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# Transatlantic Theatre Mediators

## Abstract

This review focuses on Nic Leonhardt's book *Theatre Across Oceans: Mediators of Transatlantic Exchange, 1890–1925* (first published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2021). It highlights the author's focus on transatlantic exchange between Europe and the Americas, and the importance of theatre mediators and playbrokers such as Elisabeth Marbury, Alice Kauser, Richard Pitrot and H.B. Marinelli. Through an analysis of their roles in the theatre industry and their use of available technologies, Leonhardt asserts that the low visibility of these individuals in theatre research is diametrically opposed to their significant influence during the period under review.

## Keywords

transatlantic mediators, theatre, technologies, power

## Abstrakt

### Pośrednicy w transatlantyckiej wymianie teatralnej

Artykuł omawia książkę Nica Leonhardta *Theatre Across Oceans: Mediators of Transatlantic Exchange, 1890–1925* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021). Głównym przedmiotem zainteresowania jej autora są kontakty teatralne między Europą a Amerykami, a także rola pośredników i agentów takich jak Elisabeth Marbury, Alice Kauser, Richard Pitrot czy H.B. Marinelli. Analiza ich funkcji w branży teatralnej oraz ich sposobów wykorzystywania dostępnych wówczas technologii pozwala Leonhardtowi stwierdzić, że niewielka widoczność tych postaci w badaniach teatrologicznych stoi w diametralnej sprzeczności z ich znaczącym wpływem w omawianym okresie.

### Słowa kluczowe

pośrednicy transatlantyccy, teatr, technologie, władza

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*Theatre Across Oceans: Mediators  
of Transatlantic Exchange, 1890–1925*

Nic Leonhardt

(Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2021)

Nic Leonhardt's book *Theatre Across Oceans: Mediators of Transatlantic Exchange, 1890–1925*,<sup>1</sup> originally written in German under the title *Theater über Ozeane*, is part of the series *Transnational Theatre Histories*, edited by Christopher B. Balme, Catherine M. Cole, and Tracy C. Davies. The book focuses on transatlantic exchange, particularly between Europe and the USA in the period 1890–1925. The author, a German theatre scholar, highlights the mobility of theatre mediators and playbrokers by focusing on four individuals: Elisabeth Marbury, Alice Kauser, Richard Pitrot, and H. B. Marinelli. Her thesis affirms that the low visibility of mediators in theatre research is conspicuous and diametrically opposed to the enormous power of action that theatre agents had during the period analyzed. Structurally, the book comprises five chapters and a conclusion, in which the author makes final remarks on the idea of *theatrescapes* and explains the geographical focus of the study as “justified by the lively exchange between North and South America and Europe in this phase” (315). Thus, transatlantic mediation in the crossings that connect Europe and the United States is a thoroughly researched subject. However, even though the book mentions the analysis of South American circuits, the imbalance of cases shows that the history of Southern theatrescapes and their mediation has yet to be written.

The author begins the first chapter by referring to the expansion of cities and urban sites in the nineteenth century, together with new forms of transport and communication technologies such as newspapers, illustrated magazines, the theatre, and the telegraph, the main media of the time. In this vein, the ideas of mobility, de-territorialized spaces and globalization are discussed, introducing various authors including the anthropologists Ulf Hannerz, Arjun Appadurai, and George W. Marcus, and the literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt. Leonhardt follows Appadurai's definitions of landscapes. Her effective approach to the aforementioned media allows her to identify this

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<sup>1</sup> Nic Leonhardt, *Theatre Across Oceans: Mediators of Transatlantic Exchange, 1890–1925* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2021). Page numbers of all further quotations from this book are provided in parentheses.

context of *mediascapes* as having created the conditions for the emergence of theatre mediators. Another important contribution of the scholar is the relationship between these mediators, the recent field of historical research, and visualization tools. Leonhardt proposes that networks of individuals, groups of individuals (prosopography), or institutions of a given period can be analyzed using the representation and visualization tools offered by today's digital technologies.

The author looks at the transport and media infrastructure that enabled trade and exchange in the society of the time, the mediascapes, linking advances in technology and media with the circumstances that allowed productive exchange and crossing between continents. She also develops her idea of theatrescapes, which is based on Appadurai's concept of landscapes as dimensions of cultural and global flows or movements, in the case of theatrescapes particularly recognizable by looking at transport, technology, and media and their relationship to theatrical circuits. The combination of the construction of ships, railways, telegraphs, and roads and the development of markets for European industries in the colonies contributed to the interconnectedness of the nineteenth century. This interconnectedness opened up trade routes, including for theatre circuits, and influenced waves of emigration to the USA. The reliability of technology led to fruitful crossings and the tragedy of the Titanic, whose victims and survivors included mediators, artists, and theatre-makers. Leonhardt also focuses on the professionalization of theatrical mediation, with its full semantic spectrum, encompassing impresario, entrepreneur, manager, agent, etc., and considers it as a very lucrative, competitive, and organized activity (*financescapes*) from 1880 onwards, mainly for three reasons: the proliferation of theatrical genres, the appearance of the theatre as a business, and the increased cultural mobility. The main thesis of this section is that the mediators, those figures who acted as representatives of authors or actors abroad, defending their copyright and promoting their art, sometimes initiated cultural developments themselves while remaining hidden from view. The author justifies the differentiation of this period based on the media innovations of the time, since the mediators used technologies such as telegraphy and the telephone, mass communication media, magazines, and daily newspapers. It was also a period of regulation through contractual negotiations, copyright, performance law, and commercial mediation, although it was not until 1886 that the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Copyrights came into force, and in 1910 that the German *Stellenvermittlergesetz* was passed to regulate commercial mediation for the protection of artists. The author focuses on four specific biographies.

Beginning with the agent Elisabeth Marbury (1855–1933), considered “an active medium for the exchange” (319), and progressing to her assistant and later successful playbroker Alice Kauser (1871–1945), the global amusement explorer Richard Pitrot (1852–1929), and the greatest exporter of European talent, H.B. Marinelli (1864–1924), Leonhardt highlights the importance of networks and the connections these impresarios had not only with actors but also with journalists and diplomats who gave them influence on both sides of the Atlantic. The specific activities of the four individuals are described in detail, with references to their careers, offices, methods of association, and ways of making a name for themselves. Their agency is closely linked to the idea of new markets in the Americas. However, when the author then goes on to analyze the theatre industry in North America in depth, she mentions some transportation circuits to South America and valuable mediators such as Frank Brown. To close, Leonhardt writes about the decline of transatlantic theatre flows, especially during the First World War, and recovers the idea of flow and fluidity that permeates the entire book. The author analyses what happened to the theatrescapes during the First World War, noting that all the transport, communication, and trade routes established in previous years were cut off or used exclusively for political conflict. Performers and theatrical mediators were left without financial infrastructures, and many were forced to leave or were boycotted. Mediators left the theatre and fought in other arenas, such as in the cases of Alice Kauser and Elisabeth Marbury, who went into war relief work or supported charities during the war. At the national level, the theatre cultivated a nationalist and propagandist repertoire. The conclusion emphasizes the prominent role of mediators and playbrokers, which has not yet been systematically researched in theatre studies. It recalls the importance of the period’s infrastructure, and the global travel and transatlantic exchange.

All in all, *Theatre Across Oceans* is an excellent example of archival research (Shubert, New York City, Europe) that produces a scholarly study that will endure for a long time to come, as it is an obligatory reference for future research. The fact that the term “mediators of transatlantic exchange” is limited to the links between Europe and the USA should not detract from Leonhardt’s analysis but should inspire further research covering a wider area of the Americas.



## Bibliography

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