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# Rethinking the Biography of the Actor and Entertainer

## Introduction

When we issued a call for papers on rethinking what is often produced as the formulaic biography of the actor and entertainer—formulaic in terms of its linear narrative, market-dictated blend of artistic triumph and sexual or familial scandal, and unquestioned nonanalytic paraphrase of source material—we could never have predicted the exciting, thought-provoking diversity manifest in the four essays making up this issue's thematic cluster. The “rethinking” of contributors Amy E. Hughes and Eileen Curley here ranges in source material from the 1200-page diary of Harry Watkins (1825–1894), a “middling” American

actor eking out a living onstage before the American Civil War (1861–1865), to the five scrapbooks of Rita (1867–1939) and Alice Lawrence (1865–1895), two sisters who regularly appeared in well-heeled amateur productions during New York City’s late nineteenth-century Gilded Age. Beata Popczyk-Szczęsna and Karen Jean Martinson, in turn, analyze different “performances” of biography that range from the polyphonic production of *Wielce Szanowna Pani* (Dear Madam), a play reenacting the professional and personal experience of Polish actress Halina Mikołajska (1925–1989), directed by Martyna Peszko and premiering in Polish Theater in Bydgoszcz on February 22, 2020, to the decades-long onstage life of El Vez, the “real person” and performance persona incarnated by artist Robert Lopez (born 1960) as a wildly entertaining, subversive version of a Mexican Elvis on tour in North America.

Each essay differently questions not only the possibility of producing a performer’s insightful biography, but also the significance and benefit of doing so. Researching nineteenth-century actors of amateur or “middling” professional status, Curley and Hughes reach intriguingly different conclusions. Curley bares the occasionally exhilarating, but more often frustrating process of discovering and piecing together source materials from which to reconstruct any sort of linear biographies of the Lawrence sisters. In lieu of filling the many gaps she confronts with well-told stories, she opts to acknowledge these gaps, reflect on the questions that they raise about her subjects’ experience, and consider—only as possibilities—the sociocultural contexts that might shed light on her two amateur actresses’ attraction to and scrapbook preservation of their theatrical experience. Hughes charts a different methodological course. Faced with Harry Watkins’s plethora of quotidian details about life in the mid-nineteenth century American theater, she maintains that this document should not merely function as a source for otherwise unrecorded information, as theater historians before her have done. Instead, Hughes contends, in light of all the minority performers who were Watkins’s contemporaries and whose professional histories are still in the process of being pieced together, Watkins’s diary should be re-viewed as important testimony of a merely competent White player’s embrace of a White majority’s delusional belief in the sure success of the “self-made American.” Such a reading highlights Watkins’s resentful, potentially inflammatory worldview—i.e., his frequent complaints about the humiliations he must endure (performing in blackface is one such example) simply to remain in the business.

The articles by Popczyk-Szczęsna and Martinson shift from Curley’s questions about reconstruction through documents and Hughes’s recontextualization of an oft-cited source to analyses of performed biography. Popczyk-Szczęsna traces the impressive communal interaction built into a play about Halina Mikołajska,

an actress renowned for her powerful performances and steadfast opposition to Poland's corrupt postwar communist regime, regardless of the penalties of unemployment and internment. Predictably, *Wielce Szanowna Pani* draws on the actress's documentation to evoke her life—taped interviews, photos of her costumed for her best known roles, readings from her diaries and letters. Yet, as Popczyk-Szczęsna remarks, the play also deploys Mikołajska-related materials voiced by different kinds of players—trained actresses onstage delivering their own lines of dialogue to reinforce Mikołajska's sharp truths, audience members recruited to read out loud vicious sections from the letters Mikołajska received from her public—in order to prompt a more generalized, yet intensified reflection on the perspective and experience of the female performer. In comparison with Popczyk-Szczęsna's sober appreciation of Mikołajska's performed biography, Martinson's profile of El Vez engages, in alternately analytical and playful ways, with the wholly created persona of the Mexican Elvis, whose songs, patter, and stage business deconstruct an all-American Elvis for his audience even as he keeps them laughing and dancing. Given the corporeal overlap of Martinson's chief research source (the artist Robert Lopez) with her analyzed subject, she necessarily devotes much of her article to outlining her academic, yet personally engaged methodological approach. Relying on the practice of the participant–observer relationship from autoethnography and the principle of critical proximity from dramaturgical methodology, Martinson aims to produce a monograph that does justice to the “world-building” performances of El Vez while acknowledging Lopez as “research subject, archive, and dear friend.”

The order of the essays briefly outlined above adheres to the chronology of their “biographical” subjects. But we encourage you to consume them in any order you please, with hopes that these authors' wonderful projects stimulate you to read them all. We owe a huge debt of thanks to the editors, reviewers, translators, and staff of *Pamiętnik Teatralny* for their hard work in delivering this excellent cluster to the world.



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Professor of Polish Studies and Russian Studies at Duke University, has published widely on Polish literature, theater, popular culture, and film; Russian literature, film, and women's studies; and Russian and Polish artists and performers in the North American diaspora. Her scholarship and work in the field have won multiple national awards.

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