiographical process? I would argue that the approach taken cannot be established at the outset of research, but rather the narrative

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FIG. 2 A photographic postcard with even less provenance than the Ormond program, also purchased online. Custom tells us that these children are not dressed in typical everyday clothes, but who they are, why they are costumed, and whether this is a holiday or a theatrical or a game in the yard remains unclear. They were photographed, and that photograph was produced as a postcard and mailed to Surrey, England.

must emerge as elements are considered, gaps are explored, and questions are answered or left unanswered. The extant materials must be played off of each other and secondary sources, so that an organic narrative will emerge, lest the historian become frustrated by the inability to piece together a linear history.

For example, the story of Alice (1863–1895) and Rita (1866–1943) Lawrence could, perhaps, be told through a more typical biographical framework, but information is at times scarce and the value in their history as amateur theatrical

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FIG. 3 A plate from Rita Lawrence's memoir, *Amateurs and Actors of the 19th-20th Centuries (American, English, Italian)*. Alice and Rita Lawrence are shown here in costume for a production of Denery and Clement's *Ernestine*, translated and adapted by T. W. Robertson. The sisters performed *Ernestine* at least four times, including in 1888, 1889, 1892, and 1893.

practitioners in the late nineteenth century in New York is greater than a personal history. As sisters who were sufficiently well-off to not need to work and whose family shunned their ideas of embarking on professional acting careers, the Lawrences had the time, means, and connections to instead fashion themselves as amateur theatrical performers. Between 1882 and 1893, the sisters participated in scores of productions in New York and surrounding summer retreat towns. Most productions involved multiple short plays or plays paired with musical acts, and the vast majority were in rented theaters, town halls, hotel ballrooms, or other public spaces. Their extant archive and mentions throughout newspapers of the time provide a bare framework for a more standard theatrical biography

which could list productions, explore a few scandals, and provide what biographical information has survived. But the sisters and their theatricals are far more noteworthy and, frankly, interesting, as young women embracing public power, eschewing some traditional gender roles, and manipulating others—all explored through the contemporary fad for amateur theatricals. In addition, their archive is almost entirely comprised of material on amateur theater; thus, the story that develops organically from their materials is simultaneously one about theater and one about all that we cannot confirm about amateur theater from the period.

The Lawrence archive at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library is a trove of amateur production material housed in five scrapbooks, and yet the nature of that material—scores of programs, occasional clippings without provenance, photographic materials long ago removed by archivists and filed with other images to increase access, letters, tickets, and the like—often leads to more questions than answers, despite the relative wealth of information. Why, for instance, do we have this information available? Rita's will, like so much of her extant writing, only hints at a possible way that her scrapbooks, which she notes were with her in Italy toward the end of her life, made their way, after her death in January 1943 at a clinic in Switzerland, to New York and eventually to the Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The Lawrences lived in a tier of New York society that made it perhaps more likely that their materials might be archived, but they are not the Astors or Vanderbilts, and their more well-known relatives worked in law and politics, not theater. Alice and Rita both kept scrapbooks, and Rita wrote and apparently self-published an autobiography in 1936.⁴ Were it not for Rita Lawrence's seeming focus on documenting her theatrical legacy, it is doubtful that their theatrical production history would be available outside of newspaper and periodical references—where they were two of hundreds, if not thousands, of names associated with amateur theater, albeit two with a public presence. Indeed, a historian is left to wonder if their regular inclusion in the newspaper society columns was merely part of social life at the time, part of a broader focus on legacy, or an attempt to traffic in the celebrity some of their friends enjoyed, including Cora Urquhart Potter and Elsie de Wolfe, who embarked upon professional theater careers while the Lawrences remained working as amateurs.

The Lawrences' archival materials were exciting at first—particularly because they existed and included much more than my previous amateur research finds: at best, passing references to theatricals in a handful of letters amid boxes of

⁴ Rita Lawrence, *Amateurs and Actors of the 19th–20th Centuries (American, English, Italian)* (Menton: Editions France-Riviera, 1936).

materials. But as I work toward imagining how to tell this story of these sisters and their amateur career, it becomes clear that the extant materials raise many more questions than they ever answer and that the documents will not provide a clear narrative of their productions, much less their lives. Their programs, for example, saved lovingly in the five scrapbooks, provide limited insights into the sisters or the productions they staged except as can be derived from standard program information, though they do provide an interesting look at the ways amateurs appear to have mimicked professional trends. Images were removed due to collection policies and filed amid others by size, rendering it difficult to know which images of which actors came from the scrapbooks. Some letters did survive, and while they are nearly all about theatricals, they only hint at production processes and scandals, and many are from authors about whom little is known. In addition, all of these documents point to numerous other equally hard-to-locate and questionable sources. The surviving newspaper reviews, thankfully accessible through digitization, are largely unreliable society column coverage—more likely to list famous patrons and attendees than they are to provide any sense of the production and infrequently including serious critiques or descriptions. Further, some of the more than 600 newspaper mentions of their shows were written by friends and collaborators such as Valentine G. Hall, Edward Fales Coward, and William Fearing Gill.⁵ Some scripts survive, but many have not, and the sisters' reasons for choosing the scripts are almost entirely missing beyond occasional memoir references to enjoying success with certain texts. Even with five scrapbooks, an autobiography, and genealogical materials saved in government archives, gaps are numerous in their history, their co-performers' histories, and in the history of their theatricals.

