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Childhood and Nineteenth-Century American Theatre: The Work of the Marsh Troupe of Juvenile Actors (Theater in the Americas)

Shauna Vey

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From 1855 until 1863, the Marsh Troupe of Juvenile Comedians, a professional acting company of approximately thirty children, entertained audiences with their nuanced performances of adult roles on stages around the globe. In *Childhood and Nineteenth-Century American Theatre: The Work of the Marsh Troupe of Juvenile Actors*, author Shauna Vey provides an insightful account not only of this unique antebellum stage troupe but also of contemporary theatre practices and the larger American culture, including shifts in the definition of childhood itself.

Looking at the daily work lives of five members of the Marsh Troupe—the father and manager, Robert Marsh, and four child performers, Mary Marsh, Alfred Stewart, Louise Arnot, and Georgie Marsh—Vey reveals the realities of the antebellum theatre and American society: the rise of the nineteenth-century impresario; the emerging societal constructions of girlhood and goodness; the realities of child labor; the decline of the apprenticeship model of actor training; shifts in gender roles and the status of working women; and changes in the economic models of theatre production, including the development of the stock company system.

Both a microhistory of a professional theatre company and its juvenile players in the decade before the Civil War and a larger narrative of cultural change in the United States, *Childhood and Nineteenth-Century American Theatre* sheds light on how childhood was idealized both on and off the stage, how the role of the child in society shifted in the nineteenth century, and the ways economic value and sentiment contributed to how children were viewed.

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