

The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top. *By Janet M. Davis.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiii + 329 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, photos. Cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth 0-807-82724-X; paper 0-807-85399-2.

Reviewed by Bluford Adams

In this important work, Janet Davis argues that the turn-of-the-century railroad circus was a powerful cultural icon of a new, modern nation-state (p. 10). She is especially interested in exploring what railroad circuses (i.e., the largest shows, which traveled by train rather than wagon) and Wild West shows have to tell us about American ideologies of gender, class, race, and empire during this period. She brings to the task not only a deep knowledge of, and obvious love for, circus history, but also wide reading across a range of disciplines. The result is a study that offers a host of fresh perspectives upon a cultural form that has been largely overlooked in recent scholarship on popular culture.

Davis argues that the railroad circus presented audiences with a view of their nation and world that was ambiguous, often even contradictory. She demonstrates this most thoroughly in the case of gender, the focus of some of the railroad circuses' most shocking and titillating displays: weight-lifting women, androgynous—sometimes even transvestite—men, near-naked star performers, and married freaks with wildly divergent body types. But, as Davis repeatedly demonstrates, the big shows often couched their most transgressive gender images in thoroughly conventional terms. Daring white female riders and animal trainers, who took risks and earned salaries usually reserved for men, were inevitably presented as dainty ladies whose happiest moments occurred not under the big top, but in the privacy of their own homes (p. 97). In contrast, the railroad circus made little effort to domesticate the gender identities of the people of color who performed in the ethnological congress, the sideshow display of nonwhite “strange and savage” tribes. In the eyes of white performers and patrons, the inverted gender roles and sexualized bodies assembled for this display in the congress placed its representatives at the lower end of the evolutionary ladder, near the animals frequently exhibited alongside them.

Davis argues that the railroad circuses' relation to industrial capitalism was equally ambiguous. The big shows marketed themselves as exemplars of a burgeoning industrial America, incorporating, and sometimes even introducing, the latest in consumerism, advertising, transportation, and management theory. The circus was the place where rural Americans heard the latest songs and saw the newest inventions. But, as Davis points out, many people saw the work that took place behind the scenes as the circuses' greatest marvel. Laborers for the largest railroad shows had to unload an entire tent city from the train, raise it, tear down, and reload it in a single workday, before moving on to the next town, where they repeated the process. To do this required huge gangs of carefully supervised, highly disciplined laborers, some of them skilled, but many of them hired temporarily at very low wages. Davis traces the circus laborers' protests against their poor pay and rough, dangerous working conditions, which culminated in the 1938 strike of unionized workers at Ringling Bros. & Barnum & Bailey. By that point, the audiences for the railroad circuses were already dwindling. The cultural form, which had expanded in parallel with industrial America, was dying in an age of radio, film, and suburbanization.

Yet, as Davis points out, even in its heyday, the railroad circus was always an unreliable partner of industrial capitalism. Many Americans went to the show to escape from, rather than to revel in, scenes of industrial labor. The railroad circus was a tame affair when compared to its antebellum wagon-show predecessors (which attracted mostly men and featured alcohol, fights, and ribald jokes in abundance), but there were still plenty of opportunities for antibourgeois behavior. Patrons could blow their money at the grift joints that followed most circuses (p. 187), pick fights with circus laborers, leer at the scantily clad dancers in the cooch show, or even join the circus themselves. Of course, most circus patrons were back at work the next day, but at least they carried with them fascinating memories of the circus dream world, a place of unimaginable pleasures and strange sights, where time stood still, and, for some people at least, leisure was endless.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the railroad circus often located its dream world in specific places, such as the Holy Land, India, the Sudan. Davis explores the elaborate spectacles that formed the leading feature of many circuses and Wild West

shows. These elaborate pageants (some of them featuring over one thousand performers) often staged scenes of Western imperialism: Columbus discovering America, the Rough Riders charging up San Juan Hill, King Edward VII being crowned emperor of India. Although the spectacles were among the most complex and expensive acts the railroad shows staged, Davis finds them to be ideologically straightforward. She argues that they celebrated American and British imperialists as mature, industrial, and Christian, while orientaling subject peoples as sexual, decadent, static, dependent, and heathen. But when one considers the common practice of cross-racial casting in these dramatizations, they begin to look more complex. In *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, Native American performers played the Spanish in the "Battle of San Juan Hill," and in "The Rescue at Peking," they represented the Chinese. Given the railroad shows' boast of ethnological accuracy, one wonders why they would engage in racial masquerade. Was it simply too expensive to hire real Spanish and Chinese players? Was it somehow preferable to have Native Americans in those roles? Whatever the answers to these questions, they suggest that the spectacles deserve a further look.

In *The Circus Age*, Janet Davis has filled a gaping hole in our knowledge of turn-of-the-century American popular culture. Her lucid prose, varied approaches, and careful scholarship make her book as intellectually stimulating as it is pleasurable to read.

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