A memoir, then, may lead to an initial cry of joy for a historian looking for additional context through which to read an archive of scrapbooks and newspaper clippings. Yet, we need to heed Viv Gardner's warning about autobiographical materials from those whom history does not celebrate:

For the feminist theatre historian—which is how in this context I would identify myself—the danger of overreliance on ostensibly authentic accounts

⁵ Notations in the scrapbook and some confirmation in newspaper archives suggest that the three men wrote variously for *Theatre*, *Town Topics*, *Home Journal*, *The Earth*, *Evening Sun*, *Evening Graphic*, *Truth*, *World*, and *New York Herald*. Jill A. Sullivan further explores some of the historiographical challenges of assessing newspaper reviews of amateur charitable performances in "Aint You Coming to Our Concert Tonight? The Court and Alley Concerts of Late-Victorian Britain," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 37, no. 1 (2010): 45–55, <https://doi.org/10.7227/NCTF.37.1.7>.

is compounded by personal and political investments in women's stories, particular those "hidden from history" by their apparent *lack* of glamour.⁶

Rita Lawrence's self-published memoir, flush with the personal insights that some biographers long to find,⁷ presents these and other challenges as she is quite clearly writing with an agenda and, frustratingly, often not writing about the performance specifics which would permit a stronger narrative about the sisters' productions. A loose assortment of memories published more than four decades after the events described, the memoir is fantastic and profoundly frustrating—a story of her theatrical life and viewing habits with few dates, many names, and a recounting of her friends and encounters with professionals. Quite a lot of her personality as an older woman also comes through, though her years as an amateur performer are clearly described with the distant pride and fondness of an older self; Rita asks us to believe they defied theatrical and other societal strictures, as woven throughout is the largely unspoken suggestion that she was sympathetic to the New Woman of the time. Interestingly, she does attempt to follow a standard biographical formula of highlighting scandals and trying to follow a roughly linear narrative and style of the era,⁸ if one largely bereft of dates and time markers and quite overflowing with name dropping—more than 1000 people are mentioned throughout. Thus, the materials about the Lawrence sisters added another layer of challenge to the more typical concerns of amateur theatrical research: determining how to contextualize an ephemeral art form within the biographical history of two women and their friends when one sister left an autobiography that, interestingly, attempts to follow typical biographical structure and yet, upon deeper analysis, only introduces yet more unverifiable knowledge gaps.

⁶ Viv Gardner, "Documents of Performance: *The Diary of an Actress: An Introduction*," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 32, no. 1 (2005): 3, <https://doi.org/10.7227/NCTF.32.1.3>.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, looking at turn of the century biography, argues that "[w]e can no longer maintain that life consists in actions only or in works. It consists in personality." Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography (1927)," in *Biography in Theory: Key Texts with Commentaries*, ed. Wilhelm Hemecker and Edward Saunders (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 120, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110516678-023>. This challenges of balancing this dichotomy between data and personality can be found in numerous responses to her work, including the particularly useful assessment by Elena Gualtieri, "The Impossible Art: Virginia Woolf on Modern Biography," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2000): 349–361, <https://doi.org/10.1093/camqtly/xxix.4.349>. Numerous contributors to *Theatre and AutoBiography* also speak to the role of the personal in the creation of biography and autobiography, Sherrill Grace and Jerry Wasserman, eds., *Theatre and AutoBiography: Writing and Performing Lives in Theory and Practice* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2006), Kindle.

⁸ For the intersections between autobiographical trends, self-presentation, performativity, and literature as seen in European theater autobiographies, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Thomas Postlewait, "Autobiography and Theatre History," in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*, ed. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 248–272.

Like extant letters and other autobiographical material, the memoir absolutely needs to be read as a performance which contains potential evidence,⁹ though her specific intended reading audience is unknown, as the book appears to have been self-published.¹⁰ If Rita is to be believed, for example, she and her sister Alice were often hanging about New York City theaters as children, stepping in to watch rehearsals and having conversations with famous actors;¹¹ is this a fond memory expanded and embellished to prove access to celebrity and grant validity to her own amateur career? The memoir has a palpable ennui under the pride—possibly born of annoyance at not having had a professional career and at wealthier members of her social circles; does this lead to a defiant retelling of the celebrities she knew? By “children” does she mean 6–10 years old or late teens and early twenties? They lived near enough to 5th Avenue at a time when some theaters were still in that part of the city, so were those the theaters? Were they going about unchaperoned in a tier of society that generally included chaperones? Is this braggadocio or is there a layer of fact underneath? And, crucially, even though she spends a couple of pages in her memoir regaling readers with such stories, are they vital for a larger discussion of her life? She clearly thinks so, but the manner of framing this discussion for the biographer becomes one fraught with questions that may never be answerable—such as whether or not theaters let the neighborhood kids wander in to watch rehearsals in the 1870s. This particular tale may not rise to the level of personal mythologizing that can occur in some source material—and that Leigh Woods models a deep analysis of in an assessment of biographies of Edmund Kean¹²—but the remark is but one example of the possibly unverifiable “truth” presented by a memoirist discussing a possible intersection of the audience and commercial theater.

