

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Robert Brock

And He Danced: A Review of Lynn Matluck Brooks's *John Durang: Man of the American Stage*

by Kirsten Kaschock

America's past became present for me in stages. At age eleven, scrambling over boulders at Devil's Den—a site at the Gettysburg battlegrounds where soldiers were deafened and killed by ricocheting bullets—I imagined a slug of hot metal blessedly whizzing past my face only to hit a stone and enter my skull from behind. As a student in New Haven, Connecticut, I never considered what the city's proximity to water meant to its sea-faring inhabitants until I toured a Victorian home and watched from a [widow's walk](#) as a storm swelled over the sound. Years later, escaping the oppressive Georgia heat while doing library research for my first novel, I was fascinated and repelled by the actual physical documents that bolstered and supported the institution of slavery—yellowing bills of sale, census figures, [inventory lists](#)—the beautiful penmanship and elegantly-drawn records that undergirded the buying and selling of human beings during that heinous period in our nation's development.

When I read fellow TD writer Lynn Matluck Brooks's exhaustively researched biography, *John Durang: Man of the American Stage*, I recognized in its methodology a kindred respect for experiential and material history. This book is not a summary. It does not over-speculate or reinvent. Instead, it curates its materials: the paper trail and physical footprints left by the [first American-born theater professional](#). Although performers from both England and “the Continent” toured the colonies, John Durang was the first native-born American to make his livelihood in European-style theater, and he was primarily known for his dancing. Brooks painstakingly compiles quotes, illustrations, and voluminous documentation of the birth of professional and (more often than not) physical theater in and around Philadelphia, noting astutely that “Durang's life coincided with the early unfolding of a nation.” I imagine the author sifting through archives in Lancaster, the town where she teaches and where Durang was born, cataloguing the mention of familiar street names and historical persons, drawing meticulous lines of connection from that time to this.

Two and a half centuries ago, a pervasively religious and austere sensibility made “the perceived dissipation and immorality in plays and farces” illegal in Philadelphia, yet performers consistently circumvented the laws. They presented pantomimes, advertised their spoken works as “lectures,” and built venues a block or two beyond the city’s borders. In other words, just before Durang began his life on the stage, the then-capital of the United States of America was denying thespianism a legitimate presence within its bounds. Nevertheless, many of Philadelphia’s permanent and temporary residents (including several founding fathers) made the trek to the outskirts and attended the nascent theater’s subtler incarnations.

Despite fears that his immigrant father would not approve of what was viewed by many as a frivolous lifestyle, Durang began a career that would eventually see him high-step the [Sailor’s Hornpipe](#), approximate Chippewa War Dances, recite Shakespeare, travel in circuses, manipulate puppets, and work on stages, slack ropes, horseback, and in drawing rooms. He did what was required to support a large family (the rule of the day) in proper comfort. Over the course of his fifty-three years, Durang set works, taught lessons, and toured the hinterlands of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states.

Brooks uses the extensive materials she has amassed (there are over 100 pages of appendices, notes, references, and illustration credits) to set the stage of John Durang’s world. She mines Durang’s memoir for details of his life, and his commentary describes not only himself but his passion for his profession. He writes, “An actor’s heart is free and open to charity,” and extols the many duties he executed beyond the obvious, “In short, I was performer, machinist, painter, designer, music compiler, the bill maker, and treasurer.” The parallels between Durang’s performing world and our own are sharply drawn in such passages.

Today, non-fiction works occasionally cause [a stir](#) because of inaccuracies, and Durang himself was not immune to a lapse in memory—misstating times and even places where he performed (as cross-referenced with other documents of the time). Brooks writes, bemusedly, “...he had a casual relationship with chronology.” But it is precisely the humanity communicated by his inexact accounts with their variable spellings (a hallmark of the time before [Webster’s](#)), his strangely proportioned watercolors, and even his omissions (a lack of writing devoted to his second wife) that I find irresistible. These details bring an imperfect man into the room where I sit to read about him—not five miles from the spot on South Street where Durang built a house and worried over a small garden. Here is a person whose life was illusion and spectacle and production, but also home and hearth. The times did not make him choose between art and family or eventually abandon one for the other. He was not a star, but he made his mark, created a theatrical dynasty (two of his sons made a life in the theater and playwright Christopher Durang is a direct descendant), and his curiosity and love for his work remains palpable. As a mother and an artist, I am comforted by [the multitude](#) that was John Durang.

Dance may have lured Durang onto the stage, but he ended his life as far more than a dancer. His hybrid identity feels utterly current to contemporary discussions about performance. The multiple venues he played are likewise instructive to modern performers drawing modest audiences to non-traditional spaces that may be less revolutionary than they know. Dr. Brooks, by thoroughly documenting the context of a single man’s career, shows that the struggle to make an artist’s life a good life is a story as integral to the American historic fabric as more tragic tales. There is a temptation to see artists as somehow existing outside social structures and economies; this book demonstrates that it might be more accurate to see in such lives the consistent and dogged search for patches of light and soil—so their art might bloom, and re-bloom, and bloom again in the gaps.

Lynn Matluck Brooks, [John Durang: Man of the American Stage](#). Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2011. 394 pp.

By Kirsten Kaschock
August 24, 2012