

The Devil's Playground: A Century of Pleasure and Profit in Times Square. By James Traub. New York: Random House, 2004. xvii + 313 pp. Bibliography, index. Cloth, \$25.95. ISBN: 0-375-50788-4.

Reviewed by Robert W. Snyder

Over the last two decades, the writer James Traub has looked on Times Square and felt disturbed by street people, heartened by campaigns against crime and disorder, and ambivalent about the growth of a global entertainment district in the heart of Manhattan. That ambivalence, and the century of history leading up to it, are defining elements in Traub's *The Devil's Playground: A Century of Pleasure and Profit in Times Square*.

In a book that is part history, part journalism, and part meditation on city life, Traub explores the changes in Times Square and what they mean for New York and popular culture. He is frankly uneasy feeling about the new Times Square: he enjoys visiting it with his eleven-year-old son, but the district's globalized amusements crowd out its venerably raffish character. If this produces an awkward ending, it also gives the book an honesty that makes it valuable for anyone who cares about cities—especially efforts to revive their downtowns.

*The Devil's Playground* casts the present in the light of a century of history. "Times Square's meaning," Traub writes, "evolved along with popular culture itself" (p. xvi). Respectfully grounded in the essays of William R. Taylor's *Inventing Times Square: Culture and Commerce at the Crossroads of the World* (1991) and Lynn B. Sagalyn's *Times Square Roulette: Remaking the City Icon* (2001), Traub examines important questions with hard answers.

Traub begins with a chronicle of Times Square, from its founding in the early twentieth century as a center for vaudeville through the heyday of the Broadway musical to the decline of the 1970s. The "crossroads of the world" may have taken its name from a self-consciously fastidious newspaper, the *New York Times*, but the earliest spirit of Times Square came from vaudeville, the polyglot form of variety theater that was in every sense the most popular form of theater at the turn of the last century. Vaudeville, whose summit was the Palace Theater at Forty-seventh Street and Broadway, was

economically ruthless but culturally vibrant. Many of its greatest stars grew up, as Eddie Cantor put it, “on the sidewalks of New York with an occasional fall into the gutter.” Vaudeville thrived by putting such distinctly urban voices together in one show that offered something for everyone. It brought people out into the public and was, if anything, the complete opposite of today’s niche-marketed entertainment. Out of vaudeville grew the Broadway musicals and gossip columnists that made Times Square a national symbol for urban entertainment and gregarious living.

But today’s Times Square stands in awkward relation to this past. While it commendably preserves the urban habit of going out at night to see and be seen, its mammoth attractions—a Toys “R” Us store, Disney productions, the MTV show *Total Request Live*—cater to huge demographic niches (kids, families, teens) on an international scale. The result, Traub suggests, is “the decay of the particular in the merciless glare of globalization” (p. xiv).

Will the global commercial culture emerging in Times Square diminish the vitality and particularity of midtown Manhattan? It is difficult to argue with Traub’s conclusion that it has. But if some people find a striking level of uniformity in a revived Times Square acceptable, it is because their frame of reference is not the gregarious vaudeville years but rather the troubled Sixties, Seventies, and Eighties. In these decades, a proliferating sex industry and a sleazy street life convinced many—including Traub—that Times Square was a tangle of urban pathologies.

In the middle section of the book, Traub examines the years from the 1960s to the 1980s, when politicians, businessmen, planners, citizens, and sociologists all argued over what to do about Times Square. If some saw it as a blighted area in need of reclamation and others saw it as an edgy playground, all felt that the area was somehow central to the city’s future. Plans for the square and Forty-second Street—a theme park, the construction of four enormous office towers—were beaten down in bruising arguments that swelled with the voices of politicians, business interests, urban sociologists, government officials, and historic preservationists.

In the end, Traub argues, their failures created an opening for the new vision of Times Square that finally emerged: a brightly lit center for entertainment, financial firms, and media companies. This Times Square, while highly corporate, is still dependent on

the powers of city government—especially zoning rules to promote dramatic lighting, municipal efforts to reduce the presence of the sex industry, and aggressive policing to reduce crime and disorder. While the new vision of Times Square pays homage to the district’s older aura of neon lights and energetic crowds, at its core, as Traub notes, exists a profound question about urban centers: “How can a plan foster a spirit whose essence is spontaneity?” (p. 165).

Traub answers this question with mixed emotions in “Corporate Fun,” the concluding section of the book. Strolling through the new Times Square that has emerged since the 1990s, he likes the greater degree of order in the district and writes lyrically about outings there with his son. At the same time, he looks at “the global crossroads that is Times Square” and sees “one pulsating global media-financial services-information-entertainment zone. All traces of an older, more localized, more organic life have been obliterated” (p. 271).

On the margins of Times Square—in McHale’s pub on Eighth Avenue or in the music stores Manny’s and Sam Ash on West Forty-eighth Street—you can still sense a time when the songs and shows of Times Square rang with New York accents. In the heydays of vaudeville and Broadway musicals, Times Square created a new urban style that it exported to the rest of the United States and ultimately the world. But as the culture industry bred in Times Square grew to international proportions in the final years of the twentieth century, the neighborhood once known as the crossroads of the world became one global entertainment center among many. International media conglomerates remade Times Square in their own image. To find sights and sounds that connect more directly to the life of New York City, the curious sightseer should leave Times Square for places like the outer boroughs—Queens, for example. There, evolving forms of Latin and Asian music are creating city sounds that will form a new sound track for New York.

For the throngs of tourists who walk through Time Square today—browsing, munching on snacks, posing for pictures in front of the bright lights—Times Square blends familiar brand names and the unfamiliar experience of being out and about in a big city. As an introduction to Manhattan, it is not all bad. I only hope that the experience leaves visitors confident enough in their street smarts and curious enough about city life to step outside for a taste of the rest of New York.

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