The complexity of the reading challenge here is stark, but Maggie B. Gale offers a wonderful explanation of the intellectual mindset required when reading autobiographical material like Rita’s memoir:

I am suggesting that when we read actresses’ autobiographies we have to engage a number of reading mechanisms at any one time. Thus, we might

⁹ See in particular the introduction of Grace and Wasserman, *Theatre and AutoBiography*.

¹⁰ At least three copies of the memoir exist: the one I purchased online in 2006, which had a note included about print costs and runs, one at Columbia University, and one at Bibliothèque nationale de France.

¹¹ Lawrence, *Amateurs and Actors*, 21–23.

¹² Leigh Woods, “Actors’ Biography and Mythmaking: The Example of Edmund Kean,” in Postlewait and McConachie, *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, 230–247.

read autobiography just as we read performance: we look at the event and the context in which that event is embedded professionally, developmentally, aesthetically, technically, and temporally; we read performance vertically and after the event.¹³

This act of reading in multiple directions, and playing the content off of secondary research, works well enough when there is enough source material; with an historical record that is full of holes, however, the process produces seemingly never-ending lists of questions and newly identified gaps. Context becomes vital to locate so that it may provide external commentary, and yet that context may be flawed or absent.

Similarly, telling the narrative through a series of microhistories—focusing on the evidence of moments that do remain and can be contextualized—may result in a narrative that is too heavily focused on what survives and what we, as modern biographers and historians, either choose to discuss or are able to contextualize. Gilli Bush-Bailey, in explaining the methodology used in *Performing Herself: AutoBiography and Fanny Kelly's Dramatic Recollections*, grapples with these and related concerns with constructing her book:

I am challenged by [Thomas] Postlewait's assertion that "telling the story well is part of the mandate of microhistory," but I am also troubled by the prescriptive protocols and strategies that the execution of a rigorous work of microhistory implies and the challenges these offer for the less-than-secure facts and often muddled waters of women's theatre history.¹⁴

I share Bush-Bailey's concerns about letting any particular methodology overwhelm the work, and like her, prefer to mix methods as appropriate to the writing situation and content. For the Lawrences, such an approach would readily produce a biography that follows more standard proscriptive formats—some background, a few career highlights, and intriguing scandals. Sufficient tantalizing tidbits exist, but they do not provide a clear narrative arc when linked together; further, when read in their contexts, these documents instead continue to raise

¹³ Maggie B. Gale, "Autobiography, Gender, and Theatre Histories: Spectrums of Reading British Actresses' Autobiographies from the 1920s and 1930s," in Grace and Wasserman, *Theatre and AutoBiography*, 185–201.

¹⁴ Gilli Bush-Bailey, *Performing Herself: AutoBiography and Fanny Kelly's Dramatic Recollections* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 5; Bush-Bailey's work is a wonderful model of how to start with an autobiographical performance document and expand our understanding of it outwards using mixed methods, including microhistory and life history.

questions.¹⁵ Also, the microhistory approach does not tell the larger story that their fragmented materials could tell us about these women and, crucially, about amateur theater at the time. A broader version could instead be what Robin Fleming describes as works that are “as much about backdrop as star.”¹⁶ When faced with source material which, like Rita’s memoir, just keeps introducing and highlighting yet more gaps with each show and person named, expanding the story to a discussion of contexts may be logical and fruitful. Indeed, as Sherrill Grace remarks, “[s]ome of the best biographies are of minor figures within a larger cultural scene, and the remembering of that scene is as important as the individual life.”¹⁷ Following these leads, one approach could have been to sacrifice the sisters’ stories for the benefit of the whole discussion of theatricals as a trend, and this approach reflects where this project initially began, with me sifting through thousands of newspaper references to amateur theater thanks to recently digitized newspaper archives. The whole was important and the individuals were needles in the proverbial haystack. Yet, the haystack itself was far too hazy and unknowable, leading the research instead to focus on individuals like the Lawrences, in hopes of finding a clearer narrative to tell. And yet, their story also proved equally hazy.

Another approach to unearthing the story of an amateur may be to look at their collaborators, whose own histories might provide Fleming’s “backdrop” and about whom more may be known. The Lawrences occasionally collaborated with artists and authors such as David Belasco and Constance Cary Harrison, and Rita cherished a friendship with Cora Urquhart Potter, an amateur-turned-professional, but as two of scores of collaborators, the sisters rarely appear in extant materials on these figures. Most of the amateurs who feature in the Lawrences’ comparatively rich but still deeply limited archive are but mere mentions—names on programs or in Rita’s memoir, like a Mr. Maurey, who was a dance partner at a Kermess and warranted mention on two pages.¹⁸ Such limits are constantly

¹⁵ For an assessment of particularly fascinating and historiographically challenging document that highlights some of the difficulties in telling the story of the Lawrences as amateurs, see Eileen Curley, “A most dreadful position: Amateur Reputations in a Professional World,” in *A Tyranny of Documents: The Performance Historian as Film Noir Detective: Essays Dedicated to Brooks McNamara*, ed. Stephen Johnson (New York: Theatre Library Association, 2011), 160–168.

¹⁶ Robin Fleming, “AHR Roundtable: Writing Biography at the Edge of History,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009): 606–614, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30223922>. Fleming’s piece is a fascinating approach to biography which uses archaeological findings to supplement textual gaps. While unhelpful for the Lawrences, Fleming’s work provides both an exhortation to reconsider what we consider sources and an intriguing option for writing biography when little more than the human remains remain.

¹⁷ Sherrill Grace, “Theatre and the AutoBiographical Pact: An Introduction,” in Grace and Wasserman, *Theatre and AutoBiography*, 13–31.

¹⁸ Lawrence, *Amateurs and Actors*, 159–160.

on display as I try to unearth the meaning behind Rita's passing comments by searching for more about the people or materials mentioned; at times, this helps to determine more about the world around the Lawrences, as seen with Potter, Harrison, and less well-recorded figures such as Elizabeth Johnson Ward Doremus. Were a biographer to write off the many failures to determine more information and simply cease looking, then the source material would simply grow increasingly limited. Yet, creating a narrative without grounding is equally problematic, and the task of searching through every connection to find the handful that might provide context is time consuming and can detract from the task at hand. As with all of these attempts to fill gaps, the historian must accept imperfection as a side effect of time management—imperfect histories born of a lack of material and imperfect searches sometimes due to an inability to travel to every archive hunting for an elusive mention of the biographical subject in their collaborators' materials. This work would be nigh-on impossible without digital archives and the internet, it must be noted. Certainly, educated guesses at who might retain information about another subject can help to focus work, but the unpredictability of research into amateur theater means that each name search could lead to a possible link to the biographical subject, to source material for a completely new project, or to yet more voids and gaps.

Design and technical production history remains a never-ending challenge for theater historians, but a few approaches exist for finding broader contexts. In cases where a specific and well-researched commercial production tradition is used by amateurs, the links may be clearer, as in Thomas Recchio's work on blackface minstrelsy and how that form may have transferred to home theatricals.¹⁹ Similar contexts for technical production work could be found, perhaps, in manuals for amateur theatricals. Hermione Lee describes Claire Tomalin's biography of Samuel Pepys as relying on such an approach, which Lee calls "ingenious analogies. Since we don't know how Pepys was brought up, she [Tomalin] provides a contemporary manual of manners for children from 1577."²⁰ This technique certainly provides context for the reader and could be useful when faced with missing information and presented as a possible way of understanding the biographical subject's world. Indeed, recent scanning technology has made an abundance of manuals for amateur theater available, and these documents are tempting, if problematic, as a source of potential information on staging and

¹⁹ Thomas Recchio, "The Serious Play of Gender: Blackface Minstrel Shows by Mary Barnard Horne, 1892–1897," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 38, no. 2 (2011): 38–50, <https://doi.org/10.7227/NCTF.38.2.6>.

²⁰ Hermione Lee, "Shelley's Heart and Pepys's Lobsters," in *Virginia Woolf's Nose: Essays on Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3f8rcp.5>.



FIG. 4 A ticket for the April 19, 1881, amateur theatrical production by the Germantown Dramatic Association, labeled as their “FIRST GRAND ENTERTAINMENT.” While research may be able to determine which Germantown(s) had a Parker’s Hall in 1881, which version of *The Cricket on the Hearth* was produced would be impossible to determine without other documentary evidence.


design as the manuals themselves were multi-purpose.²¹ Further, the Lawrences’ productions defied the narrative provided by the amateur theatrical manuals by producing different shows and, crucially, working in rented theaters, perhaps acting in front of stock scenery, lit presumably with existing instrumentation, though these details are often entirely unclear. The Lawrence materials are so much more profoundly indicative of practice and theatrical concerns than what survives from most amateurs I have researched, but their presence and Rita’s matter-of-fact presentation of vignettes without context creates yet more holes that are difficult to fill without extensive sideline research and supposition—research that must be conducted into an area that is largely understudied as a historical form because of the lack of extant materials; our burgeoning amateur theatrical scholarship is piecemeal and place-bound, and while some links between societies or time periods can be drawn, particularly as noticed by David Coates, the work is inherently dependent on what remnants have been found and studied by my colleagues.²² Our theatrical design and technology

²¹ For an exploration of manuals being read against memoirs and other documents, see Isbell’s dissertation. For an assessment of the particular challenges of using these manuals as evidence of theatrical special effects, see Eileen Curley, “Parlor Conflagrations: Science and Special Effects in Amateur Theatricals Manuals,” *Popular Entertainment Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 26–41.


²² David Coates, “Amateur Theatre Networks in the Archive,” *Performance Research* 25, no. 1 (2020): 39–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2020.1736751>. Perhaps unsurprisingly, military theatricals offer comparatively robust sources for amateur research, and amateur theatrical societies and other organizations that maintained records

ROYAL ALEXANDRA THEATRE.
 SOLE LESSEE M^{RS} EDWARD SAKER.
 MONDAY 11TH JUNE 1883.

GRAND DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE,
 IN AID OF THE FUNDS OF THE
STANLEY HOSPITAL,
 BY THE MEMBERS OF THE
FAIRFIELD AMATEUR DRAMATIC CLUB.



MANAGER - MARK W. FLEMINGTON.



PRESIDENT - J. B. COOPER, ESQ.

UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF HIS WORSHIP THE MAYOR (W^M RADCLIFFE ESQ) AND M^{RS} RADCLIFFE,
 LIEUT. COL. G. TURNER, LIEUT. COL. CA. WHITNEY, & THE OFFICERS OF THE 1ST LANCASHIRE ARTILLERY
 VOLUNTEERS, 1ST LANCASHIRE RIFLE VOLUNTEERS & THE 19TH (L^{IV}POOL PRESS GUARDS) RIFLE VOLUNTEERS.

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FIG. 5 The first page of an elaborately decorated program for a charitable performance by the Fairfield Amateur Dramatic Club on June 11, 1883. Some quick research provides some contexts for this production, including that the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Liverpool, England was managed by Mr. Edward Saker until his death in spring 1883, and from this program it appears his wife continued in that capacity. Those key bits of information, along with the public roles held by various listed participants, make it easier to determine some of the social and regional contexts for this production.

history is also regrettably under-explored. If working with living subjects, then ethnographic approaches, such as those deftly deployed by Christin Essin in *Working Backstage*, may be able to fill in the numerous gaps between extant archival materials and the labor required to produce theatrical events.²³ Such approaches are not useful for the Lawrences, and thus the mentions of production practice occur with little explanation or context, leaving the biographer with delightful possibilities to discuss and significant primary research to explore in hopes of possibly locating reliable contexts; still, the likelihood remains that answers will not be found.

Conversely, the societal context for the Lawrences' story remains by the far the easiest context to uncover, as Gilded Age New York society is well documented and analyzed; this backdrop was readily available, and the sisters clearly circulated in a tier which included the elite of New York. Alice attended the Vanderbilt Ball in 1883, the patroness lists for their theatricals included notable wealthy families, their family was regularly included in *The New York Social Register*, none of the sisters appeared to have ever held a job or married, and Rita spent most of the last five decades of her life living in expat communities in Europe. Their programs, the memoir, and the society column mentions of their shows contain numerous well-known society names from the era. With little else to go on, a biographer could just position the family in the elite and work from there with an analysis of their history and theatricals as a pastime of elite women who were claiming a public voice through charitable performances but were largely operating within expected social boundaries.

Many problematic holes and unanswerable questions about the Lawrences could be bypassed by such a discussion focused on class, with theatricals grounded in that larger social world, and yet those gaps are the ones that lead to a richer understanding of the sisters, their theatricals, and perhaps by extension, the world of amateur theater in New York at this time. Embracing the gaps and exploring them can lead nowhere or to tangents, but a failure to accept the gaps as potentially meaningful risks the historian missing critical analytical frames

also provide valuable insights. Among others, see Bethany D. Holmstrom, "Civil War Memories on the Nineteenth-Century Amateur Stage: Preserving the Union (and Its White Manly Parts)," *Theatre History Studies* 33 (2014): 4–34, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ths.2014.0000>; Janet McGaw, "Discovering Lost Voices: The British Drama League Archive and Amateur Dramatic Societies in New South Wales Regional Communities," *Australasian Drama Studies* 62 (2013): 100–112; Robin C. Whittaker, "Entirely Free of Any Amateurishness!: Private Training, Public Taste and the Women's Dramatic Club of University College, Toronto (1905–21)," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 38, no. 2 (2011): 51–66, <https://doi.org/10.7227/NCTF.38.2.7>.

²³ Christin Essin, *Working Backstage: A Cultural History and Ethnography of Technical Theatre Labor* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11434091>. Essin's study provides multiple models of how to read archival materials off of other ethnographic materials to arrive at different perspectives on a subject.

or contexts. In the case of class, the Lawrence scrapbooks' and memoir's focus on theater spoke to enough of the family history to place them in this world, but insufficiently to really provide a biographer with much to say about the sisters other than their embodied intersections with other, much more well-known, people who did not seem to be doing theatricals at the rate that the Lawrences did. The relative lack of narrative about their family history and a number of curious remarks which seemed to conflict with received understanding about the elite in New York led me to wonder about the family background and, by extension, this societal context for their work. Luckily, their family history is traceable, to an extent, through occasional references in family histories of early colonial US families, tax rolls, census records, death notices, wills, and the like. But, the quest to unearth even a modicum of biographical detail about their family posed challenges for the contextualization of their work within the New York elite. The image which began to grow from these scattered data points suggested a family which may have been slowly losing their wealth, and possibly their social prominence, over the course of the nineteenth century.

Reading their theatricals as entertainments occurring within the confines of Gilded Age elite society quickly became challenging, as their place in that society appeared simultaneously firm and yet threatened. The societal context for their work was poised to overwhelm their narrative and what it may have had to tell about theatricals and liminality—how they may have used theater to bolster a social reputation that money alone could no longer provide; how they may have been doing theatricals to develop a skill that they could rely upon if finances collapsed; how they may have been seeking a career that was forbidden to daughters of their family's prior status but perhaps not their future status; and how they gained a public voice and power through art. Each of these possibilities becomes clearer as their family history arises organically from the material, and acknowledging these possibilities born of the gaps and missing information draws the sisters closer to a wide range of amateur theatrical practitioners. On the one hand, this approach has the potential to shed more light on a broader array of theatrical endeavors; as always, though, the wider contextualization of practice threatens to overwhelm the specific narrative of the sisters. The suppositions born of their specific archival gaps and seeming contradictions produce, instead, a broader range of analysis of how amateurs may have engaged with the art form; while still imperfect, this narrative introduces possibilities.²⁴

²⁴ For researchers working on living subjects, Collective Biography Writing may provide an intriguing methodology which permits the exploration of these gaps and encourages "acknowledging that it is possible to see other ways of constructing narratives by seeing the *subject-in-process* with the destabilization of stable, rational

Grounding their theatricals solely in a class-based context not only may have misrepresented their engagement with the form, but also may have produced a narrative which neglected the numerous other practitioners whose stories were lost by setting out this one interpretation—enabled by class—as somehow representative of the whole trend.

It became clear that the task of writing their biography was instead to become a task of digging into the gaps and questions, unearthing the unknowns about these contexts, and overtly discussing how the missing information could lead to a variety of analyses and inferences. By working organically from what remained, however imperfectly, their story could be told and their theatricals could be analyzed within the breadth of contexts crossed by their own liminal position. Gale's approach to reading the layers from multiple directions needed to also be applied to the missing information. Indeed, as they existed on this possible boundary between class tiers, so their theatricals overlapped private, public, and professional—as they occurred in all three types of spaces for each set of audiences, alongside amateur, semi-professional, and professional peers.

This frame shift—from telling the story of the sisters as individuals to viewing their biography as a way to understand their lives as well as the possible history of a popular trend, was vital for moving forward, even as it opened up seemingly endless avenues for external research and highlighted yet more missing information. As but one example, Rita discusses how David Belasco was their first acting coach and Frederic Bond was their second and long-time coach. With no other context, this point raises the need to delve into the history of acting coaches and amateurs hiring them for amateur theatricals—a history that seems related to the trend toward hiring “society women” as actors and perhaps to the development of early acting schools. Rita, in her usual way, presents this information as totally understood by her reader and instead spends time sharing anecdotes about how Belasco “was then a gentle, quiet little man, who used to sit up on a chair like a good child, with his hands folded on his knees.”²⁵ While historians appreciate the image and her understanding of the difference between the Belasco she knew and the man he became, the “coach” concept is just presented as accepted wisdom. Was this active acting coaching or simply

and unified notions” (288). In this technique, which is laid out by Zuzanna Zbróg, the possible interpretations are developed through a structured discussion. Zuzanna Zbróg, “Collective Biography Writing—Theoretical Foundations, Methods and Outline of the Research Procedure,” *The New Educational Review* 43, no. 1 (2016): 287–294, <https://doi.org/10.15804/ner.2016.43.1.24>.

²⁵ Lawrence, *Amateurs and Actors*, 79.

Belasco stage managing when the amateurs rented the Madison Square Theatre during his time there? Was this a common occurrence? How did they end up working with Bond? What was the nature of that work? Was Bond missing a performance and appearing at their post-show cast party at their house—“to hear the news. ‘How did you get on honey?’”—a typical or atypical event?²⁶ Mercifully, a couple of surviving account pages list “coaching” and specifically Mr. Bond’s presence at rehearsals with fees of \$15 and \$20, providing some corroboration for the hiring. In a rare fluke, two letters from Bond exist, including one where he discusses “directing” and “coaching,” as well as his fee.²⁷ Reading these as solely part of Rita and Alice’s work and Rita’s love of name-dropping relationships with famous artists seriously limits their effectiveness in telling their story. This confluence of informational tidbits, however, particularly when read in multiple directions and seen as part of their history—as well as part of the history of amateur theatricals and the intersections between amateur and professional theater in this era—opens up numerous avenues for further exploration, many of which may never be answered but all of which permit the historian to engage with possibilities that may lead to important contexts and story elements to be told.

For instance, a deeper dive into Bond’s letters leads to an array of questions to explore: What is the relationship between actors and the social elite at this time, particularly outside of lunches with celebrities and in these more familiar moments? How much of this is even reliable, given how much Rita clearly loves to establish her connections with professional actors and her unhidden, in the memoir, desire to have been able to become one? Is her remark that Bond “was very fond of me, and anxious that I should go on the stage” a nod toward his then-employer, Augustin Daly’s, potential star-making ambitions, toward her ego being fed, toward his desire to continue working for the family, or a misreading of niceties?²⁸ Did Daly encourage his actors to recruit talented artists in this manner? Were they hiring professional coaches regularly and was this part of a larger trend, and if so, where is that history hidden in the archives of the coaches or other performers that they knew, if those even exist? Would they or later biographers mention what might be the equivalent of a stop-gap gig job or tutoring session today? The answers to these questions are not in the archive, and they may not be locatable elsewhere either, but the possibilities produced

²⁶ Lawrence, 79.

²⁷ Invoices; Frederic Bond to Rita Lawrence, March 23, 1888, Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935, Box 1, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

²⁸ Lawrence, *Amateurs and Actors*, 79.

by interrogating these gaps and thinking broadly about the contexts and the tiny pieces of information produce a much more intriguing set of possible interpretations which must, of course, remain as possibilities lest the biography delve too deeply into fiction.

This multi-faceted approach and lengthy questioning relies upon an understanding of the broader contexts, but it also enables a clearer rhetorical acknowledgement of the gaps in their archive and in our understanding of their production habits. Rather than struggling with devising a clear linear narrative from material that spoke to yet more missing information at each turn, the focus could be, in part, on the historiographical process of uncovering what we could learn about these sisters, their theatricals, and by extension, the trend for theatricals in which they participated, albeit likely at a different level than some of their peers. Yet, by acknowledging the possibility of their liminal position in society, and by analyzing what cannot be known, the sisters become more of a legitimized source for a series of reasonable inferences about possible approaches to theatricals.

This is, I admit, a historian's approach to biography—the possibilities of what may fill the spaces between the archival evidence are a key part of the story, perhaps fittingly as it is a story about the work and performers who are lost to time. It can be challenging to strike a balance between supposition, inference, process-analysis, and source-driven content, as narrative about the historiographical process can threaten to overwhelm the subject and alter the writing genre entirely. Still, the biography that becomes partially an autobiography is a viable approach when faced with scant source material, an approach carried out in parts by Bush-Bailey and in various chapters included in *Theatre and AutoBiography: Writing and Performing Lives in Theory and Practice*;²⁹ in those pieces, as in this issue, the story is as much as about the historical recovery process and how academic traditions have created these lacunae that need to be filled. I felt a particular kinship with Paula Sperdakos as I read her discussion of how she found source material about actresses from the Lawrences' era on eBay and other internet sources,³⁰ as I only knew about the sisters because their names appeared semi-regularly in conjunction with another actress I researched, Cora Urquhart Brown Potter; that actress herself became known to me through reading thousands of newly digitized New York Times articles which resulted from a search on "amateur theater." Internet searching names on a whim led me

²⁹ Grace and Wasserman, *Theatre and AutoBiography*.

³⁰ Paula Sperdakos, "Untold Stories: [Re]Searching for Canadian Actresses' Lives," in Grace and Wasserman, 202–224.

to find a copy of Rita's memoir for sale on a used book site; I took a chance and bought it, and after I realized that memoir was almost entirely about theater, it was back to the internet, this time finding their scrapbooks at Columbia. Even then, I had been let down by enough archive visits that I was not expecting the scrapbooks to contain scores of programs from their work. My cautious cynicism turned quickly to joy before I came to the realization that numerous gaps still remained in their narrative.

As Sperdakos notes while discussing her process of finding materials on Elizabeth Jane Phillips and Albert Nickinson, this "saga of re/discovery . . . epitomizes the arbitrariness of this kind of biographical research."³¹ These tales of research conducted before wider archival digitization and before our theatrical heritage was auctioned on eBay are not just snapshots of the challenges of biographical research into people whose importance may be devalued by institutional collection strategies. Indeed, they speak to a way to upend the traditional research method which relies upon those institutions, highlighting instead a more personal, if admittedly scattershot, approach to finding content. The internet allowed Sperdakos and Phillips' great-great-granddaughter to connect, just as it allowed me, in 2006, to locate a memoir self-published in France for sale in the United States. As Sperdakos warns, though, "[f]or every such story of lucky documentary recovery, however, there is an equivalent story suggesting documentary loss."³² Determining when to stop the research quest and work with what is discoverable becomes, then, a highly individualized choice which may be made under external career-driven pressures.

If this approach seems a bit chaotic, that is because it is. Embracing the chaos is key, as is accepting Sherrill Grace's reminder about facts and truth in life writing: "The facts, while important, are never enough, and they are rarely clear-cut. Truth is always ambiguous, fractured and dispersed across the perspectives of all contributors to the life story, and no one's life story is ever their own."³³ Virginia Woolf likewise reassures us that "from all this diversity [biography] will bring out, not a riot of confusion, but a richer unity."³⁴ To work on the poorly documented histories of amateurs is to accept that information, when it exists, will come from all directions and all manner of sources that expand well

³¹ Sperdakos, "Untold Stories."

³² Sperdakos.

³³ Sherrill Grace, "Sharon Pollock's *Doc* and the Biographer's Dilemma," in Grace and Wasserman, *Theatre and AutoBiography*, 275–290.

³⁴ Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography (1939)," in Hemecker and Saunders, *Biography in Theory*, 124–130.

beyond the autobiographical and factual remains.³⁵ Did the subject cross paths with someone more famous, as the Lawrences did with dozens of actors and producers? If so, the likelihood that they will appear in works about the famous are perhaps limited, but those materials may still provide key contexts, such as a greater discussion of David Belasco's early years working at the Madison Square Theatre where amateur theatricals were often performed. As noted above, Frederic Bond's employment by Augustin Daly cannot but raise questions and provide a possible context: Daly's intentional employment of "society stars" in his company. Rental receipts are one of the few sources of design information, yet require significant external research and context to decipher. The advertising in programs and patron lists can reveal information about marketing and audiences, albeit often without the rationale for participation or effectiveness of the ads revealed; the charity each production benefits may reveal the sisters' interests, but when played off of letters of invitation from charities, this information may also reveal who wanted those same patrons and audience members to support their causes. Were the sisters invited to participate because they were good actors or because they had personal connections or because they were good fund raisers? We may never know, but the discussion of those possibilities opens up lines of inquiry that should be considered when such information can be found about other amateur theatricals; in this regard, the biographer is writing for the historian audience as well as the curious reader. All in all, what documents do remain must be played off of each other, with the gaps and absences providing questions which perhaps historical context can begin to answer.

If the biographer of the amateur performer starts from a position where the gaps are as important as the extant materials, that contexts matter but should not overwhelm the individuals, then the story can become one which highlights what can be surmised while acknowledging what is missing. The narrative can be developed organically, then, from patterns that emerge from the materials that do exist, the gaps they point toward, and the possibilities raised by exploring those gaps in some depth and reading them across multiple contexts. Yet, readers still need a narrative to follow the story, and the gaps, while important, cannot overwhelm the discussion to the point that the manuscript becomes entirely focused on what we do not and perhaps cannot know. Whether that narrative becomes partially autobiographical or not depends largely on the purpose of the biography—whether the most effective narrative is to model historiographical processes or to focus on the organic story that can be told.

³⁵ For a concise exploration of thinking through a historiographical process with a series of specific documents related to amateur theater, see, for example, Isbell, "Amateurs: Home, Shipboard, and Public Theatricals," chapter 2.

For the Lawrences, interrogating the gaps and accepting the missing information leads not to a linear discussion of their production history, but a structure based on components of their work (plays, venues, design elements, etc.) which is interwoven with theatrical contexts, social and cultural contexts, and discussions of how their work intersects with what can be determined about theatricals similar to and different from their own. Each section needs a narrative throughline, provided by the sisters and their friends, but within each, the major issues in their productions and, by extension, in amateur theatricals are discussed as the content permits, with a structure derived organically from how the elements play off of each other to tell a story of their productions and what can be reasonably surmised about amateur theatrical practice. Central questions raised by the gaps are overtly discussed as they arise, as perhaps another historian will happen upon answers in another project; in this regard, the approach to history and biography is more collaborative and less focused on providing a perfectly correct or truthful explication of the subject matter. The narrative is bookended by what we do know of the sisters as people, providing key personae for readers to follow throughout the chapters and providing some closure at the end, but at times they recede and emerge as central parts of the discussion about theatricals—theirs and the broader trends implied by their work.

The Lawrence sisters' work is compelling in part because of their histories—women trying to carve out a theatrical career while living in a family and part of society that did not support them turning professional. Their archive, while small, is still more substantial than that of most amateurs I have written (or attempted to write) about, which permits a focused exploration of an incredibly popular form of production for which we have limited information. That frame—what historians can learn about these sisters and this artform by looking at the archival remains of this pair of sisters—helps to refocus the narrative away from typical biographical foci, while grounding the discussion in critical contexts of class, gender, and theater, and while, crucially, acknowledging the gaps in the archive and how those gaps intersect with received knowledge. The sisters wanted to be professional, but were not; nevertheless, they had careers as amateurs. They circulated with the elite, but they also challenged those boundaries and cannot be viewed solely through that lens, lest it produce a narrative which is overly influenced by any one context. The biographer's task then becomes to locate what little evidence of the performers and the productions may remain, to read those facts as they interact with all of the possible production and societal contexts in which they occurred, and vitally to peer into the gaps between bits of information to determine how those missing pieces might lead to a better understanding of the complexity of the subject and their work. By working

organically from the scant details and the possibilities suggested by reading into the gaps, a biographer faced with limited materials can produce a compelling and well-rounded history of what might have been and which acknowledges the imperfections of their task. The biography becomes, thus, the story of women whose history is imperfectly recorded and a vehicle for a discussion of a popular art form which does not readily lend itself to being archived, while also providing a narrative of the historiographical and historical possibilities that the past presents through its gaps.